



Grade

Hidden Scars

A. AKINOSHO

Jade:

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TRIGGER WARNING:

This content is intended for mature audience only.

Jade: Hidden Scars contains emotional references to death of parents and grief.

It also contains talks of Suicide and Rape.

This scenes were written to express vivid and in-depth emotions of the story they may be triggers to some readers.

Please read with trigger warnings in mind.

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Excerpt of Jade: Chances Are

NASEER



My heart pounds as I accelerate. I feel the thrill of the wind on my body. I dodge between passing cars, revving higher and higher. Brian, my best friend, is right on my tail, his curses ringing in my earpiece. “Asshole” he shouts at me, but I laugh and push harder. “Watch out!” His voice crackles as a car appeared out of nowhere. I don’t panic, instead, I move swiftly and get a glance at Brian.

“I got this,” I yell to him in triumph, feeling great that I’m about to win his motorcycle. He shouldn’t have dared me, but he can eat my dust. The sudden impact of the car jolts my body.

“Fuck!” I scream out loud at the top of my lungs.

I’m violently thrown off my bike, sailing through the air. As I hear Brian shout my name, my body slams against a car, which screeches to a loud stop. The force of the hard brake tosses my body into the air again like a ping-pong ball and I land on another vehicle’s trunk. My body is out of control. I

roll off the trunk, but my jacket is hooked onto a piece of metal, and I'm dragged across the asphalt. My blood is already pouring out before I register the pain of the metal piercing my skin.

The car finally comes to a screeching halt, that releases the hook and the car coming up from behind comes to a hard stop, trapping me under the hood.

“Naseer! Naseer! Naseer!” I hear Brian's scream as I black out.

I awake to hear voices. Someone keeps opening my eyes lids each time I close it. I can't talk. “We need to move him; we are losing him,” a female voice says. I blacked out again.

“Hang in there, Naseer!” I hear Brian again. I am not sure how much time has passed. There are lots of sounds, my nose is covered. I feel a needle in my body. I want to move but I can't, I want to talk but I can't. What is going on? I fade off.

I awake again and see my parents and Rilwan, my bodyguard. My mom is crying as my dad tries to comfort her. Rilwan face is set with an expression of stoic determination that I can't comprehend. The smell of disinfectant invading my nostrils, I dislike hospitals. I need to get out of here, I silently willed myself to get out of bed only to realize, I can't move. Flashes of my body flying in the air and body being dragged surges through me. The accident has rendered me immobile.

“He's going to be alright, miraculously he didn't sustain any organ damage or brain bleeding. He has multiple broken ribs,

a broken shoulder, hands, and legs. The plaster cast will help with the broken shoulder, hands, and legs and we will know more in the next few days about the movement of his legs and hand. Right now, we need to monitor him to make sure the broken ribs heal, and his lungs don't collapse."

My mom bursts into tears as I lose consciousness again. I'm numb. I can't talk and can't move. *Why didn't I die?*

JADE



The wheels of the plane screech loudly against the tarmac as it touches the ground, rumbling my whole being. I should be happy for the safe landing, so I sigh. But I'm numb. The last two months have been the worst in my sixteen years of life. It all still feels unreal. I pinch myself, hoping I will wake up from this horrible dream, but nothing happens. I'm still on the plane.

Everyone is cheering, but I'm staring out the window, not looking at anything. One dire moment was all it took to destroy my future. Eight weeks ago, I was a regular student at Atlantia International Prep boarding school with my best friend, Tito. I can't remember what we were laughing about before my name was announced. "*Jadesola Bankole, Principal Buwa wants you in her office right now,*"

Tito and I had looked at each other strangely. We tried to think of what either one of us could have done to have warranted the call to Principal Buwa's office. We tried but came up empty. We couldn't have imagined the life-altering

event because as a teenager we had no cares in the world other than having fun and passing all the exams given to us by teachers. Our parents are meant to always be there to provide everything we need, we didn't need to know how they did it, we just had to stay young, foolish, and happy.

Now happiness seems far-fetched to me.

“Ladies and gentlemen. We have arrived in the Kingdom of Rhanaz. Thank you for flying with Qatar Airways,” the air hostess keeps talking as I tune her out.

In the Kingdom of Rhanaz, the plan was for us all to visit next summer, but I'm here alone without my parents.

The gentleman next to me is out of his seat and grabbing his laptop and other belongings and I turn back to the window again. Staring at nothing. *I'll probably be the last to get off.*

Just like I was the last to arrive at Principal Buwa's office that afternoon. Tito couldn't go with me, and I couldn't escape the call, so I took the slip and off to the administrative building. It was a long, solitary walk as I tried to think again about what could warrant my call to the principal's office.

My steps slowed as I enter Principal Buwa's office, and my muscles tightened. But I saw my aunt. A smile spread wide across my face as I rushed toward her.

“Aunty Lara!” I hugged her tight. Usually, I saw her every two years for a few weeks when we visited the US. Mom said next year we would visit her in the Kingdom of Rhanaz

because she was now working as a teacher at the international school. *A pleasant surprise.* I'd thought.

Aunty Lara was crying when I pulled out of the hug. "What's wrong Aunty?" I asked, still surprised she was here. That was strange "Where's mom?" I asked.

Without answering, she pulled me to the seat. "Jade—I'm...I-I'm Sorry. Your parents" Aunty Wiped her eyes and drew in a large breath. "Your parents died. Died... In a fire," she said through sobs.

With those ten words, my world came crumbling down. I stared at Aunty Lara. She was probably wrong. Maybe she was playing a prank on me. Subconsciously, I knew she wouldn't prank me, not with the loss of my parents. That was too heavy, but I refused to accept her words. "I spoke to mom three days ago." My voice choked out.

"I'm sorry, Jade, they are both gone." I watched her move but didn't understand a word she said to me. The tears she was fighting back weren't helping. I stared, lost for words.

"Both gone where?" My brain was working in slow-motion mode. I rose from the seat. I looked to Principal Buwa for answers, but she had this pitiful look on her face. The forceful and daring woman couldn't look me in the eye. When she did, all I saw was sympathy.

"They died a few hours after your phone call. They are in heaven, dear. I'm so sorry, Jade." Then it sunk in that my parents were dead.

“Both of them?” I asked, trembling in shock. I felt my body heavier than my legs can hold. My mind swirled. I let go. I whiffed Aunty Lara’s smell before fading away.

“Miss, do you need help to get off the plane?” The poised air hostess says to me with a wide grin, bringing me back to the present.

“No,” I answer, getting up and grabbing my backpack. Everyone is long gone.

I’m alone. I make my way towards customs. I still have my US passport. Turns out my parents kept our passports in a safe deposit box in case of fire or theft. There was no box to protect them. *Oh, I wish.*

I follow the herd. When I get to the officer and he scans my passport, he returns a mystified look at me and then pushes a button. I should ask questions, but I remain standing. Just numb.

“Excuse me, Ms. Bankole.” I turn to the female officer speaking to me. “Come with me, please” I follow with no response. She takes me into a room. “Sit down,” she says. I sit as instructed without question.

She clicks and clicks on the computer. She then stamps my passport with all kinds of documents and stickers. “Welcome to the Kingdom of Rhanaz and I hope you enjoy our international school. I’m also sorry for your loss.” I blink at her wide eyes. How does she know I’m an *orphan*? Is the word spelled across my face in neon?

“Your guardian had to explain the reason for an expedited request for residency,” she explains.

“Thank you,” I say, but break down in tears. It’s as if she’d smashed the glass of numbness and I couldn’t control the excruciating pain that flooded my veins. I couldn’t control it in front of this stranger. I let it all out. She pulls me into a hug and lets me cry on her shoulder. I lose track of how long I spent crying. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

“It’s okay dear, I can’t begin to understand what you are going through but do try and take each day as it comes.” I nod and grab my bag. She walks with me until I see Aunty Lara and Uncle Ray.

They are smiling. The officer stops and touches my shoulder. “Best of luck, Ms. Bankole. I’m positive Rhanaz will bring you smiles and joy.”

“Thank you again,” I say to her.

“You got this, remember to smile.” I nodded and raced to my new guardians.

The ones willing to take the orphaned teenager. *After my parents’ burial, all other family members came up with excuses for why they couldn’t take me in. But Aunty Lara stood up for me, right in front of them.*

“I have no plans to leave Jade with any of you. I already started working on her move to Rhanaz. She will stay with Mrs. Muiyiwa, her mother’s best friend, till she comes to join me. You can all leave now.” Quietly, they each got up and left.

“Good radiance,” she had said, shutting the door after the last one left.

“Welcome to Rhanaz, Jade,” both say, hugging me. We got my luggage, and I got in the car with them to my new home. I enjoyed watching the bright lights and beautiful buildings in Rhanaz. Truly a beauty at night. They asked about my flight.

“It was fine,” I answered, in a monotone, as we drove.

“That’s your new school.” Aunty Lara pointed out “Don’t worry, you rest the next few days and start on Monday.” I nodded and continued to look out the window. At the endless lines of palm trees, with lots of high-rise complexes and large freeway, it all looks glitzy. It felt like we were driving up a hill towards the water. I could see the blue water as we kept moving towards it.

Once we pulled up at the quaint house, Aunty Lara wouldn’t let go of me. She hugs me. “I will always be here for you, Jade,” she says. I nod and pull from the hug. We step right into the living room, which is tastefully decorated with an L-shaped leather couch with two end tables. Four aesthetic-styled pillows. A lamp is by the window and the entertainment system is set up by the wall that divides the living room from the dining room and the kitchen. To the left is a door with a guest bathroom and further down is another door and behind that door are the three bedrooms. Aunty and Uncle’s room comes with its own bathroom and the other two bedrooms share a bathroom. I noticed a small walk-in closet in my room.

The room was set up for me with a twin bed, a desk, and carpet.

“We will go to Ikea to get some stuff for you to make it more you. A small garden and patio chairs are out in the back. You can see it all in the morning.”

“Thank you, Aunty,” I say, trying my best to show appreciation.

“We are happy to have you here, despite the situation and we will not leave you,” she pulls me into a hug. “We got you, Jadesola.”

“Thank you, Aunty.” I know I sound like a robot. But it’s all I could think of to say. I’m grateful but haunted by all the changes happening so quickly around me.

“I’ll leave you to shower, change, then come and eat. I ordered some food from a restaurant. I think you will like it.”

Uncle Ray brings my bags in just as Aunty Lara is leaving. He hugs me, too.

I take a moment to sit on the bed, staring at the green paint like it was going to speak to me. This is my room and new life for the next year or two. I said goodbye to Lagos and my friends. Tito and I cried at the airport. We both know it’s unlikely that I will ever return to Lagos. We’d promised to stay in touch with each other, but I have no clue how life would be for me in the next few years, but I must get up daily and keep going, like I didn’t just bury my parents.

I don't have anyone in Lagos anymore, besides the Muyiwa family that showered me with love and welcomed me into their home, no questions asked.

While my father's siblings were busy coming up with excuses for why they couldn't take me into their home, Mrs. Muyiwa stood up saying she would take me, but Auntie Lara said I was coming with her. They had planned together on how to make life better for me.

I will forever be thankful to Mrs. Muyiwa and her family, who stood by me in the worst moment of my life. Mrs. Muyiwa, who wasn't related to me, did more than said related family members who fought over my parents' last possessions like hungry lions. I agree with Auntie Lara's "Good Riddance."

I unzipped my bag to grab my sleepwear. I barely have any clothes. I was in school when our house burned down with my parents inside. Most of the stuff in the bag came from Tito's closet. The only items that belong to me are stuff I had at school with me. Muyiwa's family never leaves me alone in the house, someone always stays with me. I can see the concern in their eyes much as they try to hide but I am thankful someone is always beside me, though quiet most time. They stay close.

I let the water run with my tears. Until Auntie Lara knocked gently. "Jade, are you okay?"

"Yes, Auntie, I'll be right out," I reply. Truth is, I'm not fine, but what else is there for me to say to her?

I quickly washed up and changed to my PJs. Wrapped the robe Tito gave me and went to dinner, with my new family in

my new home and a new country.

Never forgetting the fact that I'm an orphan.

NASEER.



I'm bedridden. After months at the hospital, I was discharged to my parents' care. They've converted one of the living rooms into a bedroom downstairs for me. I'm still in a hospital bed, with round-the-clock nursing care. My ribs healed, and no lung collapsed, though I still experience shortness of breath. The doctors say I should give myself time to heal. My arms and entire lower body are still in a plaster cast. I can't move. The nurses turn me every few hours to change the dressing on my back.

I haven't seen any friends. They've called, but I've refused to see or talk to them. No one should see me like this. I can live in isolation. I barely talk and I don't want to laugh with anyone. Why would I want to laugh or talk when I don't know if I'll ever walk again?

My life has gone from bright, rich, and full to dull and bleak. Now at the age of twenty -six when I should be living life all I do is stare at the ceiling all day. It's baffling how my life had

changed in a snap. My parents are doing everything to make me comfortable. I feel like my future is over.

The sooner I'm out of the way, the better. That sloppy nurse keeps leaving my meds close to me. I'll one day reach it and swallow it all. Maybe I'll die in my sleep and my parents will be relieved of the burden of the child they can't bring out to the world.

"Your Highness, do you need anything else?" Her voice sounds screeching and irritating to my ears.

"Why do you keep asking that stupid question, Nurse Rae? Can you give me what I need?"

"I can try within my limit."

"If you can't get me to walk, then get the fuck out and stop speaking to me!" I growled at her.

"Good night, Your Highness."

"Nothing good about it, just get out!"

She leaves; I couldn't care less about anyone but myself right now. They keep asking if they can help when they know they can't.

"Naseer, she's just trying to help." I hear my mother say. "I know this position is not ideal. It will pass."

"When! Will it pass, Mom? I have been in bed for months and you keep saying the same thing. I can't move my legs." It startled my mom for a moment that I shouted at her.

“The doctors said you will walk again. The bones just need to heal first.”

“Well, sounds like the doctors just wants *you* to think there is hope. I’m done licking their hope lollipop. Goodnight, Mom” My fingers find the light button on my bed rail; I switch it off without looking at her. Not my fault if she bumps into something.

I hear the door close. Can’t they see what being in this position is doing to me? I didn’t bother turning the lights back on. I stayed awake in the dark.

It was meant to be fun. Brian and I challenged each other to race. Testing my Ducati against his Kawasaki. He convinced himself that he could beat me. The bet was whoever won would take the other’s bike.

Ken, my former roommate and Brian’s cousin, didn’t like the idea of us racing through the street, but we had called him a coward. He’d backed out. Leaving Brian and I to the dangerous challenge, as he’d called it.

Brian and I know it is crazy and dangerous but convince ourselves that we’ve not lived until we dip close to the edge of danger.

The race started fine. We weaved through traffic at high speed—out of nowhere came the car that would change my life. The thought that I may never walk again haunts me. My back and shoulders look like Wolverine and the pack of wolves fought. I see the unpleasant looks on the nurses’ faces whenever they change the dressing on my back. It appalled me

the first time. I saw my scars, but I've come to terms with my new body. No woman would ever want to lie next to me again, that's for sure. My days of being an Alpha are long gone.

My nose is broken. The doctors say it's best to leave it. I have a long scar behind my left ear down my neck. I'd ruled the world of young, rich, and good-looking. Now I'm just a marred figure of my old self.

I lay awake in the dark until daybreak. This is my new life. I need to find a way to end my life soon. That way everyone can return to their lives and stop pretending like they don't pity me or feel sadness when they see me. Little do they know I see the sympathy of my loss in their eyes.

JADE



A unty Lara took me to get the new school uniforms and things I would need for school. She said they wanted me to repeat my second year of high school, but she fought for me to be in the third year. That's the same year I was in before my parents passed away. I didn't understand why they thought I should repeat.

She just said I should face my studies and show them. I can be in a class with all the other kids. It is a prestige school. "Some kids will look down on you Jade because they think they are better, and my teacher discount gets you access to the school. Otherwise, we couldn't afford such a school, but I know academically you can meet up."

On my first day of class, I was given the front-row seat. I can hear the class snickering at my braids and how tall and skinny I am. Lucky for me, it is Math class. The teacher, Mr. Childs, a tall and lean white male with round glasses, introduces me to class as Mariam Bankole, a new student from Nigeria. He encourages them to be nice. Instead, they chuckle and snicker.

I know right away that I'll need to develop a thick skin if I'm going to survive and graduate. The boy sitting next to me was the only one that smiled at me. He even showed me the page the class was working on and showed me his name, James. He's cute, with light brown skin. I notice his muscular arms and smile that make a girl swoon. Well, I'm swooning for sure.

As the teacher gives the math problem for us to tackle, I do it in less than a minute. He looks surprised at how quickly I solved it. "Would you like to show the class how you got the answer?" He asks me quietly, but I shake my head. No way am I going to stand in front of this class and speak.

"I understand." He then goes to the board.

"Only one person got the answer right. I suggest you all pay attention," he continues teaching. He noticed my boredom because I had already mastered what he was teaching last school year. My dad was a math professor. He'd poured all his math knowledge into me, and I'd absorbed it like a sponge.

He made me believe there wasn't a problem in the world I couldn't solve with math. I was always ahead of class in math and science. Literature and English weren't my strong suit. I passed those but aced math, science, and technology. I miss Dad so much every day.

After class, we all picked up our bags for the next class. Mr. Childs asks me to stay back. I pack up and wait. Once the last person is out he says, "Mariam, I get the sense you are bored in my class because your math is more advanced." I nod. He smiles. "I have a few in this class that can handle advanced

work as well if challenged. I will group you with them. That way, you stay ahead and not get bored.”

“Thank you.”

“Any other strong suit I should know about?”

“Science and technology. I’m not very good with literature and language art.” He smiles. “Perfect. Not to worry. I’ll inform the other two teachers about you. Here’s your permission slip for lateness to the next class.”

“Thank you, Mr. Childs.” I take it, and I briskly head towards the next class. Much as I wish to find somewhere to curl in and talk to my parents. Like I’ve quietly been doing every night. I still feel like it is all a dream that my parent will appear soon.

By the next few days. I learn names but keep mostly to myself. No one wants to make friends with me. Not like I’m ready to make friends with anyone. By the end of the week. I only had two smiles, James and a happy-go-lucky girl named Taimani.

James. I think he’s the cutest boy I’ve ever seen. Tall with captivating brown eyes. I can tell he’s athletic. He’s the school’s best basketball player, and he’s smart, too. He has been glancing at me repeatedly but is reluctant to approach me. Perhaps he doesn’t want to be seen talking to the new girl.

By the end of week four. I’ve mastered all the names and categorized them all. Nice, quiet, mean and undecided. Didn’t take long for them to know, I’m a math genius in class. I could

tell some of them didn't like that. It's like they expected to me be dumb because I came from a different country.

I soon started hearing them calling me names or making rude remarks. Once a boy pretended like he didn't see me coming and tossed a cup of water my way. Soaking my uniform, he immediately claimed it was an accident when a teacher intervened. I let it go. My grief is bigger than their pettiness. I keep to myself daily.

Lydia who is the worst of them all, likes to speak gibberish to me like I can't possibly understand English. I sit in front of the class and many times I feel paper or pencil tossed at me with giggles. They pull at my braids and act like it was an accident.

I've learned to ignore their name-calling, Lydia, who I've categorized as the meanest. She's an exquisite beauty with looks like the face in magazines, always tossing her long blond hair like it must be noticed how luscious and well-kept her hair is, but I can't tell if she's smart or trying to sound smart. She's certainly the queen with her minion always on her tail.

I know she doesn't like the fact I'm in the advanced groups. She seems to think her beauty and wealth entitle her to every group. I'm convinced that she's entitled even when there isn't a need to be.

The advanced groups in math, science, and technology have helped me stay on track. We don't say much other than the work. No one wants to invite me to play. There's a silent code

that whoever speaks to me would break if they invited me out or talked longer with me.

James is in my math group, which is nice. I remind myself always to focus on the work and stop swooning over a pretty boy. His rock star look has every girl blushing, even mean Lydia. He's the only good in my day, especially when he smiles or winks at me.

My nights are harder; I spend them crying about my parents. Grief still surrounds me, like a dark cloak, despite Aunty Lara's efforts to cheer me up. *Why did they have to leave me behind? Maybe I need to find a way to join them. Or maybe I need to keep moving forward but it's hard in a new country and school. I'm overwhelmed.*

NASEER



“**Y**our Highness, your friend Brian called again today, requesting to speak with you or visit you,” Nurse Rae says.

“You’re either deaf or stupid, didn’t I tell you to stop telling me about any requests to speak with me? I don’t want to see or speak to anyone. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Your Highness.” She turns to leave.

“Did I dismiss you?”

She stops and looks back at me, frightened. “No, Prince Nasser, I thought you wanted to be alone.”

“Yes, get the fuck out!” She scurried away. I want her gone. I want to punch or attack someone, but I can only yell and scream. Why won’t Brian get the message and stop calling? I don’t want to see anyone. Still brewing in anger, I didn’t notice my dad.

“I just saw Rea crying in a corner. You need to stop yelling at your nurses, Naseer,” my dad says.

“She’s stupid, Dad, I’ve told her several times to stop relating messages to me, but she keeps telling me.”

“She tells you because she knows friends will help you heal; not sure you have noticed. You’ve become a lonely and angry person.”

“I’m allowed to be lonely and angry. I can’t walk, and my body looks like wolves had a field day with me” I raise my bed to stare at my dad. He pulls a chair and sits.

“You will walk, Naseer. It’s just going to take time, but I have hope it will happen.” It’s the same thing he always said, like he was reading a script, of a fictional plot that would never come true.

“You keep hoping, Dad, I’m done.”

“Can you at least speak with Brian? He feels terrible and stayed with you in the hospital for several days.”

“No, I don’t want to see him, Ken, Josh or Raheem. No one. I don’t want to speak with any of them. Do you know how painful it will be for me to watch them leave me here? They can stay away from me. I don’t need any friends.”

“Think about it, Naseer,” he urges.

“Nothing to think about. I’ve made my decision.”

“Can you not shout at your nurse? She’s the only one willing to work with you. The other one left because you called her sloppy and stupid. Rea is working round the clock to change your dressing and care for you. I’m still trying to convince the other one to return.”

“Fine.”

“You can do better than fine, Naseer.”

“I’ll try.”

“Good, I’ll go check on your sister now. I noticed she has stopped visiting you as well because you don’t talk to her, or you shout at her.”

“I don’t need to hear about her teenage activities.”

“You used to like to hear about it.”

“Well, things have changed, and I’m different now. Mani can stay away, too.” Listening to my younger sister yap away isn’t how I want to spend my solitude. I don’t need her teenage stories to cloud my space or information on what my exes are doing.

“Naseer, you need your sister just as she needs you. I’ll encourage you to talk to her.”

“Fine, Dad, I’ll try. Happy now?” I snap.

“Do try. Now, I’ll go find your sister and mother.”

I watch him leave, knowing he doesn’t get my predicament. He doesn’t understand what I’m feeling. He can keep hoping, but I know better. I can’t move. I’ve traveled the world and enjoyed women. Now. I’m just helpless and hopeless. All my wealth can’t get me out of this bed. I am stuck here, for an unforeseeable future without a chance of ever being my old self again.

JADE



It's now twelve weeks since I arrived. Uncle Ray is driving me to Taimani Darabi's residence. The social class had put us in a group. Our assignment was to craft a plan that would help address women's battery in Rhanaz and draw attention to the silent issue.

There are seven of us in the group, three girls and four boys. The groups decided to meet after school at each person's home to work together. James's group did not select me, they chose Lydia instead. It was a relief that I wasn't in the same group as James and Lydia. I can only imagine how torturous that would be for me to watch them together. Guess it's a blessing that the last group only picked me because I'm the last one standing and they are short one person. I can't stand Lydia and I dislike her more now that she's in James's group. I'm not happy about meeting at classmate's homes. We could work better in school, but I was outnumbered by the request to stay back at school.

So here I am, heading to Taimani's house for our first meeting with the group. Taimani has remained nice and

friendly towards me in school. I'm glad to be in a group with her. We arrived at the house after passing through an enormous gate and driving to the entrance. Then navigate through an additional security process. We cross that and I get out and press the bell. A uniformed maid opens the door. I step into the grandeur of a large, open lobby. The flooring is marble, and I look up to see the massive chandelier, which looks like something I would only see in a movie with a grand curvy stairway.

Taimani is rushing down the grand stairs. She has changed into shorts and a t-shirt. I'm still in my school uniform. "Mariam, you are here early. That's perfect. You and I can talk before the others get here. Come on," she says excitedly. I follow her as she leads. I notice several nicely decorated living rooms and lots of expensive-looking decorations. One could easily fit five of Aunty Lara's house in here and still have more room. It's a humongous house and sumptuously decorated.

We finally got to the glass outdoor room with white beams and flowers surrounding its exterior. The room feels airy. We have a long table and chairs that seat ten and to the side is another table set with food and drinks. I set my bag on a chair and took a seat. I'm seeing an excess of food and drinks that could easily satisfy thirty people. *I hope that I won't have to feed them when it's my turn. I doubt we can afford the kind of spread Taimani set today.*

"I've been hoping to get you alone for a while, not sure you know this. You are being dubbed the smartest girl in Rhanaz

International.”

“I didn’t know that, and I think they are wrong. I’m just brilliant at math and science,” she laughs.

“Come on, let’s eat before the others get here.” I rise and go to the set platter of food. Everything looks inviting.

“Stop being modest. You may not be the best in language art, but you don’t fail it either.”

“I study hard for it; I can’t afford to fail any class. I need to have excellent results, so I can get into a good university in the US, hopefully get a scholarship.”

“You are planning to go to university in the US and not the UK why? Most of us want to go to the UK.” *Good to know that I won’t be seeing any of them after I graduate.*

“Come on, Mariam, the UK would be fun. Think about it.”

“I don’t know anyone in the UK, and the US is easier for me because I’m a citizen. My aunty is not giving me any choice in that regard, plus, I have a cousin who lives in Texas.” I present her with a wry smile. *I hope that answers the question. Please don’t ask more questions.*

“Okay, I understand.” Before I could speak, Nicky sashayed in excitedly, tossing her bag on the floor. She has also changed clothes. Why didn’t I think to change clothes? Nicky talks a mile a minute. About the latest jeans and fashion. I tune her out. Nicky is of average height. She’s in my undecided bucket because she blows hot and cold. She’s one girl who’s so sure her life will be perfect because she can smile her way through

anything and in a split-second act like a big snob. Taimani tries to include me in the conversation, but I give monosyllabic answers not like Nicky notices or cares because she's one of Lydia's minions. I can only imagine what she would tell her.

The boys Tyler, Max, Tim, and Avner soon join us in the room. I have the same opinion of them. They are boisterous, arrogant, and full-blown privileged. But Avner is different; he's quiet and keeps to himself. Tyler has some smarts, but he acts dumb to fit in with Max and Tim, who are just dull. Just like Nicky, they drop their bags and pounce on the food. They all ate, and then we got down to work. Our teacher had assigned us "Creating Awareness and Help for Battered Women" as the project.

I draft ideas, but the boys, especially Max, interrupt as soon as I start to speak. I soon get the verbal cue to embrace silence and decide that I will join the group but will do the project on my own. A few times, they would get up and go back into the house. I keep drinking since I'm to be seen and not heard. My need to use the bathroom soon became apparent.

I went in to find the bathroom. *It can't be that hard.*

I start opening doors, and each door leads to another colored living room. I'm grunting inside and my need to pee keeps pressing. In my search, I knock into a vase and quickly catch it. Setting it back on the stand and continuing my quest for a bathroom.

How can it be this hard to find a freaking bathroom in this overly massive house? Pushing the next massive door open.

It's another sitting room, just how many seating areas do they need, and not enough bathrooms? I think rich houses have lots of bedrooms and bathrooms, but these only have sitting rooms. What's their deal?

This is what I get for not asking Taimani where the bathroom is located because I didn't want the first word out of my mouth in the group to be "*Where is your bathroom?*" I can hear the muffled laugh at the only poor girl that's dumb enough to wear a uniform after school not knowing the location of the ladies like it's a rich or poor thing to ask a simple logical question, but they somehow find every question, I ask, to remind me of my social status. "*You are the poor girl,*" my traitorous subconscious reminds me like I'm not overly aware that I look and feel out of place in the grandeur of the school crowd and this house. It's already an established fact to all my classmates that I'm one percent of the one percent poor in that school and I'm only there because of the deep discount my aunt got as a teacher.

The reality of my need to use the bathroom hits again. I hope I find the damn bathroom soon before I pee on myself, which will not be a pretty sight. I'd hate to imagine the new name they would have for me. They seem to have a new one every week.

Skinny M. True,

Starving M. false,

Leggy M. is *also true*. I move to the next door and push it open; my mind drops realizing it is not a bathroom but more

like a large bedroom, there's got to be a bathroom in here. I don't care anymore if it feels like I'm snooping.

I need to pee, period! I headed towards the door on my right with urgency. "Please be a bathroom," I mumble, then I hear the groaning, which makes me pause and turn toward the sound.

My eyes widen as I take in the hospital bed situated steps away from a giant king-sized bed. I am almost overwhelmed by the size of the room, which is larger than the house I share with my aunt and uncle.

When I notice the occupant's sad face, his entire body encased in plaster casts, I feel embarrassed for staring, but the feeling doesn't have time to sink in before my need presses again. "Where is the bathroom, please?" I asked. He raises a single finger that isn't encased in plaster, showing the opposite end of the door I am heading towards. Without another word, I race toward the direction he points, not bothering to close the door or care if he can hear me.

I ease myself, moaning in relief that I didn't pee on myself. Once done, I washed my hands and stepped back into the room. Now I notice more about him and the grand room with the cathedral ceiling and expensive looking drapes. My eyes roam the room shamelessly open, admiration for the grandeur before resting on the man covered in plaster cast and gauze. Large gauze covered the left side of his face and his head. His nose looks cracked, weirdly he looks good with the crack.

“Hi, I’m Mariam, thanks for letting me use your bathroom” He doesn’t respond. “I couldn’t find it.” I pause. He’s not saying a word. Maybe he isn’t even able to speak.” This is my first time here; your home is lovely.” I force a smile. “I almost knocked off a vase in my search for a bathroom, which would have been a total disaster.” A sad chuckle escapes me at the vase I almost knocked down in my quest for a bathroom. He doesn’t speak but I can feel his grey colored eyes on my face, so I look everywhere in the room but at him. “I didn’t ask Taimani for the nearest bathroom, which was stupid, but hey I found a bathroom thanks to you.” Silence. Silence. *Awkward and more awkward.*

I remain standing and him staring at me in awkward silence, and me staring at my feet and fidgeting with my braids. I know he can hear me, and he understands me. Maybe *he can’t talk*. The silence is deafening. Guess that’s my cue to leave. “Thanks again” I turn to leave, still unsure why I spilled all the extra stuff to him. Guess I don’t want him to think I’m snooping, *now I care.*

“Sit with me.” I hear the deep, croaky voice that stops me in my slow stride. I make a slow-motion turnaround. His gray eyes were so intense that it was hard to ignore his silent invitation, but I managed to look away. His chiseled face and cracked nose give him an attractive, edgy look.

A strange feeling of wanting to stay engulfs me. I quickly shut it out. I’m wondering why I’m still here. I shouldn’t have paused after peeing; I should’ve run out. My mind raves with a

lot of shoulda, coulda, woulda just as I'm about to provide an excuse.

“Sit with me. I could use the company. I'm Naseer.” His deep voice is clearer now. I sigh, and stare at his eyes, as it entraps me again. I've never looked deeply into anyone's eyes. My mom used to say it was inappropriate. I'm groomed to always look away, but his eyes had me stilled and my heart drumming against my rib cage. “Pull the chair,” he says, and I'm out of my second trance. I look around and see the chair by the door I was initially heading for, so I drag the chair close. I sit.

We remain staring at each other in silence. A feeling of dread creeps in me, that he would keep me locked up in this room, which would be impossible because he can't move, so that's not going to happen. I resume my interior, noticing the design of the cathedral ceiling, and the golden expensive drapes on the windows on each side of the king's bed. His hospital bed looks custom to fit his height and size.

The marble flooring underneath my ballet flat is super shiny. I try not to squirm in my seat, but his grey piercing eyes are making me self-conscious.

“What's your name?” He finally says something to break our silence.

“Jah-day, it's spelled J. a. d. e” I state. Surprised, I gave him my middle name, which is my preferred name. My family and friends in my old school all call me Jah-day, here in Rhanaz,

where I hide my grief and act like I'm a regular teenager. I'm Mariam.

"Nice to meet you Jah-day and I'm Naseer. I hope the bathroom met your need?"

My eyes widened in embarrassment; my skin flames up. Oh *no, he didn't just remind me.*

"Don't be embarrassed, I'm just asking?"

"It's a lovely bathroom," I mutter.

"Good, so what brings you here?"

"A team project with my classmate. We must all work together" I sound upset. I really would have liked to work alone and not be in a group. By the way, they were treating me. I can't wait till I graduate.

"Taimani invited you over?"

"Yes"

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen, I turn seventeen on March 1st." That's all I do these days, count the days till I can leave for the US.

"Good to know. I promise to remember."

"You don't need to remember. It's not important, it's just another date on the calendar." I sincerely state. I don't care about my next birthday without my parents.

"But I will."

"Okay, suit yourself." I shrug.

“Any special meaning to your name, Jade?”

“No idea.” I lie, seems weird someone would ask me what my name means.

“Maybe you should ask your mom?”

“A little impossible since she’s dead,” I state succinctly, with a sad chuckle to mask my discomfort.

“Am sorry to hear that. How did she die?”

“They died in a fire accident.”

“They?”

“My mom and dad both died in the fire. Now I live with my aunt and uncle here in Rhanaz. My aunty teaches at Rhanaz International School, and my uncle works somewhere in the business district. Now that I think about it, I don’t know what he does.” I shrug, not caring.

“Sorry about your parents. May they rest in peace.”

“Thank you,” I mutter.

“What happened to you?” I ask, turning the questions to him. Talking about my parents is never a good thing. Still feels like an infected wound for me.

“I was riding too fast on my motorcycle and a car came out of nowhere. I tried to avoid the car, and then I got hit by another car. The hit threw me in the path of the third car, tossing me in the air. I landed on a fourth car., I’m surprised to be alive, and I have no idea how long I’m going to be in this plaster cast. I’m told it’s a miracle I didn’t break my spinal

cord. Doctors say I would need intense therapy to walk again. I'll find out how intense down the road."

He sounds dejected like something has already crumbled his world. As I look at him, all I wish is to give him hope. Remind him. He's alive. My parents are gone and buried. They were burned. They died a painful death. He can still breathe; he needs to cherish that simple detail.

"So, they say you can walk again. I think that's good news. Now, all you need to do is patiently heal your bones and start your intense therapy.

"Patience is a virtue I lack. I doubt I'll make it that far to walking again."

"You will. Who knows, maybe I'll have my first dance in Rhanaz with you. I've been told the dance night is a big deal in Rhanaz," I say, not sure where that came from, but I feel a need to give him hope. After all, don't we all need hope? Besides, sharing hope is free. He laughs. I recently read how powerful hope is and that's all I have to give and share.

"You know, making a person with broken ribs laugh isn't a good thing."

"Well, I didn't make you laugh. You laughed on your own, and I'm convinced you'll walk if you do the therapy, and I'll look forward to a dance with you."

"Guess I have my work caught out for me."

I nod. "You certainly do," I respond in a sassy tone, not sure where that came from. But I find his situation just as sad as

mine. We both have scars.

“Tell me, who is Jade and what does she like to do?”

“You first. Who’s Naseer?”

“I asked you first, Jade.”

“Be a gentleman and tell the lady” I smirk “Maybe the lady can tell you about herself,” I grin.

“Guess we are gent and lady.”

“Yep,” I agree with a smile.

“How about we make a deal? You tell me who Jade is and tomorrow when you return to sit with me? I’ll tell you who Naseer is. Agreed?”

“I can’t return tomorrow. I’m only here today.”

“Why is that?”

“Because the group meet-location is on rotation. Tomorrow’s meeting is at another classmate’s home. If you ask me, not like you are asking. I think they all agreed to the rotation, so they could show off their homes. I won’t be inviting them to my house. On my day, we would be at the school library. Which is where we should be working.”

Naseer smiles. “I think the library is a good place for schoolwork.”

“I think so too,” I agree.

“How do we fix the problem we have?”

“Problem?”

“I still want to know who Jade is.”

“How about you tell me who Naseer is, and when he’s walking again, which I’m positive by the school dance, you’ll be walking. I can tell you all about Jade,” he chuckles.

“Now that isn’t fair, Lady, I tell you all about me, but I have to wait months to know all about you.”

“Gent, that’s the only option on the table,” I say with a smile as he laughs.

“I told you not to make me laugh. It hurts.”

“Again, I didn’t make you laugh.” I smile at him. He’s easy to talk to. I lower my shield and relax my strung nerves for the first time in weeks.

“I’ll tell you who Naseer is if you promise to tell me who Jade is, the next time you are here.”

“Could be a while, but you got yourself a deal. Start talking, Gent.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Tell me everything.” I sit back, ready to listen. Not in a hurry to join the group.

“Where do I begin?” he says casually like he’s going to take his time. Before he could start speaking, I heard my name. Taimani is looking for me.

“Mariam! Mariam!” Who knew Taimani could be this loud? I’ve lost track of time talking with Naseer. He’s fun to talk to.

“I have to go, Gent; I can hear Taimani calling for me. Guess they finally noticed my absence.”

“They sure did. Will you come back tomorrow?”

“I doubt that’s possible, but it was nice meeting you and I hope you are back on your feet soon.”

“Thanks, Goodbye Lady I ...”

“There you are, Mariam, have been looking all over for you,” Taimani says, barging in.

“Sorry, I was just saying goodbye,” I answered, getting to my feet. I noticed the surprised look on her face was quickly drained.

“Come on, the group has decided we meet at two houses only instead of going to everyone’s home. The vote has come down to here and Nicky’s house and it’s currently a tie for the next meeting. You will be the deciding vote. Come quick,” she says, racing out after talking so fast, not bothering to see if I followed.

“Jade, pick here, so we can talk more,” Naseer says. I simply nod as I follow Taimani.

I was going to pick Nicky’s house because I’ve heard a lot about her home. When they put the basket of colored papers in front of me to pick one. In a moment of pause, I realize I would like to speak to Naseer again. The colored pink and green paper are turned so I can’t tell which paper belongs to whose house. My eye catches Taimani. She mouths *pink* at me. It was quick; the others didn’t notice.

I roam my hand to the green, but the desire to speak to Naseer again makes me lean towards pink and I see the excitement from the group that picked pink, which means the next meeting is here at Taimani's house. When it is time to leave, the expensive cars arrive one after the other. Taimani and I wave goodbye to each classmate.

"I'm surprised you were talking to my brother," she says, the moment it's just the two of us.

"I'm sorry. I was looking for the bathroom and accidentally opened the door. He asked me to sit and talk to him." She gasps in shock.

"Naseer, asked you to stay?" she asks, still wearing a stunned look.

"Yes," I answered. "I didn't know you had a brother; you never mention him." She becomes guarded.

"We don't talk about him and don't tell anyone you talked to my brother; promise me you won't mention him." Though it was a request, the tone was firm.

"Okay, I promise" doesn't make sense, but she holds my hand hard and stares me down. "I promise.

Luckily, my uncle pulls up. I quickly bid Taimani goodbye. All the excitement about the next meeting was gone once we talked about her brother, which is strange. Still unsure why she made me promise, but I won't tell anyone.

I'm happy they squashed the idea of going from house to house. I had no plans to bring them to my home, anyway.

I ride in silence with my uncle. As the conversation with Naseer plays in my mind. I conclude that I like him very much. Yes, I want to see him again. I certainly forgot my worries while talking with him. We had a non-judgmental conversation and peace. I feel a little sad that I might not see him again. Much as I would like to.

NASEER



I smiled for the first time in months after she left. She made me laugh. I'd heard the door open gently, and I'd tried to turn but ended up grunting in pain. She'd looked my way and looked frightened as she asked for the bathroom. I pointed her in the direction. Made me chuckle as she raced to the bathroom, forgetting to close the door.

She came out and stood by my bed; I didn't hear a thing she said, but I watched her. She's tall and beautiful. Even as she looked untidy in the uniform. I felt a jolt when she pulled her braids off her face and feigned a smile at me. When I didn't smile back, she stopped smiling and remained quiet before she turned to leave.

I noticed she didn't run away when she saw me in my state. She was closer to the door when my thought went, "*Are you going to let her leave?*"

I spoke up and all I could say was "*Sit with me,*" which surprised me when I invited her to stay. My parents and my childhood friend who's also my bodyguard are the only people

that stay, only because I can't force them out and any mean words don't shake them. Taimani stopped coming to see me because I yelled at her. Yet I asked this Jade girl to stay.

She stopped and turned. Then pulled the chair and sat with me, which surprised me. I smiled for the first time in months. I could talk to her for days and not get bored. As we talked, I heard Taimani calling out for her, but she called her Mariam, not the name she told me.

She left with Taimani; I hope she picks the card that would bring them here. I want to talk to her again. I press the nurse's light. Nurse Rae comes in.

“Can you ask my sister to come and see me?”

“Okay.” She leaves.

Taimani arrives, all excited as always. “Naseer, you wanted to see me?” she asked, surprised.

“Yes, how was your project meeting with your friends?”

“It was fine. Mariam picked the pink, so they will come here twice a week and to Nicky's house once a week. Mariam seemed happy about it, too. I liked her ideas, but the boys kept shutting her down.”

“Is she new to your school?” I ask, wanting to know more about Jade.

“Yes, she joined us a few months ago. She lives with her aunt and uncle. She's dubbed the smartest girl in school, she's quiet, mostly because no one speaks to her, and some boys like

to prank her.” Surprisingly, she wasn’t quiet with me. Guess they don’t know how to get her talking.

“Do you like her?”

“I do, but she doesn’t talk much and not to worry. She has promised not to talk about you.” This is what my life has become. My younger sister is protective of me. I nod.

“Maybe you need to invite her over more often and you can get to know her then.”

“Maybe I will. Hopefully, she says yes.”

“She will if you try to be her friend.”

“Thanks, Nas.” She gets up, kisses my head, and rushes out. I smile, and just like that, I know Jade will be back and she has promised me a dance. Now I need my bones to heal.

JADE



I gently knock on the door. I'm eager, however, I've tapered my excitement. Taimani said he'd requested to see me. She's certain that's a good thing. The school required community service hours. Since I joined the school in January, my hours were reduced. I did not know where to complete my hours. Taimani suggested that visiting her brother would count towards the hours "Better than cleaning the beach," she'd joked.

I took the paper home for my aunt and uncle to sign the permission slip. Aunty Lara didn't like the idea of me going to sit with a man, but my uncle reminded her it was better than me sitting at home and crying. She then said, "A beautiful young girl and handsome man is always a recipe for disaster. I can almost see it."

He'd replied, "He can't kidnap her and Jade spending time with someone healing may give her purpose. It's better than her returning home after school and crying in her room alone." That was a surprise to hear. I didn't know they heard me

crying. Many a night, I'm reminded of my loss, and I cried myself to sleep.

Aunty Lara then said, "Fine, I'll sign but not without noting that I can see the writing on the wall, and you better be ready to deal with it when it comes."

All I heard was they were signing the permission slip for me to see Naseer daily. I didn't care about anything else. I just want to sit with him and laugh with him.

Now here is my heart drumming again. The nervous looks and snide comments from the nurses don't help. I'm scared he might become a person from the last visit. Still, I straighten myself and put up a bold face.

"Come in," he bellows.

Exhaling, I put my big girl pants on and gently opened the door.

"Hi, Gent." I nervously say, not sure what else to say.

"Hi, Lady," he responds with a smile. Relief washes through me. I smile back. "Come and sit with me, lady."

I get closer to the bed, and I pull out the chair I'd sat on the last time; it looks like it was waiting for me. Which is, of course, silly.

"Taimani said visiting me will help with your school's required hours of social service." "Yes and thank you for agreeing to let me visit you. I'll be here after school with Taimani on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday if that's okay with you." I state, avoiding his eyes. I thought it was a fluke

the last time they pulled me in. It wasn't a fluke. There's something about him that calls to me. "I don't have any visitors, so that should be fine." I nod in response. "Would you like to watch a movie?" he asks. "Sure, maybe we can make a chart of movies we would like to watch." "A chart?" he says quizzically. "I like to plan. The better planned and prepared you are, the less chaos."

"This should be interesting. I didn't plan in the past. I go with the flow, but we can try your way," he casually says. "How do you prepare if you don't plan?" He sounds strange to me. *Who doesn't plan?*

"The flow is better and more intriguing."

I roll my eyes; this should be interesting. Unfortunately, for me, I'm now stuck with him and can't change my social hours selection because once the head mistress signs you can't change your selection.

Week over week, my routine became visiting Naseer. We talk non-stop about everything and nothing. I got so comfortable laughing with him that I told him, I've never kissed a boy. His first look was surprise, then he reminded me not rush about kissing a boy. He tells me more about the places he had traveled to and his friend, Brian, who he was competing with when he had the accident was cousin to his college roommate Ken, but he and Brian were closer. Josh was the fourth guy who was Brian's roommate and they all got along well. Now he has refused to see anyone of them. Even his close cousin Raheem. I didn't like that, but I kept quiet.

And tell him about Tito and me, how we have been friends since kindergarten.

Most days I'm eagerly waiting for Taimani's to ride with her. Naseer and I watch movies and eat together. I make him watch Sci-fi movies with me which he doesn't like. We have created a chart of all the movies we want to watch together. I have gotten to know more about his likes and dislikes.

He has names for his two nurses. One is sloppy, and the other is efficient. I've found him to be quick to anger. His first outburst scared the living daylight out of me. I sat quietly as he unleashed his beast on his nurse because she relayed a message. The next day after his outburst, I made an excuse about having to finish some homework and didn't visit him. Honestly, I didn't want to return for fear he might lash out at me.

When I didn't show up on the third day, he called and I didn't have any excuse for him, so I showed up on my next scheduled day, which was five days after seeing his outburst.

"Why didn't you show up last week, Jade?" I can hear the false calm in his voice.

"I didn't like the way you yelled at your nurse; I feel you might do that to me," I'd said, looking straight at him. I don't hide from his eyes anymore.

"I would never shout at you like that."

"You can't promise that Naseer, you are too quick to anger to control it."

“I can and I promise you that won’t happen.” I nod though I doubt he has ever seen how scary he looks. “Please sit with me, if you don’t, I won’t do my therapy and I won’t call my friends.”

“Fine, I’ll sit with you only on the condition that you are nicer to your nurses. I don’t like you yelling at them.” I do want him back on his feet so he can return to seeing the world and enjoying life again.

“Okay, I will be patient and nicer to my nurses,” he says grumbling.

I took my usual seat next to his bed and mentioned James to him. I noticed he’d frowned, but I needed to talk to someone, and he’s the only close friend I have besides Tito. Telling Taimani would be telling the whole school which would be a social suicide. James is now talking to me, last few days when I didn’t visit Naseer, I stayed back at school to talk with James.

“So, you like this James boy.”

“Yes, and I think he likes me too, so what should I do?” I eagerly ask.

“Don’t do anything. He’ll come to you. If he’s serious,” he answers dryly.

“Thanks, Naseer.” Happy for his advice, we returned to our old selves, and I spent the day telling him more about James.

He listened without any comment but a stoic face and didn’t laugh at any of the funny stuff James and I did. After a long

moment of him not responding or laughing. I changed the topic and played a movie.

NASEER



The damn sloppy nurse has me in an upright position. As always, she forgot most of the supplies to treat my back wound. Now I'm upright and uncomfortably awaiting her return. Jade will be here soon, and I do not want her to see my marred body.

It's too early to scare her away from me with a body that looks like mine. Before I could reach my call bell. I hear the tap on the door. "Hi Gent". My eyes widen. Fuck! *She's early.* I look at the mirror that the nurse uses to show me my back.

She can't see my face from where she's standing, I can see her face through the mirror. I wait for the look of despair and disgust. "Gent, can you hear me?"

"Yes, sorry. I'm not comfortable in this position and the nurse says she forgot stuff to dress my back" She's now in front of me. Untidy as always in her uniform, smiling at me. I chuckle back, though I would prefer she didn't see my scar.

“I can dress your wound if you don’t mind, so you can lie back down. I used to help my mom. She was an ortho nurse.” I nod as I search her face for the look that’ll tell me she’s disgusted by my body. When I look at her, all I see is a smiling face.

“I think I have most of what I need here, not sure what the nurse thought she forgot” She rubs the healing ointment on my back. Her touch on my body sends waves of pleasure and pain all over my body and mind. Pleasure my body is experiencing at her touch and pain because I can’t respond to the pleasure. I haven’t felt this kind of pleasure in months. It’s a release, but I must stay controlled and sit through it all. Her closeness makes it possible to sniff her floral scent, with her touch arouses my senses.

I know I like her company, but the awakened body response is new to me, my senses are heightened by her closeness. My whole being wanted to claim every part of her. My body is fighting within itself to break free and wrap her body around me. I close my eyes to exact control and remain calm as she wraps the elastic bandage around my body. Just as she’s finishing, the nurse comes in

“I’m so sorry, Prince Naseer, to have kept you waiting. I had to get more ointment and a new wrap, and when I couldn’t find the bandage after looking, I realized it’s already here.” She stops in her tracks when she notices Jade already did her job. “Oh, Hello Ms. Bankole.”

“Hi, Nurse Jenson. Hope you don’t mind me helping.” She turns a smiling face to the nurse.

“Not at all, long as Prince Naseer is okay with that.” This stupid woman just revealed my title to Jade.

“I don’t mind, just help me lie back down.” They both assist in getting me to lie back down.

“Do you need anything else, Your Highness?”

“No, please leave,” I snap at her, she packs up and leaves. I know I specifically told them not to address me as Prince Naseer in Jade’s presence. Once again, this woman has shown her incompetency.

Right now, I need to focus on Jade.

She pulls her usual chair and sits next to me. “Did I hear Nurse Jenson calling you Prince Naseer or are my ears acting up?” she asks, no point lying to her.

“You heard her correctly. I’m Prince Naseer.”

“Oh, my god! I didn’t know, no one told me,” She covered her face in embarrassment.

“It’s fine, I still prefer you call me Gent, anyway.”

“I feel so silly. I’d heard about Prince Naseer in whispers since I landed in Rhanaz, but I didn’t connect the dots that you are *the* prince. Taimani said nothing either, and the prince has a different last name from you and Taimani. Just how are you, the prince? Everyone keeps whispering about for fear of being

thrown in the dungeons and you are Taimani's brother. She's not a princess, as far as I know."

"I'll explain the different last name another time. First, tell me what they are saying about me."

"All kinds of stuff, like you are not nice." She smirks. "Some think you're dead since no one has seen you in months. Others say you can't walk is the reason no one has heard from you. There are no pictures of you anywhere in the store or around. Guess it all got pulled down. I've heard it all, like maybe you're amputated or deformed or, worse, dead."

"What do you think?" I ask, waiting for the real opinion that matters to me.

"I think the only half-truth is you are grumpy and mean when upset. I have nicknamed your evil twin GET," she says, making me laugh "If you can control GET, then everything said about you is a lie, except the grumpy default." She nods, confirming to herself that she has found a solution to end the gossip.

"What is GET, Jade" I want her to only see good when it comes to me.

"Grumpy Evil Twin," I laugh. "See, it's perfect. You yell at your nurses and most times are just grumpy, especially when you don't get your way."

If only she knew her opinion is all that matters to me. She doesn't know it but long as she sits with me my evil twin will always be caged.

“So, how can we help me to keep GET locked up.” Chin up, index finger tapping her chin, side eyeing me like she’s seriously thinking about this. Though I see the mischief in those brown eyes and taunting lashes.

“You can control GET by being nice and trying not to release the ugly side of you all the time. Kind of like putting a leash on the beast.” I laugh at the way she’s telling me to put a leash on my imaginary beastly twin. None of the women I’d dated in the past had the guts to tell me, yet this sixteen-year-old girl tells me, and I’m smitten rather than upset. More importantly, I want to lock GET up just to please her.

Her opinion matters to me.

“Okay, I’ll work on that.” The beauty of us is the fact she’s seen every ugly thing about me and she’s not running. I smile inwardly. Miracles do happen when you least expect them. Jurea, my ex, broke up with me after she saw me angry. She couldn’t stand it. I’d unleashed on her incompetent assistant, who had cried, then quit, which upset Jurea.

Jade saw my anger; she stayed calm through it. However, she expressed her dislike for my outburst later, and I’ll do everything to keep from ever releasing my beast around her.

“Also, you can try calling your friends back. No man is an island. We all need our friends. I doubt I would be happy if Tito refused to speak with me.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You’ve been saying that for months and you haven’t called them back. I’m starting to think you are the bad friend and not them.”

“Aren’t you a pushy lady today?” He smirks.

“Just calling you out on your not-so-friendly manners, Prince Naseer.” She smirks.

“Fine, I promise to call Brian tomorrow.” She immediately put her hand out.

I look at her. “Let’s shake on it to seal your promise.”

I chuckle and shake her hand. That feels so soft and small in mine. Looking at her, I know I can’t deny her anything. I’ll give her the world just to have her smiling at me.

After she left, I pondered on her words that I’m the bad friend because if they didn’t want to see me, they wouldn’t keep calling. Since I promised Jade and shook on it. I’m going to call my friends back and control GET.

NASEER



Jade is here, visiting right on schedule. I've had a rough morning. I should have told her to leave and come back tomorrow, then I remember tomorrow is Friday. She only stops by after the group work. I won't see her for the next three days and Monday is a holiday, which means it will be four days. I have become accustomed to visiting and enjoying her company, but today I'm in pain, nothing is easing my grip, and the surge emanating from every part of my body. My bones are feeling sore like they were slowly cracking within my body. I know my bones aren't cracking, but it sure feels that way. The pain is excruciating.

"How can I ease your pain, your highness?" The nurses ask in a soft tone like their tone is going to ease my pain or make the pain snap away. Even more damning is the look of despair on Jade's face. I'd pressed the button for the nurse, and she knows the moment she sees my face.

"Get out!" They can't ease the pain; they can't give me any more medication. Their asking is just ridiculous. The drugs

will kick in, but it's going to take a while. "Get the fuck out! I don't want to see you."

I hear the door close. My pain continues to emanate. I feel cold but I'm covered in blankets, and it doesn't ease the cold or the bone-cracking pain I feel.

I scream out loud and in comes my nurse again. "What can I do to help, Prince Naseer?"

"Nothing. How much longer before I get the next dose? This pain is killing me."

"I'm sure it is, but your Highness, more medicine might ease the pain now, but it won't help you in the long run. If you become addicted to the meds. We need your body to do some of the work without medication."

"Stop telling me what I know. I need the medicine now!" I shouted out loud.

"Please, Prince Naseer, just hang for a little longer." Jade pleads.

"Get out of here and don't ever come back!" I yelled at her. How could she ask me to hang on a little longer? This pain is unbearable.

"Please, Gent, I can't bear to see you like this. I know the pain is excruciating, but please hang in a little longer."

"Did you not fucking hear me? Get the fuck out and don't ever return!" I lash out at Jade.

“You don’t mean that. Let me stay till you feel better,” she pleads. I could see the sadness in her eyes. I care not.

“I mean it, get out and don’t ever return or I will have you arrested for disobedience,” I repeat louder.

I see the tears in her eyes, but I don’t care. I have my pain to worry about and I don’t like her seeing me like this; she fails to realize it. I would rather throw her out than have her see me this helpless. I see the tears drop before she walks out.

I continued to rave in pain until the hour I received my next dose.

Waking up the next morning, I can move my body. The pain is still there but manageable. I remained in my bed all day. Didn’t want to speak with anyone. I know I wasn’t pleasant yesterday, but who’s pleasant when in pain?

The nurses helped with managing my pain and getting me ready for therapy. Therapy was brutal, but I needed to get it done. It was killing me and healing me at the same time.

I stayed on the path; I haven’t heard from Jade, much as missed her daily. I needed to talk to her to laugh with her, but I had sent her packing because I didn’t want her to see me in the state I was in. I also know her well. She exhibits mild stubbornness that is not easily noticed. I know I owe her an apology but she’s not even giving me a second of her time.

I know she won’t return to me even if I asked nicely, but I asked, and she rejected me politely too.

Two weeks now and no Jade. I call her phone and it's off. I asked Taimani to invite Jade over and she turned down every request. Taimani gave me her new number; she answered on the first ring because she didn't know it is me.

"Hello."

"Jade, it's Naseer," I gently confirm. I'm certain she knows my voice by now.

"Hello, Your Highness" her tone is stern.

"Can you stop by tomorrow; I need to speak with you?" I say almost pleading.

"I have been ordered to never step foot in the Darabi residence and if I do, I will be arrested. I can't disobey this order, Your Highness." Fuck, I said that to her. I don't have to see her face to know it hurt her.

"I'm sorry, I said that to you. No one will arrest you. I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"Well, my aunty has said I must not return to your residence, and I can't disobey that order as well. Thank you for being nice to me. This is where we say our goodbyes. My hours of service are completed."

"Yes, I know that. I signed the papers remember," I answered calmly, much as wanted to decree her to come and see me.

"Yes, you did. I must go now. My uncle needs me, goodbye and I wish you a speedy recovery."

She hangs up before I can say more. I try calling but the phone is switched off. I didn't expect her to come running but I certainly didn't expect the complete brush-off. She's clueless if she thinks I'll ever let her go.

I waited for two days and call the line again, no answer. I sent Rilwan to speak with her, but nothing comes of it, and she says she's busy with homework and chores. Rilwan reports to me that she has a part-time job after school. I don't like it when he tells me that some guy is always giving her a ride home after work. That doesn't settle well with me.

I sent her favorite chocolate, and she returned it. I know buying her the shining items would upset her more. Short of going to beg at her doorstep, I did everything, stubborn Jade would not speak to me.

I'm missing her and Jade not speaking is making me cranky. I'm grumpy and mean to my nurses and therapist. I refused to eat. The downside to that is the fact I can't take my pain meds on an empty stomach, which also backslides any improvement I'd made, and my dad took that personally.

He asked why I was refusing to eat and take my meds. I told him all I wanted was for Jade to come and speak with me and she refused. I had tried everything, short of going in person to her house or issuing a king's summons. My dad listened to me. I continued to call Jade and to my surprise, she answered a few days after speaking with my dad.

"Hello, Prince Naseer."

"Jade, when can you visit?"

“I’ll be there tomorrow” I detect, annoyance in her voice, but she’s showing up and that’s all I care about.

JADE.



I showed up as promised, internally kicking, and screaming. I missed him but like I'd mentioned to him. He needs to control that race car anger that has no brakes. In the weeks since I stopped visiting. James and I became closer, we talked more. James is very sweet, turns out we have a lot in common. I was so elated when he asked me to *the dance*. I honestly spent the day grinning from ear to ear.

Taimani was excited when I told her James asked me to the dance. She said we would look fabulous together and we could couple with her and Tony, her boyfriend, that she's smitten about.

But the moment Naseer's eyes locked with mine my heart galloped, and my senses awakened to his presence. All the laughter and fun with James was all smoke screen to hide the person that makes me happy and helps me forget my sorrows.

Annoyingly, Grumpy is the only one that makes my heart happy.

“I missed you Lady, and I’m sorry I yelled at you that day. I didn’t want you to see me in pain,” he said as soon as I walked you.

“Friends hang around to laugh and heal pain, not run when you are in pain, Gent.”

“I’m sorry Jade, that I chased you away from me, please forgive me Lady, and sit with me.” I nodded.

“Naseer, I know you like to command and be in control, and behind all that is someone funny and friendly. But you and I can’t be friends if you are being mean to people or not controlling that anger.”

“I will try and I’m sorry.”

I took my seat next to him and told him about my new job and James.

“So, James asked you to *the* dance.” A simple ask but I noticed the roughness in his tone, but I’m too happy.

I blushed. “Yes, and I’m excited about the dance with James but I will still come and dance with you since it was my promise to you.”

“I didn’t forget about that and I’m holding you to it.”

I nodded, noticing his stoic face, I changed topic. I asked, “How come you are called Prince Naseer and Taimani isn’t called a princess? Shouldn’t you both be prince and princess?”

“The current King, my uncle, can’t have children, so he adopted myself and my cousin Raheem as his sons. Since we

are of royal blood, the adoption was accepted and decreed us as princes, making either one of us next in line to the throne.

My grandfather signed the papers and made sure all our documents with our names were retitled with Prince before them and I took on the Raimlat last name, which is my mother's maiden name. My grandfather raised Raheem and me in the palace, teaching us everything about our role. Raheem's grandfather and my grandfather were brothers. Raheem's dad is my grandfather's nephew and he died with Raheem's mom in a car accident. Raheem was supposed to leave with them that day, but I'd challenged him to a game, and they told him to stay with us that night only they didn't return.

My grandfather decided to raise him, and he knew the only way Raheem would be happy in the palace was with me there, so he raised us together. When they realized my uncle couldn't have children. My grandfather pushed for the adoption. My grandfather wanted either of us to be able to take the role when the time comes.”

“Interesting, so you and Raheem are technically second cousins, and your last name is Raimlat, not Darabi.”

“Yes, I took my mother's maiden name. I don't use Darabi anymore since the change.”

“Your dad, Mr Darabi, doesn't mind the adoption?”

“No, he sees it as an opportunity for me to serve my country at the highest position.”

“Why didn’t he adopt Taimani as well?” “No need to make her a princess, she still can’t rule.”

“Double standard, don’t you think?” I smirk.

“Yeah, but Taimani doesn’t want anything to do with royal life so no use wasting the decree on her.” I smirk back.

“So, you are His Royal Highness, Prince Naseer.”

“Yes, you can call me Naseer when we are alone. When another person is present always call me Prince Naseer. Don’t forget, it’s very important.”

“Okay.” I nod.

“I’m serious, Jade, when we have another person present, address me as Prince Naseer.”

“Why don’t I just call you Prince Naseer that way, I won’t need to remember anything.”

“My friends call me Naseer and Prince Naseer. You can do it; I happen to know you’re very smart.”

“I pretend to be smart, see I tricked you.” I tease. “What do you want to do today.”

“I thought we agreed to watch a rom-com.”

“We can watch an action movie. I like things blowing up.”

“Action it is then.”

“Since you are a prince, you have to marry a princess right,” I ask to confirm the reality to myself.

“No, I do not,” he stated matter-of-factly.

“Very funny, I’m sure you missed that part in the decree where it says you must marry a well-bred, prim, and proper princess.”

“I’m quite sure I didn’t miss that, Jade. I can marry anyone I choose.”

“Guess we’ll see if that’s true when you eventually get married. I’ll be watching from the sidelines and smirking when you end up with a princess. I should probably put a hefty wager on it now.”

“What about you? Would you marry a Prince, a possible future king?”

“Nope, I won’t. I don’t think a palace life is for me. I still have college and the life of a single lady ahead of me.” I didn’t even try to think about it.

“So, if a king asks you to please marry him?”

“The answer would be *NO*.”

“Why may I ask is the reason for a solid *NO*.”

“I don’t think the life of a queen is for me, college first, then life as a single girl, having lots of happy hour moments that I’ve seen in movies, then getting married and being a mom of three and having my own software company where I can be the boss. Being the wife of a King would not let me work, and I can’t have my own software company.”

“What if you love the hypothetical future king.”

“I won’t be myself if I can’t work and fulfill my dream ... so no king for me.”

He smiles at me.

“Besides, the chances of me meeting and falling in love with a king are super-duper slim.” I exhale. “Let’s watch *Bad Boys II*, okay?”

“Fine by me,” he says.

NASEER



I feel like an idiot admitting strong feelings for a sixteen-year-old girl when I'm ten years older, worse yet, she's has never been kissed. Compounding it all, she's my younger sister's friend. Some of Taimani's friends had crushes or should I say had crushes on me, back when I had my swagger but these days, my confidence bar is low, I'm just a rich guy in a plaster cast and a wheelchair, could that be the reason or because she's a beautiful woman, though she's unaware of her beauty. *No, idiot she's a girl, not a woman* Maybe that's where the problem lies.

I see her as a woman, my woman to be exact but the reality is she's a girl and I need to see her like a girl but why does my heart quicken whenever she walks in, or do I feel sad when she must leave, or more importantly, I get upset when she talks about boys like she's supposed to as a teenager. I always change the topic and make her focus on me in hopes she will forget the boy, James.

That hasn't worked yet because, whenever she gets a chance, James is all I hear. Is she trying to torment me, or she can't see herself with me?

For the first time in my life, I'm at the receiving end of unrequited attraction, something I have never experienced. Women typically chase after me for my looks, title, and money but she doesn't see any of that. I still have my looks though my nose is cracked but she seems to think it makes me look more handsome and I believe her, that is just how much I like this girl.

Money and title can't get me out of bed to take Jade places, it can only make me physically comfortable, somewhat, but it can't do anything regarding my heart problems.

Why. Why. Why did I ask her to *sit with me*. I should have let her walk out like she was going to, but I didn't. She had paused. I half expected her to turn down my request only she didn't and instead made me laugh.

My first realization was that I liked her company. I then convinced her to return the next day. Only she didn't right away until she had to do the community hours for the social class, my anger made me bark at my care staff. Scaring them shitless.

A knock interrupts my thoughts. "Come in." My friend Brian, whose challenge led to my broken bones, though not his fault. I had refused to see any friends or speak to any of my friends. Jade had said it was a sad way to live. She'd

encouraged me to reach out to all my friends and to start with Brian in particular, since I had the most grievance against him.

He was surprised when I called him and asked him to fly out for a visit.

“Naseer,” he says nervously, this is the first time he’s seen me. I can see his contrite looks.

“Brian, it’s good to see you dude,” I say with a smile.

“Good to see you too,” he gives a throaty reply.

“Brian, I’m healing, stop blaming yourself,” I say to ease the contrite look on his face.

“How can I not? I put you in this bed for no good reason?”

“I accepted the race challenge, Brian; I could have turned it down. I’m just as guilty. You must stop blaming yourself. I’m still here and living to fight daily.” He nods, but he looks sad. “Trust me, I am fine, Brian. I need to share something with you.”

He pulls the chair Jade always sits in.

“When does the cast come off?”

“A few weeks. It can’t come fast enough. They have removed most of the cast just my legs are taking longer.”

“I bet and therapy is next, right?”

“Yes, I started the upper body therapy. Stop worrying. Your worried face looks worse than my mom and we both know she owns the crown on worry.”

He laughs. Good, finally got him to relax.

“First, I need to speak with you about something important.”

“Ok-ay,” he says in a dry tone.

“I met someone.”

“That’s great news,” he says excitedly.

“No, it’s not.”

“Say what now?” He’s perplexed.

“The someone is one of Taimani’s friends and I’m losing my mind here. You’re the only one I can talk to about this.”

“Back up for a second, isn’t Taimani in high school?”

“Yes, and the girl is her classmate,” I say, shocking both of us even more.

“How?” He looks more perplexed, then he starts to laugh, “Only you, Naseer, will be in a plaster cast and still get a girl, a teenage one for that matter.”

“I don’t know how.” I snap, “it just fucking happened.”

“Fine, so what’s the problem?”

“Isn’t that obvious, she’s too young for me and I don’t think she sees me as a partner, how do I make that happen without being too obvious, with a woman we both know what we want is to fuck, in this case, I shouldn’t even be thinking about kissing her let alone wanting to date her.”

“Yep, that’s a problem.” He sighs.

“Before you start convincing me to stop seeing her, you should know she made me call you back and gave me hope

plus several reasons to push towards getting out of bed and wheelchair.

“I doubt you will give her up if I tell you to stop seeing her. It’s written all over your face. I’ve never seen you like this before.”

“At least we are on the same page about something.” We remain silent. I marinating my thoughts.

“You can keep her close to you but please try not bully your way through everything with her if you can manage that” He snickers “You’ll need to let her come to you on her own, I think the only way is, not sharing your intention with her until she’s matured enough. I know this will be hard, but at some point, you’ve got to let her go and wait for her to return to you.”

“I can’t let her go,” I say exasperatedly.

“You can keep her close for now, spend time with her, but when she leaves for college, which I’m guessing she will soon. You must let her experience college without you.”

“At what point will she return to me if I do as you say and let her leave for college? I doubt she would return to me.”

“If she doesn’t return, then she was never yours to begin with.”

“She is mine. I know it,” I snapped.

“Then you have nothing to worry about.” He replies unmoved by my snap.

“And if she forgets about me, what then?” I ask in calm tone.

“Like I said, she wasn’t yours to begin with.”

“And, like I said, she is mine. I will find a way to make her see it.”

“Just how do you plan to do that?”

“I can’t stop her from going to college but will stay close to her life. I honestly think that what you’re telling me to do, let her go so she can return to me is BS, I’m not going to let her go. I know she’s unique, and I know the mold she came from was burned after creating her, so there’s no duplicate. It would be stupid of me to let her go and wait for her to return, thinking it’s chivalrous. Thanks, but no way am I letting her go.”

“What happens if you stay close, and she still chooses another man.” The thought of that puts a stamp on my whole being.

“She won’t, I won’t give another guy a chance to get close.”

“Well, I guess you didn’t need me. But you need to slow down though. Otherwise, this girl might turn you down if you push too hard.”

“I did. You helped me with the plan.” I smirk.

“If you say so, though, I doubt I did anything. You had your mind all made up before I came in. You just needed it voiced.”

“Whatever, man. How’s life on your end?” I ask. I notice his demeanor changes. He leans back in the chair.’

“I’m going to theological school; I want to be a pastor.”

“You are kidding right.” I laugh.

“Nope, after what happened to you. I prayed for you to live and following the path of pastoral ministry is what I promised to do if you lived.”

“Don’t feel obligated to become a pastor because your prayers were answered, and I’m fine.

“I do and I’m happy with the path. Trust me Naseer, you and the guys need me to go this route, we will all meet somewhere in the middle.”

“So, I can’t change your mind.”

“Nope, it’s a done deal.”

“Okay, then. Hurry up and graduate so you can marry Jade and me.”

“Slow down, hot shot. You need to date her first and she needs to agree to marry you.”

“She will. I just need to play my cards right.”

“I need to meet this girl because the Naseer I know was going to be a lifelong bachelor.”

“Pastor or not, you are not meeting her.”

“Oh! I will” He smirks.

“Unless you don’t want us to be friends again, Brian.”

“Fine, we’ll see how this all plays out once you are back on your feet.” He smirks.

“You want to place a wager on it?” I ask.

“Nope, no more wagers for me.” his voice is down “Let’s just not tempt fate again.”

“Agreed,” I answer. No more challenges. The only thing I’m focused on working on being a good enough man for Jade to fall in love with me.”

We spent the next few hours talking about friends Ken, his cousin, and Josh. What they are all up to. Brian encourages me to allow friends to visit me. I promise to reach out to all the friends that have called once my last plaster cast is removed, and I start full therapy.

“How’s Her Royal Highness Princess Nadra?”

“Don’t know and don’t care. I know she isn’t one of the people that requested to see me. Taimani told me messed up Nadra is seeing some British billionaire, as long as she’s staying away from me. I’m fine with that. Aside from her royal title and her father. Nothing about her is appealing to me.”

“Good, that’s one toxic Princess.”

“Now that I think about it, not sure what I ever saw in her.”

“You are both royal blood and your dad encouraged it.”
Brian reminds me of the only simple reason I dated Nadra.

“Dating her was a bad idea with a capital B.”

“Glad that’s over with, but you know she will be back.”

“And I’ll kick her ass out again, After I caught her doing that shit no way do I want her near me.” He laughs. We spent the rest of the day talking and laughing. Until we called it a night. I had my caregiver call Jade. The phone rings multiple times without an answer. She tries again, but still no answer.

Jade always complains that I make my caregiver wait for nothing. I instructed the Rea to leave. Though I wanted her to keep trying Jade. I’ll press the call button in another thirty minutes for her to try again.

I want to believe she’s studying and not on the phone with James. She’s certainly exhibiting all the teenage crushes. It’s upsetting to me, but there is nothing I can do about it.

I will try to keep her close to me till she realizes we are uniquely possible.

JADE



I'm not allowed to look in the mirror until Yasmin is done with my hair and make-up. She looks all serious about making me look the best tonight. We've spent so much time together whenever I come to braid my hair, we talk about my classmates and how I don't fit in the school. I'm just lucky to have guardians who can get me enrolled in a high-end school with overly entitled students.

At first, the school didn't think I could meet the academic standards, but I have surpassed their expectations. I've aced every class, especially my programming language intro class.

Today is all about having fun and not looking like the poor girl in the group.

I'm excited about the dance. James is just as excited about being my date and he's going to meet me at the hall entrance. Aunty Lara and I had gone shopping for a dress. Turns out the school dance is a big deal at Rhanaz International School. Most of the dresses I liked we couldn't afford. Then she had

an idea that we could buy the fabric and her friend Ms. Rina, a seamstress from Columbia, could make the dress for me.

I was thrilled when Ms. Rina brought the dress last night and I tried it on. It fit like a glove. The dress is a lilac chiffon with 3D pink and peach flower applique trim. Ms. Rina had made the dress with short sleeves. All the flowers at the top and the long trims flow down to the ball style of the dress. Not too many flowers, but beautifully placed. I had told my friends at my old school all about the dance. They sound as excited as I am about the dance.

They tell me that I sound better now than when I first arrived in Rhanaz.

Ms. Rina kept her promise and had the dress ready for me in less than two weeks. I took the dress with me to Yasmin's.

I'd seen Taimani's dress, and it was elegant and pricey. I bet all the other girls were also spending a lot on the dress, trying to outmatch each other in their usual style. I couldn't beat them even if I tried.

Naseer had said he would pay for my dress, but I turned down the kind gesture. I didn't want him to do that.

Yasmin finished and said I should put on the dress. She gasped in awe when she saw my lovely dress. My hair is long, curly, shiny, and bouncy down my back. Yasmin had said we should let my real hair down and no braids. After taking my box braid down and washing my hair, she blew my hair out, then put it in twist cornrows, before starting on the make-up. It now sits light and bouncy, with a few rhinestone pins on the

side to add pizzazz with perfectly done makeup. Spinning the chair to the mirror.

I'm awestruck by the beautiful girl smiling at me in the mirror. Finally, I'm convinced Aunty Lara was telling the truth whenever she said, "You are beautiful." I grin at Yasmin, hugging and thanking her for my transformation.

I want to see Naseer. I leave Yasmin's place filled with excitement and happiness.

Naseer had insisted that I must visit him first before going to the dance. He's getting better each day and moving around with crutches, though he still wears braces and sometimes still uses the wheelchair, but we've made progress. He can stand and move a little.

He said I promised him a dance, which I did when we first met. He insists I keep my promise of having a dance with him before going to the school dance. I'd asked my uncle to drop me off at Darabi's residence because Taimani and I planned to go to the dance together.

I can't help but be excited about my first dance with Naseer. A thoughtless promise I'd made and would now become pivotal. James is my date tonight. We get along well. I can tell Lydia's claws are only on me now because she has a crush on James as well. She has made herself my enemy, though I'm still unsure how that's going to play out.

James said he'll wait for me at the dance hall entrance. We can walk in together. I'm intoxicated with excitement.

All plans are in motion. I arrived at Darabi's McMansion, I happily waved goodbye to my uncle. I headed to Naseer's room first, with excitement oozing out of every pore in my body. The nurses weren't in their usual spot, so I decided to go in. I knocked and entered without waiting for a response. Not sure if I heard come in or not. The room is empty, but I can hear muffled sounds.

"Naseer, I'm here. Where are you?" I call out. No response. "Naseer?" I call out again.

"Naseer, where are you?" I called out again, no response. "Gent?" I call again before noticing a poised and well-dressed lady stepping out of the bathroom. She's pretty and looks expensive if I can say so. Everything about her screams glamor and a hefty price tag. I've never seen her before. She looks at me with disdain. My brain immediately thinks of an older brunette version of Lydia.

"Who are you?" she asks in a commanding tone.

"I'm Mariam, here to see Naseer," I state, grinning when I see him on his crutches behind her his mouth drops open in whoa expression, his open admiration gaze holds my eyes. I blush under his stare. Hands behind my back, I sway just as my dress moves with me. I'm completely lost in his eyes. The lady is non-existent in our moment. Naseer is all I see and feel, without touching. The lady moved swiftly to block my view of Naseer before I could realize what was going on.

Her palm strikes my face, making a loud sound in the room.

“How dare you address Prince Naseer by his first name? I should have you reprimanded for insolence!” she shouts in my face. I put my palm to my cheeks as it stung. Looked up to see Naseer scowl.

“I’m sorry” I instinctively move back, then race out of his room to the first bathroom. I now know where most of the bathrooms are in this 20-bedroom, 15-bathroom, 20-car garage, theatre room, staff quarter indoor and outdoor pool house. Tears trickled down my face. My make-up is getting ruined. I dabbed at my face just had Yasmin taught me.

My intoxicated excitement had made me forget the formality. I’m excruciatingly sober. My eyes were on him, his were on me with open admiration. The look on his face made me forget she was in the room with us. I inhale an anguished breath and choose to exhale joy.

That woman, whoever she is, cannot ruin my joy today. I head out and ask one household help to tell Taimani that I’m waiting in the car.

Luckily, Taimani didn’t make me wait. She was down in less than five minutes, dressed in a black and gold dress. Her hair is in wavy curls.

“Oh, my god! Mariam, I love your dress and your hair is beautiful,” she says excitedly.

“Thank you” I manage a genuine smile. Taimani talks about the dance. I try to chat along with Taimani as she talks about all we are going to do, but I’m hurt. No one has ever raised a

hand to hit me before. My parents didn't ever spank or strike me. I got punished but was never hit.

A woman out of nowhere dared to slap me for not saying a title. I don't need to come here again, ever. Stick a fork in me, I'm done.

Once we arrived at the dance. James looked dashing, his expression when he saw me put joy in my heart and a smile on my face. He had a corsage for me. I smiled at how it matched my dress. Once he helped me put it on, He held his elbow out for me to link my arm.

"You are the most beautiful girl here tonight" he whispers. I grin at him; *it's going to be a good evening after all.*

We danced together several times; he wouldn't let go whenever the other boys asked to dance with me. As the night continued, we stepped outside to get some air away from the music and noise.

At first, we remained quiet just enjoying the fresh breeze "You are the best dressed and most beautiful girl." He says in admiration. The look in his eyes tells me he's telling the truth.

"Thank you," I reply, blushing.

"Can I kiss you?" James asks, making me blush more. I lift my head to reach his lips.

NASEER



I can't believe what just happened before my eyes. One minute, I hear Jade calling out for me and I see her looking like a goddess it takes my breath away. It hit me in that moment how much I wanted her with me always. It all happened so fast. Nadra stared at me, but my eyes remained on Jade. Nadra turns and slaps Jade.

Jade runs out, not looking back. I couldn't move fast enough on my crutches. I'd just started moving with them. I moved to my wheelchair and then tried to wheel myself after Jade, but Nadra stood in my way.

"Don't tell me you are going after that stupid little girl who didn't show respect for your title and name."

"Nadra, get the hell out of my way!!" I shouted at her. Startled that I would shout at her, she moves out of my way. By the time I wheel myself out. I see the car leaving.

I returned to my room. Nadra is relaxed, flipping through a magazine like nothing had just happened. I snatch the

magazine out of her hand and toss it.

“Nadra! Get out of my house and don’t ever come back. I don’t want to speak to you again. Today, I’ll forgive you for your action because you didn’t know any better, but don’t assume I’ll ever forget it. Next time you see Mariam, I don’t care wherever in the world your paths cross again. Do not speak to her. If you do and I find out. I won’t be so kind. Take this as a warning from me. Now leave before I have my men escort you out.”

“You will throw away our history for a nobody, little girl.”

“I don’t care who you think she is, but right this minute. I need you to get the fuck out of my house and don’t ever return. I don’t understand why you are here. My accident didn’t impair my memory. We broke up so let’s keep it that way. Stay the fuck away from me Nadra. I don’t want you here.”

“Fine.” She picks up her purse and leaves.

I sigh. She’d just ruined my plans. I’d worked hard to have that first dance with Jade. I can now stand and move better with crutches. I’d wanted that moment to be special. I’d planned to drop her off at the dance myself. Now because of Nadra, she raced out of here crying, straight into that boy’s arms. I grunt. I didn’t invite Nadra here. She showed up and ruined my perfectly laid plans, probably ruined things between Jade and me, but I won’t let that happen.

I get back in bed. Anger at Nadra engulfs me. The dance she just ruined got me out of bed. I’d set the dance as my goal for

months. I pushed myself hard so I could stand and dance with her. Now, I might never get the one thing I worked so hard to get. Rilwan comes in a few minutes later.

“When should we get the car ready?”

“Please cancel the evening plans. Nadra already ruined it.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Good night,” I say to him. He nods and leaves. I lay in bed playing the moment Jaded walked in that dress. She was stunning. My god, her hair is beautiful. I hope James behaves himself.

“Do you expect a teenage boy to behave when he sees a beautiful girl like her, especially with the way she looks tonight?” my subconscious responds. “Fuck!” I grunt and scream in anger. When I calm down, I text Taimani to send me pictures of the dance. I remain in bed, raging with thoughts of Jade giving herself to this boy. I want to call Rilwan back and drive to the dance. I’ll look crazy not to mention disturbingly out of place at a high school dance. Knowing Jade, she won’t follow me willingly. Kicking and screaming will be more like it, which would make me look worse.

Taimani soon sends pictures of herself and her friends. It took several pictures before I saw one of Jade with James. He has his arms around her. It irritates me. Then another picture. Jade is gazing lustfully at James. Now, I’m angry and the only person I can blame is Nadra. Fuck! I internally yell. I can still hear the loud sound of fucking Nadra striking Jade. I can’t lose her before I can show her how I feel about her.

“Me: Invite Mariam for a sleepover,” I text Taimani.

“Taimani: Only if you promise not to interrupt our girl time.”

“Me: I won’t. I’ll even buy you that purse you want.”

Taimani: Deal

I exhale. At least any chance of unscrupulous activity between Jade and James will be crushed. I tried to watch Jade’s favorite movie maybe that will help. Hours later.

“Taimani: Mariam said no to sleepover. We just dropped her off at home. I still get the purse right?”

Me: Fine for the purse.

I immediately call Jade’s cell. It rings and no answer. I call again and it doesn’t ring. I know she has shut her phone off. She has a mild stubbornness that rears its head sometimes.

JADE



“**Y**es, I would like that,” I eagerly express. He moved closer and our lips locked. My first kiss feels good and his lips are soft. Our tongues get a rhythm. He tastes good and sweet, but my heart is not fluttering. Isn’t that what all the books and movies say happens? I don’t feel a rush of emotions, but the kiss washes away my sadness, which I guess is what first kisses are supposed to do. We break from the kiss, and he pulls me into a hug.

“I like you a lot, Mariam.” James’ eyes happily hold mine.

“Same here. I like you too,” I reply, grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Good, I was scared you wouldn’t like me,” he says, making me smile. Taking my hand, we returned to the dance and laughed together all night. Taimani invited me over to spend the night at her place. I turned her down.

Though I had a lovely evening with James, my earlier experience in Naseer’s room hadn’t healed by the time she

dropped me off at home. I texted James right away. I have something to smile about.

Me: I had a good time tonight

James: Me too. How about we meet up at Rema Beach tomorrow?

Me: Yes, what time?

James: 3 PM

Me: Ok

James: Goodnight, Mariam

Me: Goodnight, James

My phone rings the moment I hang up with James. I see it's Naseer. I ignored the call and shut my phone off. Tonight, I want to dream of James and real possibilities.

No more dreams of Naseer. It's time I face reality, he could never be mine, we would never be possible. *James is...* I smile the one that puts a smile on my face.

I woke up the next morning happy. Aunty Lara asked about the dance. I was happy to tell her every fun detail. She laughed most of the time, saying half of what we did was very typical of a teenager.

“By the way, Mrs. Muyiwa asked if you would like to come to Lagos this summer. Shola is getting married. She would like you to be there.”

I've always had fun spending time with the Muiyiwa's household. She was my mom's best friend and her daughters,

Shola and Tito, are my friends. Tito and I talk whenever we get a chance. I haven't called to talk to her in a while. Surprised to hear that Shola the older one is getting married, I always thought she would live it up for a while before settling down guess, I was wrong. Weddings are always fun in Lagos. Visiting and hanging out with Shola and Tito should be a pleasant change. A wedding in the mix will make it more fun. I could use the change. Though I still feel the grief of my parents I'm better every day and visiting Lagos should help my healing process.

“Yes, I would like to go if that's okay with you.”

“It's fine with me. I'll buy your ticket and you can leave the same day school is over. I'm glad you enjoyed the dance. I owe Rina a big thank you for that dress.”

“It was the best dress. A few of the girls said they want to meet her.”

“That's great. She might get some worthy business from making your dress.”

“A few of my friends will be at Rema Beach. Can I join them?”

“That should be ok but be back before dark and let me know if you are running late.”

“I will, thank you, Aunty.” I am all smiles.

I returned to my room and rummaged through my closet on what to wear for my date with James. I finally settled on a close-fitting t-shirt and blue shorts. Taimani always said to

show off my legs. I feel they are long and skinny like giraffe legs, but she tells me they are gorgeous, and I should show them off often.

I'm feeling confident today and think it's a good idea. My hair is still wavy. I will enjoy it for a few more days before braiding it again.

I finally turned my phone on and, to my surprise. I have over fifteen missed calls from Naseer. *Annoying* He didn't leave any messages. I sit, exhale, then dial him.

"Jade," he answers on the first ring.

"Hello, your highness," I reply. I had half hoped he wouldn't pick up. Now my heart is beating fast against my chest like it's going to bounce right out. *Why did I call him, last night should've been my break from him?*

"I'm sorry, Jade. I'm sorry Princess Nadra put her hands on you. I've had words with her. That will never happen again." *Just great, she's a princess, well they can live happily never after.*

"Thank you," I calmly reply.

"You looked beautiful last night," he tells me. I want to believe him, but I'm still hurt.

"Thank you"

"When are you coming over today?" he asks. The request is genuine, but I can't see him yet and I need to stay away from him.

“James invited me out today. Can I see you some other time?”

“Can you come over after your date with James?” he says, almost pleading, but Naseer commands. Pleading is certainly not his style.

“Can’t today. I have homework and chores, and the store asked me to come in for a shift.” I lie about the store, but I need to build up my task which leaves no room for him.

“Okay, Jade, I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says. I choose not to tell him I won’t see him tomorrow either. I should avoid him and stick with someone my age. Part of my excitement yesterday was for my first memorable dance with Naseer and hoped he would kiss me.

My feelings had come crashing down when that woman’s palm struck my face. Right now, all I want is to stay away from Darabi’s residence and not get assaulted again to my face or my heart. I got my first kiss with James, that’s what made me smile.

I check out the homework assignments that I have and all I need to do before the school year is over and I can travel to Lagos. Time with friends should help to heal my slowly bleeding heart.

Hours later, I got my sandals on and informed Aunty Lara that I was leaving for the beach.

She waved me goodbye. I texted James that I was heading to the beach and would be there in twenty minutes. He responded

that he would meet me there.

The air feels nice as I step out of the house, maybe everything feels nice because I'm going to see James before I can hail a cab, a black tinted sedan pulls up in front of me and to my surprise, Naseer is sitting in the back seat.

“Get in, Jade,” his tone is terse.

“I don't want to take you out of your way, Prince Naseer. I'll take a taxi,” I state.

“I won't say it again Jade. Get in,” he snaps. I don't like it when he snaps. I want to refuse him but once he gets grumpy his staff will feel his grunt and I wouldn't like to be the cause of their pain, it's best for them, that I do as he says. I get in and refuse to look at him.

“Where are you going to?”

“Rema Beach” I mumble. He tells the driver to head to Rema Beach.

“If the mountain won't come to Mohammed, then Mohammed has come to the mountain,” he says as I remain quiet. “I need to speak to you in person and you seem to be busier than the king, so, here I am. I've crutched my way to you instead.”

“There is no need to inconvenience yourself, Prince Naseer,” I reply without malice, mentally happy I can control my voice pitch.

“Call me Naseer, I'm sorry that Nadra put her hands on you.”

“It’s okay, it reminded me of my place,” I succinctly say, again without malice.

“Don’t lie to me, that you’re not hurt. I know when you put up the perfect image of quiet toughness. Nadra’s action bothered me, and I know her actions upset you, I know better, and I’ve come to you in person to apologize. I’m very sorry Nadra hit you,” he says. The look on his face is begging my forgiveness. Much as I want to keep the anger steaming; I know he won’t give up until I accept his apology.

“Apology accepted,” I say.

“Thank you,” he relaxes.

“How was the dance last night?”

“It was nice. James and I danced all night, and we kissed.” Couldn’t control my grin. I noticed the relaxed look changed to a scowl. He can’t control that anger. It’s like a speed dial for him.

“Your first kiss.” He gives a sad chuckle “Did you like it?” he asked quietly, though I detected a hint of anger in that calm ask.

“It was nice.” I smile, avoiding his eyes.

“You’re meeting with him today. Sounds like you two are officially dating.” His tone is brash.

“Yes, I guess,” I say shrugging “He says he likes me a lot,” I state, tucking my wayward hair behind my ears, something to do than look at Naseer.

“And that’s a good thing, *right?*” *It’s far from good the way he says it.*

“It is. I like him too.” I reply as I hear his muffled growl. The car comes to a stop. “Go on your date. You and I will talk more tomorrow. By the way. I like your hair like this.”

“Thank you, bye Prince Naseer,” I say and quickly get out of the car. I race to the meeting point, not looking back. I’m gasping for air. Naseer was intense. I pause to control my breathing and my heart’s rhythm. Why did I share about James and me, with Naseer? I could tell he didn’t like it when I told him James and I kissed, but what am I supposed to do? James and I are possible and realistic.

I see James from afar and wave to him. He meets me halfway with a hug and a kiss. We walk hand in hand to the waves. He has a blanket; we sit and talk about college and plans. He takes me to a pizza place, and we had fun eating and laughing about silly stuff. I had a great time, until we had to leave.

NASEER



I watch Jade running to James, and I can't do anything about it. James stole that first kiss from me. I want to hate him and punch him for it, yet I can't blame him. Nadra made that possible. She's racing to him like it's the norm and I can only watch from afar like a creepy stalker. I see the moment she walks into his arms, and he kisses her, openly claiming her in front of everyone.

If jealousy had a raging twin, that would be me right now watching James as he openly claims my woman and I'm the creepy older guy stalking them. I watch with a fist clenched as he possessively holds her, with no right or stance to punch him out. I was born with privilege and power in this country and most places in the world, yet I have no right or privilege to Jade.

"Do you want me to do something," Rilwan says.

"No, that would make her dislike me. Right now, I'm on eggshells with her because of what Nadra did."

“What did Princess Nadra do to Ms. Bankole,” he asks. I can’t keep things from Rilwan. He’ll find out, anyway.

“Nadra slapped Jade last night when she came into my room, calling me by my name without the title. I saw a look on Jade’s face that I never want to see again.”

“I saw Ms. Bankole when she came out of the bathroom yesterday. She looked like a goddess, breathtakingly beautiful.” My glaring eyes shot up to meet Rilwan’s in the mirror with a look that said don’t you dare look at her. He breaks the look. “That’s why I came to you asking if you were ready. I guess the action had already happened.”

“Unfortunately, yes,” I answer, turning to watch Jade and James holding hands, walking on the beach.

She has talked so much about James, and I certainly didn’t realize James is half-black. Looking at them together. I subconsciously agree that they look good together. She’s hoping they end up in the same college. I’m hoping that doesn’t happen.

I continue to watch in disgust and anger as he tucks her hair behind her ears and laughs with her. This boy is pulling all the stops to steal my girl. No way am I going to let this happen. He may not know it, but he’s not the only contender for her heart and I play dirty.

Annoying Nadra put me in this position. James may have gotten the first kiss, but that’s all he’s going to get. I instructed one of my guys to watch James and Jade. They are to call me when they see them leaving the beach.

Rilwan and I head home. It's painful to watch them together and have no right to pull her away from him. James needs to watch out.

After hours of no call from the guys, I'm restless. I headed to Jade's house to wait for her.

JADE



James dropped me off at home. He kissed me goodnight before I got out of the car. Each kiss with James shuts out the thoughts of Naseer, much as he tries to sneak into my mind.

I waved to him once, I stepped into the house. I watch his car drive away and turn to put my crossbody bag on the table by the door. I kick my sandals and head to sit in the living room, I come to a screeching halt when I see Naseer sitting comfortably with my uncle.

He looks calm but I'm not fooled. He's smiling at whatever Uncle is talking about; I know he's not listening. He's looking me over. The wind blew my hair and James helped by tucking my hair behind my ears. It doesn't look perfect, that's for sure. It looks more disheveled than tucked

“Good evening, Uncle and Prince Naseer,” I say to them.

“Jade, welcome back. Hope you had a good date?” Uncle Ray asks.

“It was nice,” I answer, smiling. I look at Naseer with a smile, but my smile is quickly wiped away because it meets a scowling block of ice-sculptured face.

“I have an appointment; I was just waiting for you to get home. Your aunty should be back soon. Prince Naseer tells me he has some stuff to discuss with you. I’ll leave you two to it. Text me when he leaves.” he says leaving us and grabbing his car keys.

I hear the door close. Naseer and I remain in awkward silence. He looks out of place in the small living room. We have an L-shaped leather sofa. I take the seat Uncle Ray vacated which is the other end from Naseer.

“How may I help you, Prince Naseer,” I ask.

“Stop calling me Prince Naseer,” he snaps, startling me. I try not to squirm in my seat from his bark.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, honestly unsure why I’m apologizing.

“How was your date?” he asks, I do know he isn’t asking for me to tell him it was a good date or provide details on what happened and how much fun I had with James. I can’t figure out why he’s asking.

“It was good,” I tell him anyway, “We went to dinner, and he dropped me back home.”

“You were with him for over six hours, what else happened, on this date, Jade.” He looks livid like he’s received a report that I’d murdered on this date.

“Nothing happened, we talked about college and plans, looks like we are looking at the same colleges, we might end up together.”

“And ...”

“And he dropped me off at home.” I retort.

“Are you seeing him tomorrow?” I want to say yes, but it’s best not to make Naseer angrier though I’m not sure what he’s angry about. I went to my dance after the slap and on a date with James, which is all normal. I should be the angry one and I can’t understand his grumpy side right now.

“No, I have lots of homework and some projects to complete. I’ll see him in class on Monday.”

“Did you kiss him again today?”

I nod in response.

“Kissing is now a norm for you two.” His words are stated with the subtlety of a pile of bricks. I should be upset but I remain quiet and not sure how to respond to his elucidated comment. “Stop by at the house tomorrow, I don’t like coming here and making your family uncomfortable.” he continues.

“Why do I need to come to the house? I don’t want to disturb you,” I state in a low tone, with my eyes fixated on my feet like they suddenly have magical diamonds.

“Did I ever say your presence was ever a disturbance to me?”

I shake my head, still avoiding his eyes.

“It’s settled, then. I’ll see you tomorrow unless you want me to have my father make good on his threat to have your uncle and aunty fired from their jobs.” I shake my head again. Though I would love to slap him for saying that to me just the way she slapped me, his status has my hands bound in invisible ties. I can just see it, a nobody girl slaps the Prince of Rhanaz.

He grabs his crutches and rises to his feet slowly. I remain seated. He crutches his way to the door. then calls out to me.

“Jade, I can’t open the door,” he says. I move slowly to the door, as I try to taper my seething anger.

He steps back for me to turn the knob, just as I’m about to pull the door open. A hand above my head snaps the door close. He has moved closer to me. I feel his closeness, my heart racing like I’m on a wild roller coaster ride. I’ve never been this close to Naseer, my body traitorously welcomes his proximity as my anger is rinsed with desire. *I want him to hold me. No, I crave his hold, but I’m torn between desire and sensible.* I’m immediately reminded of the slap and the requirement to stay in my lane. I try to turn around and my back hits his chest. He moves back a little for me to turn and face him.

Before, I can compose myself his lips are on me. Demanding I open for the kiss, he crowds my mouth, it feels like he’s commanding all my senses that *this* is a real kiss when it’s filled with savagery and passion, rough and smooth. His tongue devours every inch of my mouth, commanding my

tongue to tango with his, there's desire and craving in this kiss. That has my heart pounding and my whole being desiring more. He grunts and pulls back. Frames my face, his eyes holding mine, and for the first time, I see the craving we have for each other. *He would never be yours*, I subconsciously remind myself.

"I've been dying to kiss you, forgive me if I was a little rough. I don't like you going on a date with James."

I have no response. I just stared at him.

"I love your hair down, it's beautiful." He says tucking the few wayward tendrils away from my face. He does it in such a gentle loving way, I almost want to shake my head and have more fall, so he can tuck it back for me.

"Thank you," I croaked, still shocked Naseer kissed me and confessed he'd been dying to kiss me.

"I didn't mean it when I said I'll make my father fire your guardians. Can you willingly come to me tomorrow?"

I nod, as he drops his hand from my face, I miss his touch.

"Did you have sex with James?"

Shock and chagrin each take a moment to poke me. "No," I snap. He laughs.

"I've missed that look when you're tethering on bursting in anger."

"Why would you think I had sex with James?"

“You were out with him for six hours; a lot can happen in that time plus he’s a teenage boy with raging hormones.

“All we did was talk, no sex,” I retort.

“Good. I’ll head home now, much as I would prefer to spend the evening here with you, I’m certain your uncle is probably waiting for that text. Good night, Jade” I open the door he crutches out and I see the cars pull up when they see him crutching towards them.

I close the door, touching my lips. Can’t believe he kissed me. I grab my phone to text my uncle that Naseer left.

I see a text from James.

James: I had a great time today, can’t wait to see you Monday.

Me: had a great time too, I’ll see you on Monday

Then a text from Naseer comes in.

Naseer: Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.

Me: Good night.

I respond, not sure what else to say to him.

I head to the shower; I can still feel sand on some parts of my body. I changed into my PJs and got in bed. I’m sleep-deprived because my mind is a scrambled mess. Naseer kissing me, which is surreal and James confessing that he likes me which was also surreal for the cutest boy in school to like me. I’m nobody. Dread and delight wrap around me like a velvet ribbon, with my mind racing to the highest volt of

possible explosion questioning how I ended up in this triangle with a handsome Prince and the hottest boy in school. Now I need Lagos like I need air to help untangle my web. Tito will help me untangle this mess. I toss and turn till I finally sleep.

JADE



I woke up feeling refreshed. Without warning the floodgate of James and Naseer bursts through. The only blocker is my homework, so I get to work on my homework assignment. My phone is turned off. Once my homework is done. I decided to visit the market, I know if I stay home. Naseer will show up again and I'm not ready to discuss what we are or not. I can see it in those determined eyes of his.

I took my old Nokia GSM phone with me. Naseer, can't get me on this one. I spend time visiting stores. I bought a SIM and phone card to call my aunt and let her know, I'm at the market. I didn't return home until after dinner time. My aunt and uncle were already in bed when I got in. I let them know, I'm home and say good night to them. I take a shower and get in bed.

I didn't bother turning my phone on, I know Naseer would have called and texted.

He's stubborn like that. And I probably poked him by not showing up today, but he needs to stay in his lane. That much

is clear to me now. Just as I'm about to drift off to sleep. I hear a knock "Jade, Prince Naseer is on the phone for you." I hear my uncle say. *Oh no! He didn't just call my uncle.* I open the door to answer the phone.

"Hello."

"Turn your phone on, Jade." He growls, just when I think I could escape him. He reminds me there's no escaping him. I pick up my phone and switch it on. I see the streams of messages.

"It's on," I say.

"Give your uncle's phone back to him so I can apologize for disturbing him. I'll call you right back in a second." I return the phone to my uncle "Prince Naseer is still on the phone for you" I say as I give the phone to him. I could hear my uncle "Not a problem, Prince Naseer."

A few seconds later my phone rings.

"Hello."

"We had an agreement last night, but you didn't hold your end it. Did you go on another date with James?"

"No, I went to the market alone," I snap, I'm upset he dares to call my uncle this late. I want to shout at him saying *what is the matter with you, have you lost your mind? As always, his status has my tongue-tied.*

"All day?" he says questioning the potential unfathomable that I could be in the market all day alone hanging around

stores and haggling with sellers, a trait I learned from my mom.

“Yes,” I retort.

“Why?” He is seriously asking why I would go to the market. *Why does anyone go to the market?*

“I needed to get some gifts for my friends in Lagos.”

“And that took all day.” I let out a silent exasperated sigh.

“Yes,” I snap, he’s pushing my button.

“Okay, will I see you tomorrow?”

“Not sure about my day.”

“Show up tomorrow, Jade, I won’t ask again.” His tone certainly sounds like he’s commanding not asking.

“Okay,” I acquiesce.

“Good night, Jade”

“Good night.” I mumble.

The school year is almost over. I must do better at avoiding him as much as possible. I need that trip to Lagos pronto. Tito already sent me a list of all the items she wants from Rhanaz. Going to the market today was a good idea, I can start packing my bags.

I’ll ask my aunt if I can leave a few days before the school year is over. Once all my work is done.

The next day after school, I ride with Taimani to the Darabi residence. I head to Naseer’s room once we get inside, and

Taimani goes to her room. I promise to stop by her room before leaving.

The nurses see me and smile “Thank goodness you are here, he’s been cranky” one of the nurses says to me in relief. I simply smile, not sure how to respond but I know how he is when he doesn’t get what he wants.

“Prince Naseer,” I say as I step into his room. No way am I going to make that mistake again. I noticed the hospital bed is now gone. He’s on the king bed with the wheelchair and crutches at arm’s length. He looks tired.

“Jade,” he says, smiling.

“How are you today” I ask as I move closer to the bed.

“Good, now that you are here. How was school?”

“Long and more homework” I answered, without any frost in my voice.

“And James?”

“He’s good. Didn’t see much of him today.” He grins like I’d just given him a winning ticket. “You look tired, is therapy too much,” I ask to change the topic from James.

“No, I just didn’t get much sleep. I missed you.” Certainly not the answer I was expecting.

“I had to get souvenirs for my friends yesterday. I keep promising them certain items. Yesterday was the only day I had to get them.” I explain though I don’t know why I need to explain.

“Okay.”

“What did you do all day?”

“Read through some financial documents and did lots of therapy. My movement is better now.”

“That’s good, you will be back to your old self and traveling the world again.” I smile, and a part of me realizes that would mean he’s gone from me, I need to start detaching from wanting to be with him daily and shifting more to James.

“That would be nice. You still owe me a dance, Jade,” he says, and it feels like her imaginary hands just slapped me again.

“It’s still a fresh wound, Prince Naseer. Can we not talk about the dance?” *Not talking about ever is what I would prefer.* I touch my cheek; I can still feel the tingle of her slap on my face.

“Okay, but we will have that dance someday, and stop calling me Prince Naseer.” I nod, knowing it will take a while for me to get back to that comfort zone.

“What do we have planned to watch?” I ask, changing the course of the stiff air around us.

“You promised to watch my movie with me.” I put in his movie pick and sat back to watch. Not talking or laughing like we used to, our silence is palpable as the friction between us thickens. We both know it. Honestly, I dislike it. But it is a new reality.

My phone rings. It's James. His name is bold on the screen. I should probably ignore it, but I answered it. Getting up so I don't disturb the movie, I move towards Naseer's closet.

"Hi James," I say, turning my back to Naseer.

"Mariam, I missed you today."

"Yeah, me too," I say I can't say I *miss you too* with Naseer in the room, and the movie is now paused. I'm sure Naseer did that.

"How about we hang out after school tomorrow at Rema Beach?"

"Sure, that sounds good."

"Alright, I'll see you in class tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow."

I turn and smack into Naseer's chest. *How did he crutch silently to me?* He's using one crutch now. His movement seems to be exponential. I'm surprised and quiet, not sure what to say to him. Before I could think of something. His lips are on me. I have no will against him. I kiss him back, passionately, and completely lost in him. He's beautifully coloring my mind with his tongue. *Why can't I pull away from him? I know I should stop this.?*

We hear a soft knock on the door. I instinctively pull away from him. He returns to the bed, and says, "Come in." The nurse comes in with his food. She sets his food down, then turns to me.

“Will you be eating with him, Ms. Mariam?”

“No, I’m leaving soon. Taimani and I have some work to get done.”

“Okay then,” the Nurse leaves.

“When did you start working with Taimani?” He asks.

“She needs my help, and I’ve promised to help her.”

“Okay, do you want to help her while I eat, then return after you two are done?”

“It might be late. My aunty needs my help tonight. She’s traveling to Lagos soon, that’s why I went shopping yesterday.”

“Jade, what’s going on? Why are you avoiding me? I thought you accepted my apology?”

“I’m not avoiding you. I just have a lot to do right now,” I lie. Of course, I’m avoiding him. His girlfriend slapped me. Taimani had happily downloaded Naseer and Nadra’s history to me when I casually asked about Princess Nadra. *I may forgive, but I’ll never forget what she did and how she made me feel.*

“Jade, you always have a lot to do, but you never let that stop you from sharing about your day. But today, you’re not speaking,” he remarked as he rose from the bed using his crutch. *Dude, you are moving faster than my brain with this crutch.*

“Fine! I’m still hurt! Your girlfriend slapped me! She reminded me of my place. My parents never raised a hand to me, and she slapped me because I was excited to dance with you. I don’t think I should spend any more time with you. It’s not healthy or safe for me. I need to stay in my lane. You are not in that lane! James is in that lane, and he likes me. The focus of my attention needs to be on a safe environment, away from any potential physical abuse or being threatened for speaking! And you just expect me to do your bidding and let you walk all over me; sorry *NO* can do!” I’m panting after my outburst. I know I’m blowing hot and cold. One minute I’m kissing him like my life depends on it and the next I’m shouting at him, telling him I want James.

“I’m sorry, Jade. I’ve warned her never to speak to you again or come near you. Don’t take her jealous reaction out on us. I need you, Jade. You give me hope and I appreciate you, so don’t let her get between us. Can you do that?” He’s pleading. Commanding is more his style, but he’s pleading with me right now.

“I’ll try.”

“Try. I’ll await your return before I eat.” I want to tell him not to wait, but I don’t know how to handle this situation. “Kiss me, Jade,” he says, surprising me and moving closer to me. I want to move back, but my hot mind is drawn to him. Though my cold mind wants my legs to move in a different direction, my hot mind wins. He seizes the moment to kiss me before I can truly process the ask or my action.

This kiss is coloring my mind. It's telling my subconscious to store this because it's real and the color is bright enough to keep me wrapped in a cloak of passion. A knock makes me pull back from him.

He looks at me in a way I can't explain but it's tender. "Go to Taimani, I'll wait for your return." I briskly left the room. I let out my stuffed breath as soon as I passed the nurses. I comport myself and head to Taimani's room.

Once in her room, we talked about the day and got down to helping her with the assignment. It's late when I return to say goodnight. Naseer puts away his food and replaces it with a Thai dish I like. I smile when I see it.

"I thought you had something different?" I ask, a little surprised.

"I did but I want to eat with you, so I ordered this while you were with Taimani."

"Thank you." I sit and eat with him. We are soon laughing and talking through the movies again. My phone rings. "It's my aunt. Hello?"

"Jade, when are you coming home?"

"I'll be on my way." I hang up with my aunt and turn to Naseer.

"I have to get going. My aunty is worried."

"I'll have Rilwan drop you at home."

“Thanks.” I rise, and he gets up too. I grab my bag to leave, and he pulls me to him, kissing me like he needs to remind me we are in the same lane. I break from the kiss and say good night. I went from having no boyfriend to having two gorgeous guys kissing me at every chance. It’s mind fucking blowing and confusing.

I seriously need a minute away from both. I rode in silence to my house. My aunty was waiting. I know she’s worried about my relationship with Naseer, though she won’t say anything. I saw the excitement in her face when I told her James asked me to the dance and the next date with James was all pleasantly welcome, but Naseer always makes her quiet. Doesn’t help that Mr. Darabi had threatened her, like it was normal business activity to threaten her with job loss if they didn’t comply with pleasing his child. Naseer called my uncle to apologize but there are just some things you can’t take back.

I thank Rilwan when he pulls in front of my house.

“Sorry I’m late, Aunty.”

“Glad you are back. I have helped you pack your things. The best ticket I could find means you have to leave two days before school is over. I will speak with your teachers. I want you to turn in all your work before the end of the week and start getting ready to leave.” I smile.

“Thank you, Aunty.”

“I’m assuming you had dinner already?”

“Yes, I did”

“Good night then”

“Good night, Aunty”

Once in my room, I realized she just made it happen for me to leave sooner than planned. I will tell James, but I can't tell Naseer. I have a feeling he would try to stop me from going.

The rest of the week went smoothly. I hang out with James at school and visit Naseer after school. James always asks what I am doing after school. I just shrug my shoulder. As the days draw near, I feel the nagging urge to tell Naseer.

Tito my bestie is excited about my visit. She has a full itinerary of everything we'll be doing, though I still feel sad about my parent's death, I need to visit Lagos and try to be happy. I decided to tell Naseer that I would be leaving tomorrow for Lagos. He can't stop me, that's for sure.

I arrived unexpectedly at the McMansion. I spend a few minutes talking with the nurses before they tell me to go in, but to my surprise, Naseer is lying in bed and *that* woman—also known as Princess Nadra—is seated at the edge, close to him, leaning and kissing Naseer.

“I'm sorry, I was told I could come in,” I say out loud. I notice when Naseer pushes her away but it's a little too late.

“Jade!” He tried to get up, and instinctively I knew it was time to get out fast.

“I stopped by to say hello. Before going to see Taimani,” I lie. I know Taimani isn't home and I came to see him.

Before he can reach his crutches, she blocks him.

“Goodbye,” I say quickly, rushing out of the room. Almost knocking sloppy nurse Sammy down. I raced out of the McMansion at lightning-fast speed. Rilwan tries to stop me, but I manage to escape. I let out a loud exhale, soon as I stepped out of the gated house that has my heart in a bind. It’s time, I unbind whatever keeps me coming back like a glutton for punishment. I wave down the first cab I see, jumping right in. “Take me to Rema Beach.” I turned my phone off and inhaled and exhaled.

I sit alone at the beach watching the waves. It always calms me. I sit alone with my scrambled thoughts. I lost track of time. I then took another ride to the market. By the time I get home, it’s late.

My aunt was just glad I came home. The next morning, after lots of tossing and turning and barely sleeping, I grabbed my packed bags and straight to the airport. Leaving my phone behind. That’s the only way Naseer and James can reach me.

Once I’m air bound, I let myself think about what I’d planned to do yesterday when I unexpectedly visited Naseer. I was going to give myself, I wanted him to be my first, I didn’t care that he was older, or he might not be interested in me once he’s back on his feet. I’ve fallen for someone who would never return my love, stupidly, I still wanted him to be my first. I wanted to share myself with him knowing that’s all I would ever get, guess it’s a good thing I found him kissing Princess Nadra. What a *joke* I would have been.

I couldn't sleep. Spent the first few hours of the flight chastising myself *for a girl so smart, that I certainly acted stupid when it came to Naseer. Did I think he would see me as anything other than a foolish teenager at best?* I eventually fell asleep on the flight.

By the time my flight lands in Lagos, and I see Tito, a wide smile graces my face. I've missed my best friend. Tito and her mom were waiting to pick me up. I was so happy to see them hugging them and talking to their home. I forget my troubles and all the grim thoughts of Lagos, plus the mess of Rhanaz.

NASEER



Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! It happened again. Nadra ruining things for me. Jade had returned to her old self. No longer making excuses. Now this, Nadra trying to force kisses on me. I don't return the kiss, but Jade doesn't see that all she sees is Nadra and I locking lips, as always, she's out of here faster than I can catch her.

I sent Nadra packing, but that didn't eliminate the damage that's already done. Why Nadra keeps coming back is beyond me. She knows I will not change my mind, yet she keeps returning. Jade's phone is turned off. I'll have to convince Taimani to bring her over tomorrow. Rilwan had mentioned that Jade looked sad running out of here. I know he's very gentle towards her and I bet he wanted to know what I did, I'm tight lips about it.

I spoke with Taimani and offered her everything she requested for her to bring Jade over the next day. All plans were set. I had practiced my apology in hopes of convincing Jade that Nadra kissed me not the other way around.

I struggled to sleep but I needed to rest my mind and focus on my therapy during the day. Await Jade's return in the evening. Taimani has promised she won't accept no for an answer from Jade.

I was waiting at the gate when the car pulled up and only Taimani got out of the car.

"Hi Nas," she says excitedly.

"Where is Mariam, Mani?"

"She wasn't in school today, I asked James and he said she texted that she was travelling for the summer."

"What do you mean she travelled for the summer? She didn't tell me that" I snap, face-palming while releasing my frustrated grunt, getting blindsided by Jade is an understatement. She's certainly a witty one, I keep underestimating her.

"She didn't tell me either." She blatantly states shrugging a shoulder "I asked her aunt as well."

"And?"

"She confirmed Mariam left her first flight out this morning and she's not sure when Mariam will be back. The earliest is before school starts or she might be going to the US to finish her studies. Her words, not mine."

"Did you say she told James," I ask, can't believe I heard her right the first time.

“Yes, James said she sent him a text message and will call him once she’s settled.”

“Thanks, Mani,” I say crutching my way back to my room. I just lost the best thing that sashayed into my life. How do I get a hold of her? I try calling the phone, even though I know it’s a useless effort. I can bet all my wealth that Jade purposely left that phone behind, that way I can’t find her, if only she knew it’s just a delayed effort. I’m not giving up on us that easily.

Day three without Jade, I’m starting to get cranky, my staff are walking on eggshells around me. I’m pushing my therapy beyond what my body can allow, by the end of the week. I’m in a lot of pain.

Taimani is no longer speaking with me because I’d snapped at her several times for not helping me get ahold of Jade.

Three weeks into Jade leaving, I’m a sore sight. I’d told the front gate to confirm with me before letting Nadra in to visit. No more of her waltzing her way in. I’d unleashed my anger on her again. I don’t understand why she keeps coming back. I no longer want to speak with any of my friends. I’m back to my mood right after the accident. I refuse to speak with my dad. I see the worried look on my mom’s face, but I don’t care. Presently, all I see is dark clouds. Therapy is all I do, without therapy, I can’t go after Jade.

If she leaves for the US, the chances of ever finding her are very slim and that’s just a world I don’t like.

By week five, my dad comes in. “I talked with Mariam’s guardians today,” he says casually like he didn’t just drop a

bomb on me.

“And?” I eagerly ask.

“I convinced them to give me her number and not send her from Lagos to the US.” For the first time in weeks, I’m hopeful. Much as I don’t like my dad using his power on Jade’s guardian. I desperately need to speak with her.

“It seems it worked, they said she would return by the end of summer before school starts, I also convinced them to give me the house number where she’s staying. Rhanaz, is six hours ahead of Lagos, right now it’s midnight there. You will have to wait till morning to call her.”

“Thanks, Dad, can I have the number now?” I state casually, trying not to show too much excitement.

“Before I give you the number. I’m going to need you to talk with your sister and clean yourself up. Then eat with the family tonight. I’ll give you her number after dinner.” I nod in agreement. I would have climbed Mt. Everest with a limp just to get her number. As soon as he left, I went to my bathroom to shave and shower. Then to Taimani’s room to speak with her. She’s quiet when I walk in and won’t look at me.

“I’m sorry, Taimani.” She remains quiet. “I’m sorry, Taimani” I repeat.

“You yelled at me because I wouldn’t email Mariam. What is it about her anyway? I don’t like her anymore,” she snaps at me.

“Please don’t say that. I enjoy her company and I’m the one in the wrong, not her. She loves to come and spend time with you, I always keep her with me.”

“That’s not fair.” She pouts.

“I know, I’m a little selfish when it comes to Mariam and I’m sorry.” I succinctly state.

“I did email her and she’s having fun in Lagos. She sent me pictures; do you want to see them?”

“Yes, did she say anything else?”

“No, just that it’s good to be back with her friends and she sends pictures of the wedding she had to be in Lagos for.” She turns her laptop to me, and I scroll through the pictures of Jade and the wedding party. She looks happy and carefree until I see one picture that sets my mind ablaze. Jade is in some guy’s arms; they are in a bear hug and the guy is kissing her neck. She’s happily laughing.

I see another with him holding her close to him. I want to know, but asking Taimani isn’t going to help. “Can you ask for her cell phone number please?” Dad only got the number of the house; I need her direct line.

“I asked before, but she refused to give it, I have a feeling she thinks I will give it to you” A sad chuckle escapes me. Jade sure is playing smart.

“Thanks for showing me the pictures. Looks like she’s having fun, let’s go to dinner.”

We both head downstairs but my mind isn't settled. Who's the guy kissing Jade's neck as she happily laughs with him? I barely got her out of James's arms, now she's in the arms of another.

I sit to dinner with my family and laugh but my mind is on Jade with another man. She's young and beautiful it won't take much for another man to have her and I can't do shit about it. Considering she's now seventeen, certainly above the legal age of consent in most countries. I maintain a calm façade during dinner, after dinner, my dad hands her number to me.

"I know you like this girl a lot and she's beautiful which I'll say it's hard for any man your age not to notice but she's not the one for you. Enjoy your friendship with her and let her go when graduate, she could never get you to where you need to be." Dad says before I leave. I nod, but he doesn't get it, I'm the one who needs her and not the other way around.

I watch the clock and finally dial the number right at 10 a.m., her time.

"Hello." I know it's not Jade right away.

"Hi, can I speak with Jade please?"

"Who's calling?"

"Naseer." She put the phone down and I hear her shout.

"Jadesola, there's a Naseer on the phone for you can you pick up the phone by you?" I didn't hear the response.

"She said you can call her line."

“What’s the number?” she recites the number. I hang up and dial Jade’s direct line.

“Hello.” I exhale, relief washes over me at the sound of her voice. I’ve found my girl.

“Jade,” I breathe.

“Hi, Prince Naseer, how are you?” She’s giving me the cold shoulder over the phone.

“Not good, I’m missing you. Why did you leave without telling me?” I could hear her sigh.

“I was coming to tell you about my change of plans, you know what happened next.” She’s hurt, I can tell by the sound of her voice. I did that to her.

“I’m sorry you saw Nadra kissing me. I didn’t kiss her back.”

“No need to be sorry, I’m happy for you and Princess Nadra. I’m having fun here in Lagos, I’ve missed so many things and everyone is happy to have me back. I’ve gone to lots of places, hanging out with my friends is amazing ...”

“Jade, stop trying to change the subject,” I interrupt.

Silence. Silence. Silence. We could only hear each other’s breath.

“I am happy for you and Princess Nadra,” she says.

“I’m not with Nadra, I broke up with her before the accident and that hasn’t changed. I kicked her out after the last incident with you, I was sleeping when she came over and tried to

wake me up by kissing me, which was when you walked in. I certainly didn't kiss her back." Silence. Silence.

"Jade, talk to me, please" I plead.

"I don't have anything to say, and I don't know if I'll be coming back to Rhanaz, my aunty already asked for my transcript. My mom's best friend wants me to stay here with her family and my aunty thinks I might be better off in the US. Right now, I don't know anything about my future. It's best you and I stop speaking because we may never see each other again."

"Don't say that." *Please* I want to beg.

"I'm telling you the truth."

"I know you are. I just don't like it; can we agree to keep speaking while the adults are deciding where you are headed?"

"Okay."

"I saw the pictures you sent to Taimani, looks like the wedding was lots of fun."

"Yes, it was. Tito and I had so much fun with friends. Shola the bride is still on her honeymoon in Zanzibar" I hear the excitement in her voice.

"Cool, what have you been doing in Lagos."

"Nothing much, catching up with friends and hanging out a lot."

"Sounds like a good time."

"Yes, it is."

“I saw pictures of you with some guy kissing your neck.” I didn’t want to say anything, but I couldn’t help myself. She starts to laugh.

“My cousin Yomi, I call him big bro Yomi. We play a game, where he hugs me tight and tries to bite my neck like he’s a vampire sucking my blood. He came to the wedding; I hadn’t seen him in years. He’s cool plus he wants me to come and stay with him in Texas before I head for college.”

“What do you want, Jade?”

“Presently, I don’t know—just taking the day as it comes. I’m an orphan, at the mercy of so many guardians but I feel blessed because they are all looking out for my interest, only no one is asking me what I think or want. Hopefully, they’ll have answers for me before summer is over.”

“You are special is why they are all looking out for your best interest, can you promise to tell me where you will be heading when summer is over.”

“I will”

“Do you have a return ticket to Rhanaz?”

“Yes, but my aunty said she bought a flex ticket.”

“Okay.”

“How’s physical therapy?” A good thing she asked about physical therapy because I was on the verge of needing other types of therapy, not sure which one yet.

“Going great, therapy is all I’ve been focused on since you left. I’m moving better now, and my back is healing better.”

“That’s great news!”

We talked a little longer and I promised to call her again the next day. When we hung up, I moved quickly to speak with my dad. However, I had to control my emotions by the time I got to him.

“Dad, can you tell me about the conversation you had with Mariam’s aunty.”

“I asked her about Mariam, and she said Mariam had to leave for a wedding in Lagos and would be back at the end of summer. I asked her to be specific on when Mariam will return. She then said she wasn’t sure. I then asked her why she requested Mariam’s transcript and why she and her husband had asked for a transfer if Mariam was planning to return. She responded by telling me that they were thinking of returning to the US and weren’t sure if Mariam would like that or if she would prefer to return to Lagos permanently.”

“Dad, why do they want to leave Rhanaz?”

“I don’t know, but if I’m a betting guy, I’ll say they are not happy about your relationship with Mariam and the fact I threatened them. To remedy my threat, I apologized to them and told them I could get the school to increase their salaries if they stayed another school year with Mariam. I also told them you and Mariam are just friends and she has somehow helped to make you feel better. Which as your parent is my priority.”

“Mariam just told me she isn’t sure she will return to Rhanaz.”

“The school is still working out the kinks and I’ve promised them you won’t lay a hand on Mariam; please tell me I can keep the promise.”

“Yes, I have no desire to do anything with her.” *Until she’s matured of course.* We stare at each other, not sure what other answers he expects me to give him but it’s clear we both know I’m not being honest, since nothing has happened, he can’t say I lied.

“Good, give it time she will return, I mean it Naseer, don’t have sex with Mariam.”

“I won’t, I promise.” *Until she’s no longer a teenager.*

“Good, I don’t know how she did it, both you and Taimani can’t stop talking about her.”

“Mariam is loyal, friendly, and smart dad” he nods. *and beautiful*

“Thanks, Dad,” I say as I leave while trusting that Mariam will return to me. Yes, Dad. I won’t touch Jade now. I’m going to give her time to mature. Her 20th birthday, then all bets are off.

The next evening, I called Jade and we talk for a while. She tells me Cousin Yomi is taking her out before he leaves for Texas. We say our goodbyes.

The next two evenings, I called over and over with no answer. By the third evening, I called the house number my

dad gave me.

“Hello.”

“Hi, can I speak with Jade?”

“Is this Naseer?”

“Yes, it is.”

“She did say you would call but she lost her phone. Hold on I’ll find her.” I breathe relief, she’s not ghosting me again. The lady returns to the phone “Jade is not home. She’ll be back in about two hours. She went to get a new phone.”

“Thank you. I’ll call back.”

I hung up. I don’t like Jade this far away. I pace and watch the clock for the next two hours. Right on the dot I call the number again.

“She’s back and you can call her line. It’s working now.”

“Okay, thanks”

I dial her line.

“Naseer”

“Jade, what happened to your phone, are you ok?”

“I’m fine. I went out with some of my high school friends and my phone fell and smashed. I couldn’t get a new one right away. My aunty told me yesterday that I will be returning to Rhanaz and staying with them till I head for college. They renewed their contract with the school, they seem happy about the new contract.”

“That’s good to know are you happy about returning to Rhanaz?”

“Actually yes, I don’t think I’m ready to join a new high school for just one year. I’ll finish in Rhanaz and college in the US. James’s happy I’m coming back.”

“You talked to James?” My tone sounded harsher than I intended. *Just how is James getting all the information without any effort?*

“No, we emailed. He’s in Switzerland right now.”

“When are you back Jade?”

“In ten days. I should arrive at Rhanaz around noon.”

“Email me your itinerary.”

“I don’t have your email, Naseer.”

“I’ll text it to you.”

“Naseer, I might not get to speak to you till I return.”

“Why not?” This doesn’t sound good.

“Tito’s mom is religious, she’s convinced, we need prayers, we are headed to a prayer camp outside Lagos for the next three days, she’ll be taking our phones away. We must focus on Jesus.” She laughs. At least, she’s giving me heads up. “We won’t be back until the fourth day, and I will be visiting some friends. I’ll see you when I get to Rhanaz.”

“Let the ten days count down begin then.” I say.

“Yes, Tito and I have tried to make all kinds of excuses not to visit the camp but she’s not letting us off the hook.”

“Send me your travel details, Jade” I need to see that itinerary, my confirmation that she’s coming back.

“I will, I have to go Naseer.”

“Bye, Jade, see you soon.”

“Bye Naseer.”

I hang up with Jade and immediately text Jade my email. I returned my focus to therapy. I check my email and do not have any email from Jade. I asked Taimani if she heard from Jade.

“She sent me her itinerary and asked me to give it to you.”

“Send it to me.” Not sure why Jade didn’t send it to me directly.

“So, she’s coming back to Rhanaz right?” Her voice is shaky, I know my sister, something is wrong, doesn’t help that she’s fidgeting and avoiding eye contact.

“Yes, she is coming back is there a problem.”

“Not for me, but Lydia, another girl in school, doesn’t like Mariam. She thinks Mariam stole James from her.”

“What is this Lydia saying?”

Taimani shrugs. “Something about getting boys to grope her and possibly get boys to have sex with her and record it for fun,” she says, avoiding eye contact.

Did I hear her right or am I imagining my younger sister talking about the possible rape of Jade? I know for a fact some boy having sex with her will not be consensual.

“Are you with them on this?” I shouted at her.

“No! Of course not, but I don’t know what to do.” The heat of her response matched my tone.

“I’m sorry, can you tell me who the boys are and this Lydia girl.”

She shrugs.

“Taimani, if you don’t want me to shout, tell me who these boys are and this Lydia girl,” I say through gritted teeth.

She hands her phone to me, I read the group messages. It’s brutal, their dislike of Jade is very clear.

“How long has this been going on?”

“Since the dance. She won the best dress and James danced with her all night. He refused to let any boy near her. Lydia is jealous of Mariam. She has always won the best dress and had her eyes on James, but he can’t stop talking about Mariam. Lydia is not one to cross.”

“Send me their names and pictures of them, if you have one.” She nods.

“I didn’t want her to come back because of this.”

“That’s not for them to decide, thanks Taimani.” I answered, before leaving.

I couldn’t believe what they had planned for Jade. She would be walking into a trap unless I did something. I sent the pictures and numbers to Rilwan. He’s going to get the boys together and Lydia. I need to break Jade and James up.

It seems to date James comes with baggage of danger. I was going to let their relationship fade on its own but not anymore.

In three days, the boys and Lydia are sent an invitation to a gathering at the palace, they stupidly show up. I have my security surround all four of them.

I crutch in and they are all shocked to see me. They all rise to their feet.

“Sit down. You all probably know who I am and if you don’t. I’m Prince Naseer and I didn’t just invite you here. I have a very special friend that’s under my protection and I understand all four of you plan to humiliate her and worse yet even rape her and record it.” my voice is calm but it’s lethal.

They look at each other, surprised I know, these idiots forget my younger sister is their classmate.

“I want you all to listen carefully before I bring your parents in.” That gets their attention.

“Mariam Jadesola Bankole is a very special friend of mine as such protected by the kingdom of Rhanaz that means any attempt to humiliate her or worse yet rape her will earn each all of you prison time and I mean it.”

“It was just talk; we didn’t mean anything by it” the skinny boy responds quickly.

“Just talk really to grope and rape Mariam!” My palm slams on the table making each of them squirm in their seat in fear.

“I have sent the text messages to your parent and they are aware that I have the record of your *just talk* so if anything

happens to Mariam, each of you will spend nights in Jail while I take my sweet time to investigate and decide if you get prison or not and your parents just might spend nights with you in prison as well just so you know since all you planned was *just talk*.” Their eyes widen.

“The difference between you and I is that I don’t just talk; I’ll make it happen. Bring the parents in,” I say to Rilwan.

They each file in and see their children, looking frightened. I turn to them “Mariam Bankole is a very special friend of mine and what your children plan to do to her is appalling. Let this be a warning, if anything happens to Mariam, will I make sure each of them spends years in prison. I will also come after each of you with everything I have and believe me I have plenty of powerful friends and I’ll make sure the world knows you encouraged their behavior so make sure you speak to them not to test me.”

“We are deeply sorry about their behavior and will make sure they do not do anything to Ms Bankole,” Lydia’s father says, he’s the one to lose the most. His business is growing exponentially in Rhanaz.

“I understand, it would be a shame to shut down all license renewals of thriving businesses in Rhanaz because of senseless teenage behavior that leaves a lasting impact on the target, Ms Bankole in this case. Make no mistake, if anything happens to her. It won’t be a flicker when I shut down the business.”

“I hear you loud and clear, Prince Naseer,” he responds.

“Good, thank you all very much,” I say walking away slowly without a backward glance. I still can’t move very fast. I’m not using crutches anymore, but my speed is slow. I can’t wrap my head around what they planned to do to Jade.

Now, I need to eliminate James, aside from the fact he’s a thorn in my side his dating Jade puts her in danger.

Rilwan and I got in the car. “Did you mean everything you said to those kids?”

“I meant every word, did you not read their text, they were planning to rape her and record it. I can’t even imagine what that would do to her.”

“I can’t believe teenagers can be that vicious,” he says shaking his head.

“I don’t plan to give them a chance to even think of it.”

“I agree with you on that.”

We drive in silence back home. Once back home, I plan how I’m going to break James and Jade up.

I continue my therapy. My scarred back is healing. I’m in a better mood watching the calendar daily. A few more days I tell myself until she’s back. James isn’t back yet but I need to speak with him the moment he’s back.

After going through some documents, I finally fell asleep. To continue my rinse and repeat therapy.

JADE



My flight touched down in Rhanaz and waves of raw emotions flowed through me. Making my heart race and my palms sweaty. I'm happy, anxious, and scared of what awaits me. I'm eager to see Naseer and James. I'd left for Lagos with mixed feelings, I didn't resolve my conflicted mind about James and Naseer, but my mind certainly drifted more towards Naseer and how much I've missed him. I still like James but he's not occupying my thoughts as much as Naseer. As my mind keeps reminding me Naseer is the one I can't have. Yet my traitorous heart leaned towards him more.

The battle between my heart and mind ensued within me. The future is possible with James, but I get a warm feeling with Naseer. I wish my heart would tilt towards James, but it wants what it wants.

The traitorous heart wants what it can't have. I'm going to have to rely on my mind more if I want to survive without a shattered heart.

Tito and I discussed it at length and the only solution was to let it all play out. Naseer might get better and start to see me as too young for him and James might break up with me or he might do something that would stir my heart towards him. I told Tito all about Naseer, I didn't mention he's a Prince. I talked more about our age difference and the fact the Darabi's are rich and powerful, and quite manipulative with their power.

I'm going to let it play out like she said. My uncle was at the airport to pick me up. On our drive home. I excitedly told him about my trip. He laughed along with me. Aunty Lara welcomed me home with a big smile and a platter of food as I'd traveled to fasting from food land. Didn't stop me from giving her a big hug.

“I missed you, guys.”

“We missed you too, the house was too quiet without you.” I laugh.

I shower and eat before going to nap. I charge my phone and head to bed. I arrived two days sooner than planned. Shola the bride had called informing Mrs Muiyiwa that she was seriously sick on the honeymoon causing Mrs Muiyiwa to panic and insist on going to see Shola. She couldn't leave Tito and me alone at home, which isn't an issue, but she called my aunty to change my flight and paid the difference then bought a ticket for Tito to return to London sooner than planned. We had to quickly get our braids done and pack for our trip to different ends of the world.

Tito and I weren't too happy about the changes, but she didn't give us much choice, so here I am back in Rhanaz.

I woke up the next morning and asked my aunty if I could visit the Darabi residence. My aunty said yes but I could tell she didn't provide a happy *yes*. It was more of a mumbled *yes*, but I'll take it. A yes is a *yes*.

I headed to the Darabi's residence as quickly as possible taking a taxi, when I arrived at the McPalace, I was told Taimani wasn't home. I asked to see Naseer, and the new guard said no, which surprised me. I could tell by his looks and mannerisms; that he doesn't think I belong here. I asked to speak with one of the nurses, he refused as well. He didn't have to say it, but it's clear that he doesn't see me as someone worthy to enter the premises. Considering I'd arrived in a taxi, in normal clothing, nothing with designer labels. The reality of my status and the Darabis'. I'll call Naseer when I get home. I tell myself, turning to leave.

Rilwan, Naseer's bodyguard pulls up. He gets out of the car to say hello. He's always nice to me. I quickly smile to hide my low self-esteem feeling. I can't let the look and the snorty actions of the guard affect me.

"Ms Bankole, how are you? When did you arrive?" He's surprised to see me.

"Last night. My travel plan was changed last minute," I state. "The guard won't let me in. Please tell Prince Naseer I'll call him when I get home," I say turning to leave.

“Wait a minute,” he says to me then turns to the guard. “If you want to have a job tomorrow, you will let her in,” he says to the guard in a stern tone. Without a word, he opens the gate and I walk through.

“Thank you,” I say to Rilwan.

I get to his door and the nurse hugs me. “I’m so glad to see you, he’s sleeping but I doubt he would mind you waking him up, you can go in” At least people are expressing they are glad to see me.

“Good to see you too,” I say to her before opening the door gently. I move closer to his bed. Sitting on the edge next to him. I spend a few seconds admiring him before gently waking him.

“Naseer, wake up. Wake up, Gent—it’s Jade.” He slowly opens his eyes and I smile.

“Are you real?” he asks in his sleepy state.

“Yes, I arrived last night” Without a word he pulls me into a hug. He pulls me from the hug and frames my face. “You’re here, I’m not dreaming” Happiness is spelt across his face making my heart gallop. I get that a lot with him.

“I’m here and I missed you too.” His lips are on mine. I open wide and submit to his tongue. He crowds my mouth and commands my body and tongue to tango with him. *My god, I’ve missed him.* How could I have thought I could walk away from this bliss? A knock makes us pause. His unwavering gaze wraps me in silk velvet. Whoever is at the door knocks again.

I pulled away from him, but he pulled me back holding my hand. “Come in,” Naseer shouts.

Rilwan walks in. “You’re good, Prince Naseer.”

“Yes, Rilwan, I’m good,” he answers not letting go of my hand.

“Ms Bankole, I’ve spoken with the new guard, he won’t turn you away again.” I nod, and mouth thank you to him.

“What guard turned Jade away?” Naseer asked in a stern tone.

“He’s new and didn’t know Ms Bankole has permanent clearance to see you.”

“Does he know now not to turn her away again?” I ask again.

“Yes, he’s aware,” Rilwan says before turning to leave.

“What exactly did the new guard say to you?”

“He just said I couldn’t see you and Taimani wasn’t home. I was turning to leave when Rilwan showed up.” There’s more but I’m not going to bring it up.

“You were going to just leave and not call me.” His look is quizzical.

“I was going to call you when I got home.”

“Next time you call me before you leave, is that clear?”

“Yes,” I quietly acquiesce. He touches my cheek tenderly; he knows I’m giving him the jist of it. I smile close my eyes and kiss his palm.

“Now tell me all about Lagos and why you arrived earlier than planned.”

NASEER



Waking up and seeing Jade's face is one of the best moments in my day. I didn't expect her, for a few more days, I had her itinerary memorized. I managed to convince Will with the plan to pick her up from the airport, but she showed up sooner. I can't believe she's back. If I'm being honest, I was having anxiety about her not making it back. She's here laughing with me telling me all about Tito her best friend and all the fun she had in Lagos.

She's happier and more relaxed. I like this refreshed Jade. Lagos was good for her and horrible for me. She's back and that's all that matters. We talked until she mentioned that James told her he'll be back a week after school starts.

I need to crush James, I remind myself. I let her keep talking. Jade and I were still talking when Taimani burst through the door. I don't like this; I know Taimani won't leave without Jade.

"Go with Mani, return to me before you leave," I whispered to her. She nods and leaves with my sister.

I call Rilwan, “Bring me the guard that turned Jade away.”

“I already warned him not to do that again,” he says as he can almost sense the guard’s job is over.

“I know, still bring him to me.”

Rilwan and the guard both arrive. I turn to the guard “Why did you turn Ms Bankole away?” I asked harshly.

“She didn’t have any appointments and she asked to see you after I told her Miss Darabi wasn’t home.” He knows he has messed up.

“Did she say anything else?”

“She asked to speak with one of your nurses and I refused because she didn’t have an appointment.”

“Why again did you refuse without checking with the nurse or myself.” He’s quiet but I know why.

He’d sized her up and thought she wasn’t fit to come in since she didn’t arrive in fancy car or clothes. I know it, I see it on Jade’s face though she doesn’t say anything. That’s why she is going to leave and call me when she gets home. One of the many invisible walls about us, I must crush.

I rise and take my time to get close to him, then stare him down. He looks away from my stare “Look at me” he turns to me “Next time you turn Ms Bankole away. I can assure you it will be the last time you have a job in this country.” He nods. “I know what you did, she didn’t say it, but I know so let me inform you right now, she’s very important to me and if she’s rejected at the gate again even when you are not there, you

will bear the consequence, so if I were you. You would inform all your colleagues not to ever turn Ms Bankole away, is that clear.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“You are not fired today because Ms Bankole would not like it. Consider yourself lucky to have received her kindness, though you didn’t deserve it, now get out!”

“Thank you, your highness.” He leaves. Once he’s out of earshot.

“What did he do that I missed?” Rilwan asked.

“He sized Jade up and didn’t think she was worthy, that’s why he turned her away without checking. He could have called the nurses to ask but he didn’t. I bet you if we check, he’s probably the one that lets Nadra waltz in here.”

“How did you know he did that?”

“Jade’s look when she told me. I could tell there was more. That was why she was going to leave and call me when got home, not while she was outside.”

“Whoa, I swear I didn’t notice anything.”

“Jade is very good at hiding her feelings. She probably smiled and you thought she was fine.” He nods “Trust me she wasn’t.”

“You are right because he didn’t try to say differently.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t notice that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Even my dad isn’t rooting for her.”

“What’s your plan with her?” his question makes me chuckle.

“I don’t know yet, but I do know I want her next to me. I also know that any plans I have will have to wait till she’s done with college. She won’t derail that for anyone. Right now, we need to deal with James.”

“I would think you wanting her, will be something that she will jump at.” I chuckled again.

“Other women maybe, but not Jade. She already told me she can’t be a queen.”

“That means, there’s no future for you guys then, since you’re likely to be a King.”

“I’ll marry her someday; I just won’t be a king.” I shocked Rilwan. Something rare with Rilwan. He’s not even trying to hide how stunned he is by my confession.

“You don’t mean that.”

“Yes, I will give up the crown for her, you all don’t see it. I’m alive because of her and she got me out of sick bed. I’ll give her time to mature so she can see we belong together. I’m playing the long game which is measured in months and years. Patience is a virtue, I lack. With her, its virtue, I must embrace.”

“Your father isn’t going to like hearing that you plan to give up the crown.”

“My father will come around,” I respond though I doubt it, I intend to change his mind. We still have a long way to go.

He'll come around.

“I think you are underestimating how much your father wants you to be King.”

“Stop worrying, I can handle my dad.” He nods but I can tell he's not convinced about my dad.

We talk for a few minutes about other stuff, and he leaves. I know I can trust Rilwan not to ever share our conversation with anyone. Besides Brian, he is the only other person who knows how I feel about Jade.

I intend to keep it that way for now. No point ruffling feathers now.

NASEER



With Jade back, I was happy. I increased my therapy and got more movement. Jade comes to see me every evening after school. All was good until she mentioned James was back and they were going out to the park to review the schools they were applying to together.

I knew it was time to close out this business with James. I asked Rilwan to find out James's routine and where I could meet with him.

Rilwan fills me in on James's schedule and I make arrangements to meet him.

He was surprised when I showed up instead of Jade to meet with him. Rilwan had set that up.

"I'm sure you were expecting Mariam," I say the moment I grab a seat. He nods.

"I set it up, she didn't. I needed to speak with you alone." He's flabbergasted by my request to see him because we've

nothing in common if only he knew we have a very important person in common.

“Why?” he asks in a shaky tone.

“Very simple, I need you to break up with Mariam.” He’s surprised by my request, but he clearly can’t argue with me though I can tell he wants to.

“Mariam likes me,” he says.

“Yes, she does like you, but being with you is not safe for her and I happen to care about her safety, and if you want to stay safe and not get locked up where your parents won’t find you. Break up with Mariam and do it tomorrow.” Beads of sweat on his forehead let me know the message is clear. He’s frightened and that’s exactly what I want. He looks pained by my request. He does like Mariam, but his attention to Mariam makes her a target and I can’t let, that attention hurt Mariam.

“Okay, I’ll stop seeing her,” he finally says.

“Good, make sure you make it clear to her that you are no longer interested in her. Remember it’s for your safety and hers.” He nods.

“Have a good day and I’ll have my men keep an eye on you, should you think you can outsmart me.” Fear takes over his face as he nods again.

The next day Jade comes over and she’s sad when I ask what’s going on.

“James says he no longer wants to hang out with me or speak with me again. He said he’s now dating Lydia. Can you

imagine that he's dating that mean girl? You know what? Good riddance." She is distraught by it. I want to tell her what I did but I remain quiet because it would mean I have to tell her about the other stuff. So, I watch her try not to cry or show anger.

"He's a teenage boy, they are flaky like that." I lie. James wasn't flaky he genuinely liked her. I saw it in his eyes as I crushed him. I didn't like it, but it had to be done.

"Guess you are right, Gent. I liked him, but now he doesn't even look my way. It is so annoying." She grunts. "I even tried to sit next to him, and he changed seats, that was humiliating." Her voice is loud. I dislike this moment, but I couldn't sit back and let them harm her. Much as I was going to let her relationship with James die out. Being with James makes her a target for Lydia. I would rather see sad now, than the horror they had planned for her. Protecting her is my priority.

"Look at it this way, you have me to always have your back no matter what?" I gently state.

"Yes, Gent, thank you for being here for me." she gives a sad chuckle.

JADE



Final year, everyone is excited and happy but I'm sad, the school year before now was an illusion. This is the worst school year I've ever had. I can't tell my aunty much I want to request that she sends me to Texas to be with my cousin. It would also mean that I won't see Naseer again.

James broke up with me and started dating Lydia, my archenemy. I get the mean looks everywhere I go without speaking. It felt like my presence disgusted Lydia and her minions with a few boys in tow. The only people nice to me are the teachers, and a few students in my class, but the rest look at me with disdain. Honestly, if looks could kill, I would be dead ten times over.

Their mumbled insults increase. Kira, the only brave one willing to speak with me, tells me the rumor is that I am sleeping with teachers and an older man. With the help of Lydia, I'm scorned and tagged the school whore.

James sometimes tries to defend me but he's quiet as soon as Lydia walks in. Kira asks me if there's any truth to my having

sex with an older man. I'm doing it because my guardian can't afford my college fees. I tell her it is all lies, but no one believes it.

"I guess, you've managed to make an enemy of Lydia. Now you are the school whore, truth or not," she said. At least, she's willing to keep me company, we've shared the same classes and studied together a few times. She has always kept to herself and now accepts me. A little blessing, I guess.

"Please tell me you don't believe them?" I eagerly asked.

"I don't and I honestly doubt most of our classmates believe it. They are just too afraid to be Lydia's enemy, so they go along with it." I nod my understanding to her.

I can handle all snide comments and insults but what I couldn't handle was Taimani not speaking with me and joining them in calling me names. That hurt the most and I can't understand why the sudden shift in her behavior.

The only friend I now have is Naseer, he's enough but he doesn't go to school with me, and it doesn't help that I visit him, where his sister throws names and stuff at me.

I ask Taimani what I did to upset her, but she just brushes me off like I'm an idiot. I honestly have no idea what I ever did to upset her so much.

I only told Naseer once about the name calling and he asked to intervene, I refused and told him it would stop. I promised to let him know if it got worse. How do I tell him his sister, is

one of them? Is he going to punish her? I know it would be like adding more gasoline to a wildfire.

She still gives me a ride to their home with a silent feud because she wants to make it look to her brother that we are friends, but he knows we are not. I once told him; I would find my way to see him, and he said he would send Rilwan to pick me up daily.

It sounded good at first, until I realized the students would see it as proof of me dating men, older than my uncle.

I focus on my schoolwork and Naseer is determined to endure the nine months of school social torture.

My uncle asked what was wrong with me. I said nothing and lied that I'm just sad James broke up with me. He nodded his understanding and said I will get over it in time. I couldn't tell him. The meanness of the student was my issue. I stopped going to Rema because of James and the possibility of running into my classmate and started going to Keiko beach to relax but some local boys tried to assault me. I returned to Rema Beach once I figured out what time my classmates weren't there.

I apply to colleges and stay on the book track. What good would a healthy social life do if I don't get into college? I got several admissions with scholarships, but I decided on the University of Chicago. Instead of Rice University which was in Texas. I felt a need to be by myself and find myself.

My aunty didn't like that I picked Chicago over Texas, but it was my choice. Naseer and My uncle had told me to pick what

made me feel better and not what would please my aunt and friends. Chicago felt like that new beginning for me.

I'm looking forward to a fresh start. Naseer is much better and moving slowly without crutches. That is the best part of me staying to see him walking, alive and happy.

He says he's going to be travelling soon. I'm all excited about him finally getting back into the world.

NASEER



Nurse Rea set my bed and put my crutches away. I took my meds and got in bed. I know Jade won't return to me tonight. Nurse Rae stays after finishing, normally she's out the door, before I can make a request but stands and fidgets with her hair.

"Is something wrong?" I ask, though obvious.

"May I speak freely, Your Highness?" she asks, surprising me. What would happen if I said no I do want to hear what she has to say.

"Speak freely, Rae," I say still curious.

"Earlier this evening, when Ms Bankole was leaving. She bumped into your father. She greeted him and he asked her about school. I went into the green room. I'd left forgotten something in there, so I went back to pick it up." *Can she get to the point*, my father and Jade in the same sentence, has my heart racing.

"And?"

“While I was in the storage room off the green living room. I heard your father tell Ms Bankole *“You are setting yourself up for heartbreak and you’re too young and pretty for that. Leave and find a nice young man who will give you everything you want. My son is only lying to you. Don’t take him seriously. When you leave for college, don’t contact him.”* I like Ms Bankole, and I think you like her too, I don’t think your dad wants her around you now that you are moving around better. I think he prefers Princess Nadra. I just thought you should know what Ms Bankole is hearing from others.”

“Did Mariam say anything back to my father?”

“No, she was quiet, and I could see her wiping her eyes before she left.”

“Thank you for telling me, I appreciate it, Rea. If you could please make sure, no one blocks Ms Bankole from seeing me, and in the meantime, don’t mention our conversation or what my father said to anyone else.”

“Agreed.”

“Good night, your Highness.”

“Good night, Nurse Rae.”

I realize the road to Jade, and I keep getting hurdles, ditches, and bumps but they can’t win. I give them an A+ for effort, but they are fighting a war that’s already a loss to them. My dad only wanted Jade around because her presence helped me get better, but in his selfish way, her service is over, she can now leave is what he’s saying.

I'm never going to let go of Jade, that's a fact. I will only walk away from her if she rejects me. They are not seeing it; we are destined to be.

JADE



My aunt and uncle sat me down after my exams. Naseer traveled for the first time since his accident. So, I'm home more and don't need to go to school daily because I have completed all my classes and finished some exams. I talk more with Tito and hang out more with Kira, who I've found to be a silent genius. She's heading to Oxford University, and we've promised to stay in touch.

“Jade, I have bought your ticket to Texas, you don't have to spend the summer here in Rhanaz. Yomi has said he'll help you get settled into school, he has promised to take you for the campus tour, and we will be there as well to help you settle in for college” Aunty Lara, rapidly says. “I want to stay a little longer in Rhanaz.” I croak.

“No, you are leaving by the end of the week. I know Prince Naseer is out of the country, and I want you to leave before he returns.” I maintain a calm façade. She knows I want to stay because of him and she's sending me away because of him.

“A few students like you have completed all classes and exams early, so the principal has agreed to have a small graduation ceremony for you guys, which is a blessing. Right after the graduation ceremony, you will board your flight to Texas, and I need you to promise me one thing.”

“Okay, Aunty,” I respond though I can guess what she’s going to ask of me. It hurts already. I look to my uncle for help, but he doesn’t meet my eyes and it dawns on me. The decision is already made, whether I like it or not.

“Promise me you will not speak with Prince Naseer again. I need you to find yourself and enjoy your youth. Promise me Jade that you will not speak and see Prince Naseer again.” she emphatically states.

“I promise to avoid Prince Naseer,” I say to my aunty who lets out a heavy sigh like she’d expected me to protest, I know what she’s asking for is a pound of flesh that I can’t give though, I agree to it. His dad has certainly soured our relationship in my guardians’ eyes with his threats. The age gap and the social status gap between us isn’t something Aunty Lara likes. My mind understands but my heart doesn’t understand.

The week went by in a blur, I had the graduation ceremony with six other students and boarded the flight to Texas. On my final flight out of Rhanaz, I am leaving numb the same way I came.

Only this time the numbness isn’t a hundred percent. It is more of a shattered heart.

Throughout the flight, I watch movies Naseer likes and laugh in my head about the things we talk about. Now he's finally out of my life.

Tito is convinced, I will forget him and find another James. I'll have so much fun that Naseer won't cross my mind. I doubt that will ever be possible. I choose not to argue with her.

When I touch down in Houston, TX. I'm happy to see my cousin.

NASEER



My flight touched down in Rhanaz and I'm happy to be back. My first trip since the accident. I was happy to get on the plane again and see the world, a few things I didn't think would be possible after the accident but I'm beyond happy that I can walk on my own, not at full speed but I'm getting there.

The flight to visit Raheem my cousin, who welcome me with a hug and a party with all my friends even Luca my only Italian crazy friend came. The trip was good, but I've missed my girl. I wanted to call her, though I felt it was best to let her complete her finals and I can take her out to celebrate her graduation. I'm back early to surprise her.

I got her a graduation present; I hope she likes it. I was gone for three weeks, and it feels like I was gone longer. I missed her a lot, not sure what I'm going to do when she leaves for college. *We'll figure it out.* I have every plan to figure it out.

I went home to change before calling her phone. It rings, no answer. That's strange, she would have answered. I know she's

heading to the University of Chicago but that won't be until mid-August, so I have a few more months with my girl. I tried several times and still no answer.

I decided to call her uncle's line. "Hello," he answers *that's good*.

"Good evening Mr LaYola, may I speak with Jade please?"

"Hello Prince Naseer, Mariam isn't here, she's already in the US."

"Am sorry, did you say Mariam is in the US," I asked, almost like I couldn't comprehend what he just said to me.

"Yes, she left last week."

"Her graduation is in two days, isn't it?" *Did I mix up the date?*

"Well, a few students had to leave early, so the school allowed them to take pictures and receive their diplomas, her cousin in Texas wanted her to come and spend time with him. She will head to college from his home."

"May I have her number please; I need to speak with her" My heart pounds with trepidation at his answer before he says it.

"Unfortunately, that won't be possible. Prince Naseer, let Mariam get this break away from you. She's young and will find her way but to do that, she needs to be on her own."

I remain quiet, though I want to say more, but it is clear, they sent her away to keep her from me. If only they knew it's only

a temporary fix. They can't break Jade and me, we've already formed an invisible impenetrable infinity loop, and no one knows the beginning or the end of us.

“Thank you Mr LaYola, and good night,” I say hanging up. I know what school she's going to in September and what course. I already have everything I need. I'll let them all believe we are over.

While I watch from afar, no way am I going to let my girl go. I'll watch till she clocks twenty. Then no one can stop me from claiming what's mine. *What if she no longer wants you?* My mind questions. I know without a doubt that I would be miserable. Maybe I'll try to be the next king without a queen, of course.

The nurses are gone now. I don't need round-the-clock care. I have a live-in therapist with me. I need to keep going on my therapy and get back close to a hundred percent.

I had dinner with my family. Dad and I talked about the trip and my mom is concerned I'm travelling too early. If only she knew almost a year in bed can drive anyone crazy, especially, an overly active person like me.

After dinner, I pulled Taimani away from our parents. I know she has stopped talking with Jade. Her driver gave me the details of their silent feud. It's not pleasant but I can't control my teenage sister neither can I control or force Jade to speak with Taimani.

I know my sister is wrong but if I say it, she'll tell me I'm siding with Jade, so I remain quiet and try to appease Mani.

Now Jade is gone, and I can't get any information on her. I tried emailing her and found out the email account was deleted.

"Mani, when did Mariam leave school."

"I don't know, and I don't care," she says shrugging.

"Please Mani, I need to know."

"Why, so you can believe she's nice when she's a liar." I don't like the fact she's calling Jade a liar.

"So, I can ask her to apologize to you." I know Jade will bite my head off, if I ask her to apologize to my sister right now if it would give me the information I need, I'll say anything to appease Mani.

"I don't know Nas and I don't care. She's a liar." She snares.

"Okay, can you tell me what she lied about?" She folded her arms in defiance. "Please, Mani."

"Lydia told me she slept with James and kissed my boyfriend, Tony. I also heard she's been sleeping with an older man that's funding her college tuition. She acts nice to me but goes to make out with my boyfriend."

"You know Lydia lied to you right, Mani? Mariam has never slept with James. I don't know Tony, but I doubt Mariam made out him, did you ask, Tony?"

"I did ask him, and he said Mariam only helped him with his math that nothing happened."

"You didn't believe your boyfriend, but you believed Lydia."

“I told Lydia she was lying, and she showed me a recording.” She takes out her phone and plays the video for me. “That’s Tony’s jacket, I had it made for him, so I know, it’s him.” I look closely at the video; you can’t see the faces, and it is *possible* Tony is kissing a black girl, whose face you can’t see either. I stare at the video until I see the female’s right hand.

“Mani, that girl in the video is not Mariam.” I pause the video. “Look at the right hand, Mariam has a dark pigmentation on her wrist. That girl is not Mariam. Besides the date of this video shows a girl in a braid and Mariam didn’t have braids that day. I took a picture of her that day. It was my birthday.” I take out my phone and show her. “See, that’s not Mariam in the video. Lydia is very manipulative; I can almost bet that’s not Tony wearing the jacket. Lydia probably convinced another boy with the same height and hair color to wear Tony’s jacket for this video. She used you to torture Mariam and destroyed your relationship, is that someone you want to be friends with?”

My sister falls back on her bed, she’s contrite and sad. I can see all the emotions going through her. Wish I could find a way to exert some punishment on this Lydia girl for the hurt she caused Jade and Mani, but I can’t punish her for being a manipulative teenager. Doesn’t help that Jade isn’t here. People like Lydia can’t help themselves, I’m sure she will do something again and God help her I’ll be waiting. she’s a mini bitch.

“I was so mean to her; I called her names,” Mani says, as she fights back tears.

“Maybe you can make up and help me find her.”

“I deleted all her information, Nas, I was so angry. I don’t have any way to communicate with her. The only person who spoke to her in school was Kira, she left Rhanaz too. And I doubt anyone has Kira’s information because we all stopped talking to her since she talked to Mariam. I joined Lydia in making school miserable for Mariam and she didn’t fight back she just kept quiet.” I wanted to cuss but I held it in. The look on my sister’s face tells me what she and that Lydia girl did was much worse than what Jade told me.

“I’ll find her, and I think you owe Tony an apology too.”

“Please tell her, I’m sorry when you find her. Tony has said I should never speak to him again.” I nod but I know Jade, wouldn’t care about my sister’s late apology.

I need to find her.

JADE



I close the door to my temporary room. My cousin's place is large and spacious and he's welcoming. I've settled right in. Houston is hot like Rhanaz and Lagos so I'm still in my element weather but everything else is so different.

I'd visited in the past with my parents but now, it feels different. I've talked to Aunty Lara, and she sounds excited that I've settled in. Aunty Lara will arrive in a few weeks to visit my new campus with us.

Before I left Rhanaz, Aunty Lara had said again and again "This is your time to get away from Prince Naseer. Do not take his calls or respond to any of his emails. You need to find someone your age and be regular. Promise me you will not speak with him."

"I promise" I'd said, though I was hurting. I miss him but I had to listen to my aunt and trust that she had my best interest at heart. As soon as I told them he was now walking and planned to travel before my finals. They immediately started planning my exit before his return.

Now I'm here in Texas, happy to see my cousin but I would rather be with Naseer. I settle into my bed after saying goodnight to Yomi, and I feel lonely. Looking at the time, it's too late to call Tito or Rhanaz.

I lay awake for a long time before finally falling asleep with Naseer in my thoughts.

I wake up the next day and continue the rinse and repeat. I miss Naseer but no one cares. I know he won't take my disappearance lightly and Aunty Lara won't budge either. My part is to keep the promise I made to Aunty Lara. When I agreed I didn't realize just how much my heart would break daily to make her happy. Now I'm slowly shattering, there is nothing to put me together than the one person I can't speak with or see.

A week into my stay, Yomi announced that we had a barbeque party to attend, not like I had anyone to talk to besides Tito who was far away. I went with him to the barbeque party. Everyone was welcoming to me. I met a lot of people. I met Bosun, a good-looking guy. He's tall well chiseled, very friendly, and currently going to Rice University, he sounded bummed out that I didn't pick Rice.

He tried to convince me to change. I refused. He soon started stopping by to visit me daily.

We would talk and laugh; we went to movies together and he snuck me into a nightclub. It was fun playing on the wild side a little. I told Tito about Bosun, and she encouraged me to keep seeing him.

After all the best way to get over a man is to get under another. she'd said. I didn't want to get under any guy, even as she encouraged me to have sex with Bosun that it wasn't a big deal, and I just might enjoy it so much with Bosun that I won't think of Naseer ever again.

I struggled with that a bit because I'd always envision myself with Naseer. Bosun wasn't giving me a chance to guess his intentions, he laid it out right away. We kissed a few times, and I didn't feel a thing. It was just a kiss, nothing exciting. Tito said I was probably analyzing it because of Naseer. I was determined to not move further with Bosun. I decided to google Naseer, something I'd convinced myself not to do.

There he was back in the limelight with different beautiful women on his arm. Every picture had him with a woman at different events and gatherings or outings. Details of his debauchery were right in front of me. I closed my laptop and called Bosun.

Time to get under Bosun and purge every thought of Naseer from my brain.

Bosun invited me for a trip to New York, and my cousin encouraged me to go with him, we visited some of his friends and I couldn't move past a few kisses with him despite how relaxed we were together and how much fun we had.

I returned to Texas excitedly, which made Yomi smile that I was finally getting to my cheerful self again. I was shocked when he asked me "Who is Naseer?" he'd asked, a few minutes after welcoming me back from New York.

“My friend in Rhanaz,” I’d said. He just nodded and didn’t say more.

Guess Aunty Lara is filling him in.

I Google Naseer again and, like before, details of beautiful women in his arms are all over the internet.

I finally saw one with him and Princess Nadra. They were kissing, the picture had been taken in the last twenty-four hours. Reality kicked in for me, they are back together. That picture hits like a sledgehammer to my rational brain. Throwing caution and rational away. I went straight to Bosun like he’s the solution to my shattered heart.

I lost my virginity that night at Bosun’s house. I returned home unhappy and cried myself to sleep. I didn’t feel better having sex with Bosun. I talked to Tito, and she tried to convince me that it was all nervousness, I should give it a try again.

Stupidly I went to Bosun again and again and again eventually realizing that sex with Bosun was never going to crush my feelings for Naseer, if anything it made me feel worse. Upon this realization, I broke up with Bosun. I would rather be alone than keep forcing a feeling. I couldn’t even look Bosun in the eye during sex, for fear I might say the wrong thing. So, I keep my eyes closed and mouth shut in a dark room so he can’t see my face or see my naked body.

I don’t have to keep having sex with him to know that something was off about my behavior.

My aunty is so excited when they drop me off at school. My roommate is Maureen, a petite yet feisty brunette from Kentucky. She grew up with conservative parents and had to fight for them to allow her to come to Chicago. She tells me that she's going to be wild for the next four years and if I have a problem with it, I should speak up now. I just shook my head. I like her.

I didn't care about her wild side, and it didn't take long for me to realize that Maureen is living it up now because once she's done. A conservative husband was waiting for her, and she didn't want to miss out on life.

Maureen and I got along fine, even as she changed boyfriends like she was changing a blouse weekly.

Every week, we tried a new restaurant in Chicago. I introduced her to Afro beats, and she introduced me to salsa dance. Tito visited and we did a road trip once. It was truly single-girls full-on fun.

NASEER



I had promised my grandfather that I would complete the Prince Academy training. It's a debt I owe. The training has four parts. Physical, Pleasure, Mental, and Emotional each training has two parts. Each part takes three months, a total of twenty- four months to complete. It feels like a forced rite of passage that I must complete to be a prince. Whether I like it or not. I must be ace every aspect prince or not.

You pick the order in which you want the training, but you have to complete them all. As a younger man, pleasuring a woman was the first part I signed up for. It involved knowing the act of seducing a woman, from the looks to the foreplay and mastery of sex. Raheem and I did the physical part A and immediately signed up for pleasure part A. It was well worth the training, and I was a very good student in class. Chloe's business was selected to teach all the princes the act of pleasuring a woman.

My accident happened and I couldn't go back to continue any of the training, I met Jade, and no way was I going to be

with another woman, but I couldn't un-ring the bell of what I'd signed up for.

I tried to have them cancel part b of pleasure training, but I was told that's not possible. We were given time to pick. Once selected, you can't change it. I would be cheating on Jade something I found that I couldn't do. Though we weren't dating yet.

I returned to the training for the Mental portions A and B. To train my mind and adjust to stressful situations especially when there was a lot of chaos happening at once. Physical and emotional control go hand in hand.

You learn not to show emotion, especially anger even when you are beyond pissed. You learn to read the room and remain calm even when the house is burning down. You stay neutral in every situation regardless of what emotions you feel. Something, my grandfather stated, that I needed more than others.

I had met Jade and kissed her several times before she left for college. I haven't had sex with her *yet*, but I wanted just her and no one else. Jade is the woman I craved. I'll have to do the physical training all over again later.

I didn't want to do part B of the pleasure, but I had to, Chloe's business had sent someone over. I complained a lot and skipped classes then they suggested I wear a mask and the lady wears a mask. Somehow, I got through it by wearing a mask. I didn't feel good afterward, but it was done.

Now I needed to regain my strength before I could return for the physical training.

My dad had sent women my way like I needed his help to get a woman. I took most of them out and returned them to their homes with kisses on their cheeks. Some think I am now impotent, but I don't care.

I sleep with a few ladies in hopes of quenching Jade out of my system. After her cousin, Yomi happily tells me she's in New York with her boyfriend. I push and push and finally get her uncle to give me her location, he does after making me promise not to tell his wife.

When I show up at the door, I am met with a frown from her cousin, who refuses to give me any information other than the fact she's with her boyfriend. I leave upset with plans to purge her from my being. I do everything, date lots of women, and nothing quenches the flickering light of Jade. I still want Jade. Doesn't help that a few women are repulsed at the site of my scars. Eventually, I conclude I'm not giving her up, she's the only one that matters.

I want her, boyfriend or not.

So, for the last two plus years, I've watched from afar. As she went on dates, reminding myself she will eventually be mine. I send her gifts on her birthdays and holidays, and called her multiple times, but she won't take my calls or return my texts. It all ends next Friday because it's Jade's twentieth birthday, she will no longer be a teenager, it's time I claim my woman.

JADE



“Ms Bankole.” I hear my name and only one person addresses me like that. Rilwan. Naseer’s right-hand man. I pause for a second then turn to see him standing behind me.

“Guys please excuse me. I’ll meet up later” I say as I pack my bag. They just nod. I turned to Rilwan, and we moved away from earshot.

“Is he here?” I ask as my heart pounds my ribcage. I’m a little doubtful but Rilwan would only be here if he’s close by. It’s their law of nature, you can’t see one without the other.

“Yes, waiting in the car.” I nod and walk next to him. I’m not sure what to expect. I’m happy he’s here and surprised he’s here, on my birthday no less. He’d always encouraged me to celebrate it. The air is cool today for Chicago’s bipolar weather it could change soon but I feel beads of sweat sipping into my body, each light yet heavy step I take next to Rilwan who never shows his hand fills my feet with equal part trepidation and anticipation. My mind is spiraling at why

Naseer is here probably passing through and wanting me to know of his engagement or maybe he's here to give me one final kiss and Hasta-la-vista.

I left town without telling him and I haven't replied to any of his text or phone calls as I promised Aunty Lara. Guess, I can't escape him, he still came for me. I just need to find out why he's here and everything will be okay.

If I'm being honest, I'm delighted that he's here and didn't forget that I exist in the world. I've missed him. Tito advised me to not respond to his call or text if I wanted to move on from him. It's been difficult, to say the least. I've just focused on books and nothing more. The few times I tried to go on dates because Maureen encouraged it. I unequivocally won the award for worst first date. I did kiss a few boys, but they were all terrible.

Whenever I'm alone. He's all I think about. Doesn't help that I google him, and I see him with different women. It always reminds me that I'm not the chosen one, it hasn't stopped me from reminiscing about our time together and how I fell in love with him. I had stars in my eyes every day and wanted to be next to him always, didn't matter if we argued or laughed or he acted grumpy, which is his default. It was always us in our own bubble in that room. The world was nonexistence, until his dad told me he was using me, and his future wife was already selected. All they are waiting on is Naseer to set a date.

“You are setting yourself up for heartbreak and you’re too young and pretty for that. Leave and find a nice young man who will give you everything you want. My son is only lying to you” Mr Darabi had said to me. All I did was nod and try not to cry in his presence. Of course, it was right after Naseer had kissed me and said, *“You are very special to me, never forget that.”* My seventeen-year-old self was floating in clouds. With his father’s words came the downpour of rain from my clouds and no rainbow.

With my thoughts in solitude, each dreadful and delightful step I take is with curiosity and a healthy dose of craving for Naseer. I know in my heart that walking away from him would crush me. One would think that should be a smart reason to avoid him but who’s ever smart when the heart is involved plus there’s no book manual on how to walk away from someone you crave like air and not be sad or how to pretend you don’t feel so deeply for them when all you want is live wrapped in their arms and laugh with them daily.

“Have him and get him out of your system that way you never have to wonder” my subconscious interjects.

“Yes, I will, and when he leaves me. I won’t have to ever wonder, and Aunty Lara would never know. I broke my promise to her or took a bite of the forbidden man.”

Rilwan opens the door for me to get in. I let out a weighted sigh, my heart pounds as I got in. I’ve been waiting for this moment, now he’s here and I’m nervous. He’s sitting calmly in cargo pants and a green shirt. *“Hello Jade, my lady,”* he says to

me, with a subtle smile like he's trying not to smile. I can't believe I haven't seen him in three years. I itch to touch him.

“Hello, Prince Naseer.” He looks too good for me to even think about walking away. His hair is shorter, and that cracked nose gives his boyish grin a sexy look that I doubt I'll ever be able to walk away from. He looks more fit and his square chiseled face is enhanced. Those gray eyes would always be my downfall.

“Happy birthday, Jade. I've been counting down to your birthday.” He grins, I thought this was the year he would forget. I didn't tell my course mate today is my birthday. My aunty and friends had called to wish me happy birthday and Maureen my roommate had bought a cake. Tito had mailed this chiffon and silk blouse to me, and I'd put it on right away. Before putting on the tights with a miniskirt and the blouse Tito had gifted.

Two days ago, I'd taken down my twisted braids and gone to the beauty shop to get my hair washed and put a twist in. In anticipation, I wanted to feel pretty on my twentieth birthday and happy despite the fact. I didn't feel happy because the one person I wanted the most to wish me happy birthday had not called or texted me in the last four months *yes, I'm counting*. Can't blame him, after all, I gave him the silent treatment.

Last year, I'd received a card, box of chocolate, and the latest iPhone from him along with a message that said the phone service was covered. It had all arrived the day before

my birthday. I'd initially wanted to return the phone, but Tito said I should enjoy it even if I didn't speak with him.

I'd done as Tito suggested, used the phone and ignored his calls and text messages. I secretly hoped he would come and see me, but he never did. After dressing up and taking my twist out, I applied make-up. I'd sent Tito the final look, and she'd responded with "*Love it. Enjoy your birthday*" Of course, I didn't tell her my birthday was going to be spent in a group discussion with a bunch of coding fanatics.

Yes, they had all shared a surprised look when they saw me. All dressed up and made up, but no one had said anything to me. We got right down to business and that was until Rilwan showed up.

"Thank you, I'm surprised you remembered." Though he has always had a gift for me since my 17th birthday. A part of me keeps thinking the following year is the year he would forget.

"I told you I won't forget," he says smiling. His eyes on me are intense, he's watching my every move. Sitting this close to him makes it hard not to want to touch him. I lace my hands to keep it from acting.

"Correct, you didn't forget, and thank you for coming to wish me happy birthday," I say shyly. I can't look him in the eye. It pulls me in, and I lack the power to push back. We've talked for years. I'm not sure how to feel or respond to the intensity in the back seat. He's not easing up on that intense gaze.

“I have your present at my hotel, and I’ve ordered dinner. Would you like to come with me?” I should be screaming *no* and getting out of the car. I have my hand on the door handle, but I can’t open it because I can’t walk away from him again.

“Sure,” I say as Naseer smiles and turns back to the driver. “Take us to the hotel.” We can both feel the intense sexual silence cocooning between us. It would be senseless to try and deny it.

I’ll take any amount of time I get with him no matter how small, it’s better than nothing. After all his father already informed me of his plans with him.

At the hotel, we go in through the back entrance. Arriving at the sumptuous suite that resembled a perfectly decorated high-rise apartment. I see the table is set for two. Happiness hit, and I decided to dress and clean myself up.

We take our seats just as the server comes out to serve steak, veggies, and rice. Turns out I’m hungry. I devoured the food in silence, keeping my focus on the food. I don’t know what to say to him. We haven’t talked in three years though he still owned my thoughts and dreams.

“How have you been, Jade?” His voice breaks through the silence of cutlery sounds.

I briefly glance at him “Pretty good, school is kicking my butt, I’m managing not to drown.” I answer staring at my cut pieces of meat. Like they are test answers

“Any boyfriend?” he asks casually, my eyes flicks to him. I wish to lie so he doesn’t see I’ve been pinning for him. *Shakara (pose) a little as Tito* would say, but I don’t want to play hard to get or a game of push and pull. The desire for him has been ringing and buzzing loud and far too long in my being and right now, I know all I get is a little time what’s the point in wasting the time with unnecessary pride. Now is the time to cease the moment or forever walk away.

“None yet, I guess I’m a bit boring for most college guys,” I lie. A few guys have asked me out, *I’ve kissed a few* but I’ve gently turned down a request for a second date. *My heart wants you; it still desires to tango with you, Naseer.*

“Good,” he says. He’s smiling about my zero-boyfriend status. I’m a bit ticked I would like to tell him my lack of a boyfriend isn’t a lack of possible suitors; it is more along the lines of me comparing every guy to him and they never measure up. None of them could cocoon me with their eyes or make me laugh even when I’m sad. I didn’t feel a sense of protection with any of them. As annoying as he can be when he releases his evil twin. I know he won’t harm me. I glare at him as he grins with confidence that I would like to wipe off his face.

“How have you been, Prince Naseer?” I ask in an even tone much as I would like to wipe that grin off his face.

“We are alone, Jade” I know we are but calling him Prince Naseer has always been my shield wall. It helps my mind to

remember who is in what lane, but my dreadful heart doesn't care about my walls. It wants what it wants.

“How have you been, Naseer?” I ask again.

“Missing you daily and making a herculean effort to stay away from you because it feels worse when you don't return my calls or respond to my texts. Not to mention the fact you left Rhanaz without saying goodbye.”

“I wasn't sure you wanted to hear from me.” I know that's a lie, but it rolls off my tongue.

“I'm sure no sane person would keep calling or texting someone they didn't want to talk to. I guess my question is why you have ignored all my calls and texts?” He leans forward, his eyes challenging me. I'm sure he knows the answer yet, he wants me to voice it. *The truth is that I promised not to speak with you.*

“I felt it best for us to sever all ties. After all, I don't fit into your lifestyle or your side of the lane.” I didn't want to say the latter but it's also the truth. He gives a sad chuckle.

“All I know is, I want you Jade and I do not care if you fit into my lifestyle if we fit. The real question is do you, Jade, want me?”

I hesitate, lowering my eyes, not wanting him to see how much my whole being craved him. He sits back waiting as the air thickens, my mind filled with conflicting emotions because of the promise I made. I've always wanted him though I'm not sure when it happened. Was it when we laughed or when we

sat in comfortable silence, or when we fought or was it the first time I laid eyes on him? All I know is I've craved him for a while now and the shit ain't going away. I answer, "Yes."

"Look at me, Jade, and tell me you want me." I look deeply into those gray eyes that always suck me in. I can feel desire emanating from those eyes in waves. I can't hide anymore. I look straight at him. My wants and cravings are all I see. "I want you," I reply not blinking, not hiding. I'm exposed.

"Good, because I think we have danced around our desire for each other long enough." I nod in agreement. "The wait has been killing me," he continues. "I must warn you, there's no turning back once we have each other. Are you sure you are ready Jade?" His eyes doesn't leave mine.

"I'm ready and I understand," I say, taming my excitement. I almost want to jump on a chair shouting *yes, yes*, I'm ready.

He pushes the chair back and puts his hands out to me. I put my hand in his, following as he leads to the bedroom. I should be nervous but I'm not. It's certainly a large room with a king-size bed and white linen. It just had to be white to show, I'm no longer a virgin. He goes to sit on the edge of the bed. Taking his shoes and pants off without taking his eyes off me.

Boxers and unbuttoned shirts remain. I remain standing staring at him. His erection staring right back at me "Undress for me Jade." he says. It isn't a question.

I slowly and teasingly take my shoes off, *yes, I've learned a few things from Maureen* then my blouse. my skirt and tights. I'm down to my underwear. Our eyes do not waver from each

other. I unhook my bra and slowly take it off. Releasing my throbbing hardened nipples. He groans. I push my panties down and kick them off. His manhood looks like it is about to burst out of that underwear.

I have never felt more desired. From the way, his eyes are caressing me. He's the first man to see me naked and I don't feel an iota of shame in his presence. The air barely cools the heat radiating between us. There's no denying my wanting him.

He moves slowly to me, gently touches my face, then moves down to my neck, down to my nipples and navel. He stops. I want to scream. He circles my back. Starts to run his hand again. My body is insanely awakened to his touch. *Kiss me now please*, I want to scream. He's circling and touching me like he's doing a slow sensual forensic inspection of my body. He is in front of me and stops touching me.

"You, my lady, are beautiful," he says. I don't reply all I want is his hand back on my body and the desire to kiss him is killing me slowly.

Almost like he can read my mind, his hand is back gently roaming my body, I'm about to lose my shit and jump him, he knows his touch is sending waves through my body and he's purposely teasing me.

"Once we have each other Jade you will be mine only" I nod. "I need you to say, you are mine" I swallow the massive lump in my throat.

"I'm yours," I say without question.

“You belong to me; Jade and I belong to you.” He says it’s the next step, but it’s a hard one for me to process.

“I can be yours at will, but I belong to me.” he chuckles.

“We’ll see about that.”

He moves back to the bed and sits. “Kiss me Jade” I move to him. I pull his shirt off and toss it. I slowly run my hands on his body the same way he did to me. I take my time to scan his scars.

I need to touch them; the scars remind my senses he’s real. I kiss his scars and around his body. My body tingles with the waves of desire that are about to engulf us. We’ve craved each other “Stop it” he says as he pulls my lips to his. We tear at each other; he lifts me and tosses me on the bed. His weight sinks the bed as he slowly kisses my body from my nipples down to my navel and back up again. Pleasure radiates through my body, I’m high on pleasure.

“Naseer please.”

“Not yet, Lady. You have not told me you belong to me yet.”

He continues to torture me with kisses, He slowly makes his way to my lady part lips and I cry out moaning the moment his warm tongue licks my lips. My god, he’s good. I’m making sounds I’ve never made in my life before. My nails are digging into the sheets. Then he suddenly stops.

“What the fuck!”

“Tell me, you belong to me, Jade.”

“I belong to me” I breathily mumble. He chuckles and puts a finger in me, his other hand and lips are working my nipples, driving me crazy and making me cry out with pleasure. “Tell me Jade, or it will be a long night.”

“I belong to me,” I mumbled in ecstasy.

“You are punishing us, Jade” His head is back between my legs.

“Please, Naseer” I pull his hair, writhing.

“Tell me,” he commands like he’s asking for candy and not asking for my total surrender to him. His tongue swirls my sex, I can’t take it anymore.

“Fine! I belong to you, Naseer.” I scream. He smiles like he has just won a golden ticket. I see my cum all over his lips. His gray eyes glow with open male admiration and ownership, he owns me now.

“I have waited four years for this moment. I can’t promise I’ll be gentle,” he says as he centers himself on my sex, I gasp as he fills me. Our hands entwined as our eyes lock. *Yes, we’ve both waited for this magical moment that entwines our lives.*

He begins to move, the pleasure I’m experiencing of him inside me is undeniably euphoric. I want more. I wrap my legs around him to match his rhythm, taking him in completely. His lips are all over my neck, he’s found my spot. I cry out once he starts to run his tongue seductively down my neck. He’s grunting like, he doesn’t want to let go. It’s a fact, neither one of us has control anymore.

He soon let *go, with a loud groan releasing in me. I also let go with a loud cry. We are both slaves to our desire for each other. He crashes on his back pulling me to him as we both come down from the euphoric high of lovemaking. *You are lost for him, Jade. My subconscious says.* I try to move out of his arms. He must have sensed it. He holds me tighter. We remain quiet.

We both know what just happened. There's no turning back for us.

“Jade...”

“Sssh, don't say anything.”

He's quiet and rains kisses on me. I fell asleep in his arms. When I woke up, took a second for my surroundings to settle in. I notice Naseer in a chair watching me. I can't read his look, does he want me gone, all the shame I didn't feel earlier floods in. I sit up in the bed and pull the sheets to cover myself.

He doesn't take his eyes off me as he moves closer to me on the bed, pulling the sheets off. “You are beautiful, don't ever cover yourself from me.” I blush.

“I'm sorry if I was a little rough,” he says.

“I'm fine.”

“I'm glad I didn't continue to resist staying away from you “

“Why did you stay away from me, Naseer?”

“I wanted you to enjoy college. I know I can be a lot. I didn’t want to dampen your college experience, though I was chewing myself out about what I would do if you started dating, some boy.”

“What if I’d started dating. What would you have done.”

“Guess, we would never know since you didn’t” he kisses my cheek.

“Why show up today on my birthday,” I ask.

“I couldn’t stay away any longer besides your birthday was the perfect excuse to see you.” He gives a roguish smile.

“I’m glad you came, now where is the present you tricked me to come for,” I smirk.

“I’m the present” he smiles “I’m giving myself you to you and this” he gets out of bed and pulls a box out of his pant pocket handing it to me. The box read Effy. Inside is a blue topaz and diamond earring. I love it.

He turns to me. “I love it,” I say smiling. “Thank you.”

“Good, I wasn’t sure what to get you.”

“This is perfect, and I think it deserves a proper thank you,” I say turning to kiss him.

That was all we needed to get going at each other. We spent the weekend talking and enjoying insatiable sex. I didn’t know I had that much energy in me. At a point, I did feel jealous at how many women Naseer would have slept with to be this

good, but I didn't say anything. Just enjoy the moment, I tell myself.

By Sunday evening it was time for me to leave and return to reality. "I don't want you to go," he says as I smile and kiss him. I realized how easy it had become for me to just kiss him whenever I wanted. He pulls me onto his lap. I feel his manhood. This guy is a machine.

"I don't want to go as well but duty calls. When should I expect to see you again?" I ask quietly. I guess this might be the moment when he tells me we are done. He cups my face, and plants a kiss on my lips.

"Jade, I'm not going to walk away from you. I don't have it in me to ever walk away from you. I'll be traveling and working. It might be a few weeks before I return but you can answer my calls and reply to my text, please my lady" I laugh.

"Yes, I will answer your calls." He handed me a card.

"If for any reason you can't reach me. Call this line. Promise me you will."

"I will, can we keep us private for now?" He gives me a quizzical look. "I promised my aunt I'll stay away from you. I need time before I tell her plus, I don't want to be photographed with you and join your long list of debauchery." I feign a smile, thoughts of other women, make me Jealous. I grin to hide my thoughts and lighten the mood.

"I can live with the photograph part. I don't want them to disrupt your schooling too. I don't like not telling your family

about us. I want them to know.”

“I can’t right now, Naseer. I promised my aunt and I’ve disobeyed and broken my promise to her, so I need time before I tell her.” *Who knows maybe he’ll break up with me before, I get the courage to tell her. I feel my heart thump at the thought of him breaking up with me. Get your shit together Jade, you know it will happen eventually.*

“Fine. I’m not going anywhere, and you will have to tell her eventually, anything else?”

“I’ve only dated one guy before you, I’m not that experienced in dating but I will not share you with anyone, not a princess, not a noble blood, not a superstar. No one. I need that to be clear between us now. If you don’t want to be exclusive with me then we might as well part ways now. No harm, no foul” I succinctly state. His face shrivels up. I can tell what I’ve just said surprised him, but I need that clarification between us. Princess Nadra may be his future wife but while he’s dating me. I won’t share him with anyone.

“And I won’t share you either as I said before no turning back, agreed.”

“Agreed,” I say getting off his leg and grabbing my backpack.

“Jade, would you walk away from us?” He looks perplexed but I need him to know that. I may be new to dating and dating someone of his status doesn’t intimidate me.

“There’s no *US* if I’m sharing you with princesses,” I succinctly state.

“Let’s get going before I tie you to my bed and forget all my duties,” he says, deflecting.

We head out. Once in the hallway before we get on the elevator. I removed my hand from his. He looks at me and doesn’t say anything. In the car, I sit away from him.

The car pulls up to my building. I try to pull away from him. Guess he sensed I didn’t want to display any affection in front of anyone.

“Rilwan and Keith please step outside for a moment.”

The moment they are out of the car. I jump on his lap and straddle him, kissing him ferociously. “I’m going to miss you, Gent.”

“And I you, my lady” He cups my face. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Promise?” I ask.

“I promise” I nod compose myself and get out of the car. Wave goodbye to him. I didn’t dare look back because I just might want to follow him and that would mean. I miss school and probably become a dropout. Totally bad idea right now. I can sense my dad’s soul roaring. *Keep moving, and don’t look back, now is not the time to be Lot’s wife.*

As soon as I entered my dorm room. I find Maureen and Calvin, her crazy boyfriend making out. I’m too tired to care about them. I put my headphones on and got in my bed turning

my back to them. I fall asleep dreaming of my prince. Though I'm fully aware there's no fairy tale ending as his father has mentioned to me, he won't pick me but right now, he's mine.

NASEER



I watched her enter her building. Finally, she's all mine. She was worth the wait. I feel like shouting to the world. I'd tried so hard not to be too aggressive, all my pent-up years of waiting for her. I finally claimed her as mine. When she asked what I would have done if she had a boyfriend. I didn't have the heart to tell her that I would have made sure he broke up with her just like I did with James. The good thing is she already broke up with her last boyfriend.

It wasn't fun finding out another guy beat me to a first with her again. It would seem, the more I crave for firsts with her, I always come in second. If second means I get to keep the girl, then I'll take second.

While she slept, I spent a few moments watching her sleep peacefully in my bed. Reminding myself to take things slow with her and not rush. She's young and I can be intense, probably more with her.

I've missed laughing and relaxing with her. She calms me in a way no other woman can, I've wine and dined lots of

women in the last few months, and I told myself, I needed to give her space and let her enjoy being a college student as Brian keeps reminding me. I felt all I needed was a female body. Which I did get after picking up a few women. I wouldn't take my shirt off during the sexual act, I doubt my ego could stand an awkward or scrunched-up face from a woman after seeing my marred skin, their pitiful look aside it didn't take long for me to realize that all I wanted and needed is Jadesola Bankole.

Once realization hit, I started returning the women to their homes without so much as a kiss. I didn't want any of them. I wanted Jade and she's the only one that could quench my craving.

Sitting in the car as we drive to the airport, all I can think about is her delicious body undermine and that look when she orgasms. I want to be the only man to ever see that face. "*What if, she meets a new guy*" I clench my fist and squash the thought. That's a thought I can't bear.

We've agreed to be exclusive; I know she will stick with it. I need to trust her and avoid all the women that could make her doubt me or dare her to walk away from me.

I board the flight and head to Italy. To meet with a friend and discuss trade. My friend Luca has agreed to export a large portion of his olive oil and pasta to Rhanaz. We would in turn sell him gold and diamond at a discount. A business his family is trying to get into. Luca loves to party and soon throws a party just because.

To my surprise, Nadra shows up. She tries to cling to me. I don't hesitate to pull away. She tries to kiss me, and I pull away from her multiple times. She then tells me we can have a beautiful night as I pull away for the umpteenth time. "Not interested Nadra." I succinctly state.

"Come on Naseer, it would be like old times, we would ravish each other," she says pushing her boobs closer to me. I look down at her boobs and do not react.

"I no longer want the old. I've someone new and she pleases me beyond my wildest dream." I reply with a smirk. I pettily rubbed it in her face.

"Anyone I know," she asks after hiding her discomfiture.

"If you must know, remember that beautiful girl you dared to slap in my room because she looked like a goddess. She's my woman now and believe me when I say this. She's more than enough. So no, I don't want what we had. I have something better and much more precious."

"So, the little one finally caught you in her web." She laughs "Well we both know you'll never marry little miss nobody," she says in a sly tone.

"That, I believe is my decision, not yours," I state, walking away. I want to retort a snarky response to her comment of "*little miss nobody*" realizing it might be lost on Nadra. I choose to leave and find others to mingle with. A few hours later I couldn't find my phone. Rilwan, Luca, and I checked everywhere but no luck.

After a day of not finding my phone, which certainly upset me, I used Luca's office line to contact my PA and informed my PA, Rita to call Jade and connect me. Also, replace my phone immediately. It's been days since I dropped her off and I needed to talk to her.

I received a new phone the next day, Rita tells me Jade didn't pick up the calls. Once I had a new phone, I called her directly but no response either.

I can't leave until this deal is closed. I call Rita every day asking if Jade called. The answer was always the same "No, Your Highness, no call from her and I can't get ahold of her." To make matters worse, a few days later a magazine has pictures of Nadra and I together, the picture makes us look like we are a couple. Jade won't see this. She's buried in books. *I hope she doesn't see this picture.*

My mind starts a battle with itself, did she meet a new guy? Is she having sex with him? She's not supposed to want any man but me. I tell Luca to expedite the agreement, by the end of week three. We close the deal. The original plan was for me to fly to Rhanaz and present the agreement to the king, but I went straight to Chicago first.

"Go and get my girl," I say to Rilwan, the moment we arrive. He goes and returns without Jade. "Her roommate said she's at a dinner party with some guy."

"What guy!?"

"I don't know, but she said Ms Bankole will be back in two hours."

“Fine, we return in two hours.”

I’m pacing in the hotel room; I called Jade’s phone several times and got the same thing.

“Rilwan, it’s over an hour can you go and wait, be there when she gets back and bring her to me,” I shout.

My mind is spiraling, I’m imagining her having sex with some boy who’s about to have broken bones. I down my shots, it doesn’t help to calm my mind. Rilwan returns without Jade.

“Where is she!?”

“She said to tell you that she got the message, and you don’t need to try and be nice and to tell you, ‘No harm no foul.’ Her words.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” He shrugs.

“Go and get her here, kidnap her if you have to, but fucking get her here!” I shouted. I’m seriously losing my shit.

About forty minutes later, Jade storms through the door. Wearing a black boat neck, above knee length dress with three-quarter sleeves. The dress hugs all her curves. She has a wedge heel ankle boot. Her braided hair is pulled into a ponytail. She has make-up on with drop earrings. Who did she go on a date with looking like this? The guy probably had his hands all over her. I know I would.

“What is your oversized problem, mighty Prince Naseer?” she snickers “You haven’t answered my calls for weeks, I left multiple messages with your PA, and you don’t respond. You then disconnected my phone line. Did you expect that I’d be

crying, wallowing in self-pity, or making bubble wishes, for you to come and go as you so damn please? Rilwan harassed my date, why!?” She’s upset, good because I’m upset too. She dares to tell me I didn’t call her when all I did was call her.

“Am glad Rilwan harassed your date, if he has any sense, he won’t come any close to you again. All I did was call you and you didn’t respond. Why for the love of mankind would I disconnect your line and keep calling the same line?” I return the same intensity of anger. Crowding her space, inhaling her floral lavender scent, my body awakens to her scent. *Down boy, first we need to eliminate poachers.*

“You don’t get to decide who I date Naseer, and I didn’t get any calls from you. My phone just stopped working and the phone company told me the line was disconnected, by you,” she shouts, pointing a finger at me and moving out of my space. *What did she just say?*

“What do you mean you didn’t get any call from me? I asked Rita to call you several times and she said she couldn’t get a hold of you.”

“Your PA is a liar.” She snickers. “I called her at least three times a day when my call to your direct line would not go through. She made me spell my name each time I called.

“J for Jane, A for Apple, D for Daughter, E for Elephant. J.A.D.E My last name is spelled B for Boy, A for Apple, N for Nancy, K for kite, O for orange, L for Larry, and E for Elephant.

Jade Bankole. I did that each time I called asking for you and told her to please have you call me back. You never did. After the fifth day I just gave up calling and went about my life, so tell me again why Rilwan has the right to harass my date?”

I’m shocked by what she has just said, all my anger washes away.

“I’m sorry, Jade. I didn’t get any calls from you. Rita lied to me and I’m about to find out why. Please use your phone and call her again.” She doesn’t respond, just continues her defiant stance. “Please, Jade.” I plead. I command men in business, yet Jade makes me beg.

“Fine,” she snaps and dials. Rita answers and I watch Jade recite her name all over again, requesting I call her. She hangs up after the exchange. “What now?” I put my finger to my lip telling her to be quiet and call Rita putting my call on speaker.

“Hi Rita, any luck getting Ms Bankole?”

“No, Your Highness. Same thing. I haven’t heard from her, and I can’t get through to her phone.”

“Okay.” I hung up.

“As you can see, my PA has been playing us. Why? I don’t know but I’ll find out.”

“It didn’t come from me, so, can I go now.”

“No, Jade, you can’t go, I haven’t seen you or talked to you in three weeks, and while I was going crazy trying to reach you. You were busy hanging out with a college boy” I respond sneering.

“So,” she stresses the word. “I’m supposed to sit around and wait for you always because you are Prince Naseer. Sorry, no, can do!” arms folded and eyes rolling, she has certainly grown.

“Not because I’m Prince Naseer, because I am Naseer, and we have something special.” She looks away.

“Who was the guy, Jade?”

“My course mate, we both made the dean’s list and decided to go to the party together.”

“Anything I should know about this guy that’s hanging out with my woman?”

“Nothing, he’s just a friend and he has a girlfriend. Are you always going to act jealous and possessive? I just told you I made the dean’s list, but the guy is all you hear.”

“Yes, I’m allowed to be jealous when it comes to you, and congratulations on making the dean’s list. I did not doubt in my mind that you would, and I unabashedly admit that I’m possessive.”

“Thanks, but you and I won’t work if you don’t trust me or act like a caveman all the time,” she states.

“I trust you, but I don’t trust the guys that use friendship as a way to get close to you.” *I intend to be a caveman where you are concerned.*

“Whatever Naseer. I have an early morning class; I do need to leave.”

“You are spending the night with me and leaving in the morning, first you have to give me your new number.” She doesn’t move, she’s deliberating giving me her number.

“Jade, I did not disconnect your line, I’m sorry about all this, I’ll get to the bottom of Rita’s action. Don’t make me put Rilwan through the trouble.”

“Fine.” She calls out her new number and I enter it into my phone. I dial her and it rings. Rita has just made things difficult. I no longer have access to Jade’s phone to see who she’s talking to. When I sent her the phone last year with the activated line, I had spyware installed and I could see everything she was doing, a few dates, and mostly classes. I can’t see it anymore. Now I must trust.

“I can have your phone reinstated.”

“No, I’m fine with this new one. Maureen and I are on the same line and it’s fine.” I realized it’s best not to push.

She takes a seat. I breathe a sigh of relief. She starts to take her boot off. She gets up and stands close to me. “Kiss me, Gent.” I smile.

“Yes, my Lady.” That’s all I need to possess her mouth and her body. I pull the dress off her body swiftly taking a hardened nipple in my mouth; she moans. I love the sounds she makes. I pulled her hair tie down and the braids cascade down her back. I scoop her up in a fireman lift making her laugh out loud. Dropping her on the bed. She laughs quickly removes her panties and spreads her legs for me.

I buried my head between her legs making her cry out screaming my name. She had come twice before I make my way inside her, claiming her, and reminding her who she belongs to. As I thrust harder in her she moans loudly, I move closer to the neck, it's her spot. "You are mine, Jade," I say in her ears. "Say it."

"I'm yours, Naseer."

"Say it louder."

"I'm yours, Naseer." She screams between moans.

I move fast and she lets out screaming "Yes, Gent."

We both come loudly, every tension in my body is gone. She is my peace and strength.

She falls asleep on my chest. Hearing her subtle breathing I realize she has the power to crush me in ways no other woman can, but Jade won't use the power selfishly which is her beauty. I text Rilwan to dig into why Rita is lying to me. Rita has worked for me for the last two years efficiently and loyally, why now would she be lying to me? I trust her with my phone and vital information, so something isn't right.

By morning, Jade is ready to leave, she looks tired. I didn't let her sleep for long before getting between her legs again. After all, it's my favorite place to be, pleasuring her is my second favorite to do. I'd trusted and had my ways with her all night. I'm sure she wants to stay in bed, but she has classes, nothing I can do but watch her leave. I'm seriously counting down the months to her graduation.

“I came back early because not hearing from you, was driving me nuts. I’m flying to Rhanaz today and won’t be back for about three weeks, so I’ll see you then. Are we in agreement that no more dates with college boys?” I ask kissing her neck.

“Maybe,” she says shrugging. That has my attention.

“Jade, don’t make me release my evil twin on young impressionable guys. I mean it.” I sternly state.

“Fine, what about you and Princess Nadra,” she asks folding her arms.

“Nothing is going on between Nadra and myself. Why would you ask me that?”

“Let’s see could it be the fact that you were partying with her while I was calling you.” *I convinced myself that she wouldn’t see the pictures.*

“I have no idea how she got to that party and no idea how she left. I do know I told her that you and I are together. How did you see the pictures?”

“It’s online. When you didn’t call me. I thought something had happened to you and your PA wouldn’t tell me anything, so I went searching for you and I saw pictures of you, having fun with the poised princess Nadra.” She continues the eye-rolling. No doubt, Nadra is a thorn in her side. I’m going to have to get used to this eye-rolling thing she keeps doing.

“I wasn’t having fun with her. I was there to close a trade agreement and that’s all I did. I couldn’t very well leave the

party.”

“If you say so,” she says in a condescending tone that I didn’t like.

“I mean it, Jade I’m with you and only you.” I need to reiterate to her.

“Okay. I need to go now otherwise I’ll be late, plus I need to change before heading to class.” She answers like it’s the answer she is supposed to give not the answer she wants to give. Shift focus from my confirmation that I’m only with her. I’m not sure how else I can convince her other than staying the fuck away from Nadra. God-awful photographers had to put the pictures out there.

“Rilwan will drop you off.” I’m ready by the time Rilwan returns. We headed to the airport. Rita has all my planned itinerary.

“What is Rita up to?” I asked Rilwan once we boarded the flight. I’d called him while Jade slept to investigate Rita’s lies and her disconnect from Jade’s phone. Rita has all my planned itinerary.

“She’s working for Princess Nadra. The princess must have something on her. I’m still trying to find out what the princess has on her but presently, she’s feeding Princess Nadra all your movement,” he says.

This means Nadra has all my itinerary because Rita planned my itinerary. The only itinerary I decided not to put on the calendar is my visit to Jade.

“Damn it, she’s efficient but I can’t afford her interfering in my personal life. Had we not returned sooner, I would have lost Jade, and I can’t stand that. I won’t fire her, till I can get a replacement. Keep a close eye on her and find another assistant for me. I don’t care about gender. I just need someone efficient and can’t be influenced by Nadra or my father. One of my life’s mistakes is getting involved with Nadra and worse having her around me after breaking up with her.”

“Do you want me to start blocking her from seeing you?”

“Much as I would love to say yes to that, unfortunately, she’s a perfect rose with extremely sharp thorns that I need to keep close because of her father who isn’t a rational man. If he thinks his daughter is being slighted, he will act without thinking. That’s a man that needs the Academy training. The man strikes first then thinks later.”

“What would you have me do in the meantime?”

“Keep her away from me as much as you can without raising red flags and find me that new assistant soon. Rita is compromised.”

“You got it.”

I want to call Jade, but she would probably be in class, instead, I turn to Ril. “What do you know about the guy Jade was with last night.”

“I don’t know anything about him, I think he’s just friends with Ms Bankole.”

“Friends is how they all get her attention, even I started as her friend.” He nods in agreement.

“We are going to show up unexpectedly from now on,” I state. I can’t leave room for more dates with horny college boys.

JADE



I returned to class the next morning with mixed feelings; I didn't like Naseer's unwarranted jealousy. It's over the top at least he's not unleashing GET on anyone. Which would be a problem. I had to apologize to Dan for Rilwan's behavior.

My week continues fine without a hiccup, not like I have a life besides books and Naseer. I made a new friend this week, his name is Nate, he's Ghanaian and I would say a chick magnet. The ladies are always batting eyes around him. He has that look and physique that makes a woman weak in the knees.

Fortunately for me, my mind is stuck on some prince.

We hung out a few times and studied together. Maureen feels I should have sex with Nate because he's totally into me and for the first time, I tell her that I have a boyfriend. Her jaw hit the floor before she thought to ask where he was.

I mentioned he's not a student, he's older and travels for work. She then laughed at me that I was living in a fantasy

world. She was sure my boyfriend was busy fucking other women, and I was stupidly saving myself for him.

I didn't believe her but the pictures of bitchy princess Nadra and Naseer did bother me, though I tried to hide it. I remind myself that we have no plans to get married and I'm enjoying him while I can.

I need not create a mess for myself, where I have to keep two boyfriends and come up with lies or half-truths to keep their worlds apart. Besides I'm not attracted to Nate, he's handsome that's for sure but no shred of desire to even kiss him.

Naseer calls and texts, and we talk as much as the time difference and our schedule can allow. He has promised to show up more often. In the meantime, I will stay focused on my studies and try to have fun in college as much as possible. Frankly with Maureen as my roommate, I couldn't afford to be dull.

The week goes by fast, between classes and phone calls with Naseer. Maureen and I get to hang out a few times together. She doesn't mess with her studies despite her somewhat carefree attitude.

Naseer calls to say that he would be in by Friday, which surprises me. I didn't expect to see him so soon but I'm not complaining. Rilwan came to pick me up, and I introduced him to Maureen before leaving with him.

As soon as Naseer opened the door. I rushed to him kissing him like he had been gone for years and just returned. He

pulled me into a hug, holding me for a moment. I started coughing. I go to get a glass of water, but the cough persists, and my throat feels itchy. He's by my side.

“Are you okay, Jade?”

“What did you eat, Naseer?” I ask instead.

“I had an avocado and cucumber sandwich, much as I dislike the avocado in this country.”

“Shit. I'm allergic to avocado!” I raced to my bag coughing, looking for my EpiPen.

“Why would you not tell me that!?” he shouts. Grabbing my bag and emptying it. I'm starting to itch, and I hold my throat because I can feel my airway tightening. No EpiPen, in my excitement. I forgot to pack my most crucial item.

“Rilwan!” Naseer screams. “Jade is sick, we need to get to the hospital right now.” He lifts me up cradling me to his chest. Racing to the car, I can feel his heart pounding like a drumbeat of desperation. My tongue swells so quickly that I can't speak, my airway is strangled as life is getting sucked out of me. “Stay with me, Jade!” He pleads over and over, his voice rising with intensity and plea. I'm looking at him, I see his fear and tears, but I can't do anything. “Jade, please...”

I fade out until I let out a loud gasp as air fills my lungs. When I open my eyes later. I see Rilwan and Naseer pacing anxiously around the room.

“Gent,” I whisper. He races to my bedside, and I see relief and fear mixed in his eyes.

“You are awake, how are you feeling, Jade.”

“Much better, sorry, I scared you.”

“Why didn’t you tell me about your allergy? I almost carelessly killed you.”

“My dad used to say it’s my kryptonite and people can use it to harm me, he was paranoid like that. He drilled it in me to not show my weakness. I just tell people; I don’t like it and stay away from it while I keep my EpiPen with me. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I know you don’t eat avocado here because it doesn’t taste the same. Guess I should have told you. In Rhanaz, I used to ask what you ate for lunch.” His eyes widen in recognition of my subtlety.

“You almost died in my arms, Jade.” He runs his hand through his disheveled hair, I bet he has done that lots of times while waiting for me to wake up. The fear of the unthinkable is real in his eyes.

“I’m sorry, Gent. I rushed out to meet you and forgot my EpiPen. It won’t happen again.”

He pulls me into a hug burying his face in my neck.

“Don’t scare me like that again. When you stopped moving, I thought you died. I almost lost you Jade, and it scared the hell out of me.” He whispers, squeezing me tight. He pulls and cups my face. “Promise me, you won’t forget the EpiPen and be careless like that again.”

“I promise.” He hugs me again; we pull from the hug when the Doctor comes in. Giving me the spill of how lucky I was,

and I'll be discharged in the morning. Turning to Naseer.

“You can go home, she's in good hands and pick her up in the morning.” Naseer looked at the Doctor like he'd suddenly become dumb to say that he could leave me.

“We'll be staying.” Rilwan answers.

“Okay.” the Doctor says before leaving. I slept soon after taking the meds the Doctor prescribed.

I opened my eyes the next morning to find Naseer and Rilwan waiting for me to wake up. Naseer looked relieved when I opened my eyes. A few hours later, I was discharged. When I returned to Naseer's suite. We spent the day watching movies and cuddling. He keeps looking at me like I'm suddenly going to vanish into thin air.

I scared him more than I realized. I returned to school better but images of the fear in Naseer's eyes are etched in my brain.

He put out the mean and grumpy image, though he cares deeply and I saw the fear in his eyes. I'm his kryptonite.

NASEER



Jade stirs next to me in bed, I've worn her out. I have an unattainable craving to be inside her every time I have her next to me. It's insanely crazy if I can use both words together. The fact is I don't mind how I feel about her. I remember my grandfather saying, "*She will walk in at the unexpected time, at the unexpected moment and she'll be completely unexpected but keep your eyes open Naseer you won't want to miss her because if you do, you will be missing out on your best love story and best life.*" I'd laughed at my grandfather, my accident happened and the miracle I wanted was to walk but the most beautiful part of my miracle was love walked in and gave me the strength to walk. I almost missed out on her because she was so unexpected. I glance at her again, and just as she slowly opens her eyes, smiles at me then wraps her body to mine, she nestles her head on my chest. As her hand maps the scars, on my body like she's committing each scar to memory. Her soft touch of each scar flickers my heart to thump for her, like a wrecking ball, reality hits that I'm utterly,

undoubtedly crazy in love with her. The realization echoes loudly in the silent moment.

“I’m in love with you, Jade,” I say to her. Her hand roaming my body comes to a halt. She moves out of my arms. Back to the pillow next to me. She sighs and pulls the sheet closer to cover her body.

“Don’t say that to me,” she says quietly, I’m completely taken aback by her response.

“You know most women would smile and say I love you back or I’m in love with you too,” I say, at least that’s what I expected guess I should have known better.

“We both know, I’m not most women, and using words like *love* complicates things. We’re already complicated, let’s not make it worse.” I’m taken aback.

“Jade, I have no clue what you are talking about. You need to clarify?” I turn to her, still baffled she doesn’t want me to use the word “love” with her.

“Okay, stop telling me you love me, we both know, we are just fooling around. I may be naïve or inexperienced with relationships, but I’m not stupid to think that we are going to exist beyond what we have presently. Let’s enjoy our time together and not ruin it with promises that can’t be kept.”

I sat up utterly surprised. I’m pouring my heart out to her while she has us on the expiration shelf in her head. No way am I going to let her write us off. I pull the sheet to me, and

she does the same then pulls her knees to chin with the sheet to cover her body. *Is she covering herself from me?*

“If I’m understanding you correctly, you don’t want me to confess love and you believe our relationship has an expiration date,” I state as gently as I can manage.

“Yes! And you don’t need to try to make empty promises.”

“What if, it’s not an empty promise,” I state, just as she gives a sad chuckle.

“Come on Naseer, am sure your dad has all the princesses lined up for you to choose from, and don’t worry, I’ll meet someone when I’m ready. I assure you. You don’t need to make promises of love or forever cheesy stuff to me. We can both go our separate ways when our clock runs out, no hard feelings.” She says it’s no big deal. I want to shake her maybe she would come to her senses unfortunately, that won’t work with Jade.

“When do you think our clock will run out?” I ask, still gobsmacked by what she’s saying to me.

“I don’t know, I’m not thinking that far ahead, just enjoying all the sexiness you have to offer. I’m sure you will let me know once your dad or the king announces your engagement.” she gives a faint smile.

“I’m sure, I will. Do you have a guy in mind that you plan to marry or date right now?” I ask though my mind is about to implode, I have no idea what I would do if she told me she

fancies some guy or she's seeing some other college boy. She's quiet for a moment and starts to laugh.

"You're too funny Naseer. You know, I lack the acute mind to date two guys at the same time. Right now, I'm all school and Naseer, which if you ask my roommate is quite boring and terrible plus you are the grumpy's evil twin when it comes to sharing. It's best to save us both, the headache of you showing that side of you." She responds with a sad chuckle. At least she understands that I would never share her.

"Honestly, Naseer, let's just enjoy our time together without any promises."

"Fine, if that's how you want it." I acquiesce. She has no idea there's no way I am ever letting her go. If it makes her feel better. I'll let her keep believing at some point we'll go our separate ways.

I lie back down and reach for her; she doesn't turn away. I pull her to me; she soon falls back asleep. My mind can't rest, Jade has an exit plan. I need to start working on erasing her exit plan. Giving her space to concentrate also sounds like too much space for her to plan an exit. I'm going to show up more often, so she knows I'm playing the long games here.

I feel a need to have someone keep an eye on her, should she suddenly start having thoughts about dating boys on campus. The cons, if she finds out, she will walk away from it. Right now. I need to plan how to change her mind about us and not compound it.

When I woke up the next morning, Jade was not in bed. Which isn't unusual. She's an early riser. I stepped into the living room and found her dressed with a bag packed.

"Why are you dressed and where are you going?" I'm ticked, what is she up to?

"Back to school." She mumbled her response.

"Why, I thought the plan is you leaving Monday evening?" We had agreed on this, but now she's acting weird.

"I realized Maureen and her creepy boyfriend won't be in and I could use the time to study," she answers avoiding my eyes. Staring at her shoes, the way she does when nervous.

"Bullshit Jade, you're not going anywhere!" I know her, she's trying to put a wall between us and that's not going to work.

"You can't force me to stay, Prince Naseer." She's saying prince again, pushing me away. No way am I going to let her build a freaking Chinese wall between us.

"I'll not dignify that response with an answer, but I'm saying it again. You're not leaving until Monday. You have two options, we can continue our original plan of going to my cousin's party in New York or we can stay here indoors all day, your choice. Either way, you're not leaving today." I tersely state.

"Fine, Naseer. You win," she snaps.

"Glad you are back to addressing me appropriately. Now what do want to eat?"

She ignores me and goes to sit further away.

I hear a knock on the door, “Come in.” I call out, and Rilwan walks in.

“Good morning, Prince Naseer,” he says to me then turns to Jade “Ms Bankole, are you ready?” She shakes her head and avoids his eyes.

“Sorry for troubling you, Ril. I’ll be staying,” she says in a conspiratorial tone before heading to the bedroom and slamming the door.

Rilwan turns to leave. “Stop, Rilwan!” I call out. He turns to me.

“Let’s be sure, I have this clear. I’m guessing she called you to say she wants to leave, and you were going to take her away from me without consulting me first.” I’m upset and trying to control my annoyance.

“She was crying on the phone saying she needed to leave. I called your line when you didn’t answer, I arranged transportation for her.”

“She was crying, and you thought getting her away from me was a good idea.” I feel like smashing his face in.

“I’m sorry.”

I moved closer to him. “Rilwan, you, and I are friends, we are also boss and employee. Next time you take any action that involves Jade without consulting me first. I can confirm to you it will be the end of us. Is that clear?” I sternly state without

breaking eye contact, I need him to know. Jade is always my number one concern, never his.

“Yes, Your Highness”

“I assure you; I didn’t do anything to make her cry.” I clarify to him. “I’ll let you know when we need to leave,” I state walking away from him.

Jade is sitting on the edge of the bed when I open the door to the bedroom. “You still haven’t answered about breakfast.”

“I’m not hungry.” Her lower lip is quivering.

“Is this going to be us, I have agreed not to make any promises and agreed with your terms so can we just erase that I said anything and return to us?” Un-fucking-believable. Grandfather certainly forgot to mention, how hard I’ll have to fight to keep this unexpected woman. I’m ready for the fight though. Fight, I will

“I’ll have toast, and scrambled eggs with a glass of apple juice,” she answers.

“That’s better” I pick up the phone to place the order for our breakfast. I want to ask why she was crying but it’s best to leave it alone.

Once the order is placed, I sit next to her “Kiss me, lady” She turns towards me a little hesitant at first, she leans in for the kiss. I don’t give her a second to think. I’ve realized the only way I can express my love is to continue to show her in every way, how much I love her. I give all of me to her, she

doesn't hold back either. There's no way she isn't in love with me. We both know it, only one of us is willing to voice it.

She's soon back to herself, laughing with me. We eat our late breakfast. We start getting ready for New York. I refuse to let Jade open her laptop and study. She mentally locks me out once, she starts to work. I love her grit just not today.

We rarely ever go out together because of my status and the fact she doesn't want to be photographed with me. The camera always finds a way to show up, I don't want them following Jade or making life difficult for her. Without the press, she's already writing us off. I hate to think how she would react if the press got wind of our relationship.

She'd told me her friends wanted to hang out at a party. I don't want to go to a college party. Our agreed compromise is for us to fly to New York for a party my cousin Raheem is having at the new penthouse he just purchased.

I told him I wasn't going to go but Jade wanted to party, so I figured I would take her. I call Raheem to confirm we'll be showing up.

We soon boarded the private plane. Jade falls asleep as soon as we take off, she reaches for me right on cue as she normally does in her sleep. She leans into me her head on my shoulder and arms wrapped around me. She purrs. I notice Rilwan watching us. He's never seen us like this. Jade doesn't do PDA. She keeps everything with us private. Now he can see firsthand that she's not frightened of me. She loves me but just won't admit it.

“Gent, I’m sorry for wanting to leave earlier,” she mumbles.

“I know.” I turn my head to kiss her forehead, and she smiles.

“Wake me when we land.”

“I will, go back to sleep.” I adjusted our chair so she can sleep comfortably.

I gently wake her up once we are about to land. She still clings to me, though awake now. We drove to my apartment. I rarely visit New York now because of Jade. Used to be my first stop, but now I’m always in Chicago with her.

Once settled in, we both get ready. I’m dressed in a shirt and jeans and a blazer. When Jade comes out. In sequin shorts and a snug halter top, showing too much of her legs and breasts with strappy sandals. She has lots of make-up on, but Jade doesn’t wear make-up. If I’d known, she would be wearing what she’s wearing right now. I would’ve suggested we stay home. I would like to change our plans; I know she wouldn’t like that. I remain quiet and say, “You look beautiful, my lady.”

“Thank you, Gent,” she says giving me a questionable look. She knows I won’t let her wear this on a regular day, but we are taming Naseer today.

We quietly drove to Raheem’s party; my cousin had already given me the code to his back entrance. We go in through the back elevator. The loud music and noise greet us once we step into the party. Holding her hand, I lead the way to find

Raheem. I notice a few guys checking my girl out, something I figured would happen with what she's wearing.

I find Raheem and he waves for us to join him in a quiet room. Raheem and I shake hands and his eyes widen when he probably realizes it's Jade "You must be Mariam?" He says to her proffering his hand for a handshake,

"Yes, I'm Mariam and you are Raheem, right?" she takes his hand. He lifts her hand to his lips.

"Pleasure to finally meet you, Mariam, my cousin has been keeping you all to himself." she laughs.

"Yeah, he does that a lot." She smiles at me.

"I don't blame him; I'll most likely do the same if I have such beauty." She smiles and leans into me. I wrap my arms around her waist.

"What would you like to drink," he asks her.

"Any fruity drink with less alcohol would be fine."

Raheem gets us both a drink, he knows what I drink. His attention is soon called. Jade and I found a spot to sit. She starts to talk about Raheem's place. I notice she likes his place. We noticed a few people going to the open rooftop and she pulled for us to go there.

"Whoa! This is beautiful." Jade exclaims once we step onto the tastefully decorated rooftop. She's all excited. We found a spot to sit and enjoy the view. My phone starts to ring, I check it, it's the King.

“I have to take this call,” I say to her. She nods and I step away to take the call from my uncle. I expect the call to be all pleasantries, but my uncle shares a developing concern about the head of transportation with me. I leave Jade, though I don’t want to, but Raheem and I are urgently needed. I find Raheem, we ended up in his private office speaking with my uncle at length on how to attack the issue of the head transportation corruption that’s come to light.

The phone call took time with some immediate planning. The king finally hangs up. Raheem and I concluded that he would be flying out tomorrow to assist our uncle.

We return to the party, and I see Jade laughing with a guy, he’s touching her, even whispering in her ears. I’m about to head their way when Raheem stops me. He knows I would knock the guy out. “He’s gay,” he says.

“So, he could be bisexual.”

“Come on, Nas, he’s not trying to steal your woman.”

“Dude still has a dick, and he sure looks too comfy with her,” I reply tersely.

“I assure you; she’s talking to the safest guy here. His partner is also watching,” he says directing my attention to the guy standing a few feet away from the Jade and the touchy guy.

I grunt, and cross my arms in front of me, determined not to stop them, but not controlled enough to hide my annoyance.

“My, oh my, how the mighty have fallen, you are in love with her,” he says, smiling.

“Yes, and she doesn’t want me to tell her that,” I confess to him.

“What!?” He looks incredulously at me.

“She’s convinced we are just enjoying each other’s company and at some point, I’m going to break things off with her and marry some imaginary princess. Nadra if I’m being specific.” I say to him though my eyes stay on her.

“Why would she think that?”

“For starters, crazy ass Nadra slapped her years ago.” His eyes widen at the utter shock of the action, I still cringe every time I think about it. “My dad told her that I’ll never pick her. She didn’t tell me, but I heard about it and my sister who was her friend joined others in making her miserable. So, yes, she has a few reasons to push back on me making any promises to her. I’ve only highlighted a few.”

“She’s with you now, which means you have time to change her mind.” I chuckled.

“I hope that’s possible; Jade can be annoyingly stubborn.”

“Guess, you need to pull all the stops to change her mind, from what you’ve told me. Her heart is already yours, the only task you have is to treat it right and it will remain yours forever.”

“Thanks, I need to save her from that guy. That smile she’s giving him is fake.”

He laughs and walks away.

I save Jade from the guy. We spent the rest of the evening at the party and night at my apartment in New York which Jade loves very much. We decided to stay till Monday morning.

Monday afternoon, we returned to Chicago. I always have mixed feelings whenever I drop her off at school. She never looks back which I find strange. I'm convinced, it means she doesn't want to leave me either and would rather not look back.

“Let's head to, Rhanaz,” I say to Rilwan.

NASEER



“Naseer, you haven’t touched your avocado, it’s usually the first thing you reach for once it’s set before you,” my mother says quietly in that observant tone. I ponder, whether should I tell them or not but what harm could tell them possibly cause.

“I’ve given up eating avocado,” I state matter-of-factly and continue eating my eggs. I could sense my dad sitting up and his bewildered expression which is also stamped on my mother’s face.

“Come again.” my dad says. I turned to him.

“I don’t eat avocado anymore,” I reply.

“But it’s your favorite, the one thing I’m always assured you will eat,” my mom says.

“Well, not anymore. I almost killed Jade. She’s severely allergic to avocado.”

“Can you provide more context? We do not understand you, and who’s Jade?” my dad asks still shocked I would give up

avocado.

“Miriam is Jade. Jade is her middle name. I had an avocado and cucumber sandwich on my way to see her. We kissed right after I ate avocado, and she immediately started reacting to kissing me. She ended up in the hospital. I didn’t like, the fact I almost killed her. Since I happen to like her more. I’m now giving up Avocado.” I continue with my eggs. I know giving up avocado is a big deal for me but she’s more important.

I will never forget how she looked like she was dying before my eyes, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. She broke out in hives and couldn’t breathe. Rilwan drove like a maniac to the hospital that day. At the hospital, they injected her with epinephrine, the moment I told them about her allergy. She starts breathing fine, but didn’t open her eyes.

I swore that day to give up avocado and anything that would cause harm to Jade. She knew about it and didn’t tell me. I was so mad at her, but I had to let it go. Since that day, I check to make sure she has her EpiPen with her and order some to have on me for her.

“Miriam ... isn’t she your sister’s friend? And why are you kissing her, I thought you two were just friends and you are still dating Jurea, King Issa’s daughter.” My father says hurriedly, as my mother continues to look surprised.

“I broke up with Jurea long before I even dated and broke up with Nadra, I’m with Jade now.”

“So, you are seriously giving up avocado for Mariam?” my mom asked almost as if she couldn’t believe her ears. I felt a

shudder at the thought of Jade barely breathing in my arms. A good thing Rilwan was there, I almost punched the doctor when she didn't wake up right away. My mom's cough brings me back to the present.

“Yes, and it would please you, Mom, to know that I'm also selling my motorcycles,” I state casually.

My mom's face breaks up into a wide smile. She's been pleading with me to get rid of all my motorcycles, but I refused, telling her I'll always ride. Weeks ago, Jade and I were talking when I told her I would be getting on any of my motorcycles again soon. She casually sits next to me and says, “Be sure to let me know when you do, so I can start looking for a new boyfriend sooner than planned because I won't date you if you ride that thing again.” I initially laughed and thought she was joking but she kept quiet and let me have my moment.

I then say, “Jade, I'm the last man you'll ever date.”

Her reply was, “Luckily, for us both, each one of us is allowed to have choices and I'm telling you right now. I'll go on a date with the first guy that asks me out the very day you get back on that thingy that gives you a crazy thrill.” She'd sheepishly smiled “Who knows maybe whoever he is will get lucky on our first date. I just might be overly eager to please him.” Her words that day made me feel like a metaphorical raging bull in a China shop with an imaginary guy as a red China plate. I knew she meant every word.

She can be very assertive, and I know when she is that way. I can't win against her will.

"I'll be sure to let you know when you made me commit murder and rest assured, I'll get away with it." I'd replied.

"Very funny." She'd replied.

As she cuddled next to me in her sleep later that night, I realized what I needed to do. No way was I ever going to give Jade up but avocado and collection of motorcycles had to go.

"You will sell all your motorcycles?" my dad asked in a condescending yet shocking tone.

"Yes, I already found a buyer for two." My mom starts muttering praises to God, but my dad's reaction is harder to decipher.

"It's good you are giving up your motorcycles, you know you can't ever marry Mariam, if you marry her your head will not wear the crown, by the way, isn't she too young for you." I chuckled. I know his strategy. He's twelve years older than my mom, yet he's trying to frown at Jade and me, our age gap is ten years.

"If Mariam is too young for me, then I guess Mom is too young for you, Dad," I reply stating the obvious. I'm not falling for that mind game.

"Don't be rude, your mother and I courted properly."

I laugh.

"What do you think I'm doing with Mariam?"

“Did you not hear me say the crown may not be yours if you choose Mariam.” He exasperates.

“I don’t need the crown. It’s a want and Mariam is a need; in case you haven’t noticed. I’m doing fine without the crown.”

My dad sighs, and my mom is shocked. I’m grinning. I know I’ve shocked them but I’m letting them know now of my stance with Jade. The sooner they know the better because in truth I will give up the crown for her in a heartbeat only I’m not giving it up. I don’t want it to begin with. Raheem can wear the crown.

Though it shocked me as well when I first realized that, however, it’s the truth. I can do without the crown but a life without Jade is one I can’t do. The best three words request I ever made was “Sit with me” I didn’t realize how my life would change with that request.

I know Jade is convinced we are just dating and at some point. I’m going to break up with her and marry someone my family believes is better for the crown but what she doesn’t know is I’ve already chosen her.

I didn’t know it then, but I’d chosen her from the first day she walked into my room and spent a few minutes making me laugh and giving me hope. The reality of me choosing Jade wasn’t clear to me back then. It’s crystal clear now.



After my morning bombshell of informing my parents Jade and I are involved. I could tell my dad wasn't happy about the news, it was no surprise when he showed up in my office later in the day. I expected it. He casually sits as we both try to pretend like it's the norm.

“So, the genie is out of the bottle,” he says.

“Dad, what are you talking about.” I know what he's talking about, I want him to spell it out.

“Mariam, you are dating Mariam. Guess, that's the reason I haven't seen pictures of you with your usual women. No more soiling your royal oath,” he states like I've ever cared. Raheem is the one that keeps a low profile but behind the scenes, he's worse than I am. I honestly believe he knows he'll be the one wearing the crown, not me.

“Guess so.”

“You've been smart not to put her out there, that's a good thing. When you do marry Nadra or the right woman of the right pedigree, you can keep her as a mistress. A win-win for all parties involved.” I had to do a double take to make sure I heard my dad right about Jade being my mistress. I wanted to laugh out loud, but I tapered my laugh and chuckled. He doesn't know Jade. So, I turn the narrative.

“Is that what you do, Dad? Marry Mom and have a mistress?” I ask like maybe this is some information I'm only privy to as an adult male.

“No, son. I don’t have a mistress, just your mother, and I’m a happy man. You, however, need an edge over your cousin to wear the crown, and marrying Nadra will give you that edge. I understand you want Mariam. I doubt Nadra would fight you for having a mistress, as long as she’s queen. She’s born royalty and understands what it entails to be a queen.” He’s convinced himself that this is the logical thing to do.

Is he serious right now? or just baiting me, but the look on his face tells me he’s convinced and serious about the fact that I should marry Nadra and keep Jade as a mistress.

“That would be an easy and perfect scenario, the first problem with your suggestion is the fact Mariam is an all-or-nothing kind of woman, she won’t agree to be my mistress and I don’t think I want her to be my mistress.”

He frowns. Does he have any idea how the said women cannot mix? Nadra will throw a fit, if she finds out Jade is my mistress and I’m sure Jade would never speak to me again the moment I’m engaged to Nadra.

“Then, you will need to break things off with Mariam, before she starts saying she’s pregnant.” His tone is stern.

“Dad, as I said before, I don’t want Nadra. I’m very happy with Mariam and not to worry Mariam has no intention of getting pregnant anytime soon and she’s convinced our relationship has a shelf life of her college graduation day. You need not worry about her getting pregnant anytime soon.” I don’t add how happy I would be if she was pregnant.

“At least she’s smart enough to know there’s no future for the two of you,” he says casually like it’s all settled. I wanted to tell him otherwise, but I decided it was best to be quiet about my plans.

“Yes, she’s smart and you need not worry about convincing her to be my mistress.”

“Good, guess it’s settled then, when are you meeting with your uncle?” he says changing the subject and I go with it. If I’m being honest, I don’t want to talk about Jade with Dad. Though it nags me.

“In about an hour,” I reply lying to him. I don’t have to meet with the king today, but I don’t want to keep speaking with my dad about Jade either. What I want is to call Jade soon before she goes to class. I need to hear her voice. I need to confirm to my mind that we are real.

If my dad has an idea of how I feel about Jade. He won’t think to mention another woman, so I’ll keep that news to myself for now.

“I’ll speak with you later. It was smart of you to keep Mariam hidden. Once she graduates, you can call your relationship quit and move on to better arrangements,” he says as he gets up, just as he’s about to leave, at the door. I decided to poke his thought.

“Dad, if by some miracle Mariam agrees to be my mistress what happens when she wants children or a husband she can be seen with?”

He sighs before turning to face me, I can tell he didn't think that far into making my girl a mistress.

“You can't have children with your mistress, Naseer. Mistresses aren't meant to have children, their sole purpose is to warm your bed and in return, you shower them with material things and make them comfortable.” He says it like there are standard rules for having a mistress. He tells me that he knows them well.

“So, I should tell the woman I love, I can't give her children. Because the woman I don't love is the one, I can only have children with. I can assure you impregnating Nadra won't happen naturally because I can't stand the touch of any woman besides, Jade.” There I share a glimpse of us. My dad's eyes widen.

“You are making this difficult, Naseer.” He casually says though I sense, he would prefer to shout at me.

“Am I? Let's say by some miracle we don't have the children problem, what happens when Jade wants a husband or wants out of this mistress arrangement?” I know my girl.

“Then you will have to let her go.” He gives a quick response. As I shake my head getting up from my seat and moving closer to where he stands.

“That's the flaw in your equation, Dad. Letting go of Jade is not an option for me.” Realization hits his face. He's barking up the wrong tree. It was never about Jade but about me and how much I love her.

“Are you confirming that you would give up the crown for Mariam?” *Yes, is the answer* I chuckle as I also realize I need a diplomatic answer.

“I will complete the training as promised to my grandfather, I have no desire to wear the crown that has always been my position. Having a woman, who doesn’t care about the crown makes it easier.”

“You are giving up the chance to be the king of Rhanaz for a girl?” he shouts. It’s obvious the news is upsetting him more, as he realizes how serious I am. His eyes turn fiery, clenching and unclenching his fist. I remain unraveled.

“I’m giving up the crown because it’s a want I can do without, but Jade is a need I cannot do without. I know you want me to be King, truthfully, I don’t want the pressure of the crown being with Jade just made me realize it more. Plus, she won’t marry me if I’m King and I can’t have that. She’s the love of my life and I can’t let her go, Dad. I’ll give up everything before I give Jade up.” I reveal to him as I notice he looks like he’s about to implode. A good thing Jade isn’t here because I believe my father would attack her if she was.

“I don’t get it Naseer, there are lots of women that would make you happy, why would you settle for a nobody when you can reach higher?” I want to tell him not to insult Jade.

“Because she’s the one I love and loves me back unconditionally. She doesn’t care about my riches, my status, or how ugly my body looks, and I’ll ask you not to try and get between us.”

He looks perplexed. Like he can't understand why I'm throwing away a chance of a lifetime for a nobody as he calls her but that nobody is my world, and I will fight for her every day.

"Dad, I know you told her aunt and uncle to send her away, so I won't see her, as we both know that didn't stop me. I waited four years to date her. I need you to promise me that you won't get between us."

"I want what is best for you Naseer and I honestly think this girl has you bewitched somehow. Maybe she used some African spell to lure you to her, I cannot understand this obsession with her." I burst into a boisterous laugh, that's the best he can do bewitch and spells. Rather than accept that I'm in love with Jade he chooses to say she cast a spell on me. If it helps him sleep at night I won't argue with his mind.

"I don't trust her and her family and I'm going to prove you wrong." he sneers.

"Dad, let's not do this right now. I need to go and visit the King but don't forget about not getting between us. I mean it, Dad. I don't joke when it comes to Jade. Spell or not."

"I'm not joking about this situation either." He leaves with a frown without a goodbye or a backward glance. I sense that I've inflamed the situation by telling my dad how I feel about Jade. I should have kept quiet though I needed him to know my position. Jade will never be my mistress. She'll be my wife.

Once he's out. I leaned back in my chair. I want to punch things, but all I can do is control my breathing till I'm calm. I try to read through documents but after reading the same line over and over without any comprehension. I realize it's a fruitless effort. I call Jade anyway.

"Naseer, are you okay?" she says groggily.

"I'm fine, just wanted to hear your voice."

"Gent. I was up all night studying. I have a test later today. Need to rest a bit."

"Okay, my lady. Call me later."

"Bye, Gent."

I hung up and breathed in relief, she's still mine. I focus my mind on work.



I spent the next two weeks in Rhanaz only speaking with Jade. She's her usual self. I can't travel to Chicago. My uncle needs my help with some documents. Raheem arrived about a week ago to help.

We spend our days working and our night drinking. He's usually with a woman or two sometimes. The guy has a bottomless stack of willing women, which always baffles me. I always end up raising a glass to him. One of the ladies tries to touch me and I turn a hardened face to her. "Do not touch me," I growl.

She scooches away immediately. Word spread in Raheem's stack that I shouldn't be touched and that I'm grumpy. That's fine with me, I need them away from me.

Once I'm back at my house, I'll call Jade before going to sleep. I hate it when I'm this far away from her. I try to see her every weekend, though I make sure it doesn't go beyond a fortnight but with this investigation, my uncle is running on a member of the cabinet.

We are going through lots of documents, and I can't leave, especially when the king has Raheem and I as the only ones reviewing the documents, he doesn't want it out that we are combing through the cabinet member's work. Jade can't leave school as well; I'm slowly hitting my peak of frustration.

If we are not done, by the end of the week. I'm going to go see Jade. I don't care if the flight hours to and from are unreasonable.

The next evening, I watched Raheem kissing each woman. One of them keeps looking my way seductively but the more she looks the less interested I am. After downing my drink, I grab my jacket and leave the club with Rilwan right next to me.

My phone rings as I'm getting in the car, it's Jade.

"Milady," I say smiling.

"Naseer, when are you coming over?"

"Are you missing me?" I tease.

“Yes, I’m missing you like crazy so when are you coming?”
shocking, she admits.

“Sooner than you expect.”

“Good because Maureen is trying to make me buy a sex toy and I know how much you would like that so you better hurry.”

“You mean, how much I won’t like that?”

“Well, if you don’t like it, you need to show up soon before I’m convinced to replace you with a sex toy or a handsome young impressionable college guy.”

“I’m irreplaceable, Jade,” I say teasingly.

“That you are, my gent.” She’s quiet. I had to look at my phone to see if the connection was still on.

“Jade, are you still there?”

“Yes, it’s weird, but I feel like someone is always watching me lately, maybe my mind is just acting up because I’m missing you though I get the weird feeling like I’m being watched or followed.”

“I’ll be there soon. Do you want me to send someone out to check it out?”

“No, Gent. I’ll be fine. I’m sure it’s nothing. I’m heading to my room and will stay in for the rest of the day. I don’t have any more classes today.”

“Okay call me if anything changes.”

“I will.”

My ride home is quiet. My mind ponders if someone is watching Jade daily. The thought creeps me out. Maybe it's nothing. I'll try not to think about it. I need to see her soon. I went straight to bed. It doesn't help that my body reacts to thoughts of her.

Raheem is excited the next morning and probably had too much fun with the ladies.

"You know, the ladies have friends too," he happily suggests.

"No, thank you. None of them appeals to me and they can't quench my thirst. It's pointless drinking from a fountain that won't quench your thirst. What I need is your help to review this document fast, so I get to my own fountain."

"Fine but if you change your mind all you have to say is *I'm ready* and no question asked," he says excitedly like he just offered me the front seat to a basketball game.

"Won't happen let's get to work."

The next couple of days are the same. We continue to review all the documents and find nothing; it feels like a waste of time. The man is meticulous in details, my uncle is convinced he's hiding something buried in between the details. Much as I would like to argue. I do not argue with people's gut or instinct, most times gut instincts are accurate.

Raheem and I dig deeper but find nothing. Just as I'm trying too hard to find this missing information, I'm also trying not to exact my frustration on a task that might yield no reward.

Raheem leaves for a break. I continue to dig.

I toss my pen, grunting in frustration when my dad comes in, tossing a manila envelope on my desk. I raise an eyebrow in question *what is this?*

“Open it,” he calmly says as he takes a seat. I oblige and open the envelope. Taking the content out it’s a picture of Jade. She’s in a man’s arm her head tilted and the man is kissing her neck as she laughs. My eyes zoomed in on the beautiful laugh. My lady looks happy, *where have I seen a picture like this?* I mentally search my brain but come up empty, my mind is tired and I’m missing Jade. I refuse to consider this picture to mean anything.

I put the picture back in the envelope and tossed it back to my dad. Who seems happy with himself like he’s found the missing piece of information I’ve spent weeks searching for but all he’s brought me is more anguish that I don’t have Jade in my arms.

“Now you know what she’s doing behind your back. This-” he taps the envelope “Tells me she can’t be trusted. I want you to break things off with her immediately.” I’m swiveling in my chair, my right hand rubbing my face, controlling my exasperation of my father’s dog with a bone mentality regarding Jade.

“Naseer, are you listening, this girl is unworthy of you. I can’t seem to understand what you see in her.”

I chuckled at that statement. I stop swiveling and face him *you can’t understand because I fell in love with a girl that*

doesn't care about the crown and loves me despite all my weakness and scars, I don't say that to him.

“Dad, stop stalking Jade. I don't like it, and this picture.” I tap the manila envelope “means nothing. I'm certain Jade will not cheat on me; she will break up with me rather than cheat.”

“Is that all you're going to say, for me to stop watching her, I'm looking out for you don't you see it, she has you roped around her finger. Is the sex that great?”

“Enough!” I shout slamming my desk “Stop stalking Jade and this picture means nothing!” I release the frustration I've been holding back. My dad is shocked, I dare to raise my voice to him.

It makes sense now the feeling Jade had of someone watching her. I'd tried not to think much of it since she didn't mention it again. My dad had people following her which is rubbing me wrong right now.

I lean back in my chair “Dad, call your men off my woman now!” I say in a stern tone, trying not to shout at him again. He glares back at me.

“I will not call them off. I'll always protect you especially when you're too veiled to see what's staring right at you.” He volleys back tensely too. We are having a face-off.

“I will not ask again, Dad, call them off or I'll make that decision for you. I promise you won't like it.” I calmly state but the command is clear.

“No! Son.”

“Fine, you leave me no choice.”

“If you insist on having her in your life, it should only be as a mistress. I’ll never accept her as daughter-in-law.”

“Then we are at an impasse Dad because it’s Jade or no one else.” We maintain the stare. I realize he won’t call off his men and he’s daring me. I picked up my phone and called the number to Rilwan. I kept my eyes on my dad, neither of us blinking.

Rilwan answers right away. “Find out who the men my dad has watching Ms Bankole are. If they are Rhanazian fire them all. If they are outsourced eliminate them.” I state in a commanding tone. Not breaking eye contact with my dad.

“Consider it done,” Rilwan responds.

My dad rises from his seat, his eyes blaring, his chest heaving in anger, we both know who has the power. “You’ll destroy men’s careers for a cheating woman?” he shouts. I don’t blink.

“I gave you the option to call them off, the end of their careers is on you.” We stare each other down, neither blinking. Both frustrated with each other.

“I will destroy a thousand men for Jade, like I said before, I don’t joke when it involves Jade, and for the record, not like you care. I’m certain Jade isn’t cheating and there’s an explanation for that picture.”

Without a word to me, he heads for the door, dialing on his phone. I can tell he’s trying to call the men off before Rilwan

gets to them. I give a loud grunt. I can't believe him; he has some men following Jade. I pace in my office to control my anger.

I can't work now. I look out at the beautiful beach. I don't want to call Jade, but I do anyway.

"Hi Gent."

"Milady."

"Is everything okay, you don't usually call at this time, are you okay Naseer?" I can hear the concern in her voice.

"I'm fine, just wanted to hear your voice. What's that noise."

"I'm at a restaurant with my cousin Yomi. He surprised me today, he just got engaged. I'm having dinner with them. I've spent the day with them." That's the answer I've been searching for the fake vampire cousin.

"Is that the cousin that tries to bite your neck like a vampire?"

"The same," she says laughing "I'm surprised you remembered."

"Then he's the same one that kept you from me in Texas and refused to give me your number."

"Yep, it's him and I just told him about us, and he promised not to tell Aunty Lara."

"Maybe, we'll like him a little." she laughs.

"Naseer, can we talk later, they are ready to leave. I'll call you when I get back to my room."

“Okay, Jade, tell your cousin congratulations.”

“I will, bye my gent. Talk soon.”

I hung up. I would love to hold her right now and kiss her senselessly. I know there is an explanation for the picture. That’s all they could get, and my dad rushes in here with information that means nothing. I’ll apologize for shouting at him but no apology for protecting Jade.

NASEER



It took another week before I could return to my Jade. My uncle was right, we found the hidden money in between the details, though smart we managed to uncover it, and the cabinet member was immediately removed.

As soon as I found the answer, I raced to the airport with Rilwan. By the time I landed in Chicago, it was late, but I didn't care. Jade had her bags ready. I'd missed her so much.

Jade is sleeping, I have ravished and possessed her body repeatedly. I'm watching her sleep. I'm not happy about her plans. She's going to Lagos for the summer and her cousin's wedding, then to South Africa to visit her aunt and uncle that's two months that I won't get to see her or longer depending on how my schedule shapes out. Which for the most part is unpredictable.

Raheem calls stating he's not feeling well he wants me to attend the meeting at *THE HOUSE* an exclusive club of men and a few women, where we trade industry secrets and get richer daily without having to break a sweat.

But something else gets traded that's not formally written 'Sex' The members bring partners, if another member shows interest in said partner it becomes free for all. They can approach unless the said partner is wearing a gold beaded bracelet that was incorporated after, a partner's wife was solicited. It caused a big rift and new rules were created to eliminate another rift.

I don't want to take Jade to this gathering, and I don't want to leave her here for roughly eight hours. Jade will either leave or grab her laptop and mentally lock me out. We barely have enough time together as it is. I don't want her to leave. I exhale my frustration.

I'll take Jade with me. I'm not missing out on spending time with her. I decided to call Raheem.

"Nas."

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I'm about to puke my gut out," he mumbles.

"That doesn't sound good."

"It's not good, you can make the meeting tonight right Nas?"

"Yes, and I also need the bracelet."

"Why?"

"I'll need to take Jade with me. "

"Are you sure? Some of those guys are hawks with no boundaries."

“I don’t have much of a choice. My only option is to leave her here for roughly eight hours or longer and she might leave.” I go into details about her travel plans and my plans it could be a couple of months before I see her again.

“I’m sorry for messing up your plans.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll take her with me much as I don’t like the idea. I need my bracelet and yours.” he laughs.

“Both bracelets?” Though sick he still sounds shocked by the request.

“Yes,” I sound a bit over the top to myself “I don’t need any hawk saying they didn’t notice the bracelet.”

“Okay, I’ll send it to your apartment, and Naseer, the most we can go on the deal is forty percent.”

“Don’t worry, I got this. You feel better.”

“Thanks.”

I go in to wake Jade, we will be flying to New York. I need her close to me. No way am I leaving her behind and then returning late tomorrow.



We arrive at the gathering. All eyes are on us. I rarely show up and I’m with a woman. In the past, I came alone and left with a woman. I notice some salacious looks at Jade. I expected that after all this a hunting ground. I immediately regretted bringing her. What could make a manhunt other than sex and

money every man here is ready to hunt both. My selfish need to have her next to me has clouded my judgment. I've now made her a prey, in a room full of hunters.

I raise our entwined hands to my lips. I notice that some see the bracelet and look away and a few do not stop the salacious look. Raheem had sent dresses along with a stylist and make-up for Jade as an apology.

She'd loved the dresses and finally settled on a black dress with a sheer top a few laces to cover her breasts and the back sheer with just buttons. The dress clings to her body. legs are exposed in a peek-a-boo style when she moves. The stylist has convinced her to take down her cornrows, now her hair cascades down her back in waves that most would want to touch.

Her makeup is impeccably done, enhancing her cheekbone and luscious lips. She's stunning and happy. I didn't have the heart to ask her to take it all off, to explain that where I was taking her was much more than a party. Seeing the looks on the men, I wish I'd let my instinct win.

Rilwan can't follow me around, house rules. He must stay behind a certain line with other bodyguards. I already informed him to keep his eyes on Jade tonight, if my back is turned and he sees anything inappropriate with Jade. He needs to alert me right away.

Hand in hand with Jade. A few guys soon stopped by us to say hello. I know they only want to meet Jade. I shook hands.

We share pleasantries and I don't bother to introduce Jade to any of them.

Jay Stuckley, the only guy I genuinely dislike, doesn't get the hint. He turns to Jade.

"And you are?" he says to her with his hand out.

"Mariam," she replies smiling shaking his hand which he lifts to lips.

I shot him a glare, but he ignored me.

"I'm Jay, it always a tingle to see a beautiful woman." She smiles again. "Can I get a dance later?"

"Sure," Jade replies. I'm fuming.

"Perfect," he says leaving without acknowledging me, he already got what he came for, soon as he leaves, I turn to Jade.

"Don't dance with anyone here."

She is going to object but sees my stern look and nods.

Shortly after, another group of men greet us. They all smile and compliment her, which makes my blood rise. *Bringing her here was a bad judgement call. I hear someone say, "She's a fucking wet dream." That just seethes my blood. I gambled wrong in bringing Jade here tonight. Much as I would like to leave now. I can't, that would be letting Raheem down and I can't do that either.*

"Whoa, this is the first I've seen where rich people are friendly, their usual default is rude and obnoxious to ordinary people," she whispers.

“Now that’s a stereotype,” I reply, but I know why they are all so friendly. They all wanted to see my reaction to Jade. They are testing, the limit to see if I’ll object to them talking to her.

“Yeah, yeah gent. It’s a correct stereotype.”

I smile and pull her closer to me.

“Gent, I like this song would you like to dance.”

“Yes, my lady” I take her hand and lead her to the dance floor a few people are moving around on the dance floor. Jade starts to move to the song; it is obvious she likes the song but she’s moving her ass a little too much for my liking. The song changes to her slow song, *finally*.

I pull her to me. My hand is roaming her body seductively. “Naseer, are you trying to make love to me on this dance floor.” I chuckled.

“No, my lady. I love you very much.”

“I love you too, but we are not having sex in front of all these rich people, I don’t care, how exclusive this gathering is.” she proclaims with a casual air, all I hear is the fact she finally voiced that she loves me. I pause for a moment to let the words sink in. Before crushing her lips against mine. Jade doesn’t do public display, but this time she throws herself into the passionate kiss that radiates for our beings.

We are no doubt making out in front of everyone, there’s no way anyone watching us would think I could ever share her.

The beeper for the meeting starts to vibrate, causing us to break from the kiss. I frame her beautiful face, running my thumb on her lips “You finally tell me here.” our hearts are racing. I can feel it as she smiles at me. “I have to go and handle business. I’ll be back soon my lady.” She nods I lead her close to where Rilwan is standing so he can watch her.

I pause a moment to kiss her lips again “Go Naseer, I’ll be fine.” I smile and walk away. She finally tells me making me feel like a teenager that’s just had good sex for the first time. All my worries wash away. I’m ready for the deal.



“Gentlemen sit down.” the lead says. We all sit to discuss business, the other hunt of why we are here *money*. We argue, push back, and finally agree. “Documents will be sent in the morning the lead says.”

I step out of the room feeling great and close the deal and Jade is waiting for me. I immediately see Rilwan and he’s agitated. Rilwan is never agitated, he’s always in control.

“Ms Bankole stepped outside for some air and Mr Stuckley followed her. I can’t go over there because of the rules; I can see from afar that things aren’t pleasant for her.”

“Thanks” I moved briskly to where he pointed. As I get closer, I can hear Jade “For a man that’s a leader, you don’t listen very much. Please, stop touching me.” I hear the

frustration in her voice, he doesn't listen and tries to run his hand on her arm again and block her path so she can't get out.

"Please stop touching me. I can assure you Prince Naseer won't like it either." She's upset and rightfully so.

"Then, he shouldn't have brought you here and enticed us all with that kiss. He had us all salivating and wanting to get a turn. Now is my turn, I'll make it worth your while. A night with me and you'll forget about him." he says making my blood seethe.

"I need to leave, stop touching me. You will make him release *GET* and it won't be a pretty sight for us all."

"You keep saying *GET* what is that?"

"Grumpy's evil twin." I retort the answer "She tells me to keep that dark side of me hidden and believe me Jay you don't want my dark side." I growl at him.

He stands back and puts his hands up like he's waving the white flag. I take my jacket off put it on Jade and pull her to me. She buried her face in my chest. I hold her for a moment "Go to Rilwan." I say to her.

She nods "Don't release *GET*, Naseer. He's not worth it." She whispers before leaving. Once she's out of earshot I turn to Jay.

"She has two bright and shining fucking gold bracelets, yet you still approached her. Twice I heard her telling you to stop touching her." I growled at him.

"Hey, I mean no disrespect." he snickers.

“Yet, you intentionally disrespected me, blatantly and boldly too.” The words are stated without malice, but they drip with venom.

“I’m sorry, I must have had too much to drink and she’s a beautiful woman. I’m just weak to her beauty.”

“No Jay, Alcohol is not the problem, you just wanted her and thought damn all consequences you were going to have my woman,” I reply through gritted teeth.

“Poor judgement on my part due to the alcohol.” He sighs.

“Yes, very poor judgement because I’m voting you out of *the house* tonight.” his suppose alcohol delirious face widen but I don’t give a fuck about him.

“Come on Naseer, I just thought she’s just one of the others and you were being selfish not wanting to share. She can’t be special if you brought her here.”

“Address me appropriately, we are not friends.” I sternly state, no shake in my tone. “The gold bracelet was created to avoid hunting another member’s partner, regardless of who you think they are. You violated that and you’ve to live with the consequences.”

“Fuck!!” he pulls his hair “You will vote me out over a nobody woman.” My body is ready to attack but I control my anger. Jade wouldn’t like it. Little does he know he just set fire to his already gasoline-covered self.

“Men have gone to war over a woman, you should be glad all I’m doing is kicking you out not taking your business

empire to war, believe me, I will, if you test me.” he finally gets how far I can go. No one touches my Jade.

I walk away, leaving him to live with the consequences of his actions. He should be thankful Jade asked me not to unleash *GET* on him. She’s the only one with the power to keep *GET* on a leash.

I find Jade nursing a drink, she smiles when I get to her. “I hope you didn’t release GET on him.”

“I didn’t, much as I would have liked to.”

“Gent, are you ready to leave? I don’t like the look of some of the men here. I feel like a lamb surrounded by lions.” She rises into my arms; she finally sees it.

“Let’s go, business is done, and I get to take that dress of yours off,” I whisper in her ears making her smile.

We headed out with her tucked in my arm. At the exit “Prince Naseer a moment.” I turn to see one of the guys we just closed a deal with. “Go with Rilwan,” I say to Jade. I turned to him.

“I wanted to ask if that gold bracelet is real or just for tonight?”

“Real as a heart attack.” I gruffly respond.

“Good luck and have a good evening,” he says leaving. I’m upset but he asked and respected the rules by not approaching Jade. Unlike Jay who thought he could approach and harass her and try to take what doesn’t belong to him.

I get in the car; Jade is seated at the other end. I want to pull her to me. I need her to tell me she loves me again as I take that dress off her and make love to her. I've waited years to hear those words and she finally tells me in a room full of hunting eyes. We ride in silence. She holds my hand, her way of telling me we are together. It's going to be a long, beautiful night of passion.

JADE



As we drove back to the hotel my phone beeped with a text.

May: Nice meeting you tonight, Mariam, if the gold bracelet is for tonight only, Mr. Sloane would like to spend the night with you for \$10K. Please text me back with a yes, or no.

I read the message again. May, one of the ladies, I met earlier tonight while Naseer was in the meeting. A few ladies had stopped by to talk to me, I was hesitant to share my number, but May kept pushing, and I eventually caved and shared my number. This text was probably sent in error, rather than in answer, so I ignored the text. Naseer holds my hand as we head to the elevator. I feel another vibration, but I don't bother to look.

When we get inside the apartment, as I drape his jacket on the sofa, I hear my phone beeping again. I reached for it.

Now I have two more messages from May, each with a *Mr. somebody* offering money for a night with me. I turn to Naseer, maybe I'm missing something. "What happened at the place we went to tonight?" I ask as I take my shoes off.

"Lots of business, why do you ask?" he says casually, as he takes his shoes off too.

"Are you sure there isn't more going on there?" I ask with eyebrows raised in question.

"Yes, just business," he says but I watch his face. He's hiding something from me, he has a tell and I know it. Especially when he avoids my eyes and finds things to do.

"Then explain to me why one of the ladies I met tonight is offering me \$10K for a night with some of the men. I could make \$30K within the next few days and all I need to do is fuck a few of the men." Now I have his attention. He has the look like I've out of nowhere bitch slapped him. Frankly, I'm quite close to that.

"What lady!?" Rather than answer his question, I showed him the text messages. His eyes are livid as he deletes the text.

"Are you going to tell me what the gold bracelet means, because a few of the ladies did comment on me wearing two?"

"It just means you are with me," he snarls.

"Stop lying to me Naseer, naïve doesn't equate stupid." Hands on my waist, I maintain my stand holding his glare.

"It just means, you are with me, and no other man is allowed to approach you." He pauses, faces palms, and runs his hand

through his hair in frustration. I maintain my defiance stance “The House is for sharing business secrets, Raheem and I started it with a friend. It’s great for business but soon enough the men started trading sex and stealing each other’s partners, to the point it caused a bad rift. The gold bracelet was invented as a back-off. If a woman or partner is wearing a gold bracelet no other member can poach or solicit sex with said woman or partner. They could try after the evening.” Now I’m seething.

“Let me get this straight, you took me to a gathering where men can solicit to pay me for sex. In other words, I was your arm candy with the potential to be pimped out.” My tone is calm, but my high-voltage brewing anger is about to explode. There’s no calm to this storm.

“That’s just crazy, Jade, you know I would never do that,” he says in a brush-off tone.

“Do I?” I retort in a condescending tone “After all you gave me these gold bracelets so they won’t approach me tonight, but they can try later what’s your cut if I spend a night fucking any of these men. How wide do I need to spread my legs to allow them in, how many thrusts inside me do they get, is there an extra charge for blowing them or rolling my pussy on their face, maybe I should text back and say *yes* to the offers and ask about the extras. Is there an additional charge for you watching me orgasm or is it free?”

He’s now seething, good, I’m upset too.

He moves closer to pull me, I step away from his grip, knocking into the vase on the side table. It makes a loud crash

to the floor causing Rilwan to come in without knocking. Naseer tries again to pull me closer to him, but I'm seething that he would take me to a place where women are objectified. He barely takes me out, but he sees it fit to take me to this place. I lash out and start hitting his chest.

“Stay away from me! I never want to speak to you again!” I continue as Rilwan pulls me off him holding me tight. “Don't fucking touch me, ever in your life! We are done!” I'm shouting at Naseer as I try to wiggle myself out of Rilwan's stronghold. As I struggle, Rilwan's hand brushes my breast, he doesn't move but maintains his tight hold of me. I don't care about how tight Rilwan has me, all I want is to hurt Naseer for presenting me like an object to be passed around.

My body is tugged into a firm hold in Rilwan's hands and body. I may not be able to move my body, but I can certainly speak.

“I'm not yours to pass around, it makes sense now, why that Jay guy wouldn't stop when I told him not to touch me. The asshole felt entitled to do whatever he wanted since stupid me walked in there smiling at everyone! I've had enough of your bullshit, we are so done!” I continue to struggle and lash at Naseer as Rilwan maintains his stronghold. “I belong to me, and I decide who I choose to be with! Get that into your thick royal head. Jadesola decides! Prince Naseer doesn't have a say!” I'm panting after my tirade. Rilwan's hold is subduing the fight in me.

“You will take your hands off my woman, right now!” Naseer roars. His chest rises with rage at Rilwan instead of me. Rilwan’s hand falls off in a snap, I trip from the sudden release but manage to catch my balance. Naseer’s face is that of an angry monster, he has released the evil twin on Rilwan.

“Don’t you ever put your hand on my woman again!” He angrily growled at Rilwan with darkened eyes ready to attack Rilwan’s hand for touching me.

“I’m sorry, she was attacking you and I must protect you,” Rilwan responds stating the obvious

“You will not touch Jade ever, even if she has a knife to my throat!” Rilwan’s eyes are equal parts of shock and bewilderment, though he nods in agreement.

“Do I make myself clear? You do not put your hands on Jade, ever!” his voice blaring with dark raging eyes.

“Yes, Your Highness,” Rilwan responds quietly, his face hardens but he maintains calm. They both maintain a silent standoff before Naseer turns to me.

“Jade, in the room now!” I want to say *No* but Naseer and Rilwan heated standoff made me quiet. Annoyingly, I moved past him, slamming the door. I’ve put Rilwan in an uncomfortable situation. I don’t like this. It was supposed to be a beautiful night, but it’s now a nightmare.

I hastily grab my suit, as I hear him shout. “Get the maid to come and clean this broken vase.”

I hurriedly take off the dress. Left with just my underwear, I throw my things into the suitcase. Not exactly sure where I'll go if I leave here. I feel a need to be ready to leave. I hear the bedroom door slam.

“Sit the fuck down, Jade, you're not leaving because we are going to talk about this. As difficult as it may be, we are going to talk,” he says in an exasperated gruff tone.

“I'm leaving you, Naseer, you say you love me. Yet to take me to a place where am seen as an object to be passed around. I thought we had something special, but I was wrong. It was all in my head. We are over! My aunty tried to warn me, and I didn't listen. I'm clearly out of my element.” I continue to put my things in the suitcase.

“Jade, sit down!” he shouts, more of a roar. I take a seat on the edge of the bed. He's pacing. I know he's trying to control his anger. After a few minutes, he stops pacing.

“I didn't like the idea of taking you there tonight. I haven't attended meetings since we became a couple. I had to go tonight because Raheem is sick. I could have left you in Chicago, but I didn't want to do that either because I want to spend time with you before you leave for Lagos, and we may not see each other for months. I wanted to be with you so I thought putting the gold bracelet on you would stop them from approaching. I would never in a million years let another man spend a night with you. You know it and I know it. It was poor judgement on my part to think the gold bracelet would work. That's all I'm guilty of can you forgive my selfish need to

spend more time with you and not realize some men have no boundaries.”

“I could have waited for you here in this apartment. I didn’t need to be at that gathering. We rarely go out and tonight we did. I was happy only to find out it’s a place like that. How do you expect me to feel?” My phone beeps again “This May lady keeps texting me. What do you want me to say to her?”

“Just delete the text messages. I’ll take care of her. Let me make it right.”

“Fine, but I’m leaving tonight.”

“No, Jade you are not leaving me, not tonight, not ever. I know you are upset right now the reality is all we have is tonight for months to come so stop fighting me on this. Once we return to Chicago tomorrow. I leave for Rhanaz, and you will be in Lagos by the end of the week.”

“I don’t like this feeling of being displayed as someone to be pimped out, Naseer,” I state. Maintaining eye contact so he can see. I’m hurt.

“I’m sorry Jade that was not my intention. forgive me, my lady,” he says the latter in a contrite tone. I look at him. I wish I had the heart to keep fighting but I don’t. I love him too damn much.

“Fine, Naseer I need to apologize to Rilwan. He was just trying to protect you from my attacks which were warranted by the way.” He chuckles.

“Do not apologize to him, he had no reason to put his hands on you.”

“I will Naseer, he’s a nice guy and very protective of you. He didn’t do anything wrong here.”

“Okay, you do you, as long as he never puts his hands on you again.”

“Am sure, he wouldn’t again. Though I think GET should be released on those other men with no boundaries no Rilwan.”

“I already sent a message to kick Jay Stuckley, out of the club, for approaching you. Rest assured you won’t receive any more text.” My mouth opens to say something, but no words come out. Yes, the guy was annoying. His hands felt like a creepy critter crawling on my skin and he refused to listen to my request to stop touching me, guess I now know why. I was the fresh face and body to be on the platter and they all wanted a taste, he was the bold one, but his boldness was more of an assault.

“Are you sure that’s the right move, I don’t want to have an enemy out there this early in the real world. I already had one in Rhanaz high school, though it was amateur, it still wasn’t pretty.” I remain quiet not speaking, my mind spiraling with the thought of someone blocking my prospect.

“Stop thinking about them, Jade.” I look at him and weirdly, I know he has my back.

“Fine.” I put on leggings and one of Naseer’s T-shirts then headed to Rilwan.

“I need to call Raheem.” I hear Naseer say as I leave the room. I found Rilwan watching a basketball game, with Radek the driver also a trained bodyguard.

“Rilwan.”

“Ms Bankole. Do you need something,” he asks, getting to his feet. This is the moment of truth.

“No, I came to apologize to you for Naseer’s behavior, it wasn’t your fault. He just made me so mad. I would never hurt him though. I would never put a knife to his neck, just thought I mention that.”

“I understand. You don’t need to apologize.”

“I do, I know you guys are friends and very close and I don’t want to be the reason your relationship is soured. Once again, I apologize for his behavior. Please accept my apology.”

“Apology accepted, Ms Bankole.”

“Thank you and good night” I smile.

“Good night, Ms Bankole,” he says smiling back.

I returned to the room, to find Naseer in sweatpants lying on the bed. I may have forgiven him, but I haven’t forgotten. “I know nothing I say will ease the hurt tonight. I was looking forward to us having a lovely night because earlier you told me you love me, but I guess all that has happened has ruined my plans, I still selfishly want to be with you, can we watch one of your movies.” I nod and climb into bed next to him.

Yes, I'd voiced my love for him earlier tonight and I saw how excited he looked but I'm still upset he would take me to such a gathering. Only one other woman has a gold bracelet, and they all marvel at the fact I have two. I don't know how to respond because it is all new to me.

Now I understand the reason they kept asking how and why I had two gold bracelets. The lady May told me Naseer hadn't shown up in a while, and this was the first time he had come with a woman. Which means in the past he came alone and left with a woman. I know he's annoyingly possessive of me, but I can't understand why he would take me there tonight doesn't make any sense.

"Which movie do you want to watch?" he asks. Interrupting my thought

"I'll pick, maybe watch one of my thrillers."

"Okay." He gravels, I've just decided on his least favorite. I could punish him a little.

I fell asleep before the movie was over. I wake to Naseer's arms wrapped around me. I managed to unwrap myself from his hold. I walk away without kissing his body like I normally do. I didn't unpack the items I stuffed in my bag last night. I showered and got ready.

"I see you haven't forgiven me." He says to me when he comes out to find me on my laptop, I don't respond yes or no.

"What can I say to make us right Jade?" He looks contrite, the hurt is still bleeding on the carpet. We are not good right

now.

“I’m hurt Naseer, it’s going to take some time.”

“I know, just don’t let this come between us.” I simply nod.

This is already between us.

NASEER



Jade is quiet as we head out and I don't like it. She didn't kiss my scar this morning which is a first. I upset her a lot more than I realized. Rilwan is smiling as he opens the door for her, she responds to him with a quiet good morning and a smile. I get a bland face. I know she went to speak with him yesterday. I'm still angry he put his hands on her. He had her wrapped in his body, tightly yesterday and multiple times his hands brushed her breast. The image played in my head repeatedly after she slept. No man is allowed to touch my woman. Unless he is saving her life otherwise, he should never put his hand on her.

Rilwan and I are going to speak again, he's never to touch Jade. I spent the flight reviewing some of the documents I received this morning from the meeting last night. Jade is quiet, just looking out the window. I don't like this at all, the right thing to do is to give her time, unfortunately, it's time I don't have, wanting time caused my poor judgement yesterday. My buried doubt begins to rare its ugly head. What

if she sees this as the time for her to start dating someone close in age to her? I mentally shake my head, Jade won't, she loves me. I remind myself.

We ride in silence from the airport to the new apartment I bought for her in Chicago. When we pulled up in front of the building. Jade won't get out of the car. I turned to her surprised but she won't even look at me.

"Rilwan can drop me off at school," she mumbles without looking my way.

"Jade, please get out from the car, we need to talk. He can drop you in the morning, let's not argue."

She frowns and gets out of the car. I try to touch her as we ride the elevator, but she pulls from my arm. She's still upset. Once in the apartment.

"I'm staying the week in Chicago," I announce, she doesn't respond. I've just decided on a whim. No way am I leaving with her this upset with me, and lots of ocean between us. I have no idea how I'm going to coordinate my business from here, what I do know is, that I can't leave with Jade not speaking to me, that's a recipe for fast shelf-life expiration.

"Jade, I'm staying the week in Chicago," I repeat.

"Suit yourself." she shrugs.

"You will be staying with me."

"I'm returning to campus tomorrow morning, I'll take my finals and leave for Lagos on Friday."

“Rilwan will drive you to school daily and you will return here in the evening.”

“When did you decide all this without asking me?” Her tone is terse.

“When you refused to talk to me. Talk to me, Jade?”

“You have no right to decide my schedule. My time is mine and if I wish to share the time with you or any other man or fuck every rich man, that’s my choice.” She succinctly states though the words drop like a block of ice with a loud thud to my heart. I remind myself *She’s upset and doesn’t mean it.*

“I won’t dignify that with an answer.” Now I’m not so sure I want her tongue lashing or her voicing her anger. Her phone rings. She answers right away it’s Tito. I see her smile and start to speak Yoruba which I don’t understand. I hate it when she does that, and I know she does it when she doesn’t want me to know what she’s talking about.

They talk at length as she laughs and giggles. I’ll always like the sound of her laugh. She finally hangs up with Tito, after what feels like forever to me.

“What do you want for lunch?” I ask the moment she’s closer to me.

“I can’t stay, Nate just texted to meet him.” I frown, Nate guy keeps testing my patience. Today isn’t a good time for him to test me.

“Did Tito tell you to break up with me?” It seems logical to ask, after hanging up with her best friend she’s running off to

Nate. She didn't share our time with Nate in the past, why would she welcome meeting with him today? She chuckles the first I get since last night.

“That would have been easy, right but, she told me to stop being upset with you and that I would miss you more if I leave with us fighting.”

I exhale. *Thank God for the little mercies of reasonable friends.* “Are you going to take her advice?”

“Doesn't look like you were giving me a choice to leave before, since you had my schedule, all planned out, like it was yours to take over.” She retorts.

“I didn't want to leave things between us with you upset with me. Can you put down the invisible shining sharp swords and kiss me or talk to me without throwing daggers.” she nods, and I move closer to her, she doesn't pull back. Good, we are warming up. “Kiss me my lady” She hesitates a moment before lifting her lips to mine. I immediately crowded her lips. She wraps her hand around me. Our tongue and sound are making their symphony. I lift her as she wraps her legs around me. Making it to bed in record time without breaking the kiss. We fall on the bed, frantically tossing the clothes. She lets out a moan as soon as my lips take a nipple in my mouth, devouring it. I find my way back to her neck; she arches it to give me room. My teeth bite gently into her marking her as mine, and she shudders. In her ears, I whisper “I love you, Jade” I say before taking her nipples in my mouth.

“I love you too Naseer” She lifts my face to look at her “Don’t ever put me in that position again,” she warns. I acknowledge there is no point denying that she was hurt.

“Won’t happen again, I promise” I say putting two fingers in her and my thumb massaging her clit the way I know it gets her over the edge, she arches her back. My tongue swirls on her nipples she moves and moans, though writhing she’s still hanging on to control. “Naseer” she mumbles.

“Tell me again,” I say as my fingers pump her.

“I love you, Naseer” she shouts. “Fuck me, please”

“Yes, my lady.” I pull my fingers out of her dripping wetness. “Are you ready, Jade?”

“Yes, Naseer please fuck me.”

I smile, spreading her legs in on a swift move I’m in her wetness, and she lets out a loud moan. Her eyes are on me. I move fast pounding and pummeling. She screams my name loudly, just the way I enjoy hearing it. She’s no longer hanging to any control, and I love when she lets go. I thrust more and we both came crashing into each other. I release all of me in her.

Honestly, at this moment. I would love to get her pregnant, but she still has one more year of school plus Jade would not like that. She’s irrevocably mine, so I can wait. I waited four years to date her. I can wait another year to put a ring on her and my child in her. I lay on my back and pull her to me.

She kisses the scar on my shoulder and chest. *Yes!* I mentally scream. Wrapped in each other. She runs her hand all over me. Her phone starts to ring in her clothes, then stops.

“Naseer, are you going to stay the week?”

“Yes, I’m staying.”

She smiles and kisses me again.

Her phone started to ring again. She pulls out of bed. Looks through her clothes and answers the phone on speaker as she picks up her clothes.

“Hi, Nate.”

“Mariam. Just stopped by your room”

“Sorry, I’m not there. Can I meet you in the library in an hour to get the papers?”

“Sure. See you soon.” She hangs up and turns to me. The necklace I gave her on her twentieth birthday is all that’s on her. My gaze roams her body, I remind myself she’s mine.

“Gent, I need to get going. I need those papers from Nate. They are keynotes from a former student who aced the class and I need them. Nate and I would make copies and study them for our finals.” She turns to the mirror “Oh no! I have just-fucked hair.”

She did, I couldn’t suppress a laugh.

“No complaints from me. Rilwan will take you and wait till you are done and bring you back.”

“Naseer, he can drop me off. I can find my way back on my own. No point in making Rilwan wait for me. I’m going to study. If it gets late. I can call for a pickup.”

I want to reject her option, but since I’m just a smidge above thin ice, I agree.

“Okay call before you are done, so you don’t have to wait for pick-up.”

“Will do, I need to shower. I don’t need to smell like Prince Naseer’s royal sperm.” She laughs again.

I toss a pillow at her. I want her to smell like my sperm. Maybe Nate will get the message and stop sniffing my thoroughly sated girl.

She goes into the bathroom, and I hear the water running, without a second thought, I go in after her. I get in as she’s stepping in. I stepped in after her. She smiles and grabs the shower gel to lather herself, I take it from her and rub her body down with my fingers massaging her clits “Naseer.” She moans. I capture her mouth once more, possessing and devouring every inch of her mouth. As the water runs on us, I make my way down her body to her lower lips and let my tongue work on her, she pulls at my hair as I continue to have my way with her moaning. She comes loudly on my tongue. I suck it all and rise to take her mouth again.

“Naseer” she moans louder. I pull her into a hug and let the water run over us. I feel her relaxed into me. she wraps her arms around me. lifting her face, I kiss her forehead. “Now

you can go to Nate,” I state. I step out of the shower and towel myself off. I go to the closet to put on lounge pants.

Jade comes out dressed in ripped skinny jeans and a white top. Her boobs are enhanced. Her hair is pulled into a ponytail. She applied light makeup. It’s an understated sexy look. I expected baggy sweatpants and an oversized t-shirt. She’s fucking beautiful. No wonder Nate keeps sniffing her.

Pulling her to me. Nuzzling her neck. “Naseer. I need you to tell Rilwan where to drop me.” I don’t respond and continue to kiss her neck and chest.

“Stop,” she says pulling away with a smile. “I won’t be happy if I don’t get that paper to study for my finals.”

“Fine,” I grumble.

Grabbing my shirt from the floor. I put it on and followed her out as she put on flat sandals.

She tucks her phone in her back pocket. The jeans are perfectly fitting her ass. I groan again remembering how that ass controls my cock. Rilwan appears, I’d text him “Please take Jade to school. She has said not to wait and will call you when she’s ready to return.” he nods.

She comes closer to give me a peck, but I pull her in for a kiss. “See you later, Naseer.” she breaks away. “I’ll stop at my dorm to grab some clothes,” she shouts as she leaves.

I called Mark, my new PA, to tell him. I’ll be staying the week in Chicago. He needs to rearrange my schedule and push

out any travel that can be pushed. I'll be working the week here.

I could tell he wasn't too happy about the sudden rearrangement of my schedule; he couldn't ask me why. The answer is obvious. Jade is here.

I take a shower before calling Raheem.

"Hey, Naseer." He sounds better.

"I got the papers; we are good with these numbers."

"I thought so but review it once more to make sure we are not missing anything that could hurt us."

"I will and Naseer, a few of the men at the House called asking about Mariam." I frown. I'd texted him and two top members to kick Jay out because he broke the rules when he approached Jade.

"What did they want?" I ask, am glad she isn't here right now.

"They want to know if you are serious with her or just gold bracelet for last night. They ask where to find her?"

"Fuck! What did you tell them?"

"I told them she's a permanent gold bracelet and they should look elsewhere but you know some won't listen."

"Is Jay kicked out yet?"

"Yes, the notice went out."

"Remind them why Jay is kicked out. I'm staying the week with her before she heads for Lagos."

“Good, I’m sorry about the mess with Jay.”

“Don’t be, the guy doesn’t have a good character. She kept telling him to stop touching her. He acted like he could take whatever he wanted. Can you have our guys keep an eye on him? I doubt he will go quietly. I wanted to break his nose, but I held it together. He’s going to be upset now that he’s out.”

“I got you; I probably would have broken his nose.”

“Did you tell May to stop texting Jade?”

“Yes, she’s worse than the men sometimes. She sees every new face as an opportunity to cut.”

“I don’t know why Jade gave her number. May must have coerced Jade for it, but I can’t ask Jade about it right now. We fought last night. She was really upset when May started texting her about sleeping with men for ten thousand a night. “

“Fuck! May probably planned it, she was shocked when I sent her a cease-and-desist letter.”

“Good, please keep them all away from Jade.”

“Not to worry. She won’t hear from them again.”

“Feel better and let me know, if anything needs changing with the documents.”

“Will do. Bye, Nas.”

“Bye.” I hang up and finally exhale. I experienced some fear of losing Jade and I didn’t like the feeling. I call Rilwan.

“Hello.”

“Is Jade, okay?”

“Yes, I just dropped her off, her classmate was waiting for her.”

“That sucker, I bet he was. He’s always texting her.”

“We are staying the week before she travels to Lagos for the summer.”

“Okay, do you want me to wait for Ms Bankole.”

“I would, but don’t, she won’t like it if she finds out you waited. Pick up some food for me and have the housekeeper fill the refrigerator and pantry with food.”

“Okay, I’ll return.”

When he returned with our dinner. “Rilwan don’t ever put your hands on Jade again,” I state in a calm but commanding tone. That I know he understands not to ever put his hand on my woman again.

“I’m sorry, she was attacking you. I acted on instinct.”

“I know what she was doing, I wasn’t in danger of her harming me. If I was, I would have defended myself, but I wasn’t. She was upset and she had every right to be.”

“Again, I’m sorry. What was she upset about?” I tell him everything about the text and he agreed, she was right to be upset since I’d made her feel like an arm candy to be pimped out.

We had our dinner and watched a game, till Jade texted. Somehow relief washes through me. She’s coming back.

NASEER



A week with Jade has been nothing short of bliss, our mornings are busy with work and her at school, and night ravaging each other. She has now completed her exams; she's packed and ready to leave on Friday. Raheem called earlier saying he'll be in Chicago for two days. He invited Jade and me out to lunch.

A week ago, I would have turned him down but since our fight and Jade accusing me of not taking her out, I accepted the invitation.

Raheem and his new girlfriend were already seated when we arrived. Jade has on a chiffon flowery knee-length dress with short sleeves paired with sandals. Her summer breeze looks has me smiling. I'm wearing the clothes Jade picked out for me. Dark blue relaxed jeans, with three quarter sleeves, grey T-shirt and white sneakers. She gelled and styled my hair to cover the scar behind my ear.

We greet each other as Raheem introduces us to his new blond date, named Gaby. Raheem's date is clinging to him like

a little space between them is unthinkable if only she knew her time is up by the end of next week. I know Jade isn't going to cling to me, it's just not her style. She's seated in a decent space between us. I turn to Raheem, and it seems Gaby is trying to weld her body with his.

The waitress soon arrives and Jade signals to me to order for her, Gaby puts in a long order that could fill five women and the woman looks like she can't finish a bowl of salad. Raheem and I order after her, the waitress is drained after taking Gaby's order.

Raheem soon turns to Jade asking her about school and plans when she graduates, she's excited about possible job opportunities in Chicago. I was hoping she would move to a warmer climate, but she seems to be loving Chicago. The waitress soon returns with appetizers, placing them on the table in a manner that's showing off her boobs she'd opened two buttons of her shirt. She gently touches my arm.

“Pardon me” she flirtatiously grins, batting her lashes.

Jade's eyes remain straight on the appetizer, we all take a piece. I can tell Jade doesn't like it. It's cheese sticks so not her thing. We continue to converse until the order is brought. The waitress returns to ask if the order is to our liking, it's obvious she's focused on just me and not the group. She's blatantly flirting with me; I try to ignore her but I'm a little ticked Jade is not acting like she cares the woman is flirting with me. Not an ounce of jealous reaction from her. I know if

the role was reversed, I would be shutting it down without a second thought.

I decided to flirt along with the waitress, smiling and laughing. We eat and laugh. Jade is not saying anything, her body language is too relaxed, in my opinion. The waitress returns more often than usual to ask if everything is to our liking. She stays close to our table.

Raheem soon requests the check the waitress returns with the check folder and hands it to me with a mischievous smile.

Jade immediately takes the folder from me, and I see the waitress's phone number and address in the folder with the check. Jade takes the waitress's information out and hands the folder back to Raheem without a word.

The waitress returns, and Raheem hands her the folder with the card as she turns to leave.

"Excuse me, miss," Jade calls out, she turns to Jade with a smile. Jade hands her the paper she'd taken out of the check folder "My boyfriend won't be needing this." The waitress is stunned and reaches to take the paper from Jade. Raheem wears a shocked expression; Gaby's face is expressively thumbs up to Jade and I'm just in a realm of mind-blowing moments.

Raheem tries to hide his truncated chuckle. "I'm sorry." The waitress responds to Jade taking the paper from her.

"I'm sure you are but," turning to me, "he's one hundred percent taken." Just as she gives me the mean icy look that has

me frosted in my seat. When the waitress returns with Raheem's card and the receipt, her shirt is buttoned up and she avoids eye contact with me.

In that moment, I realized how badly I'd messed up. Jade may not act like she's jealous, she does get jealous, and I shouldn't have flirted with the waitress, totally uncalled for. We leave the restaurant through a side door. Soon, we get in the car. I signaled for the driver and Rilwan to give us a minute. Once the door is closed, I turn to Jade and "Kiss me" She turns to me without any hesitation and shares a kiss that reminds me of our special we are as a couple.

"The fact I don't shout like you, doesn't me I don't get jealous. "Don't do that again," she warns, and I nod.

She caught me, no point trying to act like I didn't know what she was talking about. I blatantly flirted with the waitress, and she caught me. "It won't happen again," I say and call to the men to get back in. I feel immature when I realize I wouldn't have liked it if she'd tried to make me jealous the way I did.

However, I learnt a few things about her this week. Jade can hide her jealousy; she also has a dark side and I dislike it when she doesn't kiss my scars.

Our ride home was palpable silence, with our fingers interlocked.

JADE



Naseer staying for the week was amazing. We went out a few times. We are really in a good place. I know my travel to Lagos and Joburg isn't something he's happy about, but I can't miss my cousin's wedding and a chance to hang out with Tito and Lolade my social media guru friend from high school.

We had dinner with Tate and Lande DeMoore, the only couple in Chicago that's our friend.

After I'd complained to Naseer about him being the worst rich boyfriend since I had to constantly pack a bag for a hotel visit when he could rent a place and I wouldn't need to keep packing toiletries. He went house shopping for a place and bought a fully furnished space from Tate DeMoore and his friend Dane who are into real estate business.

Naseer then requested to meet the decorator which was Lande DeMoore because he felt I might want to make changes to the unit.

I'd met Lande DeMoore, and we immediately became friends. The only changes I had were to the curtains in the master bedroom and the office, everything else was perfect.

Our evening with the DeMoore's was lovely with Lande and I speaking in Yoruba just to taunt Tate and Naseer.

We told the DeMoore's we would both be out of Chicago for the next few months and promised to call them once we returned. Lande shares a list of things she wants from Lagos and Tate cannot understand why she wants to buy stuff from Lagos, making Lande and I laugh. I explain to him that certain items are best from Lagos, they probably exist in America but getting the specific item she wants from Lagos is preferred.

Friday evening, I'm packed and ready for my flight to Lagos. Naseer doesn't want to let me go. I didn't want to leave him either, but the plane wasn't going to wait for me. I was surprised when I found my ticket had been upgraded to first class. I knew that was Naseer doing, though I told him not to.

He did it anyway. He doesn't understand that when reality comes. I will be flying economy again and I don't want to start flying first class now only to have my ass back in the economy when we do break up.

Rilwan won't let me change it, since Naseer had to wait in the car and not be seen with me. Rilwan was with me till I got past security.

I then called Naseer. We talked for a few minutes before he boarded his private plane.

Tito, Bosun, and Lolade were waiting to meet me at the airport. It was nice to see Lolade and Bosun. I'm happy to know they are going strong. Knowing Bosun is a nice guy the issue in our relationship was simply the fact Naseer had stolen my heart and not the fact that Bosun was a bad boyfriend.

I felt bad breaking up with him because he was good to me but, I'd already given my heart away. It was pointless stringing him along. When I couldn't even let him see me naked. He still visited me after I'd broken up with him hoping I would change my mind.

On one of his surprise visits, Lolade and Tito were also visiting. Lolade openly showed interest in Bosun, and I was happy to hook them up. Telling her Bosun and I were just friends. No point tainting the love in her eyes, they have been inseparable since then. I'm happy for them. They have each other and I have Naseer. A win-win, everyone is happy.

NASEER



Jade left about a month ago and I dislike it more now than I did the last time she travelled to Lagos. If I thought, I missed her then and acted crazy, now I'm a hair trigger short of losing my shit completely.

I barely get to talk to her. My schedule plus the fact I'm craving her like a vampire craving blood is making me lose my mind. I thought I could handle not seeing her for months but I'm cranky without her. It's time I visited her. If she can travel there, I can do the same.

Raheem always knows someone, who knows someone who can give me a crash course into my last-minute trip to Lagos, something I'm sure Mark might struggle with besides it's best it stays between Raheem, myself and of course Rilwan. I decided to call him, he can arrange my travel to Lagos. "Hey, Naseer."

"Hey, I have a favor to ask?"

"Shoot."

“I need to visit Jade in Lagos.” He’s quiet, I know my request is surprising, to say the least.

“As in Lagos, Nigeria?” I detect the questionable tone.

“Yes, can you arrange it for me?”

“I can, but are you sure you want to travel there?” He’s probably thinking I’m losing my mind.

“If she can travel there, I can too. Last I checked, humans live there and it’s not an Amazon jungle.” He laughs.

“Certainly not a jungle, we just don’t have any business there. But if your girl is there, then I guess you have business there. Give me a day or two and I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks,” I say, hanging up.

Running my hand through my hair, I exhaled an exasperated sigh. I need to see her. I tried calling her and it just rings. She might text me later, but I’ll probably be sleeping. I’ve only talked to her about five times since she left, and I dislike it. It’s time I paid her a visit in Lagos.

I tried to bury my head in work. Checked my phone several times, hoping Raheem would reach out sooner but nothing. I tried calling Jade and no response on that end either. It is driving me crazy.

When I woke up the next day, I saw I’d missed calls from Jade, and it annoys me, I tried calling her back with no response. I go through my day. Working long hours and crashing just as well.

Two days later, Raheem calls.

“If you are serious, you can leave tomorrow evening. I have arranged your flight. I have a guy called Vincent, he will be your guide and he’ll be travelling with you and Rilwan. Your hotel, ride, and extra security when you arrive there will be ready for you.” He did it, I knew he was the right guy to ask though surprised he pulled it off fast but I’m beyond happy.

“What time is my flight?”

“It leaves Heathrow at three p.m. and lands in Lagos at ten p.m. Your guide will get you through the airport and customs.

“That’s a good time. I will wrap up here and be in Lagos Friday night.”

“Yeah, and I hear it’s always a wild night in Lagos on Fridays. Travel safe and I can’t wait to hear all about your trip. Regards to Mariam.”

“Thanks, Raheem.”

“You’re welcome.”

The next few hours go by fast. I wrap up a few things and pack my bags. Jade always said it’s warm like Rhanaz in Lagos. As I pack, my phone rings it’s Jade.

“My lady.”

“Naseer, so sorry I missed your calls. It’s been crazy here, weddings and events. How are you?”

“I’m good, busy and waiting for your return,” I say to her.

“I’ll be back soon,” she tells me about her day with friends and a gift she has for me.

“So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” I ask.

“It’s Friday, my friends and I are going to a lounge called Coasters on the island. It’s by the water and said to be very nice. Good food, music, and lots of girls’ time.” She giggles.

“Sounds like fun.”

“It will be, especially with my crazy friend Nnoma joining us. She’s the wild one.” I could almost hear her eyes rolling.

“Have fun and what time are you going to be there, should I plan to call you.”

“Will be there about eleven pm and leave when we get tired. I’ll be sleeping the night off at Lolade’s place. I probably won’t get back home till later in the day. I have a wedding to attend around four, so it’s pretty much wake up and get ready for the next party. I might end up at Lolade’s place again. We are all attending the wedding party together.”

“Didn’t you go to a wedding party last week?”

“Lagos is all about the partying. I have a party every weekend till I leave. I might as well enjoy it. Only in Lagos can you party hop every weekend and it’s the norm.” She laughs. “Okay, so it’s the lounge Coaster, then a wedding, where again?”

“At a conference center in the naval dockyard. Why am I giving you locations?”

“Because, you know I won’t sleep if I don’t know you are safe.”

“I’m safe and fine, Gent. I must get going, my friends are calling me. I’ll talk to you later Gent.”

“Promise you’ll return to me.”

“Always, Gent. Bye,” she says quickly and hangs up. Surprising her should be fun.

Rilwan grabs my bags, and we head out. The guide is waiting downstairs when we exit. He introduced himself and we file into the car and head to the airport. We board the private flight; I find myself restless.

Unsure how she would react or would be the shocked one. With all I’ve read about Lagos nightlife, seems like a lot goes on in Lagos. *What if she’s met someone? That’s not Jade, she will tell me. She won’t hide it or cheat.* My mind is a platter of cheating options for Jade. I’m awake throughout the flight. I keep shutting down negative thoughts of Jade with different guys. I try to find something to work on, but nothing can turn off my inebriated raging mind of chaos.

We finally land and Vincent gets us through customs. The Lexus SUVs are waiting when we exit the airport, three in total one in front with guards, myself, Vincent, Rilwan, and the driver in the second and a third car has two more guards. We soon find ourselves in bizarre traffic with street hawkers, selling goods to people in traffic. Some carried items that could fill a mini store and others just carried a few items. First,

I've seen in my life as the street hawkers and cars maneuver around each other.

We get to the Eko Hotel at about midnight. All I do is shower and change clothes into shirts and slacks a bit casual. I'm ready to leave. I'd asked Vincent about the lounge called Coasters on the island. He remains quiet before saying he knows where the lounge is, and we can head there after checking into the hotel.

Once we pulled up at the Coasters. I see why he'd stayed quiet for a few seconds. The exterior ambiance is a hotspot for pickup. Feels like the vibrant night has just started yet it's after midnight. Music is blasting loudly from all the cars. Each car is trying to blast the music louder than the car next to it. Men and women talking and hanging out. Interestingly minimal PDA. A few guys with arms around women. No kissing and no making out going on, lots of clinging and territorial holds from the men. The scenery shed some light on Jade's non-PDA habits.

Vincent says I should wait in the car, and he would go in to see if Jade is in there. He'd asked for Jade's picture. He wanted to check to see if she was in there with her friends. He would call me on Facetime if he saw her. I can then get down or he can get her.

My phone rings less than five minutes after he steps inside.

"I think I found her with her friends," he says. Thankfully, inside the lounge isn't as loud as outside.

"Show me."

He turns the camera and I see Jade and her friends sitting facing each other. Lots of drinks and food on the table. A guy is sitting very close to Jade. Weirdly, I can tell she's uncomfortable by the guy sitting close to her. The guy rises and kisses her on her cheek before walking away. Am taken aback, but soon as he turns. She's wiping her cheek. I want to know how this plays out.

“Vincent, get closer to them and keep the phone on, make sure, I can hear their conversation.”

I refuse to believe Jade is cheating. It's unlike her. I know but my mind is chipping away some of that trust.

“So, are you going to give him a chance?” one of the girls asked.

“Give who a chance? I hear Jade ask.

“CJ. Who else? Her squeaky voice drawls “Like you can't tell the guy is crazy about you,” she says rolling her eyes animatedly.

“Nnoma stop trying to start trouble. I've told you I'm not interested in CJ. You can have him,” Jade answers in an icy tone. She's upset.

“I will, if he would look at me but the guy has been acting like a lovesick puppy since you landed in Lagos.”

“How's that my problem? I've told him that I'm not interested and if you tell him otherwise that's his problem for believing you and not me.”

“You know that your vajayjay doesn’t have a meter read. Your boyfriend Naseer, or whoever, can’t tell if the meter has gone up, whatever happens in Lagos stays in Lagos.”

I hear Jade laugh. “So, your answer to me saying I miss Naseer is to rack up the meter on my vajayjay with CJ.”

“Yes now! You know CJ is rich and he’s not stingy. He’ll spoil you with money and I hear the guy is a beast in bed. Won’t you just love having the multiple O.” she acts like she’s having an orgasm just talking about it.

“If money is the criteria, then Naseer still wins, and don’t worry about my O. I get my multiple Os from Naseer only.”

“I beg, leave your Naseer for America and sample this fine man.” She waves Jade off in a brush-off manner.

“Nnoma, what did CJ promise you?” I hear a different voice.

“Nothing, oh! I can just see that he likes Jade and she’s not looking his way.”

“Liar, liar skirt on fire, Nnoma. I know he promised you something that’s why you are pushing Jade to bed him but you know she won’t so you might as well forget about his promises.”

“Yeah right. Jade, are you going to tell Tito what happened last night?”

“What happened last night?” I hear Jade.

“Stop playing coy, CJ told me you guys kissed and made out last night.” She rolls her eyes as she has just shared the in-

house secret.

“He’s a bloody liar. He tried to kiss me, and I pushed him away. He then forced me into a corner and tried to put his hands under my blouse. I kicked him in the groin and shouted for Lolade who came into the room. She pulled him away from me. You can ask her if he’s telling you otherwise, he’s lying, and I don’t need to try and convince you. But I will ask you to stop giving him details about my whereabouts, I know the only way he keeps showing up, is you feeding him my movement, so stop it. I detest having him near me, but I remained quiet because I know how his arrogance and bruised ego can quickly escalate, I’m telling you again stop feeding him my whereabouts.” Jade is upset.

“Whatever, Jade” The girl grabs her bag and leaves.

“Let her go.” I hear the third voice.

“I don’t care about her, why are we friends with her again, she’s always spreading lies.” Jade is upset.

“Ignore her. Lolade should be here soon, and we can leave but I want to ask you and I say this without any agenda or malice. Don’t you think you should break up with this Naseer guy by now? You said, his family doesn’t like you, his ex-girlfriend slapped you plus she’s still clinging to him, his father said he would never marry you so why are you wasting your time with him.”

“Despite all the stated obstacles, I love him, presently that’s all I need to know and trust, though at some point, the reality is I have to give him up, honestly, it’s not something I can do

right now without crumbling. You told me how Lolade was when she and Bosun broke up last year. I honestly think I'll be worse; all I ask is you promise not to say I told you so when he breaks up with me or when I face reality and leave him."

"I got you, Jade. You know that. I just might have the perfect rebound guy for you right now, why wait."

Jade laughs. "Mistress Tito the matchmaker, already fixing me up."

"That's me," she says laughing.

"Save the person for later, when I'm heartbroken and need someone to outrageously fuck the heartbreak out of me and my vajayjay doesn't remember the days of the week because it's overly sated." I hear the laugh of her friend.

"How about you come to London with me next week and we can all hang out maybe you just might be the one breaking things up with Naseer sooner than planned."

"I can't afford to buy another ticket. Maybe next time."

"I'll pay for the ticket Jade, just come."

"Fine, only because I haven't travelled to London in a long time. And you omo mama olowo. *Child of a rich woman* so I'll accept the freebie ticket and call Aunty Lara to let her know my change of plans. I'll need to update Naseer on my change of plans as well. A few more days out before I return to school would help" she sighs.

"Good, I've been wanting to ask. How's your crazy roommate's boyfriend."

“Please don’t remind me about those two. You know after that creepy underwear-gawking incident. He came to me one day and said all I need to do is just say when and he would eat me out till am flowing like a river, his words, not mine.” The other lady gasps.

“No! he didn’t and what did you say?”

“Yes!! he did—” Jade laughs. “— believe me I have lots of words in my head for the stupid guy. I want to give him an angry woman bitch slap from Chicago to Lagos, but I realize it would mean I’m giving him a little too much attention. I decided I should walk away like he didn’t say anything.” I’m irate as I listen to Jade. I hear her friend laugh louder.

“Did you tell Naseer?”

“No, I don’t want him releasing *GET* over a stupid guy like Calvin.”

“What’s *GET*?”

“Naseer’s untamed evil twin. I’ve told him we need to always keep ‘*GET*’ locked up” her friend laughs again.

“Lolade is here!” Tito shouts

“I’m sorry. Bosun won’t let me leave, we were....” the Lolade announces.

“Ehhhh! Stop right there. We don’t want to hear all about Bosun’s sexy moves.” Jade says.

“Are you guys ready?” Lolade asks.

“Yes, please let’s go before that guy over there comes over, he’s been eye fucking Jade. I swear that guy is going to come just staring at Jade’s breast.” Tito says.

“What Guy!?” I hear Jade ask.

“The one that’s been staring at you all night and licking his lips. I warned you not to wear this dress, but you wanted to feel like a Lagos girl.” Tito says in a sassy tone.

“Let’s just go please,” Jade says.

I’ve heard enough of this conversation. I turned to Rilwan.

“Go and get my woman.” Rilwan gets out of the car.

I feel bad about eavesdropping on Jade, but I learned a few things. She loves me, and I could be miles away and won’t worry about her caving to peer pressure.

She still thinks I’m going to break up with her. If only she knew an emerald ring was waiting for her.

She’s not going to tell me about her roommate boyfriend, but I’m going to handle it my way without releasing *GET*.

JADE



I'm grabbing my purse and trying not to bend. The dress I'm wearing is bandage baby blue and off-shoulder, a little short but fits my body like a glove. A push-up bra gives the perfect cleavage. Not sure what I was thinking when I fished it out of Tito's closet. I'm taller than Tito and a little bustier making the dress reveal a tad too much of my boobs. Matching it with black patent three-inch pointed-toe heels.

I manage to get my purse and not flash the men, or my boobs fall out. I hear "Ms Bankole." my body quivers with a Pavlovian response to knowing he's here. I mentally pause because it can't be possible. I'm in Lagos. I must be imagining because of all the talks about him and the few drinks.

My friends are standing a few feet away I turn to Rilwan who's standing by me "You are here, right Rilwan, I'm not imagining you?" I ask, still trying to believe he's standing before me.

"Yes. I'm here, Ms Bankole. We arrived a few hours ago."

“Is...is he here?” I ask as my heart begins to race. I point to the exit.

“Yes, he’s in the car.” I raced for the exit in my heels. I probably looked ridiculous, but I didn’t care. He’s here is all I’m thinking, my heart racing with excitement, my Gent is here. Pushing past my friend. *He’s here*. I can hear my friends trying to catch up to me. I exit the lounge and all I see are cars all with headlights and loud music, just ridiculous but then again this is Lagos. I don’t know which car. I just stand there looking around. My friends are beside me.

“Jade, what’s wrong?” they ask.

I do not respond; I just keep looking for him. So many headlights. I see the tall shadow coming towards me, I know it’s him without seeing his face. It wasn’t logic or cognition as I raced to him on gravel stones in five-inch heels and tight clad dress. He moves faster and lifts me off the ground in a hug. I wrap my arms around his neck in exhilaration. He set my feet down once I started kissing his neck. I didn’t care about my surroundings. I claim his lips like today is my last day on earth and this moment is my last dying wish. He responds equally. My surrounding is a distant memory as I ravish Naseer’s mouth and all of him. Molding my body to his.

“Jade!!!” I hear Tito shout my name.

“I’ve missed you,” I say when we finally break from the kiss. He frames my face before bending to kiss my neck. I arch my neck to give his lips room sending a shiver through my

body, it never gets old every time he does it. *I'm a goner for this man.*

“Come and meet my friends, they won't let me leave, if I don't introduce them,” I say when he stops kissing my neck. he nods. Hand in hand we face my besties.

“Tito and Lolade, this is Naseer.” They size him up with a long look. Tito's eyebrow arches. Lolade is salivating.

“Hello, ladies.” He says, with a possessive hold on my waist and the other hand out for a handshake.

“Hello.” They both respond shaking his hand.

“Hope you don't mind me taking my lady tonight. I came to surprise her.” He looks my way, and those magical gray eyes engulf me keeping me still in a swift moment of lust, his look is always my undoing. Our eyes whisper what our lips couldn't say in front of my friends. We need to get out of here.

“We don't mind,” Tito says jolting us back to reality, just as Lolade intensifies her stare of Naseer. *oh no! Her mind is working.* She's our social update keeper, she's going to know. I didn't tell them who Naseer is, I've always just said Naseer.

“Are you Prince Naseer of Rhanaz?” Lolade asks, giving him a quizzical look.

“I am. Is that okay?” he says giving them the panty-dropping charm.

“Oh shit.” Tito blurts out, as her eyes bulge like Fourth of July fireworks.

“Lolade, what time should I show up for the wedding?” I quickly change the subject and calm their expressions on the newly released information about my princely boyfriend.

“Maybe you need to miss this wedding,” Lolade responds. I look at Naseer. I’ve missed him, I didn’t realize how much until now.

“Yeah, maybe I’ll miss this one,” I respond without taking my eyes off him.

“Tito, you got me, right?” I state. She knows the drill and tells her mom that I’m staying with Lolade. That way no questions asked.

“Yes, I got you.” She winks at me “And, you and I need to talk later.” she says giving me a look. I’ve withheld life-changing crucial information from her.

“We will, good night.” I hurriedly say. They head towards Lolade’s car as I cling to Naseer.

We rode in silence to the Eko Hotel. Our minds are consumed with glaring desire, oozing from every pore, but from the outside, we are just a man and a woman sitting quietly in a car. The ride was fast at this time of the night, thank heaven for no Lagos traffic after midnight. He held me close, the moment we stepped out of the car. I continue to cling to him. As we rode in silence to his suite, the ride felt longer as we clung to each other. I bet Rilwan can sniff the jolting need for us to tear at each other. We are calm because he’s with us on the ride. The intensity of craving is seeping out of us. Rilwan says good night once we enter the suite.

The first thing I do is kick my heels and claim Naseer's lip like his tongue is the last drop of life on earth. Ignoring the beautiful layout of the suite. He in return possesses my mouth in a way that sends shivers through my body. His lip moves to my neck, he knows my erogenous spot and right now he's hitting every mark setting my body ablaze. "Turn around Jade," he says. He pulls the zipper and reality hits instantly. *Damn, I forgot.* My body tenses up right away.

NASEER



Jade pulls away from me once she's out of the dress, her back to me. I get in front of her, and she avoids my gaze and buries her head on my chest, I inhale her lavender smell. I gently lift her face between my hands to look at me and she closes her eyes, there's tension in the air. She doesn't pull away from me, trepidation hits, is she about to make a confession that will shatter my heart? What I heard this evening doesn't show any evidence of that, but could she have cheated and now feels contrite that she must confess before anything happens, but our kisses are passionate, I feel that and I know that.

"Tell me lady, what's wrong," I implored softly. She shakes her head, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Open your eyes." I plead. She reluctantly complied, but this time no emotion registered in her features. Can I let her go if...?

"Gent," she whispers her voice trembles. "I'm embarrassed," she said quietly. "I have a wild garden down there; I didn't care before because no one was going to visit the place. But

now that you surprised me...I don't think I want you to see my wild-grown garden with weeds.”

Her coy face and her sad tone brought an overwhelming sense of relief for me, and I laughed with joy—my heart pounding with love for her. I wrapped my arms around her and kissed her forehead as I whispered in her ear, “I love you so much Jade, and I'm glad that you were not able to prepare for this moment. Your imperfection makes you my perfect match; it's when you're messy that you're most beautiful to me.” She looks at me as I slowly push the dress off her body.

“Are you sure, Naseer, that you don't mind?”

“My lady, I'm going to savor every moment of watering your garden and plucking the weeds out.” She bursts into laughter and buries her face in my chest. She rips my shirt open and starts to kiss me all over.

“I seriously need you to water my garden, Gent,” she says in between kissing my scars and pulling my shirt off my body she puts it on. “I love your scent on me. I could wrap it in forever.” She breathily says.

I answer by lifting her and she wraps her leg around my waist. I drop her on the sofa, taking a moment to salivate on the beauty before me. My legs spread hers for me. Her eyes greedily flirt with me, I know the look when she craves me. Getting down, I unhook her bra and kiss the hardened nipples that are eagerly awaiting my lips giving each one special attention. I then pull her ass to the edge and flatten her upper body back and peel off the panties. I need to buy her more of

these. Placing her right legs on my shoulder, and a finger to touch how ready she is for me, she lets out a soft moan at my touch. I apply a second finger to her soaked wetness to increase her moan “Naseer” she moans, “stop teasing.”

Licking each finger, desire is all I see. I let my tongue water her garden and she pulls my hair, moaning loudly. I take my time to swirl, lick, and feast on her till she comes with a scream. Licking every sweetness of her I watch as she comes down from the pleasure.

“Is your garden watered?” I ask with a proud grin watching my girl sated.

“Not completely, I still need you inside me and you keep teasing me.” I return a wolfish grin.

“On your knees, Jade, I want that ass completely sated.”

I push the table out of the way, and she flips on her stomach with her sexy ass to me. This ass is mine, forever. I get behind and place my manhood at her entrance, ready to fill her with all of me. “Naseer there will be a war for teasing me a second longer,” she commands I laugh. I love it when she is wanton.

I continue to tease as she tries to get me inside her. I penetrate her drooping wet sex we both let out a loud moan. We are home. I increased my thrust. Sinking in her pussy is her favorite place in the world.

“Oh yes Naseer.” she let out.

“Who owns this filled pussy,” I ask pulling her to me massaging her nipples the way she loves.

“I don’t know.” I thrust harder she’s teasing me.

“Tell me or I won’t let you come, who owns this happy pussy.” I massage her clits sending her to a louder moan.

“You know, there will be war if you stop,” she answers pushing her back to me. I stopped moving. She tries to move her ass, but I hold her in place.

“Naseer, you know you own this pussy and if you don’t make me come right now, I’m going to go out in just your shirt and fuck the first guy that answers the door I knock on.”

I chuckle. She knows how to play dirty.

The intensity was already high within me, and my movements became urgent. She cried out in pleasure as I quickened my thrusts, her body trembling beneath me. Her spine arched as she reached the peak of her orgasm, calling out my name with a voice made hoarse by passion. Exhausted from our lovemaking, we collapsed onto the floor together. Still drunk on desire, I ran my fingertips along her smooth skin, showering her face with gentle kisses. Wearing nothing, I got to my feet and scooped her up into my arms. I carried her into the bedroom where our blissful night had just begun.

Dropping her onto the bed. She laughs.

“I’ve missed you,” I say.

“Ditto, Gent. Now kiss me.”

I get on the bed and straddle her body, pressing my lips to hers in a passionate kiss. I could feel her tremble beneath me as I explored her mouth. Our tongues tango in an intimate

dance and the world outside seemed to melt away. A surge of desire charges through my heart in anticipation of making love to her. My hands moved along her body, exploring her curves and soft skin, I spread her leg and penetrated her, eliciting soft moans from her lips. We moved in harmony savoring every moment until we were both trembling with pleasure.

We lay wrapped in each other; she fell asleep in my arms. I pulled from her once she was asleep and sat to watch her sleep like I'd done many times before. The more I watched, the more I realized, I could never let her go. I return to bed and wrap my arms around her.

NASEER



I sink into the bed, listening to the sound of the bathroom door closing. Her presence alone fills me with warmth; I know she loves me especially when she softly kisses my scars while I pretend to be asleep. Spending an evening with her was worth the trip, though her friend tried to sell her off to some guy and the incident with her roommate's boyfriend is still on my mind, but I can't bring it up - for fear of revealing that I'd been eavesdropping out of my insecurity. My dad's words had clouded my judgment for a second, prompting me to doubt us, but I should have known better.

She crushed all my doubt but the fact I doubted her will be upsetting to her. This information stays with me.

The bathroom door opens, and Jade is out in a robe. I sit up in bed with a grin on my face as I openly admire the beauty in front of me. She's mine

"I still can't believe you are here. How did you know where to find me?" she asks as she dances to me smiling. My girl is happy. Worth it to see her this happy.

“You gave me your movement remember. I was about to head to the airport when you called me.”

She gets in bed and sits next to me, wrapping herself around me. I kiss her forehead “I’m glad you came; I’ve missed you so much, Gent.”

“I’m glad I came too.”

“What should we do today?”

“Whatever you want, Jade. I leave on Monday evening. All I want is time with you. It might be another month or two before we see each other again.”

“Might not be that long.”

“I thought you were leaving here next week and two weeks in Joburg then back to Chicago.”

“Tito, who you’ve now finally met, wants me to hang out in London with her. I haven’t been to the England in a long time so I’m planning to spend a week with her and then two weeks in Joburg.”

“I’ll be in London the next two weeks then,” I say it like it’s the next logical step.

“Tito, might not like you crashing into our girls time.”

I ran my finger along the side of her face. “But what do you want?”

“We’ve certainly missed breakfast, how about we go out and get something to eat? I will need a change of clothes. I can’t

wear that dress out again, it will be attracting attention” she says winking and changing the subject.

“Why did you wear that dress Jade” I ask in a subtle tone. She looked great, but it certainly caught lots of attention. The driver’s words “Lagos girls won’t kill us men. Look at this woman.” I looked and I saw it was Jade. She was looking for me. Rilwan is behind her. I can imagine how many men were looking her way. I quickly got out of the car.

“I just wanted to step out of my comfort zone, and it was perfect for a night out, just not daytime,” she smirks.

“I didn’t like the dress, Jade.”

“Come on Naseer, I was with my girlfriends. If you hadn’t surprised me, we were heading to Lolade’s place.” She pauses. “I’ll call Tito to bring me more comfortable clothes.”

“I’ll send the driver to go and pick up the clothes, we can order room service.”

“Okay” She moves to grab her phone.

“Don’t wear a dress like that again Jade, unless I’m with you.” I succinctly state.

“Fine, I’ll return it to Tito, you have to admit it was a lovely dress that made me look and feel beautiful,” she says running her hand down her shapely body.

“Too cladding you mean.” I tease.

“Yes, and stop being grumpy.” she says poking me “It was a lovely clad dress, Prince Naseer and I looked good in it.” I

nod.

“Yes, my lady you did. You still can’t wear it when I’m not with you.” I smirk.

“Whatever Naseer.” She picks up the phone to call Tito.

NASEER



Jade and I spent the day indoors talking and laughing. We ordered in by nighttime she called her friends that we should go clubbing. With the help of Vincent, we got a VIP space and ordered our drinks. I wasn't in the mood to dance. I'm happy watching my girl be happy. She's dancing with her friends and I'm sitting with Bosun, the only guy with us. Lolade's boyfriend.

“You are *THE* guy.” he says pointing his beer bottle at me “The one Jade has been pinning for, she'll never say it, but it's written all over her delectable body. She gave me her most precious trophy, and even then, I felt like she wasn't giving it to me, you know. I just happened to be the guy there at the time, you know the guy that arrived at the right place and right time because the real guy was late and she was mad, so she gave it away because she was upset, I wasn't the guy she wanted to give it to you know. I just happened to be there.” He slurred.

I nod. I can tell he's drunk otherwise he won't be telling me he's the one who stole from me.

"I tried... I mean... I tried... I pulled all the stops to make her consider me. It was obvious she already gave the real thing away, her *heart* you know." he drinks again and stares at his bottle. Whoever said alcohol isn't the international truth serum needs to think again.

I always wondered who the guy was that she slept with, now I know, and Jade didn't tell me I would be hanging out with a guy that has seen her naked.

"I've never seen her naked..." he responds like he read my thoughts. I know I didn't speak out loud maybe my mind is communicating something to his drunk stupor face.

"I can count on one hand, how many times, and even then, it was always in the dark, very mysterious. I couldn't see her face to tell if she ever enjoyed it. Heck, for all I know she could have been faking all the sounds. The only thing I can't shake out of my head is the feel of my tongue on those nipples of hers." He burps a very nasty breath.

I want to punch him and cut his fucking tongue out. "Are you in love with Jade?" I ask. I can probably get every answer I want from him right now.

He laughs and drinks again "No." he drunkenly slurs again "Lolade is the one I love" he laughs "You know, I flew to Chicago during one of my trials to win Jade. Tito and Lolade were visiting Jade. I could tell she was pawning me off to Lolade, even told her there was nothing going on between us,

we were just friends. At first, I was upset.” he laughs “Lolade was very willing, and it turns out to be the best thing that ever happened to me. Lolade drives me crazy all the time, but that’s the woman I love.”

He looks at me and drinks more. Not sure if I should like him or dislike him. I’m upset he was her first and glad at the same time he doesn’t feel good about being her first. He’s not trying to rub it in my face. Even in his stupor, he’s somewhat apologizing.

Jade made me hang out with her ex; I’m guessing Lolade doesn’t know. I could see her throwing a fit, guess it might be a good thing to watch someone else act crazy, the only question is can she handle it? Considering, I’m trying my hardest to handle this piece of information.

Jade soon returns to me. She wraps herself around me. I want to push her away. I can’t, I want to address the truth omission but right now It feels good to have her in my arms.

She danced all night, and by three a.m., we headed back to the hotel.



After settling in, I immediately asked.

“Is there a reason, you didn’t inform me Bosun was the first guy you slept with and are there more guys, that I should be aware of possibly hanging out with in the future?” I ask in a calm tone as I watch her body stiffen. *Yes, Jade, I know.*

“I just didn’t think it was important, especially when it’s obvious he and Lolade are getting married.” Her voice is subtle and contrite.

“So, you are saying it’s okay for Lolade to know and I didn’t need to know.” I am trying hard here not to be upset.

“Lolade doesn’t know and it’s best it remains that way. It was love at first sight for her and there was no point tainting him for her. Besides, if Lolade finds out. I’ll have to answer a long list of questions and I can assure you it will be a nightmare, she’s the kind that would call to ask questions like when you kiss, how long did it last, did you feel butterflies, and did their wings flutter.” *Even I want to ask those silly questions.* I remain quiet.

“I didn’t like to find out from him the way I did at the club no less. He said a few things that made me not want to punch him. I still would have preferred to find out from you, not him.”

“I’m sorry for not telling you about Bosun and I. I thought it was irrelevant to us. What Bosun and I had was more of a dalliance.”

“Let me make the decision on what’s relevant for me to know or not know. Why you had sex with him is what I want to know, sounds like he could tell it wasn’t something you wanted?”

“Like I said it’s irrelevant to us. Bosun was there, I decided to give him a chance with some encouragement from my friends, you were out with other women. Magazines with

different women in your arm were right in my face every day. It was clear to me that we were over before we even began, my friends reminded me that I was a teenager with a stupid crush, and I needed to move on. Bosun showed interest in me and to move on from you meant I had to go all the way with him, so I did. Like I said we were a dalliance.” she shrugs

“You went out with him because you saw me with those women and thought I’d moved on from you?” She nods.

“I tried going out with those women hoping I’d feel something, I dropped them all off at their homes alone. I’d gotten your address after driving your uncle crazy with phone calls and my persistence. He finally gave me the address in Texas, I wanted the phone number and he refused to give it. I showed up on a Sunday morning and your dear cousin Yomi had the pleasure of telling me that you were in New York with your friend Tito and your boyfriend who I now know is Bosun.

He said you’d moved on and you were happy with said boyfriend and he is better for you because he’s closer in age, with the same culture and background, I thought it was best to give you that room as we both know, that didn’t last very long because I started sending you gifts on your birthday.” She looks perplexed obviously, dear cousin didn’t tell her I came looking for her. The plot to keep us apart thickens.

“I’m sorry he lied to you, my daily aura to him was a façade of what I was feeling, I was hurting under the surface. The invisible mask I put on daily expressed that I was fine and chirpy, I guess he bought it. I wish he’d told me you came by.

When I left for New York. I wasn't in a sexual relationship with Bosun, we were platonic until our return from New York. I was still hanging on to you showing up or something, A few days after we returned, I'd planned to call you and break my promise to my aunty. Technically now, I still broke the promise. I went online to search for you and an article with pictures of you with Princess Nadra on a said romantic date. That's when I decided to give Bosun a chance. I figured you've moved on with her and I needed to do the same." She's crying now. They played us. She wipes her tears and I pull her to me. Her head rests on my chest.

"I need you to know, I'll never leave you for Nadra. That's something I can promise you." She nods.

"Now, that you know it was Bosun. Does it make a difference?"

"It doesn't make any difference that it's Bosun, but I do not like your vampire cousin at all." He caused all this, or would it be my dad or her guardians or Nadra that keeps tagging to me, seems the list is endless when it comes to keeping us apart.

"Do you think I should tell Lolade?" she asks, I can tell she's trying to shift focus.

"I didn't like hearing from him. I'll suggest you tell Bosun to tell her himself."

"Okay, guess I'll have to deal with that when he does tell her." She groans. I lift her face to look in my eyes.

“I don’t like it when you omit telling me stuff.” I need her to always tell me the truth no matter how bad or how uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, Gent.”

“Promise you’ll always tell the full story, no omission Jade, and no matter how bad or uncomfortable.”

“I promise, Gent.”



Before leaving Lagos, she’d presented me with a bracelet that had a symbol. I like the leather strap. She’d explained that the symbol was her idea, and the leather was sourced from the tribe called Hausa in north of Nigeria. They’re very skilled at leatherwork. I’d asked her what the symbol signified, and she shrugged and said it just looked nice and she had it made for me.

I felt like the symbol meant something, but she didn’t want to tell me what it signifies. I didn’t mind, just promised to always wear the bracelet.

NASEER



“Tell me again, why you are upset because I can’t seem to understand what type of bug crawled up your ass that’s making you this annoying though that’s your default to most people.” Brian says. I lean back watching him. A good thing we’ve been friends for so long and he’s one of the few people I call a close friend.

“Are you upset because some guy beside you popped her cherry or are you upset you met the guy or because you hung out the guy or the guy isn’t too pleased to have been the cherry-popping guy or her cousin tried to protect her from you and sent her towards the cherry popper?” He says in a way, that makes me want to mess him up for a minute.

“Stop saying cherry popper it’s annoying and the answer is all of the above.” I retort taking a drink.

“If you say all the above. Then, I guess Mariam should be allowed to be upset about some of the list as well. She has met Nadra who has been aggressive towards her, and you have been sleeping with other women until you started seeing her

and your dad sent her packing in his mind, he was protecting you from her, could it be that you want to be privileged in this relationship?”

“Like that’s even possible with her, you haven’t met Jade.”

“Then, let it go. The guy that was her first ever admitted to you that he felt second. That my friend is your win.”

“Fine, I’ll let it go. Though I selfishly want everything about her to involve me.”

“I think you already achieved that goal stop sweating the stuff that doesn’t matter or as she said it’s irrelevant.”

“Whatever, Brian. You are no help,” I say taking a drink.

“Yeah, I know that’s why you keep coming back.” He snickers.

We spent the next few hours talking about some donations he wanted me to make to his charity. Ken joins us hours later and we make a night of chilling.

JADE



Naseer stayed a few more days with me in Lagos before leaving. I didn't go to the UK with Tito. I went straight to Johannesburg to visit my aunt and uncle. I had a good time with them. Aunty Lara seems happier and more relaxed.

She asks about school and boyfriends. I lied to her and said that I was not seeing anyone right now but dated a few. I can't tell her I've broken my promise and I'm with Naseer. She'll probably move back to Chicago to make sure I'm staying away from him.

Doesn't help that I had to give Lolade and Tito more details about Naseer plus the fact we must be a secret. I begged them not to let their parents know because it would mean Aunty Lara knows which will not bode well.

Naseer doesn't like the fact, that my aunt doesn't know we are in a relationship, he wants everyone to know. Wish it was that easy to do, but I know better.

One day while my aunt was out, my uncle sat me down.

“Tell me the truth Jade and I won’t tell your aunty, are you single?” I want to lie to him but for some reason, I know he has always been in my corner when it comes to Naseer.

“I’m seeing someone,” I say, avoiding eye contact.

“Prince Naseer, I presume.”

“Yes, but I can’t tell Aunty Lara.”

“I understand, I can’t tell her either that I gave him your Texas address.” I chuckled.

“I love him, Uncle.”

“I know you do, but his family doesn’t want you with him, you need to be very careful.” He warns.

“I promise I will be.”

“Good, this stays between us.” I nod in agreement.

I would spend the next two weeks with them having fun and talking to Naseer in secret. When my aunty is not around. Most times, I can hear Naseer grumbling over the phone whenever I whisper that I have to go because my aunt is back.

When I arrive back at O’Hare. I plan to take an Uber back to our apartment and spend a few days there before going to campus. I am pleasantly surprised to see Rilwan waiting as I exit, I rush to hug him though he remains stiff, but he smiles which is good.

He takes my bags from me. I find Naseer waiting in the car, another pleasant surprise.

My prince, waiting for me. I happily spent the next few days with Naseer before going back to school and him to somewhere in the world.

My schedule is back in full swing in my final year. Maureen is carefree as always, but Calvin is quiet and has no more snarky comments. He now knocks before entering our room. I wonder what happened to him, but I couldn't be bothered by him.

Naseer and I talk as much as possible. He always shows up telling me he's waiting for me at home. Most times I find my way there alone without Rilwan coming to pick me up. We always look at each other before eating or spending time together laughing or teasing.

The last few days, I have experienced an excruciating pain in my stomach. I had a pregnancy test done and it was negative which was a relief, *I honestly couldn't handle being pregnant*, the pain would not stop. Something is wrong.

By the next day, I couldn't take the pain anymore, I could barely stand. Maureen managed to help me up and drove us to the ER. Once admitted after the test the doctor said my appendix had to be removed and right away too.

I quickly sent a message to my cousin Yomi, telling him what was happening. I tried calling Naseer, but it went to voicemail. I decided not to leave a message for him. Maureen stayed with me throughout and only left once I opened my eyes after the surgery to see her and my cousin. I went back to sleep by the time I woke up again. My aunt and uncle were

there with suitcases. They must have flown all night, they hugged me and left after speaking with the doctor.

NASEER



Rilwan had returned without Jade. I never like it when that happens because it means she's out or upset about something or testing my limit, this time, however, he had me racing out the door with him. Jade is in the hospital recovering from surgery. I'm trying to hold myself together till I see her, he'd returned saying "Maureen said, Ms Bankole was complaining of abdominal pain and had to be taken to hospital. They operated on her, and she's fine." I'm sure she is, but I need to see her to believe it.

Arriving at her hospital room, I raced in to find her sleeping. I finally let out the air I'd been holding when I found her sleeping. "Wake up, Jade," I say in her ears, like a command she opens her eyes.

"Gent." she croaks "When did you get here?"

"Just now, you weren't responding to any of my calls or texts. I was worried."

“I’m sorry. I was in a lot of pain. Maureen brought me to the ER. Turns out I had to have my appendix removed. I have no idea where my phone is. My aunt and uncle are here, they arrived last night.”

“What did the doctor say?”

“Surgery went well and I’m healing fine, just need to rest a while, no spring break partying for me this year. My 21st birthday is next week. I’d planned to party. I’m going to have the worst 21st birthday in history.” she gives a sad chuckle.

“It’s more important for you to be alive and healthy next week. The dead don’t party. Let’s get you back on your feet and I’ll plan a big bash with your friends for you.”

“You are no fun Naseer,” she says.

“I know, I’m just glad you are okay, go back to sleep Jade, I’ll be right here.”

“You don’t need to stay Naseer, aunty Lara will be here soon.”

“I’m staying Jade, stop trying to hide us from your family.”

“She won’t like it gent, she already told me to stay away from you because you will hurt me. I promised her I’ll never speak to you again. If she sees you here, she’s going to know I broke my promise. Gent please.” I’m not surprised her aunty will tell her that. They already tried to get her away from me several times. I know how she’d lied to her aunt that she was at school whenever her aunt called and that she was with me.

“I don’t care if your aunty doesn’t like me or us together or not, I’m staying with you.” No way am I leaving. I’m not staying in the shadows anymore.

“Don’t you have some business meeting to attend?” she asks when she sees I’m unwilling to leave.

“Not when you are sick Jade. You and me through the good the bad and the in-between. I’m not leaving.” I state in finality.

“Fine.” she pouts “please be nice. I don’t want her shipping me to Timbuktu.” I laugh.

“Go to sleep Jade, I’ll be respectful.” I hold her hand and she goes back to sleep. I fell asleep as well, till I felt a tap on my shoulder. Opening my eyes and before me stands her aunt and uncle. They beckon for me to step outside. I release my hand from Jade’s, then follow them out. Without words, they head to the sitting area, away from the rooms. Expecting me to follow which I did knowing this isn’t a moment to act cowardly, not like I’ve ever done that. The moment we arrive in the sitting area away from the rooms. Aunty Lara doesn’t waste any moment to turn her full-blown anger towards me.

“Prince Naseer, I’m going to be blunt here. I don’t want you dating, my niece. How long has this being going on? You need to put an end to it, right now.” she vehemently states. This is the first time an aunt doesn’t want me dating their daughter.

“We’ve been dating about a year now and I have no intention of breaking up with her.” I succinctly respond. Her eyes widen like she’s mentally raining thunder on me, I can sense she wants to hit me but she’s controlling herself. We stare each

other down for a moment “I know you sent her here, hoping I will be out of her life, sorry to tell you your plan didn’t work.”

“Your father promised us, you wouldn’t date Jade. He said you will leave her alone, so she can date someone real. ‘*This*’ you and Jade in a relationship is not real and you’re wasting her time. Time she can spend with someone, she can truly be with and would love her.” she tersely states. I expected anger but I didn’t expect her to disregard our relationship, like it was nothing.

Folding my arms to control my anger, I take a step back from her. Reminder Jade and I are at stake here and I need to control this moment and not make it worse.

“Jade and I are real; I assured my father that I wouldn’t date Jade while she was a teenager. She’s an adult now and you cannot stop me from seeing her, if she wants to see me.”

“I don’t care if you think you love her or she loves you, I want you to end this relationship now or I’ll tell your father.”

“My father is aware, I’m dating Jade.” She gasps and squeezes her husband’s hand hard; his squashed-up face expresses the pain she’s inflating as he remains quiet, watching us throw daggers at each other.

“You do realize that you are putting Jade in danger or are you so selfish that you can’t see what you are doing to her?” she looks like she would kill me if it would get me away from Jade. Weirdly, Jade looks a lot like her when she’s upset.

“I assure you; no danger will come to Jade and I’m not breaking up with her because you blatantly or forcefully requested.” She’s got it twisted, if she thinks Jade is in danger by having a relationship with me.

“Fine, I’ll tell her to end it, she won’t disobey me.” She proudly says I can tell she’s going to exert her power on Jade, that would put a strain on our relationship. Instinctively, I block her path as she attempts to head towards Jade’s room.

“You can’t do that to her, that’s not fair to her.” I snap at her as she gives a sad chuckle.

“Fair is me keeping her safe from your family, especially the wrath of your father.” she snaps back at me. This woman is feisty. I know she’s right about my father, not wanting our relationship, though I won’t admit it to her. It would mean I’m aware Jade could be in danger, which she isn’t because I’ve already crushed my dad’s thoughts on getting between us.

“Please don’t ask her to choose sides, you’ll only be hurting her. I beg you, please don’t do that to her.” I plead. I know how Jade has struggled with breaking her promise to her aunt. I’m a good boyfriend, at least, I like to think that I am. I should’ve left and continued to remain a secret, but I needed her family to know so she could be free and stop lying. We both maintain our stance, in our battle of will.

“He’s right, Lara” her uncle finally speaks “I don’t like this any more than you do, making Mariam choose is not fair to her either.” he squeezes her hand.

“You can have any woman, why did you have to pick Jade?” she shouts “Why! Why Jade!”

“She’s the one I fell in love with, and she loves me too. It’s just that simple.”

“It’s not that simple.” she snaps “Because you can’t see your forbidden love is doomed. I don’t want this for her. She deserves better, for now. I won’t ask her to choose but don’t expect me to champion your relationship, every opportunity I get, you can be assured I’ll convince her to break things off with you.” she forcefully states pointing a finger at me.

“Long as you don’t ask her to choose,” I retort.

“Fine” she snaps, and I move out of her path. I find a chair and exhale. And let my anger dissipate. It would seem, there’s a fight at every turn for us. Palms to face, I heavily sigh. Our relationship is a challenge enough without external forces putting additional strain.

I feel the presence of her uncle next to me. “You know my wife is only concerned about Mariam’s safety. Your father made it clear to us that you and Mariam will never be a couple and she’s unworthy of you. He told us we needed to keep her away from us or we could expect consequences. As soon as we sent her to Texas, we started making plans to leave Rhanaz, we liked it there but with your father’s threat, we had to take the jobs in South Africa.” He sighs, just surprised to know my dad has been spinning wheels long before now to separate Jade and me.

“My wife now feels like it was a mistake bringing Jade over to Rhanaz, with all that we’ve experienced in the last few years, as challenging as they’ve been I still think it was a good idea to bring her to Rhanaz, that girl lost her parents in a very tragic manner, she needed to be with family not alone in some boarding school.

When she first arrived in Rhanaz, she used to cry every night and would stare at the walls or her books for a long time. It didn’t help that the kids at school refused to be friends with her. Your sister was the only one kind to her, then she met you and somehow, she started laughing again and stopped crying. That was why we didn’t stop her from coming to see you, spending time with you gave her purpose, not even in our wildest dreams did we expect you two to become lovers.”

If only he knew, we gave each other purpose. It didn’t have to be in their wildest dream. It was in our dreams, and it became our reality. The few hours Jade and I spent together daily while I was healing were not mistakes. It was the foundation for our future.

“I’m in love with Jade and I’m not ashamed to say it.”

“I know and I’ve known since the day you came on crutches to see her and sat with me for hours waiting for her to come home. I honestly thought it would fade but you proved me wrong when you kept calling for her Texas number and wouldn’t let me rest. I couldn’t tell my wife that I gave you the address in Texas and please don’t tell her. I’m not ready to

sleep on the sofa.” I chuckled, after having a standoff with Aunty Lara I can empathize with him.

“You know, I’ll never leave Jade,” I state.

“I know, I also know your father doesn’t understand or care how you and Jade feel about each other,” he replies.

“He will, he doesn’t have a choice. Jade and I are inevitable.” he chuckles at my reply.

“I hope you can convince him for both your sake.” He leaves without looking back. I notice Rilwan hasn’t said a word since.

“What do you think Ril?”

“He’s right, the person that needs convincing is your dad. Not them”

I remain in the waiting area until they leave before returning to Jade. She’s no longer sleeping. I can tell she has been crying. I pulled her close to me. “I’m sorry, Jade.”

“My aunty has never been upset with me before. This is the first time she is angry with me Naseer,” she says through sobs. “Maybe it’s best we stop seeing each other, Gent.”

“No! Jade that’s not going to happen. You and I stay together.” I wipe her tears. I can’t stand that she’s crying. I did this and I don’t feel proud of myself now.

“We are in this together, we’re staying together my love not apart.”

“How Naseer, even your dad wants us apart. Maybe they are all right.”

“We stay true to each other, and not let them get between us.” She doesn’t respond, just keeps sobbing. she sobs until she falls asleep. I lay in bed with her. The next moment I opened my eyes. I see Rilwan on the chair alert and a big bone female nurse standing over us. She looks about fifty-ish, and her face shrivels up, probably from the tight-looking chignon she’s wearing, she looks upset by the way Jade, and I are wrapped around each other.

Her stern expression tells me she would smack me if she could, I gently pull myself from Jade. “You know she needs to rest right, she just had surgery.” she snaps.

“I know, I just held her so she could sleep, she was crying” never had to explain myself before but under this woman’s intense stare, I feel a need to explain.

“Well then, gentleman, am guessing you are the boyfriend. Her aunty isn’t happy about it.” How the hell does she know that? “Not to worry, the lady ain’t hiding that she’s displeased with your relationship.”

She starts to check Jade’s temp and vitals. Jade is not responding and continues to sleep through it all. I’m guessing the meds are kicking in and she’s knocked out.

“So, I overheard her aunt saying you can have any woman, yet you insist on her. I’m curious too, why her?” she asks. She’s the second person today asking me why Jade. I want to scream, why not Jade and answer them by saying.

Because, when she offered to dance with me. I willed every broken bone in my legs to heal.

Because she walked into the midst of my self-deprecation and doubt and then presented me with a smile and ultimately love.

Because of her I stopped wishing to die and saw a possible tomorrow.

Because every time she laughs with me, I know I'm the luckiest man on earth.

Because of the marred body I hide from the world, I leave it open for her soft kisses.

Because I know without a doubt, she was meant to walk into my life, and we are destined to be together forever. So, stop fucking asking me why her. I wanted to say all the thoughts in my head instead I said.

“It’s simple. She’s the one I love.” She pulls the blanket over Jade’s leg. I turned to Rilwan. He nods and immediately gets out of the room. This lady is so distracted with gossip, that she’s about to expose my girl. She pulls up the hospital gown and checks and changes Jade’s dressing. Then turns to me.

“Being in love is good, her aunty isn’t convinced though,” she says. *Well done Captain Obvious.*

“She’s not convinced because she believes, I won’t marry Mariam, not because she doubts our love. In her mind, love is not enough.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, why would she be so sure you won’t marry a girl you love?”

“Because I’m Prince Naseer of Rhanaz.” I stand up straighter, showing her my authority.

Her eyes widened in amazement and shock. She puts her hand on her chest like she’s trying to control her heartbeat. She’s stumped and can’t believe I’m real.

“The prince that was in the accident” she finally utters.

“Yes, I’m fine now and would appreciate it. If you look after my girl and not tell anyone about her”

“Why are you ashamed of her, didn’t you just say you love her” her snappy tone returns.

“I’m not ashamed of her, I don’t want the media following her or disturbing her life. I’m protective of her. If no one knows about us, she can enjoy her college life stress-free without any judgement or scrutiny.”

“How sweet of you. I won’t tell anyone who you are, but I need something from you” Just when I thought she would agree to help me without trouble.

“A picture with you and dinner for all the nurses.”

“Done. Every night for the week and you promise, not to tell anyone.”

“Deal, my name is Susan.”

“Nice to meet you Susan and thank you for looking after my girl,” I say shaking her hand.

“Oh, you’re welcome,” she says grinning. Now self-aware she starts to pat her tight chignon. She gets her phone out of her pocket. “I’ll be the one to check on her while she’s here,” she says as she comes closer to take a picture. I oblige her with a trained smile for records.

“I would appreciate you looking after Mariam” She smiles and leaves, Rilwan comes right in, and I ask him to arrange lunch and dinner.

“Is there a back door, I can use to exit” I ask when she returns.

“Yes, I’ll show it to you when you are ready.”

“Thank you, Susan.”

“Miriam should be able to go home tomorrow.”

“That would be great.”

Rilwan and I leave. I instruct him to schedule breakfast, lunch, and dinner for the nurses’ station till Jade leaves. I called Nurse Susan before going to sleep to make sure Jade was still sleeping. She fills me in about the aunt and uncle visiting and promises to call me when they leave.

I return to Jade once she lets me know the guardians are gone.

JADE



Days later, I'm discharged from the hospital. I watched in silence as my aunt and Naseer had a standoff over whose care I was to be discharged to. Uncle Ray had to intervene to stop the possible fistfight between Naseer and my aunt.

Aunty Lara finally accepted after pleas from Uncle Ray. I went back to our apartment. Aunty Lara stopped by a few times, the hostility between her and Naseer is as clear as the sun but they somehow managed to be polite and not pluck each other's eye out. Though Aunty Lara always looked like she would stab Naseer if she thought she could get away with it and Naseer always looked like sticks and stones don't bother me if Jade is with me.

I always let out a breath whenever Aunty Lara or Naseer leaves the room. Together in the same proximity they always had my nerves strung and my feet ready to jump in and stop a possible fight, the tension was always high.

My uncle as always was happy, until Aunty Lara sends him a glare and he keeps a straight face, I try not to laugh out loud at the exchange but always send my uncle a wink.

My stitches are removed, and the doctor is happy with how well I'm healing. Aunty Lara and my uncle left much as they didn't want to admit it, they knew Naseer would take care of me.

Tito and Lolade finally got to visit, I've been filling them in on the hostility and advised them to stay away. Naseer hasn't left my side though I can sense his itch to travel. He keeps saying I'm more important and he prefers to know I'm better before leaving.

On my birthday, to my surprise. Naseer presented me with a manila folder. I looked at him weirdly. I expected a gift but an envelope, he better not be trying to break up with me on my birthday. I will claw his eyes out before leaving.

"Open it," he says, "and stop overthinking". I opened and read the paper, my eyes widened as I read, and I turned to him.

"This says I own this apartment unit and the other unit where Rilwan and Radek are staying," I shakily say.

"Yes," he simply answered kissing my forehead. "Happy birthday my Lady."

"Naseer, why." He looks at me with those gray eyes that always cocoon me, making my heart gallop. He lifts his hand and points to the bracelet I'd ordered for him and gave him in Lagos.

Bosun's friend was an awesome craft man, and his business was making men's bracelets with logos and straps woven together in leather. I'd had requested he made Naseer the Celtic symbol of everlasting love.

When I gave it to Naseer in Lagos, he'd asked if the logo meant something. I'd shrugged and said it just looked good, but I knew what it meant, and I just didn't want to get all emotional. He'd promised to wear it always. Maureen showed me the symbol a while ago and told me what it meant. He was the only face on my mind when I first saw the symbol.

"Because you gave me this," he says tapping the bracelet in his hand.

"Raheem told me what the symbol means." He pauses "Jade, you are my everlasting love."

I stared at him in awe, tossing the paper. I jump on his lap and kiss him breathlessly. "Thank you, Gent, though I would have preferred a watch or a gift card. But I'll accept this gift because it's our home."

"Our home. I love the sound of that." He mumbles in my breast. Before taking my hardened nipple in his mouth.



Spring break is finally here and since I didn't get to celebrate my 21st birthday partying. I decided to go clubbing with Lolade and Tito. Naseer didn't like it, but I promised him that we would be fine, and I wouldn't drink.

It took a lot for him to let me leave without any bodyguard, we got to the club and danced all night. Lolade convinced me to have a little drink, I didn't want to, but she kept pushing so I did.

Next thing I know, I'm kissing Naseer, but he tastes different and smells different, feels like he's trying to swallow me whole.

He whispers sweet nothing in my ears, and I laugh. Lolade pushes the drink again and I take more. I'm surprised Naseer isn't upset, and Tito is not here.

I kiss Naseer again. Tito comes to get me, and we leave.

Tito asks what Naseer's is number, and I respond, he's LOML.

NASEER.



I got a call from Jade's phone. It was Lolade, "We are outside, Jade is drunk can you please come and get her," she said.

I decided to go myself. I'm a bit upset because she promised me, she wouldn't drink. Rilwan comes with me.

She gets out of the car and falls into my arms. She's totally out of it, I lift her and carry her to our apartment. As soon as I put her on the bed her phone pings with text messages.

Stan the future: We had fun tonight, let's catch up later. I like you.

I nudge her, "Jade."

"Hmm."

"Who's Stan the future?"

"The guy I was dancing with. He said he likes me, but I told him I have a boyfriend, but not to worry my boyfriend will

break up with me soon, and he can be my future Stan.” She turns and continues to sleep.

Guess the guy can’t wait, I’ve never looked at her phone and didn’t feel a need to but right now I wonder if a few future guys are lurking and waiting for me to break up with her. I scroll through her phone and it’s mostly text with friends and classmates.

I searched for my name and did not find it, so I called her line and it showed LOML. She has me saved in an Acronym, which is weird, guess she’s still hiding us. I nudged her again.

“Jade, what does LOML stand for?”

“Love of my Life. It’s cheesy I know; can you call him to come and get me,” she mumbles.

She’s still out of it and doesn’t know she’s home. Before, I could put her phone down a video text comes in from Lolade, so I decided to watch the video.

Rage fills me as I watch the video of Jade kissing a guy. The guy is seriously getting his fill of her mouth. His hands are all over her. I couldn’t watch it anymore. I stop the video.

I leave the room for a drink to calm my rage. I’m livid. I want to shout at her, but I need her sober. I grab the full bottle and sit with the drink; I remain in the same position with anger brewing in me till daybreak when she steps into the living room looking disheveled.

“Good morning, Gent” she mumbles. Still a little, not herself. I don’t respond and that gets her attention.

“Gent, I’m sorry. I was out of it, last night. Lolade kept pushing that I drink, and I only had a little. I don’t know what happened. How did I get home.”

Instead of speaking I get up and move closer to her and play the video of her kissing some guy. Her face widens, hands on her mouth as she rushed back into the bedroom and straight to the bathroom.

I could hear her throwing up. I sit on the bed waiting for her when she comes out.

“Gent, I’m sorry. I don’t know what happened. I thought that was you.”

That sounds like the flimsiest excuse in the world. I let out my built-up anger.

“You thought that was me, which is why you kept kissing him, drinking, and saving his number. He had his hands all over you. Did that feel like my hand? You must think I’m a fool for you!” My anger can be felt and heard as I shout at her, making the walls vibrate. She moves back in fear.

“I’m sorry, Gent,” she says, with tears dripping down.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it, guess you and your little friends had this all planned is why you refused my bodyguards following you.”

“No, Gent, please I didn’t plan that.” She points to the tossed phone.

“Don’t you dare call me gent ever again. You and I are over. I never want to see you again in my life!”

She gasps in shock at me.

“Naseer, you don’t mean that, please forgive me. I wouldn’t knowingly do that.” she pleads.

“I must look foolish to you. We are over. Leave when you are ready, but I don’t want to see you ever again.” I walk past her as she falls crying. I’m hurting she betrayed the trust I have in her how could she do that to us?

I wasn’t supposed to see that video but thankfully, I did because I wouldn’t have known how well she played me. My father tried to warn but I refused to listen. I trusted her.

Her slow receding footsteps echoed louder in my ear; I heard the closing of my heart as the door closed behind her. The door shutting was the last beat to my flamed anger.

JADE



I'm lost, I don't know what to do or where to go. I have no recollection of kissing another man. I don't cheat. The fact remains that I did only I've no idea how that happened. Now we are over, and he never wants to see me. I can't go back into the room. Where do I go now? The tears won't stop flowing.

I go to Rilwan and knock. When he sees me, he's shocked.

"Please can I stay here, till I can figure out where to go? Naseer told me to leave and never return" I say through sobs. I wish I could stop crying, but Rilwan let me in and closed the door. Radek, the other bodyguard leaves, shaking his head.

"What happened?" he asked.

I play the video, and he watches as I continue crying. "I don't know what happened, one minute I was having fun with my friends and Lolade gave me a drink and I refused but she kept pushing so I finally took the drink. After that I don't remember much other than dancing and kissing a guy, I

thought was Naseer. He saw the video and lost it; He told me to never return.” We both remain quiet as I wipe my tears.

“I should leave but I’m not in the right frame of mind. Can I please stay till I can think straight?”

“Of course, Ms Bankole. The room on the left is empty you can rest in there.”

“Can I please have Tylenol; I have a headache.”

“Sure, just a minute.”

Rilwan returns with two pills for me. I take them and go to the room. I get on the bed and the tears just keep flowing. The images of Naseer’s angry face and his words keep playing in my mind.

I roll to my side and just let the tears flow.

NASEER.



She walked out, I'd shouted at her to leave. I expected her to stay and provide more explanation, but she didn't. I stayed in the room waiting, angry and pacing with rage. She has no idea how much I detest any man touching her. The Stan guy in the video had his mouth all over her. I can't sleep, I can't do anything. I'm pacing like a caged lion. Waiting for her to return. I need some fucking explanation.

She tried to offer one and you didn't listen.

She didn't try hard enough, she just left.

I continued my insane pacing in the room waiting for her to return. After hours of her not returning, I started to panic.

Is she okay?

Did she leave?

Where did she go?

Did she go to him? The thought of her going to him, has me frustrated, clenching and unclenching my fist.

I call Rilwan. I'm sure she said goodbye to him. She wouldn't leave without speaking with him.

He comes in with a perfected scowl face trained at me. *Yes, she went to him.*

“Where is Jade?”

“She left,” he answered not breaking the look.

“And you let her leave?” I want to shout but he's angry at me.

“She was a mess and didn't have anywhere to go, so I bought her a one-way ticket to Texas.”

“What!?” How dare he? “Why would you do that, you know we just had a fight, and I didn't mean what I said to her, but you were happy to get her away from me, what exactly is your goal.”

“My goal?” He quizzically questions “You told her to leave, and you told her you never want to see her again.”

“Get the fucking pilot ready, I'm going to get her, you know I didn't mean for her to leave. I was upset when I saw a video of some asshole sticking his tongue in her mouth and touching her.”

The image is still driving me crazy.

“Did you watch the video till the end?”

“Of course, I didn't, I couldn't.” It ripped me the first time I saw James kiss her, I certainly couldn't watch the video of another man sticking his tongue in her mouth.

“Well, you should have because, she thought it was you and she called the guy Naseer, her amateur friend forgot to edit that out.”

I slam into the chair, I’ve lost Jade. Why didn’t I pause to believe her?

“Her friend drugged her, why I don’t know, but she did is why Ms Bankole was not herself.” I’m staring at him in shock and anger at the thought of Jade being drugged.

“Rilwan please, let’s go and get her. I messed up but you saw the video and you can understand why I was angry.”

“I saw the video but what I don’t understand is why you would think she would do that, Ms Bankole is in love with you and we both know that, why didn’t you believe her?” He’s scolding me and he’s right to do so.

“I wasn’t thinking just filled with jealousy of some guy kissing her. Rilwan, can we go get her please, you can scold me later?” I plead, knowing without him. I can’t get her back.

“I couldn’t let her leave in the state she was in. I gave her sleeping pills. She’s sleeping next door.” I pushed past him, racing to his unit, and opening the doors. Radek sees me coming, he gets out of my way and points to the room she’s in.

I open the door gently and see her, relief washes over me. I owe Rilwan for thinking when I was controlled by jealousy and anger. She’s sleeping all curled up. It’s clear she cried herself to sleep. I move closer and kiss her forehead. “Naseer”

she mumbles. I leave her to sleep, much as I want to take her back to our unit.

Rilwan is waiting when I get to the living room. “Show me the recording of her friend drugging her?” He opens his iPad and hits play. I watch as Lolade puts stuff in her drink while Jade and Tito have their backs turned. I watched in anger as she encouraged Jade to drink, then went and brought the guy to their table. When the recording ends. I turned to Rilwan.

“Deal with that guy, that took advantage of my woman. Make sure he knows the message came from me.” he nods. I know he understands what to do. “Radek will take me to Tito and Lolade. I’ll take care of her.”

I walk out with Radek and head to the house where the ladies are staying. Tito opened the door. She was surprised to see me “Is Jade, okay?” was her first question.

“NO, where is Lolade?” I ask, she moves out of the way for me to see Lolade. Who shrivels up and starts to move back when she sees me coming towards her.

“How dare you drug my woman!?” I bellowed at her; the room echoed with my booming voice. The tears fell immediately.

“Prince Naseer, please she will apologize to Jade, I already had words with her,” Tito says from behind. I move closer to Lolade who runs behind a chair.

“You’ll send a video to Jade detailing what you did, apologize to her and you will not speak to her again ever, do I

make myself clear?” she shakily nods.

“Now tell me why you drugged Jade?” She starts to rub her hands together and fidget with her hair.

“Tell him,” Tito shouts.

“Bosun and I had a fight, and he told me he was Jade’s first and she would never forget him. I was upset when I heard. I felt betrayed by Jade because she told me there was nothing between them.”

“You couldn’t talk to her about it, instead you drugged her and had another man stick his tongue in my woman. You are lucky, Jade is your friend otherwise you will be paying dearly for what you did.”

“I’m sorry, I acted in jealousy when he told me. I’m truly sorry.”

“Did I drug Bosun or beat him up?” She shakes her head.

“Why then did you think it was okay for you to drug Jade.” She sobs more but I’m not moved by her fake aftermath tears. “Jade may have a forgiving heart, but I don’t. If I ever find you speaking with Jade after you send a video apologizing. I will destroy you and that’s not an empty threat. Nod if you understand me.” She nods.

I turned away from her to Tito. “Is Jade, okay?” she asks.

“She’s sleeping off the drugs, you can call her later.” She nods. I leave without a backward glance to the loud sobs of Lolade. Subconsciously, Jade knew Lolade couldn’t handle the

fact she had sexual relations with Bosun, neither one of us thought Lolade would take things that far.

She almost destroyed us had Rilwan not exercised more caution.

I return to our apartment, and Jade is still sleeping, I want to ask what pills he gave her to knock her out this much, but I remain quiet and watch a movie with him.

JADE



When I wake up, the room is strange and dark. I'm still in the clothes from yesterday. I feel the bed, there's no one next to me. I can't see anything. I reach to my right and feel a lamp and switch the light on. My eyes look around my surroundings and it's still strange.

I get to a sitting position and my feet feel the carpet. Where are my shoes? I looked for my phone and it's nowhere in the room. I then remember giving it to Rilwan and not taking it back because I was in tears. Reality seeps in. Naseer breaking up with me. I need my phone to call Maureen.

I need to leave this place. Before, I go and beg Naseer again. Getting out of bed, I go to the bathroom and wash the smudged makeup off my face, finger comb my hair, then use mouthwash to rinse the foul taste in my mouth out.

I return to the room and head for the door. In the living room, I find Naseer and Rilwan watching a movie. I've never seen them like this before. No point making things any more awkward than they already are.

I turned to Rilwan. Ignoring Naseer. “Thank you for your help, Rilwan, can I please have my phone?”

“Yes, Ms Bankole. I charged it for you.”

“Thank you, I’ll get my things and be on my way,” I state. Not to either one. I head to the adjoining door and head straight to Naseer’s bedroom. Grabbed a pair of leggings and a t-shirt, I changed and brushed my teeth. My mouth still feels sour. I pull out my carry-on suitcase and realize that I have too much stuff in this apartment they wouldn’t all fit in my carry-on suitcase. I just need to grab important stuff that I can’t leave behind.

I heard the door close and Naseer’s heavy footsteps. I felt his intense gaze on me, but I couldn’t look at him. My hands were shaking as I searched for items I couldn’t leave behind while fighting back tears that are threatening to fall. The silence in the room was oppressive with weighted tension. I could feel his gaze burning holes in my back as I moved around tossing items into the suitcase and desperately trying not to trip over myself under his intense gaze. I managed to close the suitcase and called for an Uber before I rushed to the bathroom double checking that I hadn’t forgotten anything. Dragging the suitcase that felt lighter than my heavy heart, I wanted to turn and beg him to please forgive me, but I reminded myself that we are over; he had asked me to leave, and I must respect it as much as it shatters my heart. I let out a heavy sigh. *This is it, the reality I knew was going to come is now here.*

I reached for the doorknob; it wouldn't budge. After a few minutes of fumbling with it in vain. I know he's standing behind me, my body tenses with the aura in the room. He locked this door on purpose. I decided to face him, the sooner I face him,

the sooner I can leave with my shattered heart.

I turn to him, avoiding his eyes "Please open the door, my Uber ride will be here soon."

"I'm sorry Jade," he says, his hand in his jeans pocket, A glance at his face shows no anger. Just contrition.

"We were good while we lasted. Please open the door. I don't have the strength to argue with you. I understand you feel betrayed, and I don't have any explanation for what happened, so please open the door."

"I'm sorry Jade," he says again.

"Apology accepted, please open the door, Prince Naseer." There, that's our formal wall. He looks at me in a way that expresses how irritated he gets whenever we are on opposite ends with each other. I keep my eyes trained on the floor.

"I can't let you leave Jade; I would be miserable and I'm sorry I didn't believe you."

"Like I said, it's okay, we both knew a day like this would come, I should get going, my ride is three minutes out, Prince Naseer please open the door." I plead, I can feel my tears pooling and I'm making a herculean effort not to break down

in front of him. I can't even call Tito or Lolade. I need Maureen's craziness to make me feel better.

"I'm sorry Jade that I shouted at you and said I never want to see you again. I'm sorry for everything I said. Please stay and let's talk." He moves closer, and I step back till I hit the door. I don't want any physical contact between us.

"I don't think that's a good idea, Prince Naseer. I think I should leave." My phone pings again. "My ride is outside, I beg you, please open the door and let me leave."

"I can't let you leave right now." He grabs the phone out of my hand. I want to fight him for it, but I remain standing like a deer in headlights.

"I've canceled your ride, let's talk." He tugs my phone in his jeans pocket.

"You have no right to do that, and I don't think we have anything to talk about. Give me back my phone."

"Jade, please" he pleads.

"Fine" I move from the door, past him, making sure we didn't touch and take a seat on the chaise "Talk!" He's not going to let me leave until he has said his peace I might as well let him.

"I'm sorry, Jade."

"You already said that, and I've accepted your apology so can we get to the part where I can peacefully leave?"

“I didn’t mean that. I was hurting and I hurt you too, for that I will continue to apologize until you believe me.”

“I believe you; can I leave now?” I get up.

“Jade, Lolade drugged you.” Shock has my feet frozen in place and my mind blazing, that can’t be true. My body drops into the chaise. “Lolade drugged you is the reason you were so out of it. I didn’t watch the video till the end as you probably guessed, I couldn’t, but Rilwan did, and turns out you were calling the guy you were making out with Naseer. She forgot to edit that part out.”

“You are lying Naseer, Lolade would never do that to me,” I shouted at him.

“You told Rilwan you couldn’t remember anything, so he went to the club, sniffed around, paid someone and he got a recording of Lolade putting something in the drink when you and Tito weren’t looking. You refused the drink, and she kept pushing you to have it. The recording Rilwan found showed you completely out of it and calling the guy Naseer. The guy knew you were not yourself and took advantage of you.”

“I can’t believe she would do that to me, doesn’t make any sense.”

“I spoke to Lolade, she found out about you and Bosun. She got upset, felt betrayed, and wanted to destroy us.”

“That’s not fair, I broke up with Bosun before they started dating, and I don’t talk or call him. Why would she drug me?” she exhales, palms her face in exasperation.

“She feels like you lied to her.”

“She didn’t speak to me first, instead she drugs me, what if I’d OD? That’s just too much!”

“Yes, and I’m glad you didn’t overdose.”

“Thank you Naseer, can I have my phone back now? I need to get going before it gets dark.”

“Jade. I can’t let you leave.” He’s now on his knees in front of me, cupping my face so I can look at him.

“Naseer, I’m not upset but maybe this is a sign for us to move on from each other.”

“Your friend tested our love and she failed.”

“Naseer, I do need to leave so I can think. Aunty Lara was right, I need to be on my own for a while.”

“Jade please don’t analyze us; we had a fight and I admit I overreacted. I promise to make it up to you, but I honestly can’t afford to give you a chance to analyze us, that would paralyze us. And your aunty isn’t right about us.”

“You said you never want to see me again.”

“I was upset, remember when you were upset and told me I don’t love you and said we were done? I didn’t get upset because I knew you were angry; can you do the same for me now and not get upset by the things I said in anger.”

“That’s not fair, I had every right to be upset. In your case.” I paused, I wanted to say he didn’t have any right, but there was a recording, and it was clear as day. I probably would have

reacted the same way too. I sigh “Fine, I see your point though I didn’t like you kicking me out.”

“I’m sorry my lady.” He smiles and kisses my forehead.

“Naseer, I do need to get back to school.”

“I know, just not today. The plan was Tuesday. Can we continue with that plan?”

“Fine, I do need to shower and I’m hungry.”

“Okay, I’ll order us something while you shower.”

I get up from the chaise and realize I need to speak with Rilwan. He’s my guardian angel. I headed to the door. “Naseer, please unlock the door.”

“Why?” He looks perplexed like I’m about to sprint out the door after agreeing to stay.

“I need to speak with Rilwan, and I hope you aren’t planning on locking me in here till Tuesday.”

“If that’s what it takes to get my apology through, I will” He kissed my cheek and unlock the door and I head to Rilwan.

NASEER.



Jade and I returned to our usual routine. Lolade left town after apologizing. Jade still can't understand why she would drug her. She has promised me she will stay away from Lolade.

I show up most times to surprise her. I've plans for her graduation. She seems willing to be seen with me as the days draw closer.

I left Jade and returned to Rhanaz. I need to complete this training soon. I went in after telling Jade I'll be gone for three months. I explained why I needed to complete this training in the stretch, and she understood. I should be done before she graduates, and I can clear my schedule for her temporarily.

I'm behind on the prince academy training but it needs to be done. I'd just completed part A when the king summoned me due to an urgent need. I had to attend a gathering and talk over some situation that had gone bad. Of course, Nadra showed up at every gathering, one evening she even tried to kiss me, but I did my best to avoid the kiss and save face.

The next day I saw a magazine that told a different story. Once the crisis was averted, I went straight to Chicago. I can't return to the camp without seeing Jade. I sent Rilwan to get Jade, but he returned without her and a voice message "We've reached our stop, I think we should go our separate ways, Prince Naseer. I no longer wish to date you. Goodbye."

I toss my drink. "Are you sure Jade is, okay?" I ask Rilwan, who returns a frown.

"I know that Princess Nadra paid her a visit last week."

"What!?" that has disaster written all over it. How the fuck did Nadra know where to find Jade? The only answer that comes to mind is my dad and I'm not liking this at all.

"I have it on good record that words were exchanged, and Princess Nadra left upset."

"Do you know where Jade is?"

"Yes, she was on her way out with her course mate, Nate." He then showed me the picture he took.

I look at the picture and I'm upset, seeing the guy's arm wrapped around her in a short dress, no point sending Rilwan back. I'm going back myself. Two hours later, I return to her campus and Rilwan gets me into her room.

Certainly, a dorm room. I sit in the corner of her bed and wait. I noticed a magazine with a taped note. "Do you think you're exclusive?" Whoever sent this magazine to Jade knows how to make her tick, the downside is, that it could be anyone in our long list of enemies. Doesn't help that fucked up Nadra

visited her. Waiting is my Achilles heel yet somehow Jade seems to always keep me waiting. I checked my watch every minute until I got a text from Rilwan telling me she's on her way up.

She soon arrives with the boy. They are smiling and laughing, they didn't notice me. He's getting comfortable like he's going to stay the night, I notice he's attempting to kiss my woman, that's where I draw the line. I've had enough of this nonsense.

Clearing my throat loudly, I rise.

JADE



I walked back with Nate to my dorm room; it was a quiet walk we had a good time together. He's fun.

I needed to laugh and hide my broken heart. Last week while studying a strong familiar smell that I detest filled my nostrils when I lifted my head from my books, there she was in front of me. The mighty Princess Nadra in a study room. Staring me down in her overpriced clothes looking completely out of place in a college library. I've never considered anyone to be my bane, but I can honestly say Nadra whose perfume chokes my lungs, is the bane of my existence in a thousand scorching sun. The thorn in my side. I could go on, but I needed to get rid of her, first.

"How can I help you?" I firmly ask as I maintain eye contact and do not bother to get up. If anything, she's disturbing my flow and I'm glad there's a large table between us because the open hatred emanating from each of us could have set the library ablaze.

"You can stop fucking my boyfriend." She snickers.

“Who might that be?” I refused to take her bait though we both know the one person we have in common.

“Prince Naseer; he keeps coming to Chicago to fuck you. I’m sure you’re aware that he’ll never marry you so stop getting between us.” Her eyes roll in disgust. Hands on her waist. I watch her stance, as I prepare myself for her attack.

“Who said anything about marrying him, not to worry, he can be yours when we separate but right now, he’s mine and I can fuck him anytime I want.” I returned a Cheshire cat grin to her scowl. While preparing myself for a fight.

“You must think, you are special because he can’t stop coming to you but not to worry, I’ll have the last laugh and I know how to play dirty.” She snares.

“I know how dirty you play, and like I said right now, he’s mine. But if you feel a need to settle this immediately. Why don’t we call him on speaker so he can tell you that right now he’s mine.” Her face looks like she’s about to beat me to a pulp. Her nostril flares. She shifts her weight in annoyance. I bet she didn’t expect me to respond.

I remain seated and brace myself for a physical fight with this crazy woman while Naseer is unreachable.

“Sorry, I’m late,” Nate says behind her, she turns and leaves behind the choking poignant smell of her perfume.

“Who was that?” Nate asks.

“Someone not worthy of our time.” He nods and opens his computer.

Returning to my room that night, I wasn't too happy about Nadra's visit, the only person I could share that with was Tito and she just told me not to worry about it and keep my focus on Naseer. I was doing just that until a few days later when I found a magazine on my bed with pictures of Nadra and Naseer kissing, my heart dropped.

The magazine probably came from Nadra to prove her point, much as I don't want to believe there's truth to it, it's also reality staring at me that eventually he would pick her. Mr Darabi's words keep playing back in my mind much as I want to shut it out. His look and tone that day spelled something that I mustn't dismiss. My smart mind tells me it's time to let Naseer go and end this subconscious possibility of us. We are getting closer to our shelf-life expiration date.

I know, I would be a mess this close to my finals but the sooner I rip the bandage off the better for me.

After brooding with my decision, I finally told Maureen what was going on with me. In her usual casual style, she tells me to dress up and go partying, maybe I just might start seeing other possibilities. Like she'd always mentioned to me.

She decided to dress me up, and Nate agreed to be my date.

When Rilwan arrived to pick me up, Maureen was my wing woman. I sent a message to Naseer that we are over.

Now at my door with Nate, "I had a good time tonight. Thanks, Nate. I am glad I didn't stay indoors with books much as I love my books, partying and having fun was good for me.

Guess it's true when they say all work and no play makes Mariam a dull girl." We both laugh. I open the door.

"Yeah, you were certainly not a dull girl tonight, you're welcome, I had a great night too."

Nate and I laughed.

"Do you think we can do that again?" I ask, I've had my head buried in books and Naseer for too long. I need to enjoy every minute of college. In my final year, I'm realizing all I've done is study and wait for Naseer to give me crumbs from his royal table no more of that, now is time to party.

I will still graduate top of my class without trouble. I'll enjoy every minute of a single girl living once I graduate. I already have a job offer lined up. I'll live it up. No hold barred to my future single girl life. Time to make my twenties the golden years while partying and seeing the world.

"We can certainly do it again," he says moving closer to me. My usual instinct is to move back but if I need to move on from Naseer, I need to be a little open and taste other guys as Maureen keeps telling me to hurry up and enjoy the last few months of college. I'm certainly a super late bloomer. I'm partying in my final year which most people did in the first year, but hey better late than never, right?

Nate moves in for a kiss, I angle my head to receive him, closing my eyes but before I can feel his lips all I hear is the loud guttural sound, jerking my head back I turn towards the direction of the sound, and he stands to his full height dominating the room.

How- the fuck did I not notice him and just how did he get in, he's wearing all black clothing. Why is he here in my room in stealth mode and looking angry? What could be making him scowl? I set him free and he's here, why? He has never been in my room before; this move of showing up in my room is throwing me off. Maybe a woman has never broken up with him before and he feels he should have the last word on that. I'll let him say whatever makes him happy. I should've known with his overbearing self; he wouldn't accept the message I sent.

He proffers his hand to Nate just as he pulls me to him like I'm a rag doll "Hi, I'm Prince Naseer and you must be Nate. Mariam has told me a lot about you," he says smiling, but I know that smile is feigned. I know him well enough to detect the forced royal smile, Nate probably thinks the smile is genuine.

Nate accepts the handshake "I'm Nate, nice to meet you, I'm sorry Mariam never mentioned you." He states giving me a look as I lied to him. Nothing I do or say will change that look of deceit that he has for me.

"My lady likes to keep our relationship very private, but it doesn't change the fact that she's mine," he confirms.

"Good to know." Nate says in a condescending tone "Mariam, we had fun tonight. I'll see you at the meeting tomorrow."

"Yes, I'm sorry our night is cut short, but I'll be there tomorrow," I eagerly respond.

Naseer proffers his hand to Nate again which is strange, but Nate took it not to be rude. Naseer pulls Nate close and leans to his ear “Next time you try to kiss my woman. I won’t be polite, consider this a warning because you didn’t know. Mariam is and always will be mine.” he says to him probably supposed to be a whisper, but we can all hear or maybe he intended for us all to hear.

My eyes widened in shock, Naseer didn’t just say those words to him. The look of betrayal Nate shoots my way and rips through me.

Nate nods and leaves without a backward glance at me. He’s just ruined the great evening I had with Nate. Rage blasted through my veins as I turned to Naseer attacking his chest with my fist.

“How dare you, I belong to no one!” I yell “I was never yours. How dare you threaten Nate. I’m not yours, I belong to no one.” I continued yelling and hitting him. I’ve no idea how many times I hit him. He pulls my hands apart in a hoist hold. I can’t hit him with my fist, but my blood is still seething, I begin to kick him. I only get one kick in before he starts to block my kicks. Then pulls me to his chest into a tight hold wrapping me in his arms. I can’t get out. I’m still fighting but it’s useless I’m too small compared to his height and strength. The fight in me slowly wanes, but I’m still angry.

“Naseer, I’m not yours, please let me go.” I plead quietly as my fight adrenaline dissipates. “Please let me go, our time together is up. I can’t continue this roller-coaster relationship.”

Silence is the response I get but he doesn't release his hold. Our hearts are beating fast. I lift my head to look at him "Please let me go, Gent, we both knew this day would come." I plead with him. Especially with my body already traitorously responding to him.

"I can't, Jade. Don't you think I've tried?" He sounds exasperated. That should be me, not him.

"Try harder, we can both try together," I plead. Again.

"I don't like the thought of it so I'm not even going to try again, let's talk, If I release my hold, will you stop hitting me" I nod. He releases his strong hold on me. I sat on Maureen's bed away from him. I watch his eyes rove my body in the skimpy dress I'm wearing. Maureen had offered the dress for me to show off what I got, and the dress did just that tonight.

I certainly got hit on many times tonight but clinging to Nate made me feel safe.

"We'll talk about this dress later, first let's discuss the message you sent to me" I lift my chin in defiance.

"What's there to discuss, I'm breaking up with you. I no longer want to be in a relationship with you but if it boosts your ego to be the one to break things off, you can do that and it's fine with me. I need to date someone in the same social class as me and I'm tired of getting crumbs in your time. When several guys are willing to make me a priority. I'm done." I succinctly state as I watch his pace burning holes in my cheap decorated carpet. He stops pacing and picks up my desk chair to sit right in front of me crowding me in.

“We agreed to keep our relationship private because we didn’t want the press invading your life and following you around. I didn’t want them to ruin the most precious thing in my life. I’ll always protect you from the part of my life that’s never fun. Jade, I love you and will love you till the day I die but I can’t stand the thought of you not being in my life.” He pauses and stares like I need to let his words sink in. I remain defiant, I don’t want to believe him.

“Jade, I’m sorry if you feel like I don’t have time for you or giving you crumbs. I was trying to give you space and let you enjoy your college years as best as possible. You have no idea; how hard it is for me to stay away from you for lengths of time and the mountains I move each time I need to Chicago.” I avoid his eyes and look away. I need to stay strong I remind myself. He turns my face to him.

“Jade, you ripped my heart out when you sent the message, don’t ever do that to me again.” He sighs and glares at me. “I raced here to speak with you and get some answers, but I find another man about to kiss you, how do you think that made me feel” he’s still glaring. I want to cower, but I need to speak up now or always succumb to his intensity. Which I know he will always use to his advantage.

“How do you think I felt when I got the pictures of you kissing her mighty highness Nadra in public and smiling together like a happy couple. They dubbed you two as the gorgeous royal couple, amazing how you got an amnesia about that. Did you forget how you told me you were going to be too busy to see me or even call me, but you’re detailed attending

special and exclusive events with her? When you are supposedly in a location that I can't contact you." I glared back at him, but he's not moved.

"Truthfully, there's no doubt we will always be special to each other, we can save ourselves the trouble of wondering if the other party is cheating and go our separate ways. I've enjoyed every minute of our time together and it will always remain special. The reality of how different we are is knocking and it's time we answer the door. I'll never fit into your lifestyle, and I have no intention of changing who I am.

You are the prince of Rhanaz and soon to wear the crown itself and I'm just the girl from a small city called Lagos who just happened to walk into your room when you needed a friend, we both know it's time to go our separate ways while it's still good. We've discussed this in the past, and we understand the time to go our separate ways will come. Now is a good time, I graduate soon and get into the big world. I'll travel and have fun with my friends." I try to move out of the crowded space, but he won't budge.

"Letting go of each other is not an option for either of us and you know it. That kiss with Nadra was staged and I had to smile for the cameras, I couldn't push her off in public that wouldn't be nice. It would upset her father and in turn, upset my uncle the king's public shoving of Nadra is bad for Kingdom business." He sighs "I was at the camp but there was a situation and the King sent for me, which was why I left the camp. Nadra wasn't part of any of my engagements but

somehow, she showed up to each one. Someone fed her my movement. I'm still looking into that.

Jade, I'm sorry if it made you doubt us. I swear to you. I don't have any relationship with Nadra, and I didn't bed her, each time we left a gathering together. I dropped her off at her place and returned to my bed alone. I need you to believe me, Jade."

I nod because I do believe him but if I don't walk away now it will be bad for me.

"Naseer, you and Nadra had a history that I think your family wants back. I honestly can't compete with her."

"My father's wants and wishes aren't mine, Jade." He sighs "You, my love are my greatest wish come true."

I remain quiet. Questioning if I can walk away from him as his unwavering eyes captivate mine.

"I can hear your doubting thought Jade, stop analyzing us." I look at him and all I see is a man I'm hopelessly in love with despite his quirks and the fear of him breaking up with me and marrying another, makes me want to run to the hills before he shatters me. Truth is I can't leave him either much as I know that's what I'll need to do, so I deflect.

"Naseer, I don't like, the way you were mean to Nate, he's a good friend to me."

"No guy is just a friend when you are wearing a dress like that and he's leaning in for a kiss. I won't stand by and watch another man get close to you."

“Are you being the grumpy’s evil twin again?” I ask presenting my icy look.

“Where you are concerned, *yes*. That little sucker that got the first kiss, the club guy, and Bosun they are as far as I would go.” I chuckled.

“You know, your possessiveness isn’t sexy right,” I say, he laughs. “I’m serious Naseer, I don’t like it when you’re possessive, you need to get control of that.”

“I don’t need it to be sexy, I just need it to scare away all the little suckers trying to steal my woman,” he smirks at me. “I will try long as no poacher are coming unto my woman.”

“Nate wasn’t trying to do that, James, I had a normal teenage crush on him, Bosun was just casual. Stan was just an opportunist idiot.”

“Exactly, why I had to nip Nate in the bud before he starts to get ideas.”

“Not cool Gent.” I sternly say to him.

“Fine, I promise to try.” I smile as my heart is joyous again. He pulls me into a hug whispering sweet nothing in my ears. This is us in private, smiling and laughing. I wonder if there’ll ever be a public us.

“Jade, get your things let’s go. I’ve missed you and I don’t want to touch you here. Maureen might walk in on us, or I can have my guards block the door so she can’t come in” he says like it’s a college boy putting a signal on the door for his roommate to return later. I can already see Maureen throwing a

manic fit if she's not allowed into the room, lord help us if Calvin is with her. The image of her walking in us isn't any better.

I want to say, he can leave, and I'll see him tomorrow, but I've missed him too. I doubt I'll sleep if I don't get a taste of him soon.

"I'll get my things." I pull my backpack and stuff a few items into it for the night. "I must be back by 4 pm tomorrow, I have a meeting with my classmates."

"Okay," I leave a note for Maureen, telling her I'll be back tomorrow. Naseer and I leave together.

"Hi, Rilwan," I say avoiding his eyes, I feel like a cliché, I sent him away earlier and Naseer shows up, and I follow him. I've been dick- swoon-matized.

"Welcome Ms Bankole" he responds with a nod and a smile to me as he opens the door for us to get in the back of the Benz truck. I don't bother to ask if this is a new car. It's Naseer after all.

"You do know, I'm burning this dress right" Naseer says, checking me out again. His looks always cocoon me.

"It's Maureen's, please don't do that." looking out the window. My mind still wonders if I'm willing to remain in hiding forever with him.

"Return it to her," he says sternly, I nod. The dress is a tad bit out of my comfort zone, which is the reason I'm not arguing with him. I felt like a fish out of water in the dress. I

agreed to wear the dress to prove Maureen wrong, that Naseer didn't control my life. She'd dared me to wear the dress and I took the bait of the dare. I'm glad Nate stayed close to me. A few times during the night he'd asked me if I was comfortable in the dress. I'd responded shaking my head. I can't lose his friendship.

We arrived at the apartment and as always, Rilwan and the others whisked us through the back entrance.

Once we are in the privacy of our apartment. He tosses the sweatshirt and heads for a drink. I take a seat and remove the heels that are killing my feet. I have no idea how some women wear heels all day, heels like this were not built with ladies like me in mind.

I lean back onto the comfortable sofa, letting out a sigh. Naseer is in front of me on his knees. He spreads my legs and gets between as he tucks his right hand behind me, and his left-hand goes to pull the string of the dress.

“Naseer, I'm not wearing a bra under this dress, if someone comes in” my nipples already betraying me as they fight to slice through the flower petal nipple cover. He looks at my breast and back at me.

“My guards know better than to walk in on us. I'm going to remove this dress and toss it” I remain quiet as his right hand pulls the zipper in the back and his left hand pulls the string strap off. I raised my hand and he pulled the dress over my head, tossing it. He peels the nipples covers up and my hardened nipples plead for his mouth. His eyes greedily rave

over my body. His look always arouses me. I also know he's thinking the biker short is all I had under the dress.

"Kiss me," I say to stop his mind raging. He leans in and takes on a bud in his mouth. My mouth exhales a moan. Finally. My hand is in his hair as he attacks my pointy nipple. "I've missed you" I let out. His lips move from my nipples to my mouth. I took my mouth aggressively, kissing away every negative thought I ever associated with us. He pulls from the kiss and starts to kiss my neck. I arc my neck to give him more room. I know he's branding me. He's going to leave a hickey for everyone to see, right now I don't care. His lips are setting my body on fire. A fire only he can put out.

My short is drenched, and it's going to start sipping on the sofa. Which will not be pretty a sight in the morning "Naseer bed please, I'm wet." without any utterance. He stands and picks me up from the sofa, heads to the bedroom, and drops me on the bed. I watch as he takes his sweatpants off, and all his manhood is fully bloomed and daring me to come and taste. I move to get up and reach for him, but Naseer flattens me back on the bed with my hands raised above my head and in one strong swift, he pulls my shorts off, tossing it.

He spreads my legs and he's in me a quick thrust, spreading me and moving in me in ways, we've never shared before. I meet his speed with loud cries, begging him not to stop. He didn't stop as he rigged more and more orgasms out of me. I lay panting and weak beneath him. I could feel his seeds dripping out of me. *Just how much did he pour in there?* I don't use pills, and this isn't my safe period. I'm going to get

plan b first thing tomorrow. I've always used plan B whenever he showed up unexpectedly.

He gets off me and rolls to the side, he sits at the edge of the bed with his back to me, he reaches for the sweatpants to wipe the few still dripping from him. "Jade you are mine, yesterday, today, and tomorrow and I'm yours, always." I watch his body exhaling. He's hurt and he can't hide it.

"My intention wasn't to hurt you; I was trying to protect my heart before you shatter it." He turns to me.

"What would ever make me, hurt you? Anything that hurts you, hurts me, Jade. I need you to know that. I would never do anything to hurt and I'm not going to break up with you." I did hurt him; I can see it in his sad eyes.

"I was hurt when I found the magazine on my bed and I reacted, I felt foolish believing all your words when the paper in front of me was saying otherwise. I didn't think of myself as a jealous person, but it would seem, I am where you are concerned, especially with that woman that I have an instant distaste for, and you know why."

"Someone planted that magazine, to get a reaction out of you. I believe the same someone shared my schedule with Nadra and instead of you calling me, you wore that dress and went out with another man, then sent me that message. Do you know how I felt when I rushed back here to see you and instead Rilwan delivered that message to me with pictures of you in Nate's arms?"

“I’m sorry, Gent,” I say getting on my knees and wrapping my arms around his waist. My front to his back. I rest my head on his shoulder. “I’m sorry, my Gent.” He pulls from my wrap and turns to face me.

“Marry me, Jade,” he says, shocking me. I open my mouth to speak but no words come out. I closed my mouth and tried to speak again but no words again. I closed my mouth again and look down at the carpet. He lifts my chin to look at him. “I didn’t stutter Jade, I was going to wait for you to graduate before I asked you, but I can’t wait any longer for you to know, we belong to each other. And stop this back and forth of you doubting or analyzing us and running every second.”

“I believe you, Naseer, we don’t have to get married just to prove a point, I promise you, I won’t send a message like that again.”

“Just say *yes* Jade and stop overthinking it.”

“I can’t help but think, you know that. Marriage is a big step. I will graduate soon and have plans to live the life of a single girl soon. Marrying you will be skipping that want, it’s not a flimsy want, if I may add besides, we still have the issue of you becoming a king.” I try to convince him, to understand my position. I didn’t lay the other obvious like Nadra, his dad, and my aunt.

“How about we revisit this discussion after I’ve worked for a year?” I say again to convince him. I can tell he’s not going to be convinced by anything I say besides a yes.

“Just say *YES* Jade and we can figure out the rest.” We stare at each other, my look probably saying we can wait, and he is pure desire. I’ve never been a carefree person. I’m a rule follower, I plan and think and plan again. I’d thought about my exit strategy from him because I always thought he would never marry me but he’s asking me right now.

Throwing all my sanity and logic out. Why can’t I leap with him, after all, there isn’t anything to hold me back. *Except for the fear of his family never accepting me, if he accepts me then we should be fine. I also will be giving up my life as a single girl but he’s worth it.*

“Yes! Naseer, I’ll marry you” I say looking him right in the eyes. He comes closer and kisses my lip gently. Then goes to the drawer, pulls on another sweatpants, and pulls it on. He then tosses a t-shirt at me. I put it on. He returns to me with a box in hand, when he opens it. I see a simple twist rose gold ring with an Emerald diamond. I don’t know much about diamonds, but I know this ring is certainly beautiful. He knows me well. A big diamond on my finger would be out of place for me. He takes the ring and puts it on my ring finger and it’s a perfect fit. *How long has he had this ring?* I wonder.

“We will get married tonight, privately that way you know there’s no doubt in my heart. When you graduate, we can tell everyone and work out how things would work for us. Then, I can protect you better from the prying eyes of the press.” Looking at the ring on my finger all I muffled is “Okay” I’m amazed at how beautiful the ring is and the significance of it. Naseer is committing, despite my fear.

I throw my arms around him, and we hold each other quietly not speaking, he pulls from the hug “I’ll call the pastor, get dresses and we can leave.” I nod. I go to the living room to get my backpack before heading to shower and change clothes.

By the time I’m out of the shower in the robe. I see three ivory dresses on the bed. I feel each one. The fabric is so soft. I should put a stop to this, it’s moving fast my thoughts invade.

I had to shut it down, *we love each other, the rest we will figure it out*. Naseer comes in dressed in black slacks and a white shirt. “Which do you like,” he asks pointing to the dresses.

“All of them, but I can’t pick unless I try them on.”

“We will take them all with us and pick one when we get to the chapel.”

“Gent are you sure about this,” I ask, my skeptical side kicking in again.

“My lady, I’m very sure, get dressed the pastor is waiting and we are driving alone there. No bodyguards”

“Is that possible, just us without your guards? Will Rilwan be okay with that?” I ask.

“Very possible and tonight is our night of possibilities.”

“I toss the robe and start to dress in my boyfriend jeans and t-shirt” I hear Naseer instructing to have the dresses taken to his car. I go to him when I’m done, he takes my hand, and we head out. Just as he said, we drive alone in an Audi truck and no car follows behind us.

We arrive at the chapel twenty minutes later. The priest ushers us in with a big smile. A man about Naseer's age. I expected him to be old and wrinkled but he's young and looks more like the sexy boy next door than a priest. "I'm Brian" he offers his hand. I shake his hands "Nice to meet you, I'm Mariam."

"She needs a room to change," Naseer says to him.

"Come with me," he says to me as Naseer hands me the clothes. I follow him with the dresses. "Thank you for accommodating us," I say.

"It's my pleasure, Mariam. Naseer has told me a lot about you. Thank you for giving him hope to survive that horrific accident. I'm very happy for both of you" He stops in front of a door. "You should have everything you need to change in there and I'll send sister Grace in to help you if you need assistance."

"Thank you." I opened the door and put the dresses on the twin bed. It's a small room but decent for me to change and put my stuff away neatly. I noticed the bathroom. I try on the first two dresses, not my style then I try the third dress and just like I'd thought it's the perfect fit, the crepe off the shoulder stays well on my shoulder as the mermaid style falls hugging my body sweetly, though I still need to make sure every button is in place. I hear a knock "Come in" I quickly answer "Hi, I'm Grace. Pastor's housekeeper."

"Thank you for coming to help me."

“With pleasure, Prince Naseer is a good friend of Father Brian. We are all so happy to see him getting married” I break into a smile, feels like everyone knows but me.

“Let me help you” She start to help with my dress. My braid isn’t too messy. She puts it in a bun for me. I apply very simple make-up. Grace helped put the veil on and handed me a bouquet. I head out with her.

Naseer and Father Brian get to their feet once they see us coming. Then Father Brian walks to the altar and Naseer takes my hand, we both face Father Brian. I can’t believe this is happening. My heart is racing, it feels surreal that I’m standing here in this moment.

“We are gathered to join Naseer Arthur Raimlat and Mariam Jadesola Bankole in holy matrimony.” I smile at his pronunciation of my middle name. He hasn’t had time to practice. I don’t hear anything else he says until he asks “Naseer do you promise to love and cherish Mariam all your life until death do you path” I look at him smiling. “I do” he answers.

“Do you Mariam...” “I do” I response quickly, not letting him finish. My eyes are on Naseer as Pastor Brian blesses the ring and Naseer slips it onto my finger, and I do the same to him.

“You may kiss the bride,” he says as Naseer lifts the veil and kisses me. It’s the best kiss ever. Before, he whispers in my ears “My wife, my bride from this day forward. Mine to cherish and love always.” I laugh. Naseer turns to Father

Brian. “Thank you, Brian,” I smile as Grace takes pictures of us.

“Your suite is ready, not a five-star rating.”

“It will do and trust me, my wife doesn’t mind, or do you, Jade?”

“I don’t mind” I answer with a smile, it felt good to hear him say my wife. We followed Father Brian to the simple room which would be our honeymoon suite. Naseer opens the door and lift me off the floor, carrying me into the room with a queen size bed which was surprising to me. Clean white sheet, a small dresser. Stained concrete floor. A table and chair facing the window. I notice a tray of food and just like that my stomach growled.

“How did they know?” I ask going to the food.

“They didn’t, I did.”

“You know me too well.”

“That I do wife, don’t ever forget how well I know you.”

We ate and talked, laughing together. Naseer’s jacket and shirt are off, he’s in just his slacks, he starts to take my dress off. He soon gets frustrated with the buttons “Just how many buttons does this dress have” He growls.

“Just enough to let you know the prize inside the dress is worth the trouble.”

The dress is soon a pool at my feet, I step out of it, just as Naseer is kicking it to the side. “that’s my wedding dress.”

“It is on my way, I will have it dry-cleaned later, but right now. I need to make love to my beautiful wife.” I smile. “I love you Mariam Jadesola Raimlat.”

“I love you Naseer Arthur Raimlat.” That was all he needed to hear as he attacks my mouth. He moves me to the bed, removing my underwear. He lays me on the bed in my birthday suit and takes a minute to ogle me. “Mine forever,” he says as he climbs on the bed. Spreading my legs, he starts his kiss from my lips to my nipples showing each one special attention, his kisses make their way down to my belly then my thighs, and down to my lower lips.

His head is between my legs and his tongue is doing wonders to me. He knows I have no control left when he does that. I cum loudly writhing under his gaze. He rises and pulls off his pants and underwear tossing it. “Stop teasing me Naseer,” I say pleadingly. I expected him to jump right back in, but he lays on me and pauses.

“Tell me, Jade,” he says.

“Tell you what” I ask flirtatiously, batting my eye though I’ll probably say yes to anything right now anyway. The rate at which my body is buzzing and craving sinful pleasure, I know is coming. I couldn’t deny him anything.

“Tell me, you will always be mine,” he says, his voice is a thick throaty whisper, but I see the vulnerability in his eyes. I break into a smile, cupping his face.

“That’s easy, I’ll always be yours Naseer. My love, my gent, my husband.” I say to him, as I try to kiss him, but he pulls

back, stunning me for a second.

“There’s no turning back Mariam” he’s not letting me blink away. I see the yearning for me to give him my all. *Why would he think I’ll turn away from him?*

“A little too late for that but yes no turning back for us. We are in this together and you need to make love to me before, I get out of this bed and call Father Brian to report you for failing in your spousal duties” That makes him laugh and return to the serious program at hand. I didn’t care, where we are. I let loose. Naseer catches my scream with kisses. We move in a rhythm that spells forever bonded.

We fall asleep with me wrapped in his arms. I stir during the night to find him in the chair watching me. “Is something wrong?” I ask sleepy.

“No, go back to sleep.”

“Come back to bed, Naseer” he chuckles.

“I’ll be there in a few minutes, go back to sleep wife” throwing me a wink with a grin.

I put my hand out to him, he gets up from the chair and takes my hand. “What’s wrong Naseer?”

“Nothing, I just woke up didn’t want to wake you, but I was happy to watch you sleep,” he says getting back in bed.

“You know that’s creepy right,” I say smiling.

“No, it’s not,” he says in a flirtatious tone. I gasped in surprise as his strong hand slid under my back and pressed me

into the mattress beneath. His body against mine is warm. I sighed contentedly, feeling every ounce of his weight pinning me down. He kissed my neck before turning his head slightly and capturing my lips in a ferocious kiss, his tongue will be the death of me. His hands moved up to cup my breasts, one he squeezed lightly while he took the other between his teeth and bit down just enough to make me moan from pleasure. His thumb and forefinger teased the other until it hardened out of desire.

I arched up towards him as he continued to play with me, caressing me in places that turned me inside out. With each touch I felt myself getting closer to climax, he inserted a finger in me and stroking in a way that made me come apart.

I pushed on his shoulders until he moved lower, the warmth of his tongue hit my writhing lips, licking and swirling, and I screamed uncontrollably with pleasure. He lifts his head and winks. Before finding his way in me. I wrap my legs around him as he moves in me. He lets out a loud moan. This time I captured his moan with my mouth, and we both loudly moan together as we come. He rolls off me and I roll on him kissing his scars. He wraps his arms around me, and I fall asleep cocooned in our love.

I stir in bed the next morning, only to see Naseer dressed in the clothes we wore to the chapel. The real world is calling I realized, jumping up I quickly shower and change into my jeans and t-shirt.

“Sorry, my lady we must leave right away.” He says when I come out of the bathroom.

“Okay” I pack up and we head to find Father Brian, who greets us with a smile.

“Jade, please wait for me in the car,” Naseer says, I nod and head to the car. I watch Naseer and Pastor Brian talking for a minute. I notice Naseer looks upset and Pastor Brian trying to appease him. They soon shake hands as Pastor Brian smiles and waves to me.

I waved back and we drive back to campus. I want to ask why he looked upset talking to Pastor Brian, but I decided against it. “*Enjoy the moment*, “I tell myself as I spent most of the drive looking at my ring. Naseer makes a few phone calls. I put my ring away. Our marriage is private and hidden till I graduate. Naseer already put his ring in a chain around his neck. I remain quiet throughout the ride. I notice the time is almost three. I need to meet my classmate.

We arrive at my building, and Naseer kisses my cheek. “I won’t be back next weekend, but I leave for Italy tonight from there to Rhanaz, my uncle has summoned me. I can’t ignore the King. I’ll call you every night, but you can reach me, whenever you are available.” *The honeymoon is over already.*

“Okay, I’ll call you.”

“Good.” He gives me a peck on the lips. I get out of the car with my backpack and leave. I made it to my group meet on time.

Nate's didn't hold a spot for me. He's upset which is understandable. I take another seat and we get to work. Once the meeting is over. I race to him "Nate, please wait. I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Even I know I can't compete with a Prince. I did google him and he's something. I wish you two a happy life." He says and walks away from me.

I take the opposite direction. I returned to my room. I already hid my ring. It will just make things worse if Nate sees it. I fall asleep, until I wake to Maureen and Calvin about to live stream their amateur porn show before me.

It's one thing to be carefree and living your life to the fullest but with these two, it just a whole different spectrum. I grab my backpack and leave the room. Just as Calvin is unzipping his pants. At least he's not saying stupid stuff to me.

I do need to find Nate; he's my study partner and finding another one this late in the game isn't easy. I don't want it ruined by Naseer's possessive nature.

The next couple of days, Naseer and I talked. I never like it when he's in Rhanaz, the plan usually changes. I remain focused on my studies. Nate finally agrees to be my friend again after I let him know, that I wasn't attracted to him. Even if Naseer wasn't in the picture, there wasn't a chance of us. He seemed to be more agreeable to that. Everything is back to normal until Naseer calls.

"Jade, I'm going to be longer than expected." he says.

“What do you mean longer?” I ask as I feel the heat on my forehead.

“I’m sorry my lady, I’ve to go and finish my prince academy training. It’s a promise I must fulfill. My plan is do it in a stretch and get it over it.”

“How long Naseer?” my voice cracks.

“I’ll miss your graduation, I’m sorry.” I want to ask why he can’t go after my graduation, but I remain quiet. I should’ve realized he would be too busy for me.

“Jade, I want to be there but if I don’t go now. I might have to start the whole program all over again which is longer and there are parts of it that I can’t do over. Please lady”

“It’s fine. I’ll be waiting at home when you return.” He let out a loud sigh.

“I promise to be back as soon as possible and have a graduation party with you.”

“It’s okay Naseer. I’ll be here.”

“I love you Jade and I’ll see you in a few months.”

“Love you Naseer. Finish up and return to me.”

“I will, I promise. Good night, Jade”

“Good night, Naseer”

NASEER



That's the hardest phone call I've had to make. I missed her high school graduation. I'll be missing her college graduation. I can't afford to repeat the entire program. Some of the training, I can do again but there's the pleasure part that I can't do again. I can't be with any other woman other than Jade. Missing her graduation is the price. Three months then this is all over. I can be with my wife without any more commitment. Brian had advised that I keep my marriage quiet for now and not tell anyone. He seems to think, I'm living in a bubble about Jade and me. Much as I would like to tell the world. I decided to take his advice. I

I can gladly put a baby in her and get working on presenting my woman to the world.

It's going to be three excruciating long months. Let the countdown begin.

"Are you ready" Rilwan asks, I nod though I'm not ready. I would prefer to go and see Jade. I know if I do, I won't return to complete the training. I promised my grandfather I would

complete it. Raheem already finished while I was healing from my broken bones. It will always hang over my head until I do.

I get in the car with Rilwan, I take the long drive to what feels like a prison sentence. I've done this before. This time it tears at me more. Jade and I are married. It should be easy, yet it feels stronger that I shouldn't go. I have this internal pull that's telling me not to go and not leave Jade.

When we arrive at the gate. Before getting out of the car I turn to Rilwan "I know you have someone watching her without my request, can you make sure my wife is okay, please."

"I will"

"Thank you." I tap his shoulder as I head into the building. They welcomed me and took my phone, standard protocol. They go through my bag to make sure I don't have any contraband on me. They take out Jade's picture. I glared at the guy, and he put it back.

I go through the gate taking a final look at Rilwan. He nods to me. I turn towards the next three months with a nagging feeling telling me to turn back.

JADE



I just finished my finals, now I can exhale and take a moment as Naseer would always say. I called Nate and he's agreed to hang out with me tonight, thank God. After Naseer's last crashing into my apartment and intimidating Nate, he's a little skittish around me, who can blame him?

I plan to eat and sleep for three days before I start to pack my things and move into the apartment Naseer bought for us. He promised it's our new beginning and we alone can determine how it ends. I won't see him for three months. The second half of his prince training which I do not care about, but he insisted that he promised his grandfather that he would complete the training even if it killed him. All I need to do is wait for him. I can manage three months apart. Might as well enjoy single life. Then again, I'm no longer single. Our little secret must stay a secret till he returns.

Maureen is out taking her finals that means I get to relax a bit before she and Calvin strolls in kissing and grossing me out. I drop my backpack, kick my shoes each pair land around,

drop my jacket and head for my bed, I come to a screeching halt just as I'm stupefied to see the man sitting on my bed.

I know without a doubt his presence isn't a good thing, I just don't know the level of how bad. He looks relaxed in contrast to my shock because he knows he's already won. I need to apply my listening skills and agree. His look is predatory and right now I'm the prey. Naseer once said he can get away with murder, no doubt in my mind his father, Mr Darabi can too.

If ever there was a doubt in my mind on how Naseer commands a room, there isn't one now because the original room commander is staring me down like a bug that's about to be squashed with all its inside splattered all over. His presence here is sending blaring sirens of eminent danger to my whole being. Trepidation is seeping through my being, but I maintain a calm façade to his chuckle. It's clear he's aware of my fear despite my façade.

He'd threatened to get my aunt and uncle fired from the job they called the best opportunity because I refused to visit Naseer, who at that time acted like Grumpy's evil twin. I'm like a doll that he tosses around as he wishes but I'm sure he didn't expect Naseer and I to fall heavily for each other, his eager telescopic senses couldn't have sighted Naseer and I bonding. We are something he didn't see coming and he's here to shatter us into pieces, every piece so small that the best technology could never put us back together.

I know without a doubt that I love Naseer, and he loves me too but subconsciously I always knew we didn't stand a chance against the firm. Now the firm is here in my tiny dorm room, about to make my subconscious a reality. I'm almost certain he will have the clothes he's wearing now burnt because he stepped into my dorm room. He's probably trying not to scratch an imaginary rash.

"Hello Mariam" he says calmly but I know better.

"Good evening, Mr Darabi, is something wrong?" I ask in hopes to deflate the predatory look on his face.

"Nothing is wrong, you and I just need to have a little chat." He states in a calm tone, but the calmness is like a velvet rope around my neck and he's slowly tightening it. I brace for impact of my heart crashing. Though knowing no amount of straps and braces can withhold my heart from the crash.

"About?" I ask though I know the only thing we can chat about is Naseer but playing dumb is my best friend right now.

"Naseer of course, who else" he says like it's the obvious, which it is.

"I know you finished your exams today and your graduation is in two weeks." Just great, he has been stalking me. I feel the creeps all over my body, even as I nod to him. "I'm here to tell you to take the half a million dollars I'm about to offer you, leave town, and never speak to my son again." He once again states it like it's the obvious smart move.

My eyes widen, but I'm not surprised, subconsciously I expected him to try and get rid of me what, I didn't expect the half a million, I half expected more threat and more squashing, shattering, and splattering but half a million for little ole me without any power, other than pure love for Naseer. It must be a joke.

"Why would you pay me half a million, it doesn't make any sense when Naseer can just break up with me," I ask quietly or *divorce me* as I try to move away from his prying eyes.

"My son isn't thinking right now, and I need to first clear his vision, then his mind and to do that, I'm willing to pay you the blocker of his vision to clear out of his path." What his unspoken word is saying is Naseer will not dump me, instead he married me and I'm not about to reveal that. If I don't take the money, he'll make me disappear. I can see it in his eyes, he's not afraid to harm me or remove me from Naseer's life damn all consequences, however, in this case, there won't be any consequence because he'll get away with it and probably ruin my aunt and uncle's life just to make sure he covered every angle. Each time I tried to break up with Naseer, wasn't because I didn't love him. It was because of Mr Darabi, his father. I subconsciously knew he would come after me no matter how much Naseer and I loved each other and he's here just as my mind predicted. *Be smart, Jade.*

"When you put it that way, I understand but make it a million, and Naseer will never hear from me again, I'll even sign an NDA." My heart raced from zero to a hundred as I say the words but what choice do I have against a powerful man

like Mr Darabi? Naseer is unreachable for the next three months. That's a freaking long ass time. Asking for more money may convince him that it was all about the money and he won't try to eliminate me.

“I knew you would be smart, unlike Naseer. The NDA and the cashier's check will be here tomorrow, and I need not remind you not to attempt to cross me, Ms Bankole. I also need you to tell him you cheated on him. That is the reason you are breaking up with him”?

My mind is screaming with flashing red bleep. *I can't say that to Naseer, especially when it's not true.*

“Why would I need to say that, isn't breaking up with him enough.” That would just rip through him. I can't shatter him like that.

“Just breaking up with him isn't enough. You must tell him, you have another man besides him and this is a transaction that stays between us, no one will ever find out if you stay away from my son.” He says tersely. I could see the warning glistening in his eyes like he already has a counter if I so much as try to back out. I know what the counter is, I will be eliminated. Disobeying Aunty Lara is one thing that I sincerely apologize my way but Mr Darabi, that's no child's play.

“I understand perfectly, Mr Darabi,” I answer. Though my heart is shattering into a million pieces, as I say the words. I guess asking for more money is my key to survival.

“Good,” he says leaving as quietly as he came. I remain glued to the same spot, fear floating in my pores and my heart racing like I’d just fought with a lion and the lion left, the blood is seeping through my wounds, but the lion might return to finish me and say the million I asked for is outrageous and his bodyguards will just take me away.

I lost track of time until my phone rang, Nate is calling. I declined and texted him.

Me: *I’m sorry, I’m not feeling well.*

I immediately started packing my bags, I don’t need to stay for the next few weeks. I already took care of most of my stuff. I can leave now. The bangs on my door startled me. I’m panting that the lion is back, but I know Mr Darabi won’t pound, his guards will just break it down. I must face my fear.

I go to open the door. I’m relieved to see Nate.

“Hey, I thought I would come and check on you, maybe a walk will make you feel better,” he says. *Why didn’t I fall for a guy like Nate? A guy who doesn’t come with so many complications.* My first thought was to say *no* but I realized staying here is freaking me out.

“Okay, let me grab my Jacket and shoes.” which is still on the floor. I put them on and out I go with Nate.

Nate talks and I try my best to chime in, but my heart is shattering, and my mind is a scrambled mess, he probably didn’t notice but I keep looking over my shoulder like someone was going to come and grab me any moment and I’ll

never be found again. *I can't stay in my room tonight.* Nate and I walked and talked till I asked. "Can I please stay at your place tonight.?" I pleadingly ask Nate.

"Is that a good idea, I don't need your prince charming coming after me," he says in a subtle tone, but I can see his eyes showing disdain at the thought of my prince charming.

"Please Nate, I need this and he's not going to come. He's away for the next three months or forever."

"Okay," He acquiesces though skeptical.

I slept on the sofa in Nate's apartment. He was, of course, a complete gentleman. Arriving at my dorm room the next morning I found an envelope with a cashier check in the amount of a million dollars and an agreement. I skimmed through the NDA; not like I could find a lawyer to review the document, or I could contest or negotiate the agreement. I signed, made a copy, sealed, and dropped the signed copy in the mailbox as instructed. Relief washed over me; he didn't attempt to get rid of me. He just wants me gone. My heart felt heavier than a ginormous rock, I've signed my love away for money or did I sign it away for survival?

Next two weeks, I moved around like a zombie. I visited the apartment and left Naseer a note that reads "*I'm sorry, I don't love you anymore, we weren't real. wishing the best in life.*" I couldn't say more even if I wanted to. I left the note. Keeping my ring and taking some of his shirts and his perfume, I doubt he would notice the missing items.

I feigned smiles at my graduation but in truth, my heart is in shattered pieces.

My uncle had another graduation to attend, he left my aunt and me to get back to their Air BNB.

Once we arrived there. I broke down and told my aunt everything about Mr Darabi. The money I'd just accepted and cashed in. I explained how I feared for my life, and I had no idea where or how I could hide from Naseer. I didn't mention that I married Naseer, no need to add more salt to the open wound of I told you so and her glaring look.

I know without a doubt, Naseer won't believe the message in the note, I left him. I can't turn back now; I can only try to hide from him.

To my surprise, my aunty hugged me and said I did the right thing. I expected her to shout and say, "*I told you this would happen, or I warned you about this*" Instead she called my uncle to come home right away, after explaining everything to him.

Next thing I know, we're packing up. They said we were leaving town, they'd just received a new job offer in Canada to teach, and that was the news they were going to share, it's even better now that we can all leave together.

We left the same day; they understood my plight. We drove all night. I turned down the job offer, I'd accepted. After settling in and trying to adjust to my new environment. Which was quite impossible with a broken heart and me sleeping every day in Naseer's shirt.

I soon realized my period was late, my world came crashing down when a pregnancy test showed positive on four sticks each a different brand because one brand just might be inaccurate but four and no period no way could that be a false alarm.

“Why!!!” I screamed into my pillow and punched my pillow in anger. This cannot be happening to me. My uncle had travelled out of town for a wedding, my aunt refused to go because of me. I now must reveal that I’m pregnant. My mind keeps screaming, “*Why? Why. why. why?*”

I once again had to inform my aunt and I’m thinking about abortion. Early Saturday morning I stepped into the kitchen. I see Aunty Lara humming and dancing to a song. I slowly take a seat “Aunty Lara” she turns to me, and she’s greeted with a sad face “I’m pregnant and I’ll need to have an abortion.” I state quietly. She stares at me and, to my surprise, pulls me into a hug. I wrapped my arms around her, crying. “I’m so sorry Aunty, I’ll have an abortion. I’m so sorry for not listening to you. Naseer is the father, and I don’t want him to find out.” I cry out.

“It’s okay Jade, come with me,” she says pulling from the hug and we head to the living room. “There’s something very important, I need to tell you” I nod and continue to wipe my teary eyes. “I’m your birth mother.” my face shrivels up “I gave birth to you Jade.” She says that the words needed to be said differently for them to register in my messed-up head. I immediately scooted away from her. She tries to reach for me, but I pull away. “I know it’s a lot, I had no plans of ever telling

you, but with the situation you are in right now, I need you to know so you can make the right decision.” I stared at her dumbfounded by her words. She pauses, I guess, letting it all sink in before continuing.

“As a young lady about your age, I met and fell for a professor, he wasn’t my professor. A math professor at my school, nonetheless. It was a whirlwind romance and I found myself pregnant with you. I’d gone to find him to tell him, but he’d left without telling me. All I could think of doing was to have an abortion, my sister and your mother came for a surprise visit. I asked her to follow me to the clinic for the abortion. Instead, she begged me to have you and she would raise you as her own since she couldn’t have children. Initially, I said no. She spent days and nights begging me and didn’t return to Lagos. She stayed seven months with me until I gave birth to you.” She pauses. I sit in shock listening to her.

“She was the happiest woman on earth when you arrived. Your father was just as happy too. Seeing their joy that day, I knew I couldn’t raise you on my own and they were willing. I gave you to them. Wholeheartedly, without any question in my heart. That was the best decision I ever made because they raised a smart, beautiful, and amazing woman. I will always be thankful to them.” She says wiping her tears “Jade I’m vowing this moment to support you with this child. I will stay with you throughout. I don’t want you to have an abortion, please, Jade.”

I remained quiet, nothing had prepared me for the news. A part of me wished my mom was here to debunk Auntie Lara’s

story, but I know she's telling the truth, she's my biological mother.

“Where and who's my father?” I ask, my tongue heavier than an iron rod asking who my biological father is. My deceased dad was also a math genius, despite how different I sometimes felt about, not exhibiting facial features or character like either of them. Math with Dad always made sense.

“I recently found out that, he didn't bail out on us, he was called because his father was dying. He'd left me a message about that fact; only I never got it. I found him on Facebook, and I just told him about you. He wants to meet you; I told him to wait a while because you are still adjusting to the fact your parents are both dead. “

“I'll meet him,” I say to her, then realizing there's another elephant in the room. “I can't call you mom yet” I state.

“Aunty Lara is fine with me. I know you love your mom, and she will always be your mom. I can't replace her. I just want to be an extension of her. I know she would support you and not want you to have an abortion.” I nod rising from the seat. Without a word to her. I headed back to my room.

I'm not sure how I feel about Aunty Lara being my biological mother and my biological father wanting to meet me, but I do want to see what he looks like. Weird feelings engulf me knowing my parents are alive, yet my parents are deceased at the same time. The Bankole's were my parents, and nothing is ever going to change that.

I spent the next few days in my room trying to understand my life but the deeper I thought, the fewer answers I had on how life had redirected all my plans. Now with this pregnancy, I'm even more thrown off.

“I'll keep you,” I say rubbing my still flat stomach. “We have support, and we have the money your grandfather gave us to disappear from your father's life. You and I will face the future together. I'll not give you away. We'll have each other, even if we don't have your father.” I couldn't control the tears trickled down my face. Knowing, I'll never see Naseer again. He's gone from me forever. We had something far more beautiful than I could have ever dreamt of. I will love again, I tell myself, it just won't be easy.

He'll eventually marry Nadra and the thought of that hurts. I cry myself to sleep. Aunty Lara came to check on me several times, but I continued to feign sleep.

The next morning, hunger pangs got me out of bed. I need to start worrying about the health of my baby. After eating, Aunty Lara set up an appointment to visit the doctor.

She stayed with me throughout the doctor's visit. I listen carefully to all the doctor's instructions, determined to follow every step to the letter.

NASEER



I've fulfilled my promise to my grandfather, I've completed the training. I breathed relief, there were times I doubted I would complete the training, but I did complete it with a lot of mental challenges.

Now I get to return to my life with my beautiful wife, my god I've missed Jade. She's now a graduate, I've missed her graduation again not happy about that, but we can live through that, now I can introduce her to the world as my woman and she can officially change her name. I silently chuckle just thinking about how far I've come. I've indeed overcome the worst situation and ended up with a beautiful wife.

The universe reminded me that I have one life and I needed to cherish the one life but the best thing the universe did for me was bring Jade and me together. A time when we needed each other the most.

I know she doesn't like to talk about her deceased parents. All I could do was slowly erase her grief and she took away my dark days with her smiles. I fell in love, something I didn't

think would ever happen to me, yet it did, and I unequivocally accepted Jade's unadulterated love.

Rilwan and I drive to the airport, all I can think of is Jade. I decided not to call her since I'd finished two weeks earlier than planned with flying colors. It would be great to surprise her, and I can't wait to spend the next few days indoors ravishing her. I've missed her, knowing she would be waiting for me got me through.

We boarded the flight to Chicago. I dislike the cold in Chicago, but Jade doesn't want to leave yet because of her new job.

I need to start adjusting to the cold or start calling friends to give my stubborn wife a job in a warm climate, for now, I go where she goes. Because she is my home.

I'm awake throughout the flight hoping to wake her up with kisses. I practically raced out of the plane once it landed and eagerly jumped into the car.

When the car pulled up at our building. The elevator wasn't fast enough. Rilwan could sense my agitation, but he remained a quiet, smart man. The apartment is quiet and dark when I open the doors, which is strange. Jade likes the lights on. I race to our bedroom, it's empty, no Jade. I turned all the lights on as I walked through each room and found every room empty.

I call her line maybe she's with a friend but it's early Friday morning as I try not to think the phone rings in my ears "The number you are calling is disconnected." that's not possible.

“Rilwan!!!” I shouted. He comes in quickly “Where the fuck is my wife!?” He’s perplexed. Like how’s he to know considering we just arrived together?

“She’s meant to be here,” he says to pacify me.

“She’s not here and her line is saying disconnected, find her now!” I slump onto the sofa, still trying to figure out where Jade could be, then I see an envelope on the table. “Naseer” written on it in Jade’s handwriting. Picking up the envelope, I hear receding footsteps without taking my eyes off the envelope “Wait Rilwan, she left a message.”

Opening the envelope, I pull out the note card, it reads *I’m sorry, I don’t love you anymore, we weren’t real. wishing you the best in life*” This message isn’t real, I say to myself, almost like I can’t comprehend what the note says. I read it again and again until Rilwan coughs.

“Someone must think it’s funny to play a sick joke on me, read this” I shout handing the note to Rilwan. He’s shocked as well. I get up and head to our bedroom, stepping into the closet. I see only my clothes. Nothing of Jade is here. I look around the bathroom opening drawers. Nothing says Jade was ever here. I called her line again and got the same message. “Argh!!!” I scream out. This cannot be happening right now. Rilwan is still standing in the same spot.

“Find my fucking wife Rilwan!” He leaves, I take the note and read it again looking for hidden clues that didn’t exist, hoping something in the written words would make sense. I’m

in the same spot when Rilwan returns hours later. I must have fallen asleep when he woke me.

“She left school after her graduation. Doorman said she came here a few days after graduation which matched the date, she left school. She was here for approximately thirty minutes. She left with two bags and hasn’t returned since that day. The line was disconnected shortly after. The Job said she called in and turned down her job offer, before her first day. The last transaction on her credit card was the same day after she left. It’s as if she vanished.”

I want to rip him apart when he says “*She vanished*” but remain quiet glaring at him. I moved closer to him.

“Jade did not vanish!” He takes a step back.

“What if the note is real and she meant it,” he says, I launch at him with a punch. He quickly blocks my move. We get into a fight, rather than fight me he blocks my moves. He’s good but I did manage to get two punches to his face before dropping to my knees, emotionally and physically drained.

“Jade loves me, I know without a doubt, that note isn’t real. Find her please,” I say quietly and watch him leave. I roll to the floor. Only Jade can bring me down and somehow, she has done just that, brought me down but I know she loves me, nothing can change that.

The next few days involved finding Jade, but nothing turned up. I went to Nate, and he said Jade promised to keep in touch when she left but he hasn’t heard from her. He tried to reach her, and every contact has returned undelivered. He showed

me the bounced emails, He doesn't understand what happened, but last week before graduation she was acting scared and would not tell him anything, but he knew something was off. The Last time, he saw her was when she drove off with the guardians.

I'm somewhat relieved when the only conclusion is Jade left with her aunt and uncle. I tried to find them, but nothing turned up. All their credit cards are canceled. I fly to Texas to face her cousin Yomi and he tells me they didn't tell him where they are, he knows they are fine, and Jade is moving on from me. He told me not to return.

Much as I want to fight him, I know he won't give any of me information, I also know Jade well enough to know that he's telling the truth about not knowing where they are. She knew I'd check with him, so she didn't give him any information. It's as if they went off the grid with my wife. Aunty Lara finally managed to take her away from me.

I called Tito, who informed me Jade hasn't called her in weeks and hadn't responded to any communications. All she knew came from her mom who told her they were fine and didn't know where they were living.

Days turn to weeks and weeks into months, I didn't stop looking though. I went to the only person who could make sense of Jade's leaving, after all, he married us. Maybe he can explain what I'm missing.

Arriving at Brian's church, he's surprised to see me but bewildered when I say the words I never expect to say, "Jade

left me.”

“That’s not possible, anyone around you two can see she loves you.”

“Since you’re so sure explain this to me” I give him the note. He reads in for like ten minutes. Wipes his eyes and reads it again before turning to me.

“Nas, this doesn’t make any sense, something is off here.”

“What could be off, that’s her handwriting. My men have been digging and everything points to the fact she left without a word to me.” I shout, like my bellow at him will magically produce my wife when the reality is I’m in emotional pain. I’ve now realized is worse than the physical pain of my accident.

“I understand your frustration but I’m telling you something is fishy,” Brian states I want to shove the paper in his face for him to read it in black and white that nothing on that paper smells fishy.

“You keep thinking fishy, while I continue to look for her so she can explain this fucked-up note to me.” I leave without saying anything else to him.

I certainly didn’t call him for months after that. He didn’t call either. I was in a state of uncertainty, nothing making sense other than work. So, I threw myself into work. Rilwan keeps his distance from me after I rejected his request to transfer to my uncle’s service.

I don't fucking care about his feeling, my misery needs another miserable face. Maybe if I make him as miserable as I am he'll find my wife.

Work seems to be the only thing I can do, so I excelled in that. I became more ruthless and riskier in my deals and of course, made lots of money when the risk paid off and lost a few million when I gambled wrong. Overall, I'm still exceling. My phone flashes one morning with a message "*Tomorrow is Jade's birthday, plan something special for Jade.*" I want to throw the phone out, instead, I call Chloe's services.

The perfectly shaped and beautiful lady arrives, I feel nothing, even as she takes off all her clothes and stands before me in her birthday suit. Nothing, no emotions, nothing. My dick won't even stand at the sight of a naked woman.

She moves to touch my body, and I instinctively, knock her hands off, startling her, the only woman allowed to touch me and see my scars is Jade. I can tell the woman is scared and wants to leave, rather than letting her leave, I unzip my pants and take my dick out. She gets on her knees and starts to suck me. She sucks till I come all over my pants. Then I look at her in disgust, she shrivels to a corner pulling the bedroom sheet to cover herself.

"It's not you, it's me. I have personal issues. I'm sorry" That seems to bring her some reprieve from my earlier look.

She dresses and leaves with double the pay. It's not her fault, I'm miserable. I don't need to belittle others. I soon realized two things. I don't want any woman's touch and don't want to

see their faces. I ordered a masquerade mask for myself and the women. They must come in wearing masks.

Chloe's services became my outlet. I didn't get into any relationship. I club with Raheem more than usual. I become a regular visitor at 'the house', everyone notices I'm back alone, but none dare to say a word. I come alone and leave alone.

No woman wants a relationship with me. If they thought I was reckless before, I've now added ruthlessness to my personality. All because the woman I love left. It seems trivial that I would become this way because one woman left me but it's more consequential than most realize.

JADE



Days roll into weeks; I soon start to experience the symptoms of pregnancy. I once heard a lady say, the first trimester is an ass-kicker, now I know why because I experience every symptom. Aunty Lara continues to be by my side. To keep my learnt skills up I started freelancing online taking small jobs. I couldn't take a full-time job with the way pregnancy was kicking my butt.

I still talk to my baby every day and tell my child stories of my childhood. It's silly but I do it anyway.

I avoid telling Tito the truth about my mental and physical state. She can sense something is off with me, she's upset with me. I'm upset with myself too. I can't tell her about my pregnancy yet. Not now at least.

She tells me Naseer came by her place and keeps calling, I plead with her not to tell him anything. That in time I'll tell her the truth. I asked her to be careful, I won't put it past Naseer to stalk her.

By my second trimester, I started to feel better and started receiving more work which helped my mind to focus on other things and my heart to remain numb. When your heart shatters as badly as mine did, you skip all the symptoms and just go numb.

My heart is numb. My body and mind stay laser-focused on my child and work, and with that, I can function.

By the second trimester, Aunty Lara and I visited the doctor's office. I'm excited to tell Dr Babs, that I'm feeling better and scaled the fence into the second trimester. She smiles at me as I chat away about my experience, aunty Lara joins in my excitement until we notice the look on Dr Babs's face. My mind switches in a flash to fear.

"What's wrong doctor, please tell me, is something wrong with my baby?" I ask, trembling while thinking that my baby is in trouble. This can't be happening.

"Babies Mariam, you have babies not babies." she casually says.

"Babies. Babies. Babies. I repeat like I couldn't comprehend the word, truthfully, I can't. I repeat "babies, babies, babies" repeatedly.

"You're having twins Mariam, now we know why your first trimester was an ass-kicker." she chuckles repeating my exact words back to me with a wink.

"I can't have twins!" I frantically shouted, turning to her and Aunty Lara as soon as I found my tongue and finally

comprehended the gravity of what she had just said to me.

“You can do this Mariam. I know you can.” Dr Babs says patting my hand.

“Yes, you can have twins Jade.” Aunty Lara squeezed my hand, agreeing with Dr Babs.

“I can’t, I really can’t. Is it too late to have an abortion or can you remove one child, please doctor?” I cry out.

“I can’t remove a healthy baby and I understand you’re young and frightened, I strongly believe you can deliver twins.” I shake my head; my mind is free-falling into an endless tunnel. Aunty Lara pulls me into a hug as the doctor, puts all the devices away. She prints out the sonogram picture and I see the two humans inside me. If only the little humans knew they had just thrown me a curveball. I want to scream, kick, and fight.

I left the clinic in a confused state. Wondering when the tide changed, that I didn’t notice. I should’ve broken up with Naseer a while ago and stood my ground. At twenty-two the plan was to be working, having fun, travelling the world, and dating guys for fun. I didn’t get any of that.

I’m now hiding from the man I love, with his children, no single life, no fun just a messed-up body and possibly messed up life. Why, I ask myself as I’ve done many lonely nights.

Why didn’t I walk away when he asked me to sit with him?

What force held my step that faithful afternoon? so that I didn’t ignore his request. I wouldn’t be here if I’d just walked

out of that room after using the bathroom.

There wouldn't have been a clandestine affair. My focus would have been on James and right now we would've been living it up but I'm pregnant at fucking twenty-one with twins and running from the man I love because I took money to walk away from him. Talk about derailed plans.

Aunty Lara dropped me at home saying she had to run an errand. I'm dazed. I just nod. In my room, my mind is an endless wanderer. One child, I'd planned every step and how to manage our lives but two. There's no plan for two. Here goes life reminding me it's never tidy or having best-laid plans for life is a joke because real life always throws you a curve ball. Now I either sink or swim. Maybe, just maybe, I can float for a while.

I'm still staring at the ceiling when Aunty Lara returns. I've no idea how long I'd sat gazing at the ceiling.

"Jade" she calls, and I turn to her with a blank face. "You're not alone. Your uncle and I will be with you all the way. When the twins arrive, we will get help. "You're not alone." I nodded and remained quiet.

The words "*You're not alone*" kept playing in my mind over and over. It took a few days, but slowly the words began to sink in, and I gradually got in line with my new reality.

Towards the end of my second trimester, Aunty Lara said my biological father would like to come and visit. At first, I wanted to say no. Why would he want to meet a knocked-up daughter with no husband? Aunty Lara said it would be fine.

Despite how uncomfortable and tired I felt. I did my best to look presentable. On the day they showed up. It is a struggle to dress these days, but I did it anyway.

When I heard his arrival, I felt blood rush through me, a new craving for acceptance. I stepped into the living room and was surprised to see three men. I can tell the older man is my father. I notice a few features. The other two men look like him but younger. They all got to their feet when I stepped into the living room.

The smile on my father's face is wide. I'd expected something but not a Cheshire cat smile. He looks very happy to see me, making me smile back. "Peter, this is your daughter Mariam Jadesola Bankole."

He spreads his arm for a hug, and I embrace him. Weirdly, I feel comforted. "I'm so happy to finally meet you" he whispers in my ears. "You are my beautiful daughter, in whom, I'm well pleased to meet." His words bring tears to my eyes. *I'm accepted, I'm not alone.* We pull from the hug, and he continues to look at me. The taller of the two men reach for a hug as well.

"I'm Paul your oldest brother."

"Nice to meet you, Paul." He holds me a little longer before pulling away and I get a hug from the next man.

"I'm Philip your older brother."

"Nice to meet you, Philip." I watch all three men closely; my emotions are scattered. I'm happy to see them and at the same

time sad about how my journey has led to meeting them. If my parents don't die or I don't get knocked up. They wouldn't be here. I now accept that life is giving me. A family again.

We all take a seat. My dad is all smiles. "Mariam, your brothers wanted to meet you as well is the reason, I haven't come sooner" I nod.

"How are you doing with the pregnancy, is it going okay?" He looks happy and concerned at the same time.

"As okay as possible, I'm expecting twins."

"Twins!!!" they all echoed "That's wonderful news" Paul and Philip are fist bumping. All reactions I didn't expect.

We soon get to talk more about ourselves. My dad is thrilled to hear I graduated top of my class in software engineering. My oldest brother Paul studied communication and works for a TV Network. Philip is a Dentist with his practice. They are both single. Their mom died giving birth to Philip. They were raised by Dad and Grandma, who can't travel but would like to meet me.

We talk at length and laugh a lot. Paul is the funny one and keeps us laughing. A few times my dad gives him a gentle smack in the head. I realized it would have been fun growing up with them. I certainly had a great childhood, but I missed not having siblings. Now I have two older brothers.

I feel comfortable with them. The babies start to kick. My dad asked if he could feel them. I nod and his face beams with pride and joy. His eyes are teary. His looks of joy at seeing me

calmed my fear. I realized that calling him dad though strung in my heart, flows easily from my lips.

Dad soon suggests we give my grandmother a call on Skype. We set up the computer and I saw the family matriarch. I see her strength and an older version of myself. She's the one I look like. Yes, my skin is darker and I'm much younger, but the resemblance is uncanny. Finally, the truth of who I am is revealed.

My grandmother, like my father, is beaming with joy to see me. She is excited to be a great grandma. She tells me, she's not going anywhere until she's held and kissed my babies. Once again, I'm reminded that:

I'm worthy.

I'm accepted.

I'm not alone.

My brothers and father spent the day with us. When they finally left, I said to Aunty Lara "I'm going to hyphenate my last name to Bankole-Diaz." She looks at me, surprised, and gives me a big hug. I'm Mariam Jadesola Bankole-Diaz. An Afro-Latina woman and a single mother of twins.

My children will be Bankole-Diaz. They will be loved and accepted.

It is like a stained veil covering my life is removed and I can see clearly where I need to be, what I need to do, and who I am. Finally, life explains to me why I don't need tidy.

The next few months aren't as easy as I'd hope they would be. If anything, they were the toughest in my life. As the babies grew, I became very uncomfortable. I couldn't do anything. I was in a lot of pain. Twins are never full term but with the amount of pain I was in. Dr Babs had to do an emergency c-section to save all three of us.

When my babies arrived at 32 weeks so fragile. I couldn't hold them because they were preemies and needed to be in an incubator to gain some weight. I spent weeks watching them. I didn't want to believe that either of them would not make it.

I fear the worst, falling apart right now isn't an option if they are breathing. It will take weeks but they both made it home.

Once I finally held my son and daughter home. I named them Micah and Mira. Micah is a duplicate of Naseer and Mira is a duplicate of Taimani just my freaking luck. I realize Naseer will never get to hold them, and I feel sad for him. They are mine now and will remain mine.

NASEER



I spend more time in Rhanaz now than before. I only travel when it's necessary. I have cameras installed in our home in Chicago, hoping Jade will one day stroll in. I don't date and whenever I must attend an event with a date. I pay for an escort and drop her off after the date. No point in letting any woman feel like I have love to give when I know I have nothing to offer.

I hear the knock on the door and my dad pops his head in. He walks in and takes a seat. Every month like clockwork he comes to check on me. I'd told him Jade broke up with me his response then was "It's for the good" I didn't like it, but I said nothing.

Since then, he's come in to try and convince me to date more or encouraged more of Nadra and me.

"You should plan to marry soon." my dad says soon as his butt hits the seat. I smile at him. No point telling him I already have a wife I just don't know where she is. "Not interested in

getting married any time soon,” I say giving him a straight face.

“You should be ready; I know you are not dating Mariam anymore, and you haven’t told me what happened between you two,” Dad asks.

“Nothing to tell, she broke up with me and left me. I have no idea where she is and I think that’s something that should make you happy,” I say to him without malice, though talking about her is making my heart race. Every time I lie in bed alone, she’s all I think about, her laugh and the way she kisses my scars every morning and runs her hand on my body. I would give anything for a passionate fight with her right now and our make-up sex afterward. I’m miserable but I put up a trained façade for everyone, especially my dad.

Only Rilwan knows how miserable I am behind closed doors since my misery loves company. I make him miserable too. I have tried everything to find Jade but no result. I know she didn’t vanish but hiding well from me. Which always baffles me.

“I know I wasn’t a fan of your relationship with her, but you were happy, and I would like to see you happy again with the right woman.”

I sigh and return a feigned smile. *That’s just it, Dad, I had the right woman and she left me.*

“Should I put the word out that you’re available?” he eagerly asks.

“Not sure I’m available for what the proper woman would want, Dad. My emotions aren’t available. Most of these women would want intimacy and I don’t have that to give” I didn’t say I’m single because I’m not single.

“How about we ease into it, Mariam is gone almost five years now and I think it’s time you move on with your life.” I didn’t like him saying that, but I can’t fight him on the stated fact. “Maybe a few dates will help.” He pushes.

“Fine, just don’t get upset when the women are returned unhappy,” I reply to my ever-eager dad.

“You’ll be the happy one, I’m sure of it,” he says, getting up to arrange my date. I don’t care. I know the end before we begin. He’s just a little too happy that Jade is out of my life. If only he would look below the surface and see that I’m hurting. I need my wife back not Nadra or any of the women he keeps throwing my way.

JADE



F ive Years later

“Miriam, if you give me a chance. I promise to love and cherish you always. I know you haven’t let go of your children’s father but if you just give me a chance, you will not regret it. We could be a loving family.” Knox my boyfriend says to me, He and I recently started dating.

“What do you say we take a chance on each other?”

I pause, sigh. “Yes, we can do this. I know you genuinely love my children and yes, we can be a family.”

Knox exhaled, he probably thought I would say no, pulling me into a hug. “You won’t regret saying yes,” he whispers in my ears. We pull from the hug, and he reaches into his pocket, and out comes the ring. Tears fell from my eyes, it’s a beautiful halo diamond ring. It’s a perfect fit when he slips it on my finger. I burst into a tearful laugh and hugged him and for the first time, we kissed. I am happy. I have a chance at happiness and I’m going to grab happiness with both hands.

When Knox dropped me off at home later. My children are asleep. I'll wait to tell them in the morning. After changing my clothes. I open my secret drawer hidden behind my bedside drawer. I pull out my wedding ring, and staring at it again a mix of emotions overwhelms me. Happiness and betrayal cloak me.

Knox is my chance of happiness again, it may not be like what was, my former was of course childish and foolish love. The veil was pulled, and the reality of my foolishness came crashing. Though I won't change anything, I grew up and I matured. My heart may annoyingly still belong to him, but Knox is my mature relationship. One that can grow into love giving the chance and nurture.

I put the ring back and got into bed in Naseer's shirt. My new beginning starts tomorrow. I lay back, with a smile on my face. Now that I've accepted Knox's proposal. I have till the end of my project to figure out how to divorce Naseer. The thought of it sounds harder than climbing Kilimanjaro, but I must if I want to have a future with Knox, I'll eventually get to figuring out where it was officially filed.

I'll have to find a lawyer soon but for now, I sleep. Turning in shirt. I drift off to sleep.

The twins Mira and Micah woke me up. I look at them and appreciate the beauty they bring to my life.

"Mom, wake up, what did you bring for us last night" asked Micah a duplicate of his father no doubt but mine alone. I took the money to disappear and that makes the twins mine forever.

“Mommy my hair is tangled again,” Mira says always conscious of herself, my ever-girly girl but her mannerism is her father all the way.

“My Lady and handsome gent, please go and brush your teeth and mommy will be with you. I need to call Aunty Taimani.”

“Okay Mommy” they echo leaving me for a minute. I look at my ring again. Exhaling I accept my new beginning and dial Taimani to tell her the news.

Taimani and I are better friends now. *Two years ago, we ran into each other at Tito’s wedding in Manchester, UK. A pure coincidence. Tito’s groom is a second cousin of Taimani’s husband. The moment I saw her, I ignored her like we didn’t know each other but she came over and the first thing she said was “Mariam, I’m sorry please forgive me” It surprised me.*

“Apology accepted” I’d said and walked away but she followed me.

“Please give me a chance to be your friend again” she’d said.

“These days I’m not a good friend to anyone, my priorities are different now,” I replied and continued in the opposite direction of where my children were playing, I didn’t want her to see them. Especially Micah, who’s looking more like a duplicate of his father. I don’t know what Naseer may have said or not said to her, and I don’t want him to find me.

She was relentless, kept apologizing, and tried to explain her behavior in our last year of high school, the second worst year of my life. When I realized, she wasn't going to stop. I let her talk and said all is forgiving. I hugged her, smiled, and turned to leave. Unexpectedly, I saw Leah coming towards me with the twins. I moved hastily away from her, but the twin's excitement overtook me, and they shouted "Mommy! Mommy!" "She took one look at them and turned to me with acknowledging eyes.

I immediately turn to her, "They are mine and mine alone." I snared.

"Mariam, I beg you. I won't tell my brother or anyone in my family please give me this chance to know them and make it up to you."

"No!" I said, turning towards my children, she raced after us.

"Mariam please, I swear to you. I would keep your secret, please let me get to know them" I remain quiet as each child takes my hand and stares at the woman who looks like she's about to cry.

"I swear Mariam, no one in my family will know about them. Please" She pleads.

"Fine for now, you can meet them and talk to them, but I won't tell you where we live until I can trust you and if I sense that I'm being followed. I will disappear." I sternly state.

“Agreed” she had said. I turned to the twins and introduced them to their Aunty Taimani.

She has stayed true to her words and became my friend again. I told her once why I left her brother and didn't tell her who it was that made me leave, we didn't talk about it again. The twins love seeing her and love knowing their father's sister.

For now, their father is on a mission and will be back someday, hopefully when they are older, I can tell them the truth. Lying to my children wasn't easy, but it was certainly easier than the truth, I can't tell.

She had encouraged me to try and date again. I tried once, but it was a disaster. The twins wanted to try soccer and I signed them up. Knox is their coach and that's how we met. We don't talk about Naseer. It was one of my conditions if she wanted to be around my children not to talk about Naseer at all.

After two rings she answers my call “To what do I owe this early morning call” Taimani wryly says

“I'm engaged, Knox proposed last night, and I said yes” I express in a calm tone.

“What!!!, I need a FaceTime call” She shouts excitedly just as my Facetime rings.

“Let me see the ring?” she asks. I turn the camera, so she can see the ring.

“It’s beautiful, Congratulations mama bear.” Her new nickname for me.

“Thank you, I get a chance at happiness again.” I grin at her.

“Yes, and you deserve one. What did the lady and gent say”?

“I haven’t told them yet; they were sleeping when I got home last night.”

“Can’t wait to hear about their reaction.” Her eyes danced with excitement. I hope my children are as happy as she is for me.

“Do you think they will not like it” I fright.

“I doubt that I think they like Knox and they will be happy.”

“You know they are my number one priority...”

“Stop worrying they are happy children and will be fine with Knox. They love the guy.”

“Thanks, Taimani, I also...”

“Mom, we can’t reach the cereal” Mira yells interrupting.

“I’ll call you back about their reaction and the Job.”

“Kiss my lady and gent for me, Aunty sends her love.”

We hang up and I go to the kitchen to help the twins, their nanny Leah probably left already. Weekends are her time off. She’s truly a godsend. The money I accepted to disappear from Naseer’s life gave the twins and me a chance at a decent life. Surrounded by family. My children are certainly spoiled by lots of family attention.

I reach for the cereal and move around the kitchen to help them start their breakfast. They will soon be in front of the TV enjoying their shows, not sure what their new favorite show is this week. It seems to change weekly.

While they eat, I ponder how to tell them about my engagement. I'm certainly not as excited as the time their father proposed to me but I'm not sad either. He's never going to be a part of our lives.

"Lady, Gent," I call them my nickname for them. They both look up.

"There's something I need to tell you guys."

"Okay," they echo and continue with their meals.

"What do you guys think about Mommy marrying Knox?"

"Yay!!! That would be awesome, he can take us on a bike ride all the time" echoes Micah "and we can watch all the Avengers' movies with him and eat popcorn" Mira adds.

"Good," I say, "because mommy is now engaged to be married to Knox."

"Awesome!!!" Yells Micah like I'd just give him a one-month pass to Disneyland.

I go and hug them both, they have just made my decision an easy one for me.

They finish their meals and go right in front of the TV. I noticed the oven warmer setting on.

Leah had made their Lunch, perfect. I get to relax and do nothing right now.

Now, I must think about my next plans. I received the job offer yesterday and already told Knox about it which I think is what triggered his proposal. I've worked my butt off for the last five years building a strong company with my business partner Orion Isaac. Orion and I met at a mobile apps conference three years ago, right as I was thinking about moving back to the US with plans to start a business. We hit it off and today, we have a great work relationship, growing our website and apps company.

The company is growing at a perfect pace that we can handle. We are an office of six people, but it feels like a family. This new job offer could put us in the big league, it's an offer we can't turn down if I want to succeed in this field and on this path.

LaBelle Fleur company COO approached me, stating he heard about me and my team from a friend and felt I was the right person to help with the overhaul for the website and a new app. They believe they are missing out on market share because their current app is not user-friendly. They plan to launch a major campaign to target the holiday season which will also launch them into a higher market share.

They've seen my work and would like me to do the same thing for them. I'd given a ridiculous amount to deter them from working at their headquarters in the beautiful country of Rhanaz. A country I'd vowed never to return to, but they had

accepted my offer and even thrown in some extra benefits for myself, Orion, and the team.

I couldn't deny my team the chance to be a part of a career-changing opportunity, plus I didn't have a valid excuse for Orion, my amazing work husband as I call him. A guy that's always in my corner and always has my back. I decided to let go of my pride and fear, I accepted the offer, which also made my acceptance of Knox's engagement easier.

My mind is a scrambled mess, but I fired up my laptop anyway, coding has always been my savior, it's the key to my survival. Once I'm in coding mode. My troubles and woes can remain stagnant and my mind in coding mode stays fluid.

Naseer used to dislike that I could be in that mode for days and not respond to him. The numbers are my escape. He used to call me the worst girlfriend probably because I didn't swoon over him, or I didn't care if he stayed or left if I had my coding.

To get my attention, he once hid my laptop and wouldn't give it back for days. I was furious with him, but he said I needed to disengage and enjoy the moment, what he didn't know was him and books was how I survived the death of my parents. Coding and the twins are how I have survived without him for the last five years.

Taking this Job means the extra focus is paramount. The chances of our part crossing in Rhanaz are less than .000001. I should be in and out, with nice achievements under my belt then figure out how to marry my fiancée without hiccups.

Am I in love with Knox, the answer to that is *NO* but

Is he a good man? Check.

Do I feel safe and happy with him? Check.

Does he love my children? Check.

Will I someday fall in love with him? Maybe.

Accepting his proposal is easy because he checks every box that doesn't involve risking my heart.

We started dating four months ago after months of him asking me out. He's a teacher, he also coaches the twins' soccer league. The best part is his kindness and gentle heart even better that he's a tall and handsome man. He's well-groomed, keeps his hair short and his beard is always perfectly trimmed giving him that sexy look. I avoid looking at his defined arms whenever they pull on his shirt. I don't know why he would pick me mother of two, but we do laugh together, and we enjoy each other's company. The only problem is the fact his presence doesn't make my heart race. *It will happen eventually.*

I've told myself; that it will beat again, eventually. Every love story is different, Knox and I are a different kind of love story.

After the contract is over. I'll return to marry him. For now. I remain quiet. When I return, I can figure out how to divorce Naseer. Right now, I didn't tell anyone that I married Naseer. It's a problem, how'll have to deal with when I return.

Rhanaz here comes Ms Mariam Bankole-Diaz, mother of twins, head of an IT company. Recently engaged.

NASEER.



I'm working as always because it's all I do these days. When the boisterous energy of Taimani crashed into my day. I'm happy to see her, she comes in as always, energized, which is a good thing.

"Naseer, just thought I stop by to see you." I get up to hug my sister.

"How nice of you, when did you get here?"

"Last night, I thought Mom told you."

"She probably did, and I didn't remember, how are my nephew and niece"?

"Both good and keep asking when you will visit them."

"Tell them very soon."

"That's what you said the last time and it's now two years."

"No, it isn't." I give her a questionable look.

"Yes, it is, they are growing Naseer, and they don't get to see you."

“Alright, I promise to stop by next month and I’ll spend a week.”

“If you say so, I was going to ...” Her phone rings with the ring tone of ‘Ololufe by Wande Coal’ a song Jade used to sing to me. How did she get that song, it’s not a song Taimani would normally like. Is she now friends with Jade again? and she didn’t tell me.

I wait for her to finish speaking; I can tell it’s Tony her husband. She turned to me once she hung up.

“Sorry Nas, that was... “

“Tony” I answered. Happy for her that they reconciled and got married. “Where did you get the ringtone song from” Now that I asked it sounds stupid, but I want to know if she has somehow contacted Jade.

“Tony’s second cousin is half Nigerian, and they always play different songs, I like this one” I nod. “Why do you ask?”

“It was Mariam’s favorite song to me” I move to my chair but look out the window as she gives me a pitiful look.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.”

“It’s okay, I just thought maybe you’ve connected with her again.”

“No, I haven’t heard from her since she left school. I ask a few people whenever I meet them, but no one has heard from her” I nod.

“Do you still love her Naseer?” I turn my back to her, to hide my emotions from my sister. The air in the room is stiff. I look at the pictures on the shelf behind my chair. All three pictures are Jade and I but each one doesn't show her face. I know she's the one in the pictures. They are my moment of reminding myself that everything with us was real. I exhale.

“I'll always love her, she's the love of my life and I'm hers too. That I know for sure.” I say with my back to my sister. I could hear her gasp.

“I'm guessing she's the one in all the pictures?”

“Yes, and it hurts to know she's out there somewhere, living her life without me and I'm still miserable without her.”

“What if, she's is not happy either.”

“Why then won't she return to me” I tersely say.

“Who knows maybe, she's scared of something.”

“What could scare her so much that she would keep us apart.”

“Wish I could answer and help you, but I'll keep reaching out to old friends and see if I can find her for you.”

“Thanks, Mani” I turn to face her with a slight smile.

“Always big bro” She comes to hug me and leaves, with me promising to visit her home soon.

TAIMANI



I leave Naseer's office, knowing I have set everything into motion. Mom has been telling me how sad he looks and she's worried though she tries not to say much to him.

Mariam is going to be in Rhanaz soon and Ken already agreed to bring Naseer in on the first meeting.

Mariam and Naseer will finally be in the same room after years.

My job here is done.

I know my brother, as soon as he sets his eyes on her, he won't let go. The problem now is Knox, I certainly didn't plan for him to propose to Mariam but I'm certain that won't stop Naseer.

Hopefully, Rhanaz is ready for Mariam and Naseer again.

Thank you for Reading Book one of Jade : Hidden Scars

**Book Two Jade : Chances Are is available November 24
2023**

Also By

Thank you for reading *Jade: Hidden Scars*. Naseer and Jade are certainly an impossible love. Please do leave me a review, I would like to read your review.

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Excerpt of Jade: Chances Are

JADE

I explained what my team is going to bring to the table. I didn't go into details on the how, but I did give some information. I stay focused on my work, which is my preferred position. I now know why my gut would not check. *He's here!. How could this have happened. I did my homework. I crossed all the Ts and dotted all the i. Just how's it possible that he's here. The one person I must avoid is here - Taimani assured me that he's out of Rhanaz for a while. Even if he returned to Rhanaz he's going to be busy with the king but he's here, how the fuck did this happen.*

Focus Jade. My subconscious reminds. He means nothing to you, anymore.

I took the money; I signed the NDA. Focus Jade, focus.
“How long do you expect the app to be up and running” Josh asks bringing my mind back to present.

“Presently, we can’t give an exact time, but we already began work, once we have it all mapped out, we’ll have a concrete timeline, please expect about a month for us to have the mapping.” I answer Josh, making effort to avoid the man next to him.

“Any other question for us ” I ask avoiding any glance at him. I nervously rubbed my engagement ring.

“I have a question, how long is your contract.” He just had to ask.

“Six months but we hope to be done before then” I respond looking at Josh.

“Good any other questions?” Josh asked the room and no response.

“We are adjourned” says Ken. I swiftly pack up and move close to Orion

“We need to get started asap.” He nods

“Sure, I’ll be in your office shortly” I brisk out of the meeting, like a rocket was up my ass without a word to Lucy. Soon as I’m in my office, I swiftly lock the door I need a moment. I’ve breached the first portion of the contract; I exhaled the minute I dropped my laptop. I will my mind to relax but it’s impossible *he’s here*. I cannot be flustered in my professional element, though quiet I heard him ask for an office. I need to handle this.

I’m a grown ass woman,

I’m a mom and a leader of my team.

I can certainly handle him. I exhale, I inhale, exhale again I know handling him is not possible, I can hype my mind as much as possible, skyrocket my will power. Mantra all day non-stop. Deep within me, I know that handling him is me wishing I had a wand to remind my past, even magic wand can't do that. He's too much of constant to be erased. No matter how I slice, dice, chop, shake, rattle. He can't be erased. I'm pacing in my office. My mind is spiraling.

I'm still pacing when I hear the pounding on the door and rattling of the door handle. My heart races like It's about to burst out of my chest. My feet feels like they are stuck in block of concrete with each movement to the door. I let out a heavy sigh.

Time to face the angry beast. I open the door.

Naseer barges in wearing anger like a bespoke. Lucy is right on his tail as he barges in owning the room and looking as handsome as ever in his tailored suit, wearing a sage color shirt, the color I always thought made him look dapper.

My body reacts to his proximity, my female parts are awakening from years of slumber, now is certainly not the time to wake up lady part. *Lie back and be a dessert lady again.* I mentally chastise my body. Now is the time to face the beast, not crave kisses from the beast.

We stare at each other, though scowling his eyes still cocoons me. The air is equal part sizzling and stifling as we stare. I whiff that smell on him and the pavlovian response is immediate. *Be still girl*

“Mariam, your children are on the phone, they want to talk to mommy. I’m sorry I couldn’t resist them,” Lucy says. Bringing me out of reverie, just as my mind mentally implodes at her words.

“I’ll take it, transfer to my line” I respond avoiding that bewildered look on his face. My mind is chanting bad timing! Holy fuck!

I ignore him as I take my children’s call “Hi my darlings” I put a happy cheer in my voice

“Hi mommy, we miss you.” They echo

I turn my back to him, though I can feel his scorching eyes burning my back. The heat of his eyes roasting me from inside out. I force a smile for my children they can always sense my mood even on the phone

“What are you two up to?” I ask excitedly. *Who knew I could be an actor*

“Getting ready for bed. Leah said we can call you and you can blow us a good night kiss.” Micah says

“Yes, mommy can do that.”

“Good night my darling, mommy loves you more than the whole world...”

“And back again,” they complete the sentence.

“I’ll call you before you head to school and see you on our skype call soon.”

“Okay mommy, love you.”

“Good night, I say blowing kisses, I hang up and turn to see the blazing eyes of Naseer.

I instinctively switch to a professional Mariam, which from this moment on will be my shield wall from him

“Sorry about that, how may I help you Prince Naseer.” I manage to say. My body is humming like a bee that seriously needs to get busy. *Down girl*

“How old are your children?” He asks, like it hurts him to even ask.

“Three” I answer, the math can’t add up. Two plus Two cannot equal five if my children are three.

“I see, and their father?” his gruffly tone is laced with disdain, a hint of venom, drops of ferocious stare all wrapped in the man that has possessed my mind body and soul for the last few years. I know him, he’s about to explode in my face.

Currently, he’s doing a good job of not bellowing.

“He left after they were born.” I straight face state.

“And your new fiancée” he asks as he takes a seat, getting comfortable. I wish I could tell him *Do not sit with me.*

“He’s fine, thank you.” I replied as succinctly as possible.

“Am sure he is, does he know he’s putting a ring on another man’s wife.” He says it like he’d just snapped a finger all the expressions he’d wore few seconds ago are now instantly replaced with calm, but I know better, it’s the calm before the uproar.

I opened my mouth to scream but no sound or words came out, closing my gapping mouth. I challenge my mind to function better and be controlled, he’s just rattling my cage.

I can handle him. I tell myself. My subconscious laughs at me.

“My fiancé and I were both single and now engaged to each other.” I state, it sounds more like I’m convincing myself not him.

“Just because a debt is forgotten doesn’t mean it’s paid.” He says *WTF*.

“Just because you forgot you’re a legally married women doesn’t mean you’re not legally married to me.” he gruffly states with a sad chuckle.

“Just because you didn’t stay in town long enough to check your mail on the divorce paper sent to you doesn’t mean I’m still married to you. I wasn’t married when I got engaged” I respond to his analogy, but he smirks. I didn’t send anything. We both know it, I just thought it would go away. I didn’t tell anyone about that pesky yet important detail. I should have known better but sending a divorce document would mean I have to release my location.

Now that pesky detail is blowing up in my face but how could I tell anyone when I didn’t waste time taking the money or signing the NDA.

“Oh, I check the mail dear Jade.” He stares intensely “You and I know, you didn’t send me any divorce paper, if you had we wouldn’t be in this room. So currently our marriage license says otherwise of your single status.”

“In that case, I want a divorce.” He smirks again then rises from the seat. Pocketing his hands, he comes closer to me, his smell fills my nostrils and I inhale it all. I’ve slept in that smell

for years. This close it makes my droughty body cry for a sip of him. *Down girl*

“Years apart may have made you forget but I’m happy to remind you. Divorce is not an option”

“I’m engaged to be married to a man that loves me and wants to adopt my children. You are not going to stand in my way.” I retort. Snapping out whatever my body is reacting to. I put some distance between us. I need to remember that word *distance*.

“I’ll adopt them as your husband much as it hurts me to know you had another man’s children but because of what we shared I’ll accept them” He says like the decision is final.

“How very noble and generous of you but no thanks Knox is adopting them once we are married”

“You will never be married to anyone but me! I told you back then once we started dating there was no going back you thought I didn’t mean it but guess what, I meant every word.” he growls.

“A girl can change her mind we are not in the dark ages. I can change my mind.” I reaffirmed, but it sounded more like I’m reaffirming to myself. He laughs, like I’d just cracked a joke. I knew he was serious and he meant it when he gladly said no turning back for us then, of course, young stupid me dived in head first without questioning the depth of my commitment.

“I’ll leave now that I know we are on the same page concerning our marriage and do tell Knox to fucking stay away unless he wants to test my wrath.” I remain steaming at

his words and made no utterance as he leaves.

Slamming into my chair, my life is back on the roller coaster again. I better buckle up for the ride.