

ARIEL NATHAN

A CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

HOOKED *on a* DREAM



Hooked On A Dream

OceanofPDF.com

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Chapter One

Date night was at the Pizza Palace. Again. It wasn't that there was anything wrong with Pizza Palace. Jada enjoyed a good slice of hamburger pizza and a glass of grape soda just as much as the next girl. It was just that this was the eleventh Wednesday night in a row that Ronny had taken her to this hole-in-the-wall pizza joint for date night.

Jada stifled a sigh as she took in the checkered tablecloths, the electric fireplace nestled in the brick wall, and the black and white framed pictures of celebrities from days gone by hanging from walls that were in desperate need of a fresh coat of paint. This place was beginning to feel like a second home, and Jada was still paying off the mortgage on her first one.

She forced a smile and tried to give Ronny her full attention. He was in the middle of one of his work stories. After thirteen years of marriage, Jada had already heard every plumbing horror story there was to tell. From underwear in the pipes to vomiting toilet bowls, she had heard them all. She could carry on her side of the conversation on autopilot. A gasp here, a sympathetic headshake there, a smile at whatever plumbing pun Ronny came up with, and a, "you put up with so much. I'm proud of you," at the end was all it took to keep Ronny happy.

Jada blinked and registered Ronny's expectant stare. Oops. She must have missed her cue. "You put up with so much honey, and I'm proud of you."

She relaxed when Ronny reached over and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I do what I need to do to provide for my

family.” The familiar response both soothed and grated.

How had they gotten into this rut? Jada thought back to their first date, fourteen years ago. She had just graduated from college and was living in a tiny two-bedroom apartment with her best friend, Imara. The hot water in the bathroom hadn’t been working for days, and Jada was contemplating the prospect of boiling a pot of water on the stove and using it for her bath when the doorbell rang. She wrapped a lightweight crocheted shawl around her shoulders and shuffled to the door.

She wouldn’t go so far as to say it was love at first sight, but when she opened the door and came face to face with a muscular, six foot man with rich chocolate brown skin, warm caramel eyes, and thick lips that were stretched into a grin, something shifted inside of her.

Jada led him into the apartment and tried, but failed, to think of appropriate small talk as they made their way towards the bathroom in awkward silence. She nearly died from embarrassment when she saw him eyeing her mustache removal cream with a raised eyebrow, but his kind smile and the teasing look in his eyes allowed her to laugh and give him a playful shove before snatching up everything she could reach on the counter and shoving her cream and toiletries in a drawer.

“Do you always go around hitting men?” the plumber asked in a deep voice that caused long dormant butterflies to stir in Jada’s stomach. The truth was, she had very little experience with men and wasn’t sure how to flirt...if flirting was what she was currently doing.

In high school, she hadn’t been allowed to date. Her parents were strict Christians who believed that dating should be reserved for adults who were in a position to actually contemplate marriage, and she respected their decision. To be honest, she probably wouldn’t have dated in high school even if her parents hadn’t forbidden it. She was a quiet girl who kept to herself. Her world revolved around her classes, family, church obligations, and crochet.

Even though homemade clothes were unpopular in high school, Jada had been obsessed with crochet ever since the summer she had spent with her Grandma Sophie when she was eight years old. Grandma Sophie had shared her hobby with Jada as a way to keep her grandchild occupied so she could watch her soap operas in peace. Jada had known her grandma's motivation but didn't care. She loved the magical feeling she got from seeing a plain ball of yarn transform into a scarf, a bag, or sweater, with just the simple movement of a hook. It was a heady feeling to be a creator. To look at an intricately woven shawl and say, "I made that. I turned a piece of yarn into a delicate work of art."

Jada had never been good at making friends and didn't fit in with any of the groups in high school. While she enjoyed the peace that came from being alone with her own thoughts, she was lonely. In crochet, she found an escape. A balm for the nagging feeling that her life was stalled and that maybe there was something wrong with her. She spent most of her free time crocheting, and by the time she graduated from high school, she was a verified misanthrope who had made most of her wardrobe with her own two hands.

In college, Jada had been forced to socialize when the capricious housing lottery had placed her with Imara for a roommate. Imara was tall, athletic, and the definition of a social butterfly. She refused to allow her petite, yarn-obsessed roommate to become a recluse. Imara dragged Jada to a few parties and made her sit through all of her co-ed soccer games. She even introduced Jada to a few of the guys from her soccer team. Imara noticed the way Jada drew the attention of men with her large, expressive, almond shaped eyes; thick, dark lashes; smooth cocoa skin; and full, curly hair that she wore in natural twists and braids.

Jada may have been oblivious to the attention men gave her, but Imara was not. Determined to be the wingman Jada never wanted, Imara set her up on dates with some of her male friends, being careful to only choose Christian men out of respect for Jada's faith.

While Jada liked most of the men Imara introduced her to, and was thankful to finally know what a date felt like, she didn't have time for burgers and movies with random men. She felt awkward and out of place on those dates where she oscillated between laughing too loudly and sitting in torturous silence as she scoured her brain for witty responses with the fervor of a child searching cushions for loose change. She would return home from those dates haunted by the confirmation that there was something wrong with her.

To soothe herself, she would take out her crochet hook and lose herself in the rhythmic motions of creation while she dreamed of the day when she would find someone that she could click with. That one man who would think that she was special and would make her feel loved and cherished. Someone who could help her weave the drifting threads of her life into something beautiful.

After multiple dead-end dates, Imara finally admitted defeat. She remained Jada's self-designated best friend, and still dragged Jada to games and the occasional party, but she stopped trying to set her up with her male friends. It was too much effort to patch up her own friendships with her teammates after Jada ghosted them or sent them terse text messages informing them in no uncertain terms that she wasn't interested in a second date.

Without the distraction of men, Jada graduated from college and landed an entry level job at a marketing firm that paid the bills while she tried to turn her dreams of a crochet business into a reality. Life had moved smoothly until she felt herself inexplicably drawn to a man for the first time. Not just any man. A plumber.... And she had pushed him. She hadn't even said hello to him like a normal person. No. Instead, she had led him through the house in stilted silence, showed him her mustache removal cream, and pushed him.

He stared at her with one eyebrow raised and a bemused expression on his face. Jada felt her cheeks burn as she suddenly wished that she had paid more attention to Imara when she had tried to give her flirting lessons back in college.

Unsure of where to look, Jada fumbled with the handle of the toiletry drawer before mumbling, “I’m sorry. I don’t know why...I shouldn’t have...”

Unable to finish her sentence, she avoided looking at the ridiculously handsome plumber as she backed away, trying to find her way out of the bathroom that had suddenly become altogether too small for two people. *Why am I so awkward?*

She reached for the door handle behind her, hoping to make a hasty escape to her bedroom where she could live out the rest of her days in a shroud of mortification. Her plans were foiled when she caught her foot on the bathroom rug and tumbled towards the floor.

Jada squeezed her eyes shut and braced for an impact that never came. Instead, she felt herself being pulled into a hard warmth and surrounded by an intoxicating spice. Instinctively, she snuggled closer to the source and inhaled deeply. She was sure she must have died and gone to Heaven.

The contented sigh that escaped her lips was cut short by the sound of a deep masculine chuckle. Jada froze. Her eyes snapped open. *Oh no. This day just keeps getting worse. Just when I think I can’t humiliate myself any further, I go and prove myself wrong.*

She leapt backwards and covered her burning cheeks with her hands unable to look him in the face. What must he think of her?

“I’m so sorry,” she stammered. “I’m such an idiot.” Her voice cracked on the final word and her vision blurred with shame.

Great. Why not just cry in front of him to make my humiliation complete?

She whirled around and raced down the hall, desperate for the sanctuary of her room. What was wrong with her? She had never reacted like this around a man before. This proved it. She wasn’t fit to be around people. She needed to curl up in her bed and live the rest of her life in solitude. Or maybe just

work on a soothing crochet project while she tried to forget that this day ever happened.

She was three steps away from her bedroom door when she heard his boots clomping down the hall after her. She paused when she felt his warm, calloused hand on her wrist.

“Hey.” His voice was gentle like a trainer talking to a spooked horse. “It’s okay, you can shove me anytime.” Something in his wording struck Jada as funny and caused her to temporarily forget her embarrassment.

“What?” She snickered, turning to face him.

He smiled and gave a one-sided shrug. “I mean, I don’t necessarily like getting pushed around by strange women, but I can make an exception for someone as adorable as you.”

Jada rolled her eyes and smirked as his playful demeanor made her self-consciousness melt away. “Is that supposed to be a pickup line?”

He gave her a thoughtful look that sent tingles all the way down to her toes while his thumb idly traced patterns on her wrist causing the butterflies in her stomach to break out in rapturous dance. She shivered involuntarily. What was going on with her body?

“Yes,” he said as he reached up to wipe away a rogue tear from her cheek with his free hand. “Is it working?” He grinned. “I’m Ronald by the way, but everyone calls me Ronny.”

Jada didn’t bother to tell him that he didn’t need a pickup line. She may not have felt a connection with the men she had met before, but she knew that that was all about to change.

He gave her wrist a gentle tug as he backstepped towards the bathroom. “Why don’t you come back with me, and I can tell you stories about some of my most awkward moments while I work. Then we’ll be even, and you might even agree to go out on a date with me.”

“Wow, someone’s overconfident.” Jada replied with another smirk. “Do you ask all your clients out, or just the awkward ones?”

Was this flirting? She was doing it!

Ronny grinned at her and shook his head. “First of all, I never asked out a client before. In fact, I haven’t been on a date in over three years. Second of all, awkward isn’t a bad thing. I think it’s pretty cute.”

Jada pulled her hand away and crossed her arms across her chest. “Cute? How do you know I don’t already have a boyfriend?”

Ronny’s eyes grew wide, and he took a few steps backwards to create a respectful distance between them. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have assumed. I’ll just...grab my tools and go.”

He turned and hurried down the hall. Jada couldn’t be sure, but she thought she heard him mutter, “Of course someone like her already has a boyfriend, you idiot.”

Jada stood blinking after him. She had been surprised to see his confident swagger vanish and watch him deflate at the mention of her fictional boyfriend. She had meant it as a joke, but once again, she proved how inept she was at interacting with the opposite sex.

Still, she found his reaction...endearing. Could it be that this handsome man had a hint of insecurity? Was he just as bad at this as she was?

She heard him moving around in the bathroom, and hurried to catch up with him before he left. When she reached the bathroom door, she found him kneeling down over his toolbox. Without thinking, Jada blurted out the first question that came to her mind. “Why three years?”

His looked up at her. “What?”

“Why haven’t you dated in three years?”

He stood and shrugged a shoulder. “My high school sweetheart cheated on me.”

“Why would anyone cheat on you?” Jada was genuinely surprised.

Ronny shrugged again. “She said she didn’t want to spend her life with a plumber. Went off to college and left me for a frat boy.”

“That sucks.”

“Yeah, well. It happens.” Ronny picked up his toolbox and moved past her towards the apartment door. “I didn’t mean to offend you earlier. I’ll get out of your hair and send my partner up to finish this job.”

Jada raced after him. “Wait! I lied.”

He turned to face her, one eyebrow raised.

“I didn’t mean to lie. It was supposed to be a joke.” She ran a hand over her face. Why was she so bad at this? “I don’t have a boyfriend. Never have.” She shrugged and wrinkled her nose. “Can we chalk that one up to my awkward side and start over?”

Ronny stared at her a beat, clearly taken aback by her blunt honesty. Then his face broke out into a huge grin and he closed the distance between them with three sure steps and an outstretched hand. “I’m Ronny. I don’t think I’ve ever been more attracted to a woman, and I’d like to get to know you better.”

Jada let out the breath she’s been holding and placed her hand in his. She smiled as his fingers curled around hers and warmth spread through her entire body. “I’m Jada, and I’d like to get to know you too.”

And that was that. The next day, they went on their first date. Ronny planned a picnic at the state park. They ate sandwiches that Ronny made and spent hours talking as they hiked the trails and sat by the sparkling lake that ran through the forest.

Ronny shared what it was like growing up as an only child with a single mom. He talked about the sacrifices his mom made for him and his desire to be a man who provided for his future wife and children. He talked about the sense of fulfillment he felt working with his own hands and his dream of starting his own plumbing business. He talked about his

wild partying in high school and his conversion to Christianity after he started dating a pretty cheerleader who also happened to be the president of his high school's Christian club. He even shared about the betrayal he felt when that same cheerleader cheated on him, and the three years of comfort he found in his faith as he waited for God to bring the right woman into his life.

Jada shared about her life growing up in the country, being raised in the church, and her commitment to only date Christian men. She shared about her friendship with Imara and how her college roommate had become the sister she never knew she needed. She shared about moving to the city with Imara after graduation. And she shared about crochet and her dream of starting her own crochet design business.

They spent the entire day together on that first date only to say goodnight and then talk for several more hours on the phone. By their second date, Jada felt as if she had known Ronny forever. He took her to see a musical and held her hand throughout the entire performance. On their third date, Jada experienced her first toe-curling kiss and was secretly pleased to see that Ronny looked just as dazed by the experience as she felt.

Three months later, they were engaged. Seven months later, Jada was walking down the aisle.

Imara, who had been protective of Jada at first but had been quickly won over by Ronny's dotting devotion, stood by her side as a bridesmaid. Her parents had also flown in for the event, and despite the whirlwind pace of the relationship, they loved Ronny. He was the strong man of God and provider they had always prayed that their daughter would marry.

After a two-week honeymoon in Jamaica, Jada and Ronny returned to the city to start their new life together. Four months later, Jada realized that the nausea and dizziness that had been plaguing her at work was not an aversion to her coworker's cologne choices. She was pregnant.

Mercy was born. They moved to the suburbs for more space and Jada learned to balance motherhood with her career.

Three years later, when Grace was born, Jada quit her job to be a stay-at-home mom, and her crochet dreams quietly disintegrated beneath the cobwebs of her life.

She had planned on going back to work and starting her own business once the girls started school, but by then Ronny had started his own plumbing business which was doing well. He convinced Jada to stay home with the girls and homeschool them instead of putting them in daycare or public school. The thought of homeschooling had never crossed Jada's mind before, but she was tired of juggling work and parenting, so she agreed to stay home and teach the girls.

Ronny was a great father and a loyal husband, but as time went on Jada began to feel their magic fade. Deep conversations about their hopes, fears, and dreams that used to run late into the night were now reduced to short, meaningless scripts. The lines so familiar that Jada could predict every word before the scene had even begun.

She still found him attractive, but the romance and sparkle were definitely missing. Kisses were just routine. A hug was just a hug. Spontaneous dates filled with laughter were replaced with Wednesday nights meetings at Pizza Palace.

Jada wasn't sure where they went wrong, or if they even had gone wrong. Maybe this was normal. Maybe this dull routine, this rut that they were in, was a good thing. A sign that they were so comfortable and knew each other so well that they didn't even have to try anymore. Maybe every romance eventually settled into a monotonous routine. Maybe.

Still, Jada couldn't shake the feeling that something important was missing from their relationship. Things had definitely changed with Ronny. That feeling of belonging and being special had disappeared and she was once again left wondering if there was something wrong with her.

Worst of all was the fact that Ronny didn't seem to notice that anything was wrong. He seemed perfectly content with the routine that their lives had fallen into. He still kissed her each morning when they woke up. Still made her and the girls breakfast on Sunday mornings before church. Still seemed

happy to see her when he came home from work, and was eager to snuggle next to her on the couch and fall asleep with his head in her lap while she watched her crafting shows on TV. He still seemed excited, giddy even, to get dressed up for their weekly pizza date night where he would laugh, smile, hold her hand, and gaze at her adoringly. The way he was doing now.

She knew that soon he would pay the bill and take her home for what had become their weekly, scheduled, lovemaking session. Not that lovemaking was the right word. Even that had become stale and routine, always ending with Ronny snoring and Jada lying awake and unfulfilled, staring at the ceiling.

As far as Jada could tell, Ronny was perfectly happy with their marriage. And that worried her. They used to be completely in sync. He used to be able to tell when she was upset, anxious, or unhappy. But that connection had disappeared without him even noticing.

She supposed she should be grateful that Ronny didn't know how miserable she was, but she wasn't. She wanted things to go back to the way they were. How could they fix their relationship if one of them didn't even know that something was broken?

Jada didn't want to admit it, but a part of her was angry at Ronny for letting their marriage grow stagnant. She had trusted him to be the leader in their relationship. After all, he was the more experienced partner in this romance. It should have been his responsibility to keep the flames alive. Yet here he was, apparently blissfully happy, not even realizing that the fire had died out long ago and she was in danger of dying from hypothermia.

She knew she didn't have a right to be angry since she hadn't actually talked to him about her feelings. But the fact that she even had to talk about these feelings grated on her. Something had to change, and it looked like it was up to her to change it. Maybe tonight was a good time to broach the subject. Jada took a deep breath and decided to test the waters.

“Ronny, can I ask you something?”

He smiled at her around a mouthful of pizza. “You know you can ask me anything.”

“How do you think our marriage is going? Like on a scale of one to five, how happy are you with us?”

Ronny gazed at her with a look that could only be described as unadulterated devotion. “Jada, are you worried that maybe I don’t love you as much after thirteen years of marriage?” He smiled at her. “I know that your thirty sixth birthday is coming up, but you have nothing to worry about. Every year since I’ve known you, I fall deeper and deeper in love with you than I was the year before. And even though you were gorgeous when we met, somehow you get more and more beautiful every year. You don’t ever have to worry about me not loving you. When you are old and wrinkly and tottering around with a walker, I will still think you are the most beautiful woman in the world.”

Jada chewed her bottom lip. “Sooooo...you’re happy with our marriage?”

Ronny laughed. “Of course! I’ve got a great wife. We’ve got two beautiful girls together. Business is good. God has blessed us with a good home. Why wouldn’t I be happy?” He paused. “Aren’t you happy?”

“I’m happy.” Jada lied, not sure how to follow his speech with the truth.

She felt like a worm. Ronny had been falling deeper in love with her every year, and she had been steadily growing colder. She didn’t deserve such a devoted husband. Ronny was right. God had blessed them with a great life, and she was being an ungrateful brat.

Jada gave Ronny what she hoped was a seductive smile. “Do you want to get out of here?”

Surprise flickered across Ronny’s face. “Are you sure? You haven’t had your usual slice of triple fudge chocolate cake.”

Jada shrugged and gave him a meaningful look. “I was hoping for a different type of dessert tonight.”

“Oh.” Ronny blinked in surprise. “Okay. Um, yeah.” He scooted his chair back with so much enthusiasm that it nearly tipped over. He righted the chair, threw some bills on the table, and ushered her towards the door. “Anything the lady wants is fine with me.”

Jada fought off her guilt as she tried to match Ronny’s mood. When was the last time she had initiated intimacy? Apparently, it had been a while. She really was the worst wife.

Clearly, she was the problem with her marriage. After all, she was the one who was unhappy. Maybe all she needed to do was try harder? As she followed Ronny out of the restaurant, something told her that trying harder was not going to solve her problems.

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Chapter Two

It was only 9:30 in the morning, but Jada was already ready for the day to be over.

No matter what those mommy bloggers said, homeschooling was hard. This morning, Jada had attempted a hands-on experiment with Mercy. They were supposed to soak turkey bones in vinegar for different periods of time and then test their flexibility to see how the vinegar affected the bones' density. Honestly, it was all a bit confusing for Jada. Science had never been her strong suit, but even she knew that there were too many uncontrolled variables for any results to be legitimate. She made a mental note to use a different science curriculum the following year.

Homeschooling had been so much easier when the girls were younger. Back then, she had felt confident teaching Mercy and Grace the alphabet, colors, shapes, and numbers. As they grew older and the lessons grew more complex, Jada often wondered if the girls were getting the learning experience they deserved. Their test scores were always exceptional, and she did her best to make learning fun. She planned monthly field trips to local zoos, museums, and theaters. They went on nature walks and took dance breaks during the day. Jada even signed them up for sports teams so they could socialize with other kids. Still, Jada worried that maybe the girls would be better off with a professionally trained teacher.

The girls seemed happy to stay at home with her. They had never complained or asked to attend the local school, but

Jada's fears led her to stay up late studying algebra and geometry, trying to keep ahead of her daughters and plan lessons that they would actually enjoy. She read history books and pored over primary sources as she tried to give her girls a balanced view of world events that she had never really cared much about when she was in school. She developed organizers to help Mercy write the perfect five-paragraph argument essay. And, she conducted failed science experiments.

This morning's experiment had resulted in a kitchen that reeked of white vinegar and a lab report filled with questionable data. Mercy was pleased with the results, but that was Mercy. Jada knew that God had truly blessed her by giving her Mercy as her firstborn. Even as a baby, Mercy had been calm and easygoing. She rarely cried or threw a tantrum, and she was sleeping through the night almost as soon as she came home from the hospital. Now, as a twelve-year-old seventh grader, she was still as angelic as she had been back then. Quiet and thoughtful, she loved to read, journal, and doodle fanciful sketches in her notebook. She never complained about helping out around the house or cleaning up what seemed like gallons of spilled vinegar after failed science experiments.

At nine years old, Grace was Mercy's opposite. Grace seemed determined to make up for Mercy's quiet nature with her own supply of boundless energy. As a baby, she had kept the entire household up every night with her cries for attention. Like clockwork, Jada would startle awake at Grace's piercing screams shortly before midnight and sit in the nursery rocking and cooing until the sun's first rays pierced the darkness and Ronny woke up to relieve her from duty so she could catch a quick nap before he headed off to work.

Even now, Grace thrived on attention and social interaction. She lived for Sundays and the Wednesday night youth group meetings when she could catch up with her friends at church. Jada had approached Ronny about the possibility of putting Grace in school so that she could spread her social wings, but Ronny had insisted that homeschooling was best for the girls. He firmly believed that it was the parents' job to teach their children and was proud to be in a

position where he could afford to have Jada stay home and provide his daughters with what he believed was the best education they could ever receive.

“Mo-om, we’re going to be late.” Grace’s whine pulled Jada from her musings.

Jada looked at the clock on the living room wall and bit back a groan. The local children’s theater had hired a new director and was holding auditions for their first musical production—*Little Women*. Grace had never shown any interest in acting before, but when she heard about the auditions, she seemed determined to be on stage and insisted on auditioning for the role of Amy. Jada thought that Grace would be perfect for the role of the high-strung March sister, and she hoped that drama would be a productive way to appease Grace’s hunger for the spotlight.

“We won’t be late,” Jada promised as she rose from the couch and stretched her limbs. She wrapped one arm around Grace’s shoulder and squeezed her to her side. “You’ll have plenty of time to shine in your auditions and convince everyone that you were born to play the part of Amy. Let me check on your sister and then we’ll head out.”

Jada peeked her head into the old nursery that had been transformed into a schoolroom. The old Noah’s ark decorations that once lined the walls had been replaced with bright inspirational posters and colorful maps. The far wall that used to be dominated by cribs and a changing table now sported large bookshelves filled with textbooks, curriculum binders, and school supplies. The rest of the room was divided into two separate nooks. Each of which had a wooden desk and an office chair.

Mercy sat at her desk, lost in a book about dragons and King Author. The four-book series had captivated her, and she tried to sneak in a few chapters in between classes. Jada walked silently across the carpeted floor and peeked over her daughter’s shoulder.

“*Rising Dragons* again, huh? Is this your new favorite?”

Mercy tilted her head back and graced Jada with a dreamy grin. “Nope. *The Candlestone* is still my favorite book, but this one is a close second.”

“Well, enjoy it. Gracie and I are heading out to auditions.” Jada bent and placed a kiss on Mercy’s forehead. “Don’t spend all your time reading. You still need to get that math assignment done.”

Mercy groaned at the mention of her least favorite subject, but her smile remained as she closed her book. “I’ll work on that now.” She leaped up and ran to the door. Peeking her head out into the hallway, she yelled, “Good luck at the auditions, Grace!”

“Thank you!” her sister’s voice called back. “Mom! Come on!”

“Duty calls.” Jada pulled a silly face that tugged a giggle from Mercy before she raced down the hall. She grabbed her keys and a pink crocheted cardigan before heading out the door with an eager Grace at her heels.

When they arrived at the community theater, the parking lot was already full, so Jada dropped Grace off in front before driving around to find some street parking. By the time Jada found a spot and made her way inside the building, Grace was nowhere to be seen.

“Excuse me,” she called to a man walking by. “Can you tell me which room the auditions are in?”

The man was in his late twenties with broad shoulders, and a light toffee complexion. He turned to Jada with a look of annoyance that swiftly morphed into appreciation as he took in her delicate features. He gave her a smile that she was sure he used often to dazzle the ladies before stretching out his hand.

“I’m Derrick Smith, the new director of the theater. And who do I have the pleasure of speaking to?”

“Nice to meet you.” Jada shook his hand and frowned when his touch sent an unexpected tingle up her arm. She pulled her hand away and reflexively wiped it on the back of

her jeans skirt. Looking up, she noted that he seemed amused by her reaction.

“Cute.” He smirked at her and then winked.

What? “I’m married,” Jada stated in what she hoped was a bored tone. “And a mother. A mother who is here to see her daughter audition for your play.”

“Right.” Derrick smoothed his grin into a professional smile. “And what part is your daughter auditioning for, Mrs....?”

Jada stared at him in confusion for a moment before realizing that she hadn’t yet given him her name. “Oh, sorry. I’m Jada Parker and my daughter is Grace Parker. She’s auditioning for the role of Amy.”

“Jada.” Derrick rolled her name slowly over his tongue as if he were trying to taste it. “I like it.”

“Excuse me?” Jada reared back. Was this man who was at least ten years her junior really trying to flirt with her?

“I like the role of Amy,” Derrick clarified. “It’s an important part and needs a strong actress who can sing. Is your daughter any good?”

“Well, yes. She’s never acted before, but-”

“I like your sweater by the way. Did you make it yourself?”

“Yes?” The swift change of topics left Jada feeling slightly off balance.

“I thought so. My mother used to crochet before she passed away last year.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Jada took a step backwards. This conversation was getting confusing, and she needed to find the auditions. For all she knew, Grace might already be in front of the director. Her head snapped up, as she realized that Derrick *was* the director. “If you’re the new director, why aren’t you at the auditions?”

“I was.” Derrick smiled. “I stepped out to take a phone call and got stopped by a beautiful woman on my way back.”

“Beautiful *married* woman,” Jada corrected. What was she doing? He was going to think she was flirting back.

“Do you sell your goods?” Derrick asked with smug smile.

Jada’s eyes grew wide. Was he propositioning her? She had never slapped anyone in her life, but now her hand lashed out on its own accord. The crisp thwack echoed through the now empty hallway.

Derrick stumbled back and clutched his cheek. He glared at her with disbelief. “What was that for?”

“I am not a lady of the night.” Jada spat.

“What?”

“I’m not a hooker. My goods are not for sale.” Jada turned on her heel and stomped down the hall, but the sound of hysterical laughter stopped her in her tracks. She turned back to see Derrick clutching his sides as tears of laughter ran down his face.

“I’m sorry.” He gasped for air between fits of laughter. “A hooker? That’s where your mind went? I was talking about crochet.”

Jada’s mouth fell open and her hands flew to her face in mortification as the reality of what she had just done sank in. She had just slapped the director of the play that her daughter was auditioning for in the face because he asked her if she sold her crochet projects.

“I’m sorry.” Jada rushed forward with her palms pressed together in supplication. “I’m so so so so sorry. I didn’t mean to...I mean, I meant to, but I thought...I’ve never done anything like that before. I am truly, truly sorry.”

“It’s okay.” Derrick’s amused voice cut through her ramblings. “Really.”

Jada forced herself to look up at him. She sagged with relief when she saw the smile in his eyes and noted that her hand hadn’t left too bad an imprint on his face. “I really am

sorry,” she repeated. What had she been thinking? She’d nearly ruined Grace’s acting career before it even started.

“It’s fine.” Derrick grinned. “I get the misunderstanding. For the record, I would never mistake a classy lady like you for...a lady of the night.” He broke into a fresh bout of laughter before regaining control with some effort. “No. I wanted to hire you to create crochet pieces for the play. It is a historical piece, so I thought some handmade crochet sweaters, shawls, and throw blankets might be a nice touch. Are you interested?”

Jada couldn’t stop the thrill of excitement that shot through her at the thought of making and selling her crocheted items. She still made the occasional sweater for herself and the girls, but it had been years since she had put any serious effort into crochet or her dreams of starting her own crochet business. She had thought that her dream had died with Grace’s birth. While Ronny had been supportive of her goals when they first met, all that had changed when they became parents. Once the girls were born, he had made it clear that he wanted her to focus on their daughters and the home for the foreseeable future. Over the years, the part of her that lit up whenever she designed a new pattern, the creative part of her that she longed to share with the world, the part of her that made her feel alive, had dimmed to an imperceptible glow. But Derrick’s words now stirred those embers back to life.

Could she design crochet pieces and sell them? Would Ronny mind? He didn’t want her starting a new business, but this was different. This would be a way to help the local theater. And if Grace got the part, Ronny would be thrilled for her and probably wouldn’t have any problem with Jada helping out with the costumes.

Maybe this could be a way for her to get some experience selling her designs. Perhaps this could even lead to some exposure and publicity. Listing the title Costume Designer on her profile could only help her in the future if she ever did decide to start her own business.

Jada grinned as she saw her future taking shape. This job could be used as a trial run. A way to show Ronny that she

could balance homeschooling the girls and designing clothes at the same time. If she did well, it would give her more leverage to convince Ronny to let her branch out on her own. She could even use the money earned from this job to jumpstart her own projects!

But she was getting ahead of herself. She didn't even know how much Derrick was offering or if Grace would even get the role of Amy. She tried to erase the excitement from her face and assume a businesslike air. Although the condescending smirk on Derrick's face told her that he had already seen her mental happy dance. Oh well. She could still try to negotiate.

"I can't really give you an answer until after auditions," she stated. "But depending on how that goes, I would be interested in helping you, for a price. Say...two hundred a sweater?"

Jada held her breath as she waited for his response. Had she gone too high? Too low? She mentally kicked herself for not keeping up with the going rate of custom-made sweaters.

"Cute." Derrick deadpanned. "I can give you twenty dollars a piece."

"Twenty?! That won't cover the price of the yarn!" Jada waved her hand in front of her as if brushing away his insulting offer. "These will be original designs, made by hand to match the time period and the characters. I refuse to take less than a hundred."

One side of Derrick's mouth quirked up in a smile. "Deal." He leaned in to shake her hand. "Although I would have been willing to go up to as high as one-fifty for anything made by your hands."

There it was again. That tingle from his touch. Jada snatched her hand back, choosing to ignore the feeling and focus on her bad bargaining skills instead. She knew she had undersold herself at one hundred dollars. Still, she was pleased that she now had a job. She silently congratulated herself for having the foresight to wear one of her favorite cardigans to the auditions. The pink creation was an intricate design of

shells, bobbles, and a few stitches that she had come up with herself. Clearly, Derrick was impressed with her handiwork.

“Deal,” Jada repeated. “But I’m not promising anything. I need to see how the auditions go, and-”

“Don’t worry about the auditions. Your Grace will get the part.”

“What? No. You can’t just give her the part. It has to be fair. I can’t-”

Derrick’s laugh cut through Jada’s protests. “I’m not playing favorites, Jada. If I recall correctly, there was only one person who signed up to audition for the role of Amy, so I’m sure she’ll get the part.”

“Oh. Right.” Jada frowned. She could have sworn she saw several names on the list for Amy when she had brought Grace over to register for auditions two weeks ago, but she must have been mistaken. Maybe Amy just wasn’t a popular part. After all, she didn’t have many songs, and her character did steal Laurie from her sister Joe in the book. Sort of. Well, whatever the reason, this was great news for Grace.

“So,” Derrick smiled down at her. “Now that you know the outcome of the auditions, can I count on you for the costumes?”

“I’ll have to talk to over with my husband first, but I’m sure he won’t mind.”

“Great! Give me your number and I’ll call you next week to discuss the details.”

Jada recited her cell phone number and watched as Derrick scribbled it down on his clipboard.

“I probably shouldn’t hold up auditions any longer. I’m surprised they haven’t sent out a search party already.” Derrick took a step backwards. “Meeting you has been an unexpected delight.” He gave a theatrical bow before winking at her and rushing down the hall.

Jada stood staring after him as she thought about the opportunity she had just been given. Her very first crochet job!

And it was for a good cause. After all these years, her childhood dreams were finally coming true.

A part of her had always worried that maybe her designs weren't good enough to be sold. Yes, she got a lot of complements from friends and family members, but that didn't really count. This was different. A complete stranger had seen her work and decided that her creations had value. She couldn't wait to go home and share the news with Ronny.

Ronny. Would he be okay with all of this? Jada shrugged as she started walking down the hall in the direction that Derrick had taken. Ronny may have been reluctant to have her focus on her business plans before, but she couldn't see him actually refusing to let her do something that would benefit Grace and the community. She would just have to find the right way to get through to him.

For the first time in a long time, when Jada looked out at the future, she saw more than just monotonous days of homeschooling and Wednesday nights at Pizza Palace. Derrick had watered a seed that had been planted long ago, and she was going to do everything in her power to help it grow. Jada wasn't sure how, but she was certain that her boring life was about to change.

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Chapter Three

Mercy truly was an angel. Unlike her sister who had made up an excuse to leave the house as soon as she saw Jada walk through the door with shopping bags full of yarn, Mercy had stayed behind to help Jada wind the hanks into balls.

Jada couldn't blame Grace for running off to her friend Jenny's house. Few people actually enjoyed the process of winding yarn. Even the most enthusiastic yarn addicts became frustrated at the thought of detangling a hank of wool. Although hanks looked beautiful hanging in the store displays, they were impossible to crochet with while the yarn remained in that twisted state. Adventurous needleworkers who had tried to crochet straight from the hank inevitably ended up with a tangled mess and tears. The hanks had to be untangled and transformed into a ball or a cake before they could be useful, and that could be a tedious task.

Jada had pretty much perfected her technique. She would carefully untwist the hank, loop it over one of her daughters' hands, and then begin the time-consuming process of twisting the threads around her fingers until she had a tightly wound ball. Each ball took at least half an hour to wind, and she found that her girls often grew tired of sitting still to keep the threads on their arms from tangling. Jada supposed she could have gotten a yarn winder machine, but something about winding the balls by hand made her feel more connected to her art. Plus she loved daydreaming about potential crochet products as she watched each ball grow.

Last night, Jada spent blissful hours dreaming of the possibility of starting a new career. She had woken up this morning with a sense of excitement she hadn't felt in years. All day long, crochet designs had floated through her head. As soon as she had finished going over schoolwork with the girls, she had jumped in her car and raced over to her local yarn store to pick up some materials she would need for the costumes. As luck would have it, there was a sale on her favorite brand of superwash wool. It was still pricy, but she couldn't pass up on the classic colors that she knew would be perfect for the play. True, acrylic would have been much cheaper and more durable, but wool was her favorite material to work with, and she didn't want to skimp when it came to her new job.

Well...almost her new job. While she had pretty much accepted the job offer from Derrick, she still hadn't actually gotten around to talking about it with Ronny. Yesterday had just been so busy. After auditions, Derrick had pulled Jada and Grace aside in the hallway to let them know that while the official cast list would not be announced for another week, Grace had secured the role of Amy. Needless to say, Grace had been walking on air ever since. To celebrate the event, Jada had made Grace's favorite dish of macaroni pie and fried chicken for dinner, complete with fresh baked chocolate chip cookies for dessert. Afterwards, the entire family hung out in the living room watching a black and white version of *Little Women* while they munched on popcorn. Ronny had seemed ready to burst with pride. After blasting the news on all his social media accounts, he had snuggled next to Jada making predictions that his daughter would one day be a world famous actress. It had been the perfect evening. Jada didn't want to ruin it by announcing her new job.

"Thanks for sticking around and helping me." Jada smiled down at Mercy who was trying to stretch the muscles in her shoulders without tangling the yarn. Jada felt a twinge of guilt. They had been winding yarn for hours, and Mercy was probably exhausted from holding up her arms and letting loops of yarn drape over them while Jada twirled the fibers into smooth balls. They were only halfway through the yarn that

Jada had bought, but she decided to take a break after this ball was through. Or maybe after the next one. “Are your arms tired?”

“Not really,” Mercy smiled back at her mom. “I can handle a few more hanks. Besides, I like hanging out with you.”

“Aww. That’s so sweet.” Jada grinned. “I like spending time with you too, but don’t you feel like you get enough of me during school hours?”

“Nope. When we’re doing school work, Grace is there too, and she needs more help than I do.”

Jada paused her winding to study her oldest daughter. Had she been neglecting Mercy? She didn’t think so. They were together almost every day. But maybe Mercy was feeling a bit left out after all the attention that they had showered on Grace yesterday.

Careful to keep her tone light, Jada resumed her winding and probed deeper. “You’re just a more independent learner than Grace. And I’ve been really impressed by the way you stay on top of your work without needing much prompting from me. But I do think I should spend a little more time with you on math. We haven’t been reviewing math facts together like we did in the past, and you could probably benefit from some bonus assignments. Especially if you want to take advanced algebra next year.”

Mercy wrinkled her nose and leaned back on the couch. “Advanced algebra? I think regular algebra is more my speed. In fact, now that I think about it, I don’t mind being alone while you spend more time with Grace during school.”

Jada wound the last few yards of the hank around the ball and laid it on the growing pile of colorful spheres on the living room table. “Duly noted. You want to spend more time together, but not if it involves me torturing you with math.”

“I wouldn’t call it torture,” Mercy responded with a grin. “More like cruel and unusual punishment.”

Jada chuckled as she pulled a hank of indigo blue yarn from the shopping bag at her feet. She held it up and waved it

in front of Mercy. “Do you think you can handle another one?”

Mercy cracked her neck and shook out her arms. “Bring it on.”

“You’re such a good sport.” Jada looped the yarn over Mercy’s outstretched arms. “If your sister were here, you two could take turns holding the yarn.”

Mercy shrugged. “I don’t mind. Besides, she was so excited to tell Jenny about getting the role in the play. She never really thought she would actually get the role she wanted, so this is a big deal for her.”

Yes, Mercy was an angel. She never complained. Never talked back. And was always so supportive of her baby sister. She wasn’t jealous that Grace had a lot of friends or that Grace would be in a play. Instead, she seemed content to stay at home, read books, and be Grace’s cheerleader. All she asked for was the occasional trip to the library...and more time with Jada.

Maybe that was a problem. Maybe Mercy was bored. Jada caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Should she be pushing Mercy to try new things? Should she be signing Mercy up for sports and clubs? Mercy did go to youth group every week, and she seemed happy. But was she?

Once again Jada worried that she might be doing Mercy a disservice by homeschooling her. After all, one of the top criticisms of homeschoolers was that the children would become under socialized. If Mercy had been in public school, she would have been in constant contact with children her own age and had access to a wealth of clubs and sports. With homeschooling, it was up to Jada to find opportunities for Mercy to interact with others. As a socially awkward introvert herself, Jada had been happy to let her oldest child be a homebody. As it was, Jada hadn’t exactly gone out of her way to plug her daughters into community events. The few events they had gotten involved in had been because Grace, a social butterfly, had dragged her to them. Grace needed constant interaction and seemed to make friends wherever she went, while Mercy seemed content to tag along or to stay at home if

she was in the middle of a good book. But was that a good thing? Grace had her friends and now she had theater. Maybe it was time Jada made more of an effort to draw Mercy out of her shell and help her find her own interests outside of the home.

Jada made a mental note to spend more one-on-one time with Mercy and find ways for her to socialize with others. That might be a little tricky once Jada started her new job. *If* she started her new job. But she would find a way to make it work.

“It is a big deal for Gracie, and I’m so glad her dreams are coming true. Are there any dreams that you have? Like being on stage or writing the next bestselling fantasy novel?”

Mercy laughed. “I don’t think I ever want to be on stage. And I’d much rather read about dragons than write about them.”

“Okay.” Jada smiled gently. “I’m just saying, if you have a dream, like Gracie has a dream of being on stage, let me know and we’ll find a way to make it happen. In the meantime, how about we plan to spend more time together outside of schoolwork? Just the two of us. Maybe every Wednesday evening?”

“Sure!” Mercy beamed at Jada and shifted her weight to get more comfortable on the sofa. Encouraged by her enthusiasm, Jada began brainstorming potential Wednesday activities with her. They came up with a short list that included trips to the bookstore, cooking lessons, and walks along the town’s hiking trails. They planned to kick off their weekly adventures with a trip to the local farmers market the following Wednesday.

Twenty minutes later, when the front door opened, they were still winding yarn.

“What’s all this?” Ronny asked as he took in the shopping bags on the floor and the growing mountain of yarn balls on the coffee table. He picked up a label and looked at the price. “Did we win the lottery?”

“Hello to you too.” Jada reached up and took the price tag from him. “There was a sale at the yarn store, so this was actually twenty percent off.”

“That’s...still not a great deal. There must be hundreds of dollars worth of yarn here. What happened to all the yarn you already have in your work room?”

Jada hesitated. She didn’t want to talk about her job offer in front of Mercy. Plus, she was beginning to see that she may have gone overboard with her purchases. “It wasn’t that much money,” she lied. “Besides, since when do you care how much money I spend on yarn?”

Ronny sighed. “I’m sorry, baby. It’s just...I’ve had a really rough day.”

“What’s wrong?”

Ronny shook his head. “Nothing I can’t handle.” He took a seat behind her on the couch and started massaging her shoulders. “So, what’s all this yarn for?”

“Just a new project I’m working on.” Jada leaned into his touch. “You sure you don’t want to tell me about your day?”

“Mhmm.”

“In that case, why don’t you switch places with Mercy, and give her a break.”

Ronny sighed, but dutifully held out his arms and allowed Mercy to slip the loops of yarn onto them and shifted positions so that he was sitting in front of Jada. “You’re lucky I love you,” he grumbled. “I get home from a long day, and right away you’re putting me to work.”

Jada ignored him, and reached up to give Mercy a hug. “Thank you for your help, sweetie. Why don’t you go work on some homework while I talk to your dad?”

Jada waited until Mercy left the room before turning back to her husband. “And thank you for helping me on my new project.”

“You know I’m always here to help you, baby. But what is this new project? And why do you need all this yarn?” His

brows rose as he looked at the shopping bags and the rolled balls on the coffee table. “Seriously Jada, there must be at least six hundred dollars worth of yarn here.”

“I know it seems like a lot of money, but the good news is that my job will probably reimburse me.” Jada held her breath while she waited for Ronny’s reaction.

“*Probably* reimburse you? Jada, you don’t spend hundreds of dollars on something that you don’t know for sure will be reimbursed.” He shook his head in amusement at her rookie mistake. They sat in silence for a few moments while Jada continued to wind yarn as she waited for the other shoe to drop. It didn’t take long.

Ronny’s head snapped up. “Wait a minute. What do you mean by a new job? Since when do you have a job?” When Jada didn’t respond, his shoulders relaxed and he began to chuckle. “Oh, I get it. You mean your work here at the house. I agree. The work you do here is a job and is just as important as my plumbing business. This family wouldn’t run properly without all that you do.” He leaned forward and gave Jada a kiss before gracing her with an indulgent smile. “If you want to be paid or ‘reimbursed’ in yarn, that’s fine with me. Just let me know before you make big purchases like this again so I can plan for it in the budget.”

Jada stared at him for a moment, uncertain how to respond. Eventually she decided on the truth. “Yes, being a housewife is my full time job, but I may have been offered a second job. More like a part-time job. One that involves yarn.”

Ronny’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “You’ve been looking for a part time job? At the yarn store?”

“No. I haven’t been looking, but a great opportunity popped up yesterday at the theater. I met the new director and I was wearing one of the sweaters I made. And well, he liked it so much that he wants me to design and crochet costumes for the play.” Jada’s words came out in a tumbled rush.

Ronny held up a hand. “Slow down, Jada. Let me get this straight. You went out and got a job without telling me? Does this have anything to do with the Tremont Plaza deal?”

Jada took in his wounded eyes. Was he seriously hurt by the fact that she wanted to make costumes for Grace's play? And why would he think it had anything to do with Tremont Plaza? The plaza development had been voted on in the town meeting, and was seen as a win-win. It would bring new businesses and jobs to their suburban neighborhood as well as new tax revenue for the town. Ronny had been working on getting the plumbing contract for the plaza. A deal like that would push his business over the top. As soon as plans for the plaza had been announced, Ronny began networking, and he had already obtained a verbal agreement on the deal. Jada had already made plans to celebrate by remodeling the kitchen and the upstairs bathroom as soon as the contract was signed.

"Why would you bring up Tremont Plaza?" Jada asked. "Did you sign the contract?"

"What? No. Not yet." Ronny's eyes grew cloudy for a moment before he shook himself and returned his attention to Jada. "If it's not about the plaza deal, then what is it? Why would you feel the need to get a job behind my back?"

Is that what this was about? He thought she had actively gone behind his back and looked for a job? "Ronny, calm down." Jada laughed in an attempt to lighten the mood. "I haven't been job hunting. I just happened to meet the new theater director yesterday, and he loved my sweater so much that he decided to offer me a job."

"A random stranger offered you a job on the spot because he liked your sweater?" Ronny raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Yes." Jada put down the ball of yarn and crossed her arms defensively. "Why is that so hard to believe?"

"Sounds to me like he was more interested in you than the sweater."

"Ronny, be serious. This is a way for me to help out with Gracie's play."

"How old did you say this director was?"

Jada rolled her eyes. Why were men always this difficult? She spoke slowly to break through Ronny's fixation with the

director. “His name is Derrick. He’s probably a few years younger than us. And he was only interested in my crochet. Can we focus here?”

The memory of slapping Derrick for being fresh flashed across her mind, but she decided to keep that information to herself. Explaining yesterday’s misunderstanding to Ronny would just muddy the waters and increase his misguided suspicions about Derrick.

“Fine,” Ronny grumbled. “Tell me about the job.”

Jada grinned and sat up straighter, her hands flew around in excitement as she spoke. “It’s a really great opportunity. I’d be designing all the costumes for *Little Women*. Since it’s a period piece, handmade crochet items will help make everything seem more authentic. I’ll get to make sweaters and accessories for all the main characters, and the theater will pay me for each piece I make.”

“And reimburse you for all the yarn?”

Jada bit her lip. “Yes?”

Ronny smiled and shook his head. “Maybe you should iron out those details before you buy any more yarn.” He looked at the shopping bags on the floor. “And don’t wind any more balls. And keep the receipt.”

Jada blinked at him. “I can do it? I can take the job?”

Ronny shrugged. “How can I say no when you’re obviously so excited about it?”

“You’re the best!” Jada threw herself against him and gave him a tight squeeze. Ronny hugged her back and planted a kiss on the top of her head.

Jada pulled away, eyes dancing with excitement. “I can’t wait to call Derrick and talk to him about my design ideas.”

At the mention of Derrick’s name, the smile vanished from Ronny’s face. “Jada, you can take this job, but there will have to be some boundaries.”

Of course. Leave it to Ronny to suck the joy out of the moment. For the first time in years, she was genuinely excited

about creating something for the world to see, and he had to put a damper on it. “What boundaries?”

“Well, the costumes are secondary. Your priorities should still be our family and the girls. Right?”

“Okay,” Jada agreed.

“I don’t want this taking away from the girls’ homeschooling or our family time.” He paused. “Are you sure you can handle all you do around here and a crochet job?”

“Yes, Ronny.” Jada had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes.

“And one more thing,” Ronny added. “This ends when the play ends. I’m fine with you spending a few hours in the evenings making costumes at home for a few months, but I don’t want this turning into a permanent thing. I’m going to be pretty busy with work, and I really need your focus and support here.”

And just like that, he smothered her dreams of starting what she had hoped would be a lifelong career. Why were his dreams more important than hers? Why did he get to network and build his career while she sat at home all day with the girls? This wasn’t what she had in mind when she married him.

Still, this was a step in the right direction. He had agreed to let her take the job, and she would have at least three months to soften him up and get him to change his mind. Not that he had ever changed his mind before. She looked up and found Ronny staring at her, waiting for her response.

“Deal,” she said.

“Good.” Ronny rubbed his stomach. “Now what’s for dinner?”

Jada looked at the clock hanging on the wall and groaned. She had been so engaged in winding yarn that she had completely forgotten about dinner. It was already after seven, Grace would be home from Jenny’s house any minute, and she hadn’t even taken any meat out to thaw.

“I was thinking tuna fish sandwiches and potato chips.”

Ronny sighed and rubbed a hand across his face. “Tuna? You haven’t even started this job as yet, and already you’re feeding us sandwiches for dinner? See, this is why I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Jada tried to convince him that the light dinner had nothing to do with crochet, but Ronny’s pointed look at the mountain of rolled yarn on the table told her he wasn’t buying her explanation. As she hurried to the kitchen to whip up the sandwiches, she prayed that her oversight wouldn’t make Ronny change his mind before she even had a chance to prove herself.

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Chapter Four

Girl, you are glowing!” Imara pulled Jada into a warm hug and led her into the apartment. “Is there something you forgot to tell me?”

“Please, Imara.” Jada rolled her eyes. “Just because a woman looks happy, doesn’t mean she’s pregnant.”

“I don’t know,” Imara replied. “My spidey senses tell me something’s up.”

“Are those the same spidey senses that told you I was pregnant last month when I had the stomach flu? And two months ago when I had a stomach pouch from eating a double cheeseburger for lunch? And the month before that when I helped you clean out your fridge and starting gagging when I opened up the Tupperware container filled with your moldy leftovers? Because if we’re talking about those spidey senses, I think we can safely say that they don’t work.”

“Fine,” Imara grumbled as Jada followed her into the kitchen where she was greeted by Imara’s roommate, Simone.

“Hi Jada.” Simone leaned in for a hug. “Is Imara trying to get you to make her an auntie again?”

“Yeah.” Jada grinned and gave an exaggerated sigh. “I guess the two nieces I already gave her just weren’t enough.”

Simone turned to glare at Imara with mock disappointment. “Shameful, Imara. Shameful.”

Jada burst into peals of laughter as Imara threw up her hands in defeat. “I don’t know why I let you two become

friends. You're always ganging up on me."

"That's because you're always wrong," Simone quipped as she turned to slap Jada a high five.

When Jada had married Ronny, and Simone had taken her place as Imara's roommate, Jada had been less than welcoming. She knew that Imara would have to find someone to split the expensive city rent with, but she had been jealous of the petite librarian with a big curly afro and even bigger personality. Imara and Simone had hit it off right away, and Jada had feared that if Simone took her place, she would lose her only friend.

Needless to say, those fears were unfounded. In true Imara style, Imara had taken Jada out for coffee, sat her down, and proclaimed that they were going to be best friends forever despite husbands, roommates, or any other relationship that popped up in the future. She then ordered Jada to stop being petty about Simone and give her a chance. Since Imara planned on having Jada drive up from the suburbs at least once a week to hang out, and she planned on switching her membership to Jada's new church, it would make things a lot less awkward if they were all friends.

Once Jada realized that she had no reason to be jealous, she stopped behaving like a child and apologized to Simone, who graciously forgave her for her chilly welcome. Jada went from having one best friend to two. Now, her standing weekly appointment to gather for girl time at Imara's apartment every Sunday after church was one of the highlights of her week.

"What's Ronny doing with my babies today?" Imara asked as she settled into a stool across from Jada.

"He's taking them roller skating and then out for burgers." Jada reached across the kitchen island and helped herself to a tortilla chip from one of the snack bowls in the center.

"You are so lucky," Simone sighed. "I wish I had a man who would let me stay home with my kids all week, and then babysit on the weekends so I could hang out with my friends."

Jada shrugged. “Well, the girls are getting too old for a babysitter, but spending time with them is important to Ronny.”

Simone leaned forward and rested her chin in her palm. “What does it feel like to have the perfect husband while the rest of us are sifting through scraps on dating apps?”

“Fine, I guess,” Jada mumbled.

“Uh oh.” Imara leaned into the counter. “Trouble in paradise? What’s Ronny done now?”

“Who said anything was wrong?” Jada forced a smile. She wasn’t ready to talk to her friends about her problems with Ronny.

Imara gave her a look. “Jada, come on. I’ve known you since freshman year. I can always tell when something is up.”

“Like how you can always tell when I’m pregnant?” Jada joked.

Laughing, Imara grabbed a handful of cheese puffs and tossed them at Jada. “Stop being a brat and tell us what’s going on.”

Jada bit her lip, then sighed and began to share. “Okay. Do you remember when we were in college how I always wanted to start my own crochet business?”

“Remember it?” Imara scoffed. “Girl, you were obsessed. It was all you cared about.” She turned to Simone. “I thought I was going to have to stage a yarn intervention for this one.”

“That reminds me,” Simone chimed in. “I really liked the sweater you wore to church today. The color was perfect for your complexion.”

“Thank you!” Jada beamed at Simone before turning back to Imara. “Anyway, I always wanted to start a crochet business, but Ronny made me give it up when the girls were born.”

“Really?” Imara’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “I thought you decided to put your plans on pause so you could focus on

being a mother. I always admired the fact that you were willing to put the girls first.”

“I did,” Jada replied somewhat defensively. “But when the girls got older, I wanted to try starting my business. Ronny didn’t think it was a good idea. He practically insisted that I focus on homeschooling Mercy and Grace. He doesn’t think I can do that and run a business at the same time.”

“I thought you liked homeschooling,” Simone said.

“I do. But if I’m being honest, I don’t think I’m good at it. I mean, the girls are learning, but teaching isn’t my talent. Crochet is my talent.”

“Sooo...you want to take the girls out of homeschool, which they love, and put them in public school just so you can focus on making sweaters?” Imara asked. “I hate to say this, but that sounds...”

“Selfish?” Jada supplied. “I know. I like my time with the girls, and I don’t necessarily want to put them in the school system. I just want to be able to work on my business as well. Do both. And now I have the chance.”

“What do you mean?” Imara asked.

“Well,” Jada leaned forward. “I met this man named Derrick at the theater when Grace was auditioning for her role of Amy in *Little Women*. Turns out, he’s the new director. He saw my crochet work and offered to pay me to design costumes for the play!”

“Gracie got the part? That’s wonderful!” Simone squealed.

“I knew my baby had talent!” Imara cried.

“Yeah, it’s great,” Jada mumbled. Her friends were missing the point. “Derrick wants to pay me and will give me credit for the designs in the show’s program. This could be the perfect springboard to launch my crochet business.”

“So that’s why you were glowing.” Imara smirked.

“I don’ get it,” Simone said. “If you’re making the costumes, what’s the problem?”

“Ronny.” Jada sighed. “I thought he would be supportive of this since Grace is in the play, but he doesn’t like the idea. He says it will be too much work for me and I won’t have enough time for the girls.”

“So...you’re not making the costumes?” Imara asked.

“No, I am. Ronny eventually gave his permission, but I can tell he’s not happy about it. I really wanted him to be excited for me. I mean this is a great opportunity. It would be nice if my husband was on board.”

“Hmm.” Imara pushed her stool back and stood to stretch. Always the athlete, she never could sit still for long. “Ronny may have a point. You never could multitask.” At Jada’s glare, she switched tactics. “Are you sure Ronny knows how important this is to you? I mean, I’m your best friend, and even I thought you were over your crochet business.”

“Honestly, I’d almost forgotten about it too until Derrick offered me this job. Now I feel like...I don’t know. Like my life has purpose again.” Jada peeked up at her friends. “Am I being silly?”

“Yes,” Imara stated without hesitation. “Crochet is a hobby, Jada. You’re making it sound like a religious experience.”

“Imara, that’s not fair,” Simone cut in. “Crochet is important to Jada, and she just wants her husband’s support.”

“Well, it’s not as serious as she’s making it out to be,” Imara argued. She turned to Jada. “Ronny is crazy about you. Has been since the day you first met. He always tries to make you and the girls happy. So talk to him, figure it out, and stop being so dramatic.”

“Ronny is the perfect husband,” Simone agreed. “Don’t overthink it, Jada. Just work on the costumes for now. I’m sure Ronny will come around.”

“Fine,” Jada mock grumbled. “This is what I get for having two wise friends.”

The three women settled into a comfortable silence until Jada brought up a familiar topic. “Simone, how’s the online

dating going?”

“Ugh,” Simone groaned and let her head fall backwards. “It is literally like crawling through piles of muck and feces, hoping to find a diamond that might not even be there.”

“Eww.” Imara wrinkled her nose in disgust. “I hope you meant that figuratively.”

“Shut up,” Simone laughed.

Jada reached for another handful of chips and settled in for Simone’s weekly dating update. “Sounds fascinating. Tell me more.”

“Well,” Simone started. “On Monday night I went out with a man who thought it was a good idea to bring his pet snake on our date. He claimed it was his emotional support animal.”

“No!” Jada gasped while Imara snorted with amusement.

“Yes.” Simone nodded solemnly. “I don’t have a problem with support animals. But a snake? The thing was wrapped around his neck half the time. And he actually expected me to touch it!” She shuddered before continuing through her list of dead-end dates.

“On Tuesday night, I was supposed to be meeting a man who claimed to be a thirty-year-old fitness instructor. He even sent me pictures to prove it. Imagine my surprise when some wrinkly geriatric showed up on his mobility scooter. Apparently, he’d aged several decades since those pictures had been taken.”

“That’s awful!” Jada cried before throwing a chip at Imara who was laughing so hard that she was in danger of falling off her stool.

“Go ahead and laugh.” Simone crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Imara. “When you’re ready to start dating, you’ll see how slim the pickings are.”

“No thank you,” Imara wheezed as she regained her balance. “I think I’ll just keep living vicariously through you.”

With supermodel smooth skin and an athletic build, Imara had always been popular with the boys in college. Jada had

been surprised when Imara abruptly stopped dating during their junior year. Jada assumed that the hiatus had something to do with her mom's cancer scare that happened around the same time, but as the years dragged on, she began to wonder if there was something more behind her friend's decision to swear off dating.

The few times that she had tried to dig for answers, Imara always found a way to change the subject or made up some excuse to leave the room. Eventually, Jada decided to respect her friend's privacy. If Imara ever wanted to share the reason behind her dating fast, Jada would be there to listen. Until then, it was just a given that Imara had no interests in relationships.

"I'm sorry, Simone." Imara's eyes still danced with mirth. "You're just not selling me on the dating scene. Why would anyone keep putting themselves through that torture?"

Simone sighed. "Not everyone can be like you, Imara. Some of us want a loving partner and a family. I want what Jada and Ronny have."

Jada wrapped an arm around Simone's shoulder. "Don't worry. The perfect man for you is out there somewhere. God will bring you two together at the right time."

"You're right." Simone smiled. "Look how He brought you and Ronny together when you weren't even looking. Guess I'll just have to keep sorting through frogs till I find my prince."

"Don't you mean snakes?" Imara snickered.

At Simone's glare, Imara sobered. "I'm sorry for being the dating grinch. If love is what you want, I'm rooting for you."

As Jada spent the evening laughing and talking with her friends, she thought about their advice and her life with Ronny. They were right, Ronny was a good man, and she was blessed to have him. Their romance might not be off the charts, but at least he wasn't toting snakes around in his pocket. In the grand scheme of things, her relationship with Ronny was...not horrible. She just wished that he were more

supportive. And being more romantic and spontaneous wouldn't hurt either.

Crochet made her happy. It was her dream. Why couldn't he see that? Well, she would just have to remind him how much this crochet business meant to her. She would knock these costume designs out of the park. Once Ronny saw how good she was, and how well she could juggle crochet and the girls, he would be begging her to share her talent with the rest of the world.

Jada smiled to herself as design ideas raced through her head. By the time she left Imara's apartment, her fingers were practically itching to grab a skein of yarn and turn her daydreams into works of art.

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Chapter Five

You made it!” Derrick rose from the booth and pulled Jada into a hug.

Surprised by the contact, Jada stood stiff and frozen in his arms. “Um...yeah. Sorry I’m late,” she mumbled.

“No worries. I’m just glad you could meet me here on such short notice.” Derrick pulled away leaving the fresh scent of his cologne behind him.

Jada blinked. Were business hugs normal? Derrick’s smile was friendly, without even a hint of flirtation. This must be normal. Jada scolded herself for being so socially awkward. After all these years, she still felt ill at ease during normal social interactions. Still, she was determined to get her business off the ground. Who cared if Derrick was handsome and smelled nice? Not her. She was happily married. Well... married.

That thought gave Jada pause. She had never had to remind herself that she was married before. What was wrong with her? She really was overreacting because of this simple business deal. She would just have to pull herself together and act like the professional she knew she could be.

She glanced up to see Derrick staring at her with a puzzled smile.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Nothing.” He shook his head. “You were just muttering to yourself, that’s all.”

Jada's eyes grew wide. "Really?"

"Mhmm," Derrick hummed. "Something about me smelling nice and you being married?"

Oh no. Jada didn't know where to look in her embarrassment. If the ground opened beneath her, she would happily dive into the hole.

Derrick gave her arm a gentle shake. "Hey," he soothed. "It's okay. Besides, it's not every day a talented woman complements me on my smell."

Was he being nice or enjoying her embarrassment? The humor dancing in his eyes answered her question. "Shut up," Jada gritted out.

"That's better." Derrick grinned and gestured to the empty seat across from him. "Now that your power of speech has returned, why don't you sit down and show me your designs like the almost happily married professional you are."

He heard that part too? Jada stifled a groan and glared at him. He responded by winking at her. Winking! He was enjoying this!

Jada sat down with a huff. "For your information, I *am* happily married. I'm just a little nervous about this meeting and I guess my mind is rambling."

"Of course." Derrick folded his arms and leaned back in the booth with a smug smile on his face. "And what about my irresistible smell?"

"That's it. I'm leaving." Jada snatched up her purse and scooted out of the booth.

Derrick jumped up and stayed her with a hand on her arm. "Hey, hold on. I'm sorry. I was being a jerk." His eyes still twinkled, but he looked contrite.

Jada eyed him suspiciously before sinking back into her seat. "No more teasing? Just business?"

"Scout's honor." Derrick held up three fingers. A smile played around his lips before he added, "Not that I've ever been in the Boy Scouts."

Jada had to laugh at Derrick's sense of humor and found herself relaxing into the booth. She looked around the Chinese restaurant. "So why did you want to meet here instead of at the theater?"

"I've been at the theater since early this morning. I figured a change of scenery and some lunch would do me good." He looked around. "Plus, I've heard this place has the best Chinese dumplings. Have you been here before?"

"Nope." Jada shook her head.

"Really? I heard this was a popular date spot around here."

"I wouldn't know," Jada scoffed. "The only place Ronny ever takes me is Pizza Palace."

Derrick's brow wrinkled. "You mean that dingy hole in the wall on Main Street?"

"That's the one." Jada suppressed a sigh and fiddled with her napkin.

"Huh." Derrick frowned. "If I were married to a woman like you, I'd take her somewhere more upscale. Then again, I haven't been in town that long enough to visit Pizza Palace. Is the food there really just that good?"

Jada stared at him. She appreciated his empathy, but her conscience pricked her. Maybe she shouldn't be discussing her dating habits with her new boss. She didn't feel right about letting him take a swipe at her husband.

She sat up straighter in the booth. "Actually, they serve the best hamburger pizza I've ever tasted. That's why we go there so often. It's one of my favorite places."

"Riiiiight." Derrick stretched out the word with a skeptical drawl.

Maybe Jada had tried to oversell the Pizza Palace. It was time to change topics. She poured herself a glass of water from the pitcher on the table and took a sip. "You said you haven't been here long. Where are you from?"

"Well, I've been all over, but spent the last three years living in New York."

Jada was impressed. She'd always wanted to go to New York. "Really? What was it like there? I've always dreamed of going to the fashion shows."

"I'm not surprised." Derrick smiled at her. "You clearly have a flair for fashion."

Jada ignored the thrill that shot through her at his complement. "What did you do in New York? Were you a director?"

Derrick shook his head. "Nothing quite so grand. I did get a couple of minor acting roles after college, but most of my time was spent working backstage. Then last year, when I wasn't moonlighting as a waiter, I worked as a personal assistant for Andrew Tennyson."

Andrew Tennyson? The name rang a bell. "Didn't he win a Tony award for best musical last year?"

"Yes. It was his recommendation that helped me get this job."

"That's impressive." Jada had never met anyone who worked as a director on Broadway before. Well, who worked as an assistant to a director on Broadway. "Wait a minute. Are you saying that you've never directed a play before?"

Derrick shrugged his shoulders and gave a sheepish smile. "Technically....you're right. But I did study theater in college, and I've wanted to be a director ever since I was a child."

Sensing a story, Jada stared at Derrick and waited for him to continue.

"You might not believe it, but I wasn't always this handsome, great smelling, well put together man you see here today. I used to be a bit of a loser."

"No!" Jada gasped in mock surprise, and then burst into laughter when Derrick stuck his tongue out at her.

"Brat," He muttered with a grin before continuing his story. "Anyway, I was an awkward kid who didn't really fit in anywhere and didn't have any friends. I didn't even have any hobbies or interests to distract me from how pathetic my life

was. Then one day, my school took us on a field trip to see a touring production of *Les Misérables*. It was like a light switch flipped on inside of me. It was my first play, but I knew I wanted to spend the rest of my life in that environment.” He shrugged. “And here I am.”

Jada stared at him. This vulnerable version of Derrick was mesmerizing. She leaned forward and rested her chin in her hand. “You sound just like me. I was a bit of a loner as a child, and I found my passion through crochet.”

Derrick gave Jada a warm smile. “I knew there was a reason I was drawn to you. We’re kindred spirits when it comes to our art. We both need it to feel alive.”

Jada hadn’t thought of crochet like that before, but Derrick’s words rang true. She loved the way Derrick saw her as a true artist and understood her need to be seen through her art. “Well, don’t worry about not having any experience. It’s your first time directing and my first time selling my designs, so this play is a fresh start for both of us.”

Derrick raised his water glass in a toast. “And let’s not forget it’s also your Grace’s first time in a leading role.”

Jada clinked her glass to his. “How could I forget that?”

Jada looked around. It was taking a while for the waitress to get their order. As they waited, Derrick asked Jada a few more questions.

“Why haven’t you thought of selling your designs before?” He gestured towards her shawl which was made from sparkling green yarn interwoven with clear beads. “Your work is pretty stunning. If I had your talent, I would have at least put up an online store.”

“Thank you. Ronny wanted me to homeschool our girls, and there wasn’t time for much else, so…” Jada ducked her head unsure of how to continue without besmirching her husband in front of Derrick. Although the look of pity in his eyes told her that she had already revealed too much.

Derrick seemed to sense her discomfort and pulled her out of her thoughts with an encouraging smile. “What’s important

is that you are getting your chance to shine now. And more importantly, we're helping each other. You're helping my play by making fabulous costumes, and I'm helping you by letting you make those costumes.

Jada rolled her eyes and joked, "Yeah. We're a regular duo."

"I think we make a pretty good team," Derrick agreed.

A team. It had been a while since Jada felt like she belonged to a team. She used to feel as if she and Imara were a team, but that had changed when she met Ronny. They were still as close as sisters, but they weren't necessarily a team. Ronny had been her partner for a while. But somewhere along the line he had stopped supporting her. He worked hard and supported her financially, but he had stopped believing in her and her dreams.

And why wouldn't he? Jada knew that most people saw crochet as a hobby reserved for elderly spinsters. It might not be hip or life changing, but it ignited a fire in her. She had thought that Ronny saw that and loved that. Turns out, he didn't. Turns out, they weren't the teammates that Jada had hoped they would be. And living without a teammate, without someone who believed in you, was lonely.

Jada was struck with the realization that what she had thought was boredom in her marriage might actually be loneliness. She hadn't seen that until Derrick offered her something that she hadn't had in a long time. A teammate. A partner who believed in her, even if it was only for the duration of the play.

As her husband, Ronny was supposed to be her partner in life, and she would have to find some way to get them back on the same page. In the meantime, it was nice to have a supportive business partner in Derrick.

"I agree. We make a great team." Jada grinned and held out her hand for a handshake. "Put it there, partner."

Derrick clasped her hand in his and held it for several long moments, filling Jada with warmth and reassurance. "I'm glad

you agree; we make a good pair.”

“Yes. Well.” Jada cleared her throat and slowly withdrew her hand, suddenly uncomfortable with the intensity of Derrick’s gaze. “I should probably show you my designs before we make any permanent business pacts.”

Jada and Derrick spent the next hour eating a delicious meal of fried rice, beef and broccoli, and steamed chicken dumplings, while they discussed design ideas. As Derrick poured over Jada’s sketches, he shared his vision for the play. Jada couldn’t help but be impressed with Derrick’s passion and talent. He seemed to have a deep knowledge of the play and was able to give Jada tips on how to make each costume match the character.

By the end of their lunch meeting, Jada’s initial enthusiasm for the play had grown tenfold. With Derrick at the helm, the play was bound to be a success, and her designs would finally get the publicity she had always dreamed of.

“If I wasn’t excited to work with you before, I definitely am now,” Jada said as she shuffled her designs into her satchel and stood to leave.

“Oh?” Derrick stood and tossed a twenty-dollar tip on the table. “You had reservations about working with me. I’ve been looking forward to this partnership since you first slapped me in the theater.”

Jada laughed at Derrick’s pouty face and shook her head, causing her twists to bounce. “I can’t believe you’re bringing that up! And it’s not that I didn’t want to work with you. I was just a little nervous about whether my work was good enough.”

“Let me assure you, your designs blew me away. I know they will help bring this production to the next level. I knew you had talent when I saw that amazing sweater you were wearing when we first met, but I can already tell that these new designs are going to make that sweater look like an old rag.”

Jada beamed with pleasure as Derrick escorted her outside and walked her to her car. She had received plenty of complements on her crochet over the years, but those had been from family members and friends. Somehow, Derricks complements were different. Special. It felt wonderful to have a professional partner who saw her talent and believed in her.

As she unlocked her car and climbed inside, she felt as if she was floating on air. “I can’t wait to start working on these costumes.”

Derrick leaned down to smile at her through the open car window. “Good. Because I can’t wait to see you working on the costumes at our first rehearsal next week.”

Jada started to return his smile, but then frowned in confusion. “What? Why would you see me at rehearsals? I was planning on making the costumes at home.”

Derrick shook his head. “That won’t work. I need you to be there so you can take in the set and the environment we are trying to create. You know, really feel the time period. Working in the theater will help you to get to know the characters and match your designs to their personalities.” When he saw Jada’s hesitation, he added, “You have to drop Grace off for rehearsal anyway. Just bring your stuff with you and crochet in the theater. I’ll even get you a special table and a plaque that says, ‘costume designer’ and place it right next to my director’s chair. What do you say?”

Jada chewed on her bottom lip as she thought about Derrick’s proposal. Working at the theater had never been a part of her plans. Rehearsals were scheduled to meet after school three days a week and every other Saturday. That would mean leaving Mercy home alone for long periods of time. It would also mean that she wouldn’t be home with Ronny on Saturdays, and she knew he wouldn’t be happy about that. He was already reluctant to have her take on the extra responsibility of designing costumes and making them at home. She could only imagine his response when she told him that she would be spending countless hours at the theater each week.

Still, she didn't see how she could tell Derrick no. She had already agreed to take the job, and apparently working at the theater was a part of that job. It would give her the chance to support Grace as she rehearsed for her first major role. Parents weren't allowed to attend rehearsals, but this meant that Jada would get a front row seat. In reality, Derrick was offering her a gift that most of the other parents would be jealous of. Plus, if she was being honest, she was curious to see Derrick in action. What was he like as a director in his element?

“You know what? Okay.”

“Okay?” Derrick echoed as his eyebrows rose in surprise. “You'll work with me at rehearsals?”

Jada smiled and nodded. It was time she stop worrying about what Ronny wanted and start following her own dreams. And if that meant spending her Saturdays and weeknights at the theater working on costumes instead of being a full-time homemaker for Ronny, then so be it.

“That's great!” Derrick's smile warmed Jada from the inside and reassured her that she had made the right decision. “I'll see you at the next rehearsal...partner.” Derrick cocked his pointer fingers at her like two pistols, making her laugh at his antics.

Jada was still smiling as she drove home. She could hardly believe how much her life had changed over the past few days. She had gone from a listless existence to being a bona fide business woman with a boss who believed in her. Derrick had given her the push she needed to pursue a dream that she had thought was lost forever. Thanks to him, her life had a renewed sense of purpose. Crochet was her gift, and she was finally going to share it with the world.

Chapter Six

You agreed to do *what?*?”

“Ronny, can we *please* stop fighting about this and just enjoy date night?” Jada couldn’t believe that Ronny was having a public argument with her at Pizza Palace.

When they had slipped into their usual booth, he had asked her his standard opening question of, “So, how was your day?” Jada hadn’t expected her answer to make him lose it in a public restaurant.

What was so bad about having lunch with her boss? Since when did she need Ronny’s permission to eat out at a Chinese restaurant? By the time she got around to telling him that she would be doing most of her work at the theater, they were both ready to explode.

“Jada, you’re telling me that you went out for lunch with another man at a restaurant that is known to be a spot where men take desperate women to soften them up before trying to get in their pants? Is that what you’re telling me?”

Jada was incredulous. “What is wrong with you? So what if the restaurant is a popular date spot? I didn’t go there for a date. I went there for work.”

“With another man.”

“Another man who I am working with. *Remember?* Since when am I not allowed to go out for lunch?”

“Since when do you even need to have a job?” Ronny shot back. “Jada, baby, I make good money. I bust my butt every

day so my wife can stay home, and my girls can get a good education. You have everything you need. Why are we even talking about this?" When Jada didn't respond, his eyes narrowed. "I get it. This is about the Tremont Plaza deal. You heard that the deal didn't go through, and you're worried. Don't be. I've supported this family for thirteen years, and I will support you till the day I die. I've got this."

Jada's head spun. *What?* "You lost the plaza deal? I thought it was in the bag. I picked out a new kitchen island and farmhouse sink and everything."

Ronny's shoulders slumped. "I know, baby. They decided to go with a bigger company."

"A bigger company? But they practically promised you the deal. When did you find out?"

Ronny's eyes shifted away as he mumbled, "Last Tuesday."

Jada didn't know what to think. They had been counting on that extra money. Not just for redesigning the house and paying off business loans. The Plaza deal was supposed to be the next big step for Ronny's company. It was supposed to shoot them into the next tax bracket. And now they were back to the drawing board.

"What do you plan to do?"

Ronny gave her a smile that was missing his signature confidence, "We'll be fine. I still have my regular clients, and business is steady. We just have to postpone our remodeling plans." He shrugged. "Nothing I can't handle."

Poor Ronny. He had been so excited about the opportunity, and now it was all gone. The remodeling could wait. And it wasn't as if they were struggling. His business brought in enough money to cover their needs. She reached out and squeezed his hand. "It's their loss. We didn't need that deal anyway. Besides, I'm sure God has an even better deal out there for you."

At her words, Ronny sat up straighter, like a withered plant that had been refreshed by a noon rain. "Thank you, baby."

Your trust means a lot to me. I don't want you to worry about bills or money. Like I said, I can provide everything we need."

"I know." Jada smiled.

"I appreciate you stepping up and trying to help out with bills, but that's my job. You don't need to take this theatre job to make extra money. We're fine. Text Derrick and let him know you don't need his little job."

Jada pulled her hand away. *Little job?* Just when she thought Ronny was being sweet, he had to go and ruin things. Is that why he thought she wanted the job? To help out with bills? He really didn't understand her at all. She ground her teeth together and tried to hold back her frustration.

There it was again. The idea that she should give up her dreams and be eternally grateful to him because he was the breadwinner and earned good money. The idea that his business was important and hers was just a little job that didn't matter. "Ronny." Jada leaned forward. Her eyes pleading with him to understand. "It's not about the money. It's about me having a dream for my own life."

Ronny scoffed. "Crochet is not a dream. It's a hobby."

Jada reared back like she had been slapped. "A hobby?" She shook her head. "How can you say that? You know I always wanted to start a crochet business. You've known it since before we even got married. In fact, when we first met, you encouraged me to work on my designs. Then we get married and suddenly crochet is just a hobby?"

"Things change. We have a family now. Two beautiful kids. They should be our priority."

"*Your* plans didn't change. You're running your own plumbing company just like you always wanted," Jada accused.

Ronny just tilted his head and stared at Jada as if she had two heads. Jada decided to change tactics.

"Look, you wanted Grace to branch out and try new things. She wanted to be in the play, and my costume designs will help to make her play special. Right?"

A raised eyebrow was Ronny's only response. Jada took it as assent and plowed ahead. "So I had to meet with the director to discuss my designs. It was a business lunch. No big deal. And if I have to work at the theater every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Saturday, that's a small price to pay for Gracie. She really is excited about getting a lead role."

Ronny stared at her a moment before narrowing his eyes and leaning forward. "Run that last part by me again?"

Jada feigned innocence. "What? Didn't I tell you that Grace got the role of Am-"

"Not that part." Ronny gritted out. "The part where you spend all your free time at the theater."

"Ronny, it's only for a few months." Jada gave him what she hoped was a winning smile.

"Who is going to watch Mercy while you're gone? When are you going to prep your lesson for the girls and do stuff around the house?"

Jada rolled her eyes. "You're overreacting. Mercy is turning thirteen next week. She can be by herself for a few hours."

Ronny shook his head. "Something isn't right here. Why do you even need to work at the theater? I thought you were going to do all your designs from home."

"Derrick said he needs me there. I think it's just the way the theater works."

At the mention of Derricks name, Ronny's eyes grew stormy. "I'm beginning to really not like this Derrick guy. He's been disrespectful and I'm not going to put up with much more from him."

Jada's brow wrinkled in confusion. "Disrespectful?"

"Yes," Ronny spat out. "Taking another man's *wife* out to a pick-up joint in broad daylight. Taking you away from your home. Demanding that you crochet at the theater, probably so he can ogle you while you do a job that we both know you could do just as well from home."

“Aww, that’s sweet.” Jada teased. “You think I’m so irresistible that every man just wants to be alone with me.”

Ronny rubbed the back of his head. “You know you’re beautiful. I just don’t want anyone taking advantage of you.”

Jada’s heart melted a little as she saw the sincerity in Ronny’s eyes. He really was just looking after her. The problem was that she didn’t need looking after. At least not the type of looking after that kept her locked inside her house all day. Besides, Derrick wasn’t interested in her like that. They were just friends, right?

Jada tried to shake off the misgivings she felt as she contemplated her relationship with Derrick. She *had* thought that he was flirting with her when they first met. In fact, she had been so sure, that she had slapped him. But that had been a misunderstanding. And yes, he had made a few innuendoes and had taken a couple of jabs at Ronny, but that was just his playful personality. There was absolutely nothing wrong with her friendship with Derrick.

Unlike Ronny, Derrick actually believed in her. Right now, it felt like he was the only person in her corner. Ronny had no right to be upset with her for wanting to make her lifelong dreams come true.

“Ronny, you don’t have anything to worry about. Derrick is just my partner.”

“Your *partner*?” Ronny’s eyebrows shot up. “I thought he was just your boss.”

Jada realized that she may have made a tactical blunder with her word choice and tried to backtrack. “Well,” she hemmed. “We are working together and helping each other with our goals, so he’s like a business partner.”

“Woman, *I’m* supposed to be your partner.”

“You are, but...”

“But what?”

“Well, lately, it seems like we’re going in different directions. Instead of supporting me, you keep putting up

roadblocks.”

“That’s because you’re being selfish and going off on your own instead of following *our* plans.” He gestured between them with his hand. “I’m not trying to make you feel bad, but Jada, we agreed that you would stay home and homeschool the girls. You agreed to take care of the home while I work to provide for this family.”

“That wasn’t my plan. That was yours!” Jada protested, but Ronny just pressed on.

“*You* agreed to this. *We* were partners building this life together. Everything was going well. We have two beautiful daughters, a house, my plumbing business is going well. And all of a sudden you are abandoning everything to build new dreams with some new *partner* you just met. And I’m supposed to be okay with that?”

Jada cringed. When he put it like that, it did sound selfish. Jada was struck by the sudden revelation that Ronny was hurt by her decision to pursue her goals. She was also beginning to realize that they had an audience.

She gave a tight smile to the woman sitting at the table across from them who was staring at them as if they were lead actors in an addictive telenovela. At Jada’s pointed glare, the woman averted her gaze. Jada shook her head and turned her attention back to Ronny.

“Honey,” Jada’s voice was gentle as she reached across the table and covered his hand with her own. “I’m sorry. I’m not abandoning our plan or giving up on what you’ve worked for. I’m just trying to use the talent that God has given me. This play allows me to do that, and it’s only for a few months.”

Ronny sighed with frustration. “I’m not stupid, Jada. This is more than just a play and just a few months. I see that look you get whenever you talk about crochet. You want to upend our lives so you can start a crochet brand and become a world-famous designer.”

“Ronny, it’s not like that. Nothing will change.”

Ronny raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Baby, you haven’t even started working yet, and you just told me that you’re leaving Mercy home by herself several days a week. What do you think it will be like if your business really starts growing?” He scrubbed his hand down his face. “I don’t understand you. We’re happy. We don’t need the extra money or the stress. Why mess with a good thing?”

Jada chewed her bottom lip. Truth be told, she didn’t like the idea of leaving Mercy home alone for hours at a time. She had just promised Mercy that they would spend more time together, and now her new schedule would interfere with their mother-daughter time on Wednesdays. Her eyes grew wide, and she bit back a groan as a new realization hit her. She was supposed to have gone to the farmers market with Mercy earlier today. Instead, she had gone out to lunch with Derrick. Mercy never even mentioned it. Maybe she forgot too? Or maybe she was just too sweet to complain. Knowing Mercy, it was probably the latter. Jada wanted to kick herself for forgetting. She would have to find a way to make it up to Mercy.

Maybe Ronny did have a point. Maybe it would be more difficult than she thought to juggle parenting with a job. But this was important to her, so she would find a way to make it work. Why couldn’t Ronny be supportive and at least meet her halfway? “I get what you’re saying, but I’ve stayed home all these years and supported you. Crochet is my dream. It makes me feel alive, and I need to see where this goes. Can’t you just support me on this?”

Ronny threw himself back against the booth in disgust. “Seriously Jada? How am I supposed to feel when my wife tells me that *crochet* is what makes her feel alive? Not her children. Not the home I’ve given her. Not her friends. And definitely not me. Crochet?” He spat the word out like a curse.

Jada stared at Ronny as she struggled to find the right words. How could she explain to him that she hadn’t been happy in a long, long time? She had felt trapped inside her own home. She went through the motions of being a good wife and mother, but deep down, she felt like a failure.

“Ronny,” Jada’s voice was hesitant. “I love you and the girls so much. But I’ve been feeling restless, and a little... empty. Ever since I was a child, crochet has made me feel special. It’s all I ever wanted to do, and I thought you understood that and wanted to support me. Then we had the girls and...well, things changed. I feel like I’ve put my life on hold for thirteen years, but something needs to change.”

She took a deep breath and forged on. “This play is giving me a chance to try again. And I *really* need this chance. I also need my husband and best friend to be okay with this. Can you do that for me? Please?” Jada’s voice broke and she blinked back tears as she watched a muscle in Ronny’s jaw twitch.

After what seemed like forever, Ronny finally spoke. When he did, his voice was a hoarse quality that Jada had never heard before. “I didn’t realize you were so miserable. I guess I always thought...”

His voice trailed off, but then he shook himself and gave Jada an overly bright smile. “Forget it.” He shook his head swiftly as if clearing away cobwebs. “I’m being silly. You love crochet, and if it makes you happy, you should design the costumes and start your own business.”

“Really?!?” Jada squealed. She could hardly believe Ronny’s sudden change of heart.

“Really.” Ronny nodded. “Just one question. Is it crochet that makes you happy, or is it that new director?”

He tapped the checkered tablecloth while he waited for her answer, but Jada noticed that his eyes never left her face. Jada’s heart cracked at the knowledge that she had caused him to doubt her.

“Ronny, I love you. Derrick is just a business partner.”

“And this isn’t about me losing the plaza deal and not making as much money?”

Jada groaned. “For the last time, I don’t care about that.”

Ronny nodded and reached across the table to give her had a reassuring squeeze. “I know that. I’m sorry I even asked.”

He smiled at her. “What do you say we get out of here, maybe check out that new ice cream spot down the street?”

Jada laughed with relief. “You won’t hear any complaints from me.”

She could hardly believe her good fortune. Ronny had agreed to let her pursue her dreams. It seemed as if he finally understood her.

As they walked towards the exit, the nosy woman from the nearby table winked at her. Jada strangled a groan. The entire restaurant had heard their marital spat. She made a mental note to have a conversation with Ronny about finding a new Wednesday night date spot. She had the feeling that this date night would give the staff and patrons gossip fodder for weeks to come.

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Chapter Seven

You go on to rehearsal, sweetie. I need to stop by the office to pick up my pass card.”

Jada leaned down and gave Grace a peck on the cheek before she squirmed away and half ran, half skipped down the hallway. Jada smiled fondly and shook her head. Grace had been so excited about the first day of rehearsals that she had been bouncing off the walls all week. She had spent hours dancing around the house singing every song from the *Little Women* soundtrack. Jada had listened to Grace belt out “The Most Amazing Thing” so many times over the past few days that by now she had the entire song memorized.

While she had originally been reluctant to work at the theater, Jada was now grateful for the opportunity that Derrick had given her. Unlike the other parents who would have to wait until opening night to see their children on stage, Jada would get to support Grace throughout the entire rehearsal process. And now that Ronny was onboard with her new schedule, she could do it guilt free.

Derrick had texted her the night before telling her to stop by the theater office for an employee pass. While she was technically an independent contractor, the pass would allow her to enter and roam the theater unimpeded.

Jada made her way down the hall and greeted the office manager. “Hi, Mrs. Brown.”

Mrs. Brown was a heavysset woman in her mid-sixties with smooth, almond-brown skin, and light gray, loose natural curls

that poked out from the front of her brightly colored head wrap. She was the organ player at Jada's church, and while they were not exactly friends, they had always been on good terms with each other.

Mrs. Brown looked up from her computer and returned Jada's greeting. "Jada! How've you been?"

"I'm good. Just here to pick up my employee card."

"That's right!" Mrs. Brown seemed to visibly perk up in her chair. "Mr. Smith came in first thing this morning to remind me to have a card ready for our new costume designer."

"Mr. Smith?" Jada asked.

"You know. The new director?"

"Oh." Jada smiled. "You mean Derrick."

"Derrick?" Mrs. Brown's eyebrows shot up. "You better not let him hear you call him by his Christian name. He insists that everyone around here call him by his last name as a sign of respect."

"Really?"

"Mhmm." Mrs. Brown nodded. "He practically threw a fit when the music director called him by his first name. Said he wouldn't stand for familiarity in a professional setting."

"That's strange."

"You're telling me!" Mrs. Brown hooted. "He's talented, but a bit too high strung for my liking."

Jada didn't know what to make of this information. Derrick had never asked her to call him by his last name. Perhaps that was because she hadn't officially started working with him yet? She made a mental note to call him Mr. Smith going forward.

"So," Mrs. Brown leaned forward with a conspiratorial grin. "I heard your Gracie snagged the role of Amy right out from under Heather Taylor."

Jada smiled, feeling pride in her daughter's achievements. "Yes, she—" Jada paused, and her brow wrinkled in confusion. "Heather Taylor?"

"Mmhmm." Mrs. Brown's grin grew. "Now I know it's mean, but seeing Heather lose that role and get bumped to the ensemble just about made my day. Heather and her mama get on my last nerve." She gave an exaggerated eye roll before continuing. "You know how Mrs. Taylor is on the choir at church? Well, she always wants the best solos, and that soft choir director is always giving them to her. Heather is the same way. She's been the lead in the last three plays, and rumor had it that she was going around talking 'bout how she was going to get the role of Amy." Mrs. Brown chuckled and touched Jada's forearm. "I can't tell you how glad it makes me that Mr. Smith gave the role to Grace instead."

"Wow," Jada replied. "I had no idea that Heather was up for that part."

"Oh yes." Mrs. Brown leaned back in her chair, still smiling. "Now she just slinks around here like a pitiful alley cat."

Jada thought back to her first meeting with Derrick. She could have sworn he told her that Grace was the only person auditioning for the role of Amy. She had thought that it seemed strange at the time. Had he lied to her, or did he just not realize that Heather was also auditioning and already considered the role her own?

Jada shook her head and chided herself for being silly. What did it matter if Heather had auditioned? Grace had gotten the role, so she was the better performer.

Jada returned Mrs. Brown's smile. "Well, Grace is so excited about the part, and Ronny and I are very proud of her."

"You should be. Heather has a bit of a reputation in local theaters. Snagging this role could really open some doors for Grace!"

Jada chit chatted with Mrs. Brown for a few more minutes before glancing at the clock on the office wall. "I should head

over to the rehearsal.”

“Of course.” Mrs. Brown slid an employee card with Jada’s name on it across the desk. “You don’t want to keep Mr. Smith waiting.”

Jada thanked her and headed towards the door. She stopped when she heard Mrs. Brown calling after her.

“Jada, I’m so happy you’ll be working here. I’ve seen your shawls and sweaters at church and have always been impressed by your talent. It’s about time you shared that gift with the world.”

Jada was surprised to find herself blinking back tears. “Thank you,” she whispered before turning and hurrying out of the office.

As she headed towards the auditorium, Jada thought about Mrs. Brown’s words. Mrs. Brown, a woman of God and a member of her church, had noticed her talent and had been waiting for her to use it. Surely this was a sign from God that her life was finally heading in the right direction. Any lingering doubts that Jada might have had about her decision melted away. She had felt guilty about having to leave Mercy at home for several hours, but this was confirmation that she was doing what God wanted her to do.

She hitched her crochet bag up on her shoulder, took a deep breath, and entered the auditorium.

Jada had expected to see the cast up on stage, but she had not expected to see them sitting in a circle while Derrick stood in the middle giving them a lecture of sorts. The entire cast sat captive as Derrick spoke of the importance of professionalism, commitment, and dedication for everyone involved in the production. He laid out his expectations and assured the cast that there would be repercussions for anyone who failed to take their role seriously.

Jada stood at the back of the auditorium and watched. She was impressed by the passion and command Derrick showed as a director. Truth be told, he was actually a little intimidating.

After spending a few more minutes reviewing logistics, Derrick clapped his hands together. “Alright my young thespians, go grab your scripts and let’s start our table read.”

As students darted off stage and rifled through their backpacks, Jada made her way to the front of the auditorium. When Derrick saw her approach, a smile lit up his face. He jumped off the stage and jogged down the aisle to meet her. “Jada, I’m glad you actually made it.”

Jada returned his smile and gave a single shoulder shrug. “I didn’t realize it was optional.”

“Your husband is alright with this then?”

“He’s coming around.” Jada glanced at the stage. “So, Mr. Smith, where do you want me?”

Derrick’s grin turned mischievous. “Where do I *want* you?”

Jada gave him a playful slap on the shoulder. “Come on, Mr. Smith. Don’t be an adolescent. You know what I meant.”

Derrick’s smile fell away and his brow furrowed. “Why do you keep calling me Mr. Smith?”

“Oh!” The question surprised Jada. “I was told that you were very particular about people using your Christian name at work.”

“Call me Derrick.”

“Really? I thought—”

“*You*, call me Derrick.” Derrick’s voice was firm, and his stare was intense.

Jada tilted her head to the side and stared at him in disbelief. Was he angry at her? For using his name?

“Oookay,” Jada replied slowly. “I just thought you wanted everyone you worked with to call you Mr. Smith.”

“I do,” Derrick agreed. “But I can make an exception for my favorite business partner, can’t I?”

Jada smiled as understanding dawned. This must be one of the perks of being Derrick's teammate. "Okay, Derrick."

As Derrick's smile returned and his shoulders relaxed, Jada realized how much this partnership must mean to him. It was more than just having someone make cool costumes for the play. It was about knowing that he had someone in his corner who was rooting for him and who he could trust. Jada felt honored to be that person.

"Come on." Derrick grabbed Jada's hand and began pulling her to the front of the theater. "Let me show you what I have set up for you."

Jada used her free hand to stop her crochet bag from sliding down her shoulder as she followed after Derrick.

"Um...Mom?"

Jada turned and was startled to see Grace and several other cast members staring intently at her and Derrick.

"Yes sweetie?" Jada replied, looking at Grace.

"What are you doing?"

Jada belatedly realized that Grace was staring at her hand which was still clutching Derrick's. She quickly pulled her hand away. "Derrick was just showing me where I will be working."

"Derrick?" Grace repeated.

"Mr. Smith," Jada amended before feeling Derrick stiffen beside her. "I mean Derrick," she corrected again. This was getting confusing.

"Okay," Grace replied hesitantly.

Jada didn't have time to worry about Grace's strange behavior. Derrick took her elbow and propelled her down the aisle. "Alright everyone! Up on the stage. Table read starts in one minute."

He led Jada to the front of the stage and pointed to a small folding table and an office chair with a plush support pillow.

“This is your official workspace, right next to me.” He gestured to the director’s chair that sat to the left of her table.

“Thank you.” Jada smiled. “Is there anything special you want me to do while I’m here?”

“Nope.” Derrick shook his head. “Just sit here and work your crochet magic. From time to time I may give you some notes on the characters that you can include in the designs. You should also follow the rehearsal to get your own sense of the characters.”

Jada looked up at Derrick. “Couldn’t I have done most of that from home?”

“Humor me.” Derrick winked at her before backing away and hopping onstage.

Jada shook her head before sitting down at her table with a huff. Had that man really insisted that she work at the theater for this? She could have been at home with Mercy if this was all there was to it. Jada contemplated heading home just to prove a point, but decided to stick it out and see what happened. Derrick had asked her to humor him. Perhaps there was more to her job than met the eye.

After listening to Derrick explain the purpose of a table read, and watching the students as they read the first few lines of the play, Jada took out her yarn and design book, and got to work.

She decided to start with Marmee’s character. She had chosen a roving yarn in rich indigo blue to capture the steady matron of the March family. She planned on using a simple shell pattern and finishing off the piece with a silver clasp at the neck. She wanted the design to capture Marmee’s dignity and strength while still conveying her elegance.

Jada pulled out her favorite crochet hook, a hand carved wooden hook in size J that slid through yarn like butter. It had been a gift from Ronny. A few years ago, she had been working on a shawl for Mercy and had made an offhand comment that crocheting for long periods of time hurt her hands. A few days later, he surprised her with a set of wooded

ergonomic crochet hooks. Jada hadn't even known that hooks like those existed, but Ronny had gone online and done research to find hooks that would be easy on her hands. The round balls in the center of the hook allowed her to hold the hook in a knife grip for hours without feeling even a hint of pain.

Jada cast a loop around her hook and began crocheting the base chain that would eventually form the neck of the cardigan. As the yarn flew through her fingers, she was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy. She thought of the book of Genesis and marveled at the fact that the first characteristic that was revealed about God in the Bible was that He was creative. He created the entire world and He created humans in His image. He also gifted His children with the desire and ability to create.

This reminder reassured Jada. Her ability to create, to take a skein of yarn and turn it into wearable art, was a gift from God. It would be sinful to continue to hide that gift away just because Ronny had some outdated idea about mothers staying home with their children. Wouldn't it?

As Jada brought her design to life, she listened to the table read. Even though the actors were simply sitting in a circle on the stage and reading their lines, Jada could still hear the emotion in their voices. It was almost like listening to radio theater. Although Jada was already familiar with the story of *Little Women*, she still found herself captivated by the tale and growing attached to the characters. If the cast could be this entertaining with just their voices, Jada could only imagine how amazing the final production was going to be.

Derrick had clearly done a great job of selecting the cast. Everyone seemed made for their role. The only person who seemed a little wooden on their delivery was Grace. Jada told herself that she was just being more critical of Grace's performance because she knew what Grace was capable of, and she could tell that Grace was nervous. And why wouldn't she be nervous? After all, this was Grace's first time on stage, so it was only natural that she would sound stilted next to seasoned actors.

However, as the table read went on, it became more and more clear that Grace just...wasn't that good. In almost every scene that Any's character appeared in, Grace stumbled over her lines as she galloped through them at an abnormally fast pace.

Jada sensed the mood of the cast beginning to shift. A few of the girls snickered, while others visibly held back laughter as Grace read her lines. Jada longed to race up to the stage and confront those girls, or at the very least, she wanted to comfort Grace who looked as if she was on the verge of tears. But Jada knew that her interference would only make things worse. As the read through continued, Jada became so distressed that she was in danger of crying herself.

Mercifully, she was able to catch Derrick's eye. After reading the panic and fury that painted Jada's face, he stepped in and paused the table read.

"Is something funny, ladies?" His calm voice held a touch of menace. "Because if something is funny, I'd like to be let in on the joke."

When he didn't receive a response, Derrick continued. "In this theater, we build each other up. Everyone here was once a new actor, and thankfully, you all had people there to show you patience and encourage you. This cast will spend a lot of time together. We will be like a family. If you have somehow deluded yourself into thinking that you are better than anyone here, or if you don't have the depth of character needed to support the members of this family, then get out." He speared Heather and her snickering friends with a glacial stare. "Because if I hear anyone doing anything to make their cast members uncomfortable, I will not hesitate to cut you from the play and give your role to a more worthy human being."

He stared at Heather a few more beats to let his words sink in before turning to Grace. "Gracie." His voice gentled as he squatted down in front of her. "You've got this. I know this is your first play, but when I saw you in the auditions, I saw Amy March. Don't think about anyone else. I want you to breathe and just have fun with the role. Okay?"

Grace gave a tentative smile and nodded.

“Everyone,” Derrick turned to face the rest of the cast. “Can we give some heartfelt encouragement to the newest actor among us?”

The theater erupted into an explosion of handclaps, stomping, and cheers as various cast members shouted out words of encouragement and support. Grace’s smile turned into a face-splitting grin as she stood up and gave a cute curtsy before flopping back down onto the floor.

“Alright people.” Derrick clapped his hands twice to regain everyone’s attention. “Let’s pick it back up at the top of Act 2.”

The cast quieted down and the table read continued without incident. Jada looked up and found Derrick looking at her with raised brows. She mouthed a silent, yet heartfelt, thank you which he returned with a smug smile before turning back to the cast.

Jada was about to turn her attention back to her work when she felt someone’s eyes on her. She looked around and saw Heather scowling at her and glancing between her and Derrick. *What was her problem? Who did she think she was, mocking Grace like that?* Jada could understand that Heather might be upset about losing out on the role of Amy. Truth be told, Grace’s win was a little surprising. Jada had been listening to Heather as she read her few lines, and she was good. Still, Derrick must have seen something special in Grace, and for that, Jada was grateful.

Jada decided to ignore Heather and focus on her crochet. If she became a problem for Grace, Derrick had just announced to the entire cast that he would kick out any troublemakers. And he seemed like the type of director to follow through on his word.

Grace did much better on the rest of the table read. She made one or two mistakes, but she seemed more relaxed and looked as if she were having fun with the role.

When the final line was read, Derrick gave a few notes and then dismissed the cast. Jada packed up her yarn and smiled at Grace as she hopped off the stage and skipped over. “You did great, sweetie. I was so proud of you.” Jada punctuated her remark with a side hug and a kiss on the top of Grace’s head.

“Yeah, but I messed up a lot.” Grace picked up a stray piece of yarn and began winding it around her forefinger.

“True, but you didn’t give up. You stuck with it and got a lot better.” Jada gave the end of one of Grace’s braids a playful tug. “By the time you married Laurie, I *believed* that you were Amy.”

“Really?”

“Really.” Jada nodded.

“Thanks Mom.” Gracie grinned. “Mr. Smith really helped me feel like I could do this.”

“He was pretty great,” Jada agreed.

“That’s high praise coming from you,” a deep voice sounded.

Jada jumped at the sound of Derrick’s voice. “Derrick!” She whirled around to find his face only a few inches away from her own. Jada took a few steps back. “That was an interesting rehearsal. It was nice to see you in action.” She stuffed the last of her materials into her crochet bag and lifted the handle. “Any costume notes for me?”

Derrick shook his head. “Not today, but maybe I could pick your brain over lunch tomorrow?”

“I can’t.” Jada gave an apologetic shrug. “Tomorrow’s Sunday, and it’s my oldest daughter’s birthday.”

“Yeah!” Grace chimed in. “We’re going to church, and then we’re having lunch with Auntie Imara at Bessie’s.”

“Bessie’s?” Derrick asked.

“Bessie’s Diner,” Jada clarified. “It’s Mercy’s favorite restaurant.”

Derrick inclined his head. “I don’t want to intrude on family time. We can always go over notes during rehearsals next week.”

“Thanks Derrick.” Jada gave him a grateful smile before wrapping an arm around Grace’s shoulder and heading for the door.

If today’s rehearsal was any indication of what the future held, she was going to enjoy working with Derrick.

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Chapter Eight

Happy birthday to you!” Jada’s table clapped wildly as the last warbling notes of the song died away, much to the relief of the cringing patrons at Bessie’s Diner. Jada knew that her family’s rowdy and off-key rendition of the song may have been jarring for the observers, but she couldn’t give much thought to that on her baby’s thirteenth birthday.

“I can’t believe my baby is a teenager!” Jada grinned as she held up her phone, ready to capture a picture of Mercy slicing the cake for her photo albums.

After Mercy cut her own gigantic slice of cake, a longstanding family tradition, Jada cut the rest of the cake and gave everyone a slice. She gave herself a thin slice and relaxed into her booth. She looked around at her husband, her daughters, and her two best friends. She was surrounded by her favorite people, and she planned to enjoy it.

Jada smiled as she watched Mercy lick frosting from her fork. They never did get around to rescheduling their mother-daughter dates, but Jada hoped that this party would make up for the fact that they hadn’t gotten to spend a lot of quality time together lately. Besides, Mercy hadn’t complained. Jada would just have to squeeze in some time to do something special when things were less hectic. In the meantime, she would make sure that Mercy’s birthday party was perfect.

Imara leaned over and gave Jada a shoulder bump. “So, how does it feel to be an old woman?”

“Excuse me?” Jada turned to take in her friend’s mischievous grin.

“You are now the mother of a teenager. You are officially an old woman.”

“Okay,” Jada scoffed. “Last I checked, we were the same age.”

“True, but I’m younger at heart.” Imara’s grin grew.

“Don’t listen to her,” Simone cut in. “You enjoy your children and your husband while you’re young. By the time Imara and I find husbands, I’ll probably be old enough to qualify for senior discounts at this place.”

“Speak for yourself. I’m not looking for a husband,” Imara retorted.

Jada ignored her and turned to Simone. “Still no luck with the online dating?”

Simone shook her head and gave a dramatic sigh. “Girl, it’s worse than ever. I could tell you stories that would make you fall on your knees and thank the Father you’ve got a man, but I’ll spare you the details.”

“Sure you don’t want to share?” Ronny leaned over and wrapped an arm around Jada’s shoulders. “I kind of like the idea of my wife thanking God for me.”

Jada smiled and gave him a playful poke in the ribs with her elbow. “Well, that will just have to wait because right now it’s time for—”

“Mr. Smith!” Grace yelled.

“No.” Jada frowned at her daughter’s antics. “I was going to say it’s time for presents.”

“It’s not every day I get called a present.”

Derrick’s words spoken in Jada’s left ear caused her to yelp with surprise as she jolted out from under Ronny’s arm. She twisted around to look at the man standing behind her.

“How do you keep sneaking up on me?” Jada snapped, irritated at his knack for catching her off guard.

“Maybe try being more aware of your surroundings.” Derrick’s voice shook with amusement. “I wasn’t sneaking up on you. You just don’t pay enough attention to what’s around you.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting anyone to sneak up behind me and whisper in my *ear*.” Jada glared at him.

Derrick merely shrugged. “The first rule of improv is to expect the unexpected.”

“Improv?” Jada stared at him. She noticed his eyes were bright and his lips twitched as if struggling to hold back a grin. Jada was tempted to stick her tongue out at him or make a silly face to draw out his smile. Somehow being around Derrick made her want to be more playful. Ronny used to make her feel that way. Jada frowned and brushed away the thought.

Derrick winked at her and then turned to greet the other members of the table. By this time, everyone, with the exception of Grace, was staring at him with bemused expressions. Derrick wisely chose to address his ally first.

“Hi Gracie.” Derrick grinned and gave her a chin lift. “Good to see my star actress again.”

“Hi Mr. Smith.” Grace returned his smile. “What are you doing here?”

“You and Jada told me what a great place this was yesterday, so I thought I’d give it a try. I didn’t think you’d be here at this time though. Didn’t you say you were going to church?”

“We did.” Gracie nodded. “We just went to the early service so we could have more time to celebrate Mercy’s birthday.”

“I see.” Derrick turned towards Mercy and flashed his brightest smile. “You must be the birthday girl! Happy birthday.”

“Thanks.” Mercy dipped her head shyly and pushed her uneaten cake around on her plate.

“I’m Ronny, Jada’s *husband*.” Jada did not have to be a mind reader to know that Ronny was not happy with Derrick’s intrusion. His lips pressed together into a hard line as he sized Derrick up.

“Nice to meet you.” Derrick’s tone was friendly and relaxed although he would have had to be blind not to notice the hostility radiating from Ronny. “Jada has told me so much about you. From what I gather, you’re a huge fan of her crochet....and of pizza.”

Jada’s eyes narrowed and she struggled to keep her mouth from dropping open. Did he really just say that? Although Derrick had delivered the line with a straight face and an air of sincerity, Jada knew him well enough to know that he was taking a swipe at Ronny’s lack of support and his devotion to Pizza Palace. Apparently, Ronny picked up on it too.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he challenged, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Nothing.” Derrick smiled easily. “Jada speaks very highly of you. You’re quite the romantic.”

“Right,” Ronny bit out. “Our family is having a *private* birthday celebration, so why don’t you take your little drama elsewhere?”

“Drama?” Derrick’s head tilted to the side and his smile took on a brittle quality.

“Isn’t that what you do? Prance around on stage all day? You don’t know anything about me or my family, so just go on back to playing make believe so my family and I can enjoy the rest of our day.”

Derrick held up his hands in front of him and took a step backwards. “Hey man, I just stopped by your table to say hi to Jada and wish your daughter happy birthday.” He craned his neck to look around Ronny and gave Jada a weak smile. “I’ll just see you at work tomorrow,” he said before turning around and walking towards an empty booth.

Jada watched him pick up his menu and peruse the brunch specials, seemingly unaffected by his encounter with Ronny.

She turned back to her table to find everyone staring at her.

“That was...weird,” Simone stated before taking a sip of her iced tea.

“Who was that creep?” Imara asked.

“He’s not a creep.” Jada felt the need to defend her friend. “That’s just Derrick. Remember, I told you about the new director from the theater.”

“That’s Derrick?” Imara’s eyebrows shot up. “He seemed way too familiar to be your boss.”

“He seemed like a punk.” Ronny crossed his arms in front of him and narrowed his eyes. “What would make him think he could walk over here and talk to me like that? And since when are you two friends?”

Jada shook her head. All she had wanted was to have a nice birthday celebration with her daughter. But thanks to Derrick and his big mouth, this was turning into a mess. What was his problem anyway? Why would he go out of his way to insult Ronny?

“I’m going to go talk to him.” Jada scooted out of the booth and stood up.

“Seriously, Jada?” Ronny had looked annoyed before, but Jada could see that he was quickly veering towards anger. She knew she should sit back down and open presents with Mercy, but she couldn’t let go of her desire to confront Derrick.

What was he thinking? Sneaking up behind her, whispering in her ear, and winking at her in front of her husband? That wasn’t exactly professional behavior. True, he did have a playful personality, and their relationship had never been strictly professional. But disrespecting Ronny crossed a line.

Jada held up a finger and gave Ronny what she hoped was a pacifying smile. “It will just take a minute.” She glanced at the rest of the table and tried to ignore the looks of incredulity on her friends’ faces. “You all have some more cake. We’ll do presents soon.”

With that, she turned and strode across the diner towards Derrick's booth. He looked up with an easy smile as she slid into the seat across from him. "Missed me already?"

Jada ignored his teasing and leaned towards him. "What was that?" she hissed.

"What?" The smile slid from Derrick's face, and he seemed genuinely confused.

"That stunt with my family. You know, where you flirted with me, made awkward small talk with my children, and insulted my husband. What was that?" Jada repeated. "And why are you even here?"

Derrick leaned back and gave her a pointed look. "I'm here because *someone* told me that this was a good place to get a decent meal."

"Don't give me that." Jada snapped. "You know exactly what I mean. Are you stalking me?"

At that, Derrick burst out laughing. "Jada, I love that you have such a high view of yourself. A lot of talented and beautiful women struggle with low self-esteem, but not you." Still chuckling, Derrick reached over and patted Jada's hand. "Seriously, Jada. Why would I be stalking you? I mean we're friends, and even though I'm an introvert, I never tire of your company. But I just saw you yesterday. And I'm going to see you again at rehearsals tomorrow. Do you honestly think I would come all the way here just to see you?"

Jada suddenly felt very foolish. Of course he hadn't come here just to see her. To cover her confusion, she blurted out the first thing that came to mind. "You're not an introvert!"

Derrick gave her a look that said he knew she was trying to change the subject. Thankfully, he decided to play along. "Actually, I am. Despite my acting talent, devastating good looks, and natural magnetism, I'm an introvert at heart." He winked at Jada, and she tried to suppress a smile while she rolled her eyes. He really was too good at charming her out of her bad moods.

“All jokes aside,” he continued. “I’m not really comfortable around people. I’m actually a bit awkward sometimes, especially when I meet new people. I wasn’t too bad with your family, was I?”

Jada’s heart melted when she saw the vulnerability in Derrick’s eyes. Despite all the confidence he exuded, he really was just an awkward introvert. As someone who had spent most of her life feeling like a misfit, she could certainly understand where he was coming from.

This revelation caused Jada to see the morning’s events in a new light. Maybe Derrick hadn’t been trying to insult Ronny and cause a scene. Maybe he was just really bad at introductions. Jada had bumbled her way through too many awkward encounters to hold it against him. She still cringed when she thought of her own first meeting with Derrick...and her first meeting with Ronny. To tell the truth, all of her first meetings were atrocious. It was becoming evident that the same was true for Derrick.

“Nope.” Jada smiled warmly at Derrick. “You weren’t that bad at all. Thank you for coming over and saying hi.”

“You’re a horrible liar. But thank you for trying.” Derrick smiled.

Jada stood. “I should get back. We were about to open presents before you came over.”

“Alright.” Derrick stood and gave Jada a side hug. “See you tomorrow.”

Jada gave him a quick squeeze, studiously ignoring the electric thrill that shot through her at his touch, before pulling away and returning to her family.

“Who’s ready for presents?” She asked in a sing-song voice as she reached under the table to pull out brightly wrapped boxes and gift bags.

For the rest of the breakfast, she kept her attention firmly fixed on Mercy and Grace. She would deal with Ronny’s brooding and the curious stares from her friends later.

Hopefully by then she'd have some answers for their unasked questions.

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Chapter Nine

A dark cloud hovered over Jada as she drove to the theater. Gracie sat in the back seat, chattering on about her excitement to work with the music instructor, but Jada had a hard time engaging in the conversation. Her mind kept straying back to the events of the previous day.

After they left the diner, Ronny had taken the girls to an ice cream shop down the block while insisting that Jada, Imara, and Simone go to the park across the street to find a good table for them to sit at. He claimed that the separation was because the park was crowded, but Jada suspected he was trying to put some space between them. Aside from his glares, he had barely interacted with her once she returned to the table. He was clearly still upset about Derrick's interruption.

As Jada and her friends searched for a vacant table, she tried to keep the conversation lighthearted. However, it didn't take long for Imara to bring up the subject of her relationship with Derrick.

"Jada." Her tone was cautions. "Do you want to tell me what's going on between you and your boss?"

"What do you mean?" Jada tried to appear disinterested.

"I mean, he seems like a lot more than just your boss or some random theater director that you make costumes for. What was up with him whispering in your ear and getting strange with Ronny?"

"Nothing. We're just friends," Jada stated.

“Oh please!” Imara threw her hands in the air in exasperation. “*Friends?* Jada, the man insults your husband, and you respond by going over to his table, making googly eyes at him for ten minutes, and then giving him a hug. On your *daughter’s birthday*. What is up with you?”

“Jada, sweetie,” Simone cut in. “Is he really just a friend? It did seem like there was something more going on between you two. Is...is everything okay between you and Ronny?”

“Derrick and I are just friends,” Jada repeated. She was growing tired of this conversation. “He’s my business partner. And everything is fine between me and Ronny.”

Imara folded her arms across her chest and skewered Jada with a look of disbelief.

Simone was also skeptical. “Jada, you have been complaining about Ronny’s lack of support. And if we’re being honest, you have been a bit more critical of him lately. Ronny is a good man that any woman would be grateful for.”

Jada groaned. “Simone, I’m sorry that you can’t find a man. But that doesn’t mean that you get to tell me what to do in my marriage.”

Simone visibly flinched, and Jada instantly regretted her thoughtless words. “I’m sorry, Simone. I didn’t mean to say that. I know you’re right and I should be grateful for Ronny. He is a good man, but he’s not perfect and our marriage isn’t perfect. In fact, it’s kind of stagnant right now. But that doesn’t mean that I’m looking elsewhere. I promise you that there is absolutely nothing going on between me and Derrick.”

Even as she spoke the words, the memories of the electric thrills she had felt at Derrick’s touch rushed back to her, but she pushed those thoughts away.

Simone gave her a sad smile and shrugged. “Sorry I butted into your marriage. I guess I forget my place sometimes.”

Jada wanted to kick herself for being mean to Simone, a friend who had only ever been loyal and sweet to her. She reached over and squeezed her hand. “You can butt in

whenever you want. I'm the one who needs to apologize for losing my temper."

"Well, all I have to say is, don't do anything stupid." Imara gave Jada a long look. "If you're not happy in your marriage, talk to Ronny about it. Don't go getting involved with another man."

"Of course," Jada assured her, thankful that Ronny and the girls were approaching with ice cream cones, so Imara would have to let the conversation drop.

That night, Jada did not talk to Ronny about their marriage. In fact, she didn't get the chance to talk to him about anything at all. Ronny made his displeasure known by throwing up a wall of cold silence which Jada had been too tired to even attempt to break down. They had gone to bed without saying a word to each other, and when she woke up the next morning, Ronny had already left for work without giving her his traditional goodbye kiss.

All day long, Jada had been operating in a fog, and as she drove to rehearsal, she wasn't quite sure how to act around Derrick. Were Imara and Simone right? Was her friendship with Derrick inappropriate?

Growing up, Jada had never had any male friends. Then again, she had never had any female friends either. Imara was the first true friend she had, and they hadn't met until college. Ronny was her first male friend, and she had married him.

Jada wasn't quite sure how to gauge her friendship with Derrick. He made her laugh. He challenged her. He supported her. He gave her back her dream of crocheting for a living. He made her feel talented and special. He was her friend, and he was becoming more and more important to her. Was that so wrong?

If Ronny's, Imara's, and Simone's reactions were any indications, the answer to that question was yes. And if she was being honest with herself, a tiny part of her knew that this friendship was not completely innocent. There had definitely been some flirtation between them. And it probably wasn't a

good sign that she felt as if she had been plugged into an electrical socket every time they touched.

She used to feel that thrill for Ronny back when they were dating and during the early years of their marriage. She had been so drawn to him, so in love. Where did they go wrong? Why was she feeling a connection to another man that she no longer felt for her husband?

As Jada pulled into the theater parking lot, she tried to collect her thoughts. There had to be a way to keep a professional, platonic relationship with Derrick while working on her marriage to Ronny.

Jada allowed Gracie to run ahead of her as she slowly made her way towards the building. Two days ago, she had been overjoyed to be working with Derrick. She had felt as if all her professional dreams were coming true. As if she was finally walking into her calling. Now, she wasn't so sure. She still felt certain that God wanted her to use her gift of crochet, but her friends' reactions to her relationship with Derrick had somehow sullied that dream.

Jada gave herself a mental shake and made an effort to throw off her dark mood. She was being silly. She and Derrick had done nothing wrong. They were friends. They were professionals. People just didn't like change and weren't used to seeing her with male friends. Well...tough. They were just going to have to get used to it because as a newly fashioned businesswoman, she would be interacting with men, and she would probably make friends with some of them just like she had with Derrick.

Ronny and her friends couldn't expect her to sabotage her own career by avoiding all male friendships. The very idea was laughable. She was entering a new phase of her life. She would make new friends and acquaintances. Some of them would be males. That's just the way the business world worked.

Jada threw her shoulders back and strode confidently towards the auditorium. She almost felt foolish for allowing her friends' aversion to change ruin her day. She supposed it

was a part of the learning process for all of them. She decided to just focus on her costume designs and the opportunity that God had blessed her with. In time, everyone would get used to the idea of her being a part of the working world and the interactions that accompanied that.

Jada opened the auditorium doors and ran smack into Derrick who was on his way out. She stumbled backwards and struggled in vain to maintain her balance. Thankfully, Derrick reached out and pulled her towards him before she tumbled to the ground.

“Woah.” Derrick held her firmly against his chest as she regained her footing. “Are you okay?”

Jada pushed away from him and focused on righting her crochet bag and tucking loose twists away from her face and back into her bun. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Derrick gave her an apologetic smile. “Grace told me you were out here, and I was coming to get you. You’ll be working in the costume room with me today.”

“We have a costume room?” Jada’s brow furrowed. Why hadn’t Derrick mentioned it before? “That’s perfect! I didn’t realize there was another room I could work in.”

Maybe this would be the solution to her problems. If she spent her days in the costume room, she wouldn’t have to interact with Derrick as much. That would keep her friends happy while still allowing her to keep her commitments to the play. Sure, she would miss spending time with Derrick, but other than that, it was a good compromise.

As if he could read her thoughts, Derrick shook his head. “I still want you in the auditorium with me when I’m running rehearsals. It’s the best way for you to stay in the loop with new ideas and character changes. We are just going to sort through the costumes today to see if we have any outfits that would complement your crochet designs.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the auditorium and back down the hallway.

“What about rehearsal?” Jada asked as she traipsed after him.

“The cast is working with the music director today. They don’t need me there for that.” Derrick stopped in front of an unmarked metal door and pulled out his keys. He unlocked the door and opened it with a flourish. “After you.”

Jada entered the room and was immediately struck by the pungent odor of mothballs. She opened a window to air out the room while Derrick closed the door behind them and began sorting through the nearest clothes rack.

“You have a mission.” His voice took on an air of mock formality. “You are to search through all of these costumes to find outfits that will work for each character. Your crochet pieces will be used to tie everything together, but each character needs a base wardrobe to build from.”

Jada nodded as she took in the room. Several full-sized clothes racks ate up the space, each one laden with clothes from past performances. Sequined dance outfits were pressed next to frontier style tops made from imitation leather. A mountain of hat boxes clung to the wall, and packing boxes and storage bins stuffed with miscellaneous items of clothing were scattered around the room.

It would take hours to sort through all these clothes. Since Derrick was already working through the clothing racks, Jada decided to focus on the boxes and storage bins. She sat down on a closed bin and began to rifle through a box in front of her. With any luck, they would be able to unearth something useful. Although, judging by the monkey and fox costumes Jada pulled out of the box, they would have to dig through a lot of rubbish to find anything that would capture the essence of the March family.

“Is there any organization system in place?” Jada asked.

“I wish,” Derrick replied. “The old director seems to have just shoved everything in wherever it would fit. She also had weird taste in costumes.” He pulled a leopard print leotard off the rack and shook his head in disgust.

“Tell me about it. How ugly is this bonnet?” Jada pulled out a concoction of limp lace that she hoped had seen better days and plopped it on her head.

Derrick tilted his head to the side and studied her in mock seriousness. “Hmm. You always look stunning, but that bonnet is missing something. Let me see.” He tapped his chin as if in deep thought and scanned the room until his eyes landed on a clear storage bin that was filled with accessories. He walked over and opened the lid.

“Beauty like yours deserves a little sparkle.” He pulled out a pair of gaudy clip-on earrings and beckoned Jada closer.

“I’m not sure those are my style,” Jada laughed as she moved towards him.

“Trust me.” Derrick reached out and tucked a rogue twist behind Jada’s ear before clipping on the costume jewelry.

He took a step back to examine the effect and then gave an exaggerated sigh. “Nope. It’s still missing something.”

“The monkey costume?” Jada giggled at her suggestion, knowing that nothing could ever induce her to wear a monkey costume.”

“Nothing quite so extravagant.” Derrick lifted a hanger off the nearest clothing rack and removed a purple ankle length cloak with silver edging. “But I do think that this robe might work.”

“Do you?” Jada laughed as Derrick stepped behind her to fasten the cloak around her neck. She was enjoying this playful side of Derrick. After an emotionally stressful day, she was grateful for this lighthearted diversion.

Derrick fastened the clasp and trailed his fingers across her shoulders before brushing over her exposed collar bone. Jada’s laughter stopped abruptly at Derrick’s sensuous touch.

“Perfect,” Derrick murmured in her ear. “Well, almost perfect.”

He stepped away and selected a thin silver belt that was studded with fake diamonds. He looked at her with hooded

eyes, a smile playing around the corners of his mouth. “I think this will tie everything together.”

“It will?” Jada gulped and watched as Derrick knelt before her and slipped the silver belt around her hips. She stood frozen as he secured the latch and then allowed his fingers to trail down her hips and caress her thighs.

What was she doing here? How had she allowed herself to be in a space where a man who wasn't Ronny was fondling her in a musty costume room?

Derrick's touch grew bolder, and his hands slid up and down her legs before resting on her waist. Jada knew she had to put a stop to this before it went any further. What had she been thinking? What if someone saw them?

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind, than the door's handle turned, and the door flew open. At that same moment, Derrick drew her closer and placed a kiss just inside her hip.

Jada froze as Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Taylor filled the doorway, taking in the scene.

“*Jada?*” The shock and disappointment in Mrs. Brown's voice snapped Jada into action. She wrenched herself out of Derrick's grasp and stumbled backwards.

“This isn't what it looks like.” Jada's voice sounded weak to her own ears.

“Really?” Mrs. Taylor's words dripped with derision. “You mean to tell me that my Heather's role went to Grace because the new director was fooling around with a cheap slut?”

“Watch your mouth!” Derrick warned, finally getting off his knees and coming to his feet.

“You're a joke,” Mrs. Taylor shot back. “I would never have let Heather try out for this play if I had known that you only gave out parts to girls whose mothers were willing to sleep with you.”

“Woman, not even your husband wants to sleep with you,” Derrick replied.

“Please. It’s not like that.” Jada protested. “We were just looking at costumes, and...um...” Her voice trailed off as she took in the look of profound sadness in Mrs. Brown’s eyes.

“Jada, how could you be unfaithful to Ronny? He’s a good man.”

“I know. I wasn’t—” Jada choked back a sob and her vision blurred with tears. What was the use in explaining? No one would believe her anyway.

“My Heather deserves the role of Amy.” Mrs. Taylor’s demands cut through Jada’s thoughts.

“Lady, please,” Derrick scoffed.

“No, that’s fine. She can have it.” Jada struggled to maintain her composure as she quickly removed the bonnet, cloak, and belt, and dropped them on top of the nearest storage bin. “Grace and I are leaving the play.”

Derrick grabbed Jada by her shoulders and turned her to face him. “Jada, you can’t quit the play on me now. We’re partners.”

“Partners?” Mrs. Taylor sneered. “This is just too rich.”

Jada couldn’t take any more of this. She shrugged out of Derrick’s grasp, grabbed her crochet bag, and stumbled to the door. “I’m done, Derrick. Send Grace to the car.”

Mrs. Taylor stood blocking the doorway as she skewered Jada with a condescending smile. Jada pushed past her and bolted down the hallway towards the exit. She could feel Mrs. Taylor’s stare following her every step as shame trailed behind her like a sullied veil.

Chapter Ten

Stupid. She was so stupid.

Jada berated herself as she replayed the day's events in her mind. In less than one hour, she had managed to destroy her reputation and her career. Worse, she had ruined Gracie's chance to perform on stage.

The drive home from the theater had been brutal. Grace had peppered Jada with questions about why they had left the theater early and why all of the adults had seemed so upset. Jada had pacified her by stating that they had left early because she had a headache and wasn't feeling well. Technically, this wasn't a lie. Jada did feel sick whenever she remembered Mrs. Brown's disappointed face. What must she think of her?

After dropping Grace off at the house, Jada had planned on going to her room, locking the door, and having a good cry. But she couldn't bring herself to go inside. She needed to sit on the porch and think.

She was thankful that Ronny still wasn't speaking to her because she had no idea how she could even begin to explain this situation to him. Hopefully, he would keep ignoring her until this whole thing blew over.

Who was she kidding? This would never blow over. While Jada trusted Mrs. Brown and Derrick to keep the day's events to themselves, she knew that Mrs. Taylor was a catty gossip who would take pleasure in broadcasting her indiscretions to anyone who would listen. Soon the story would be all over the

theater, and the church. Grace would know. Imara would know. Ronny would know. Jada had to find a way to stop the story from spreading. Downplay it.

As she berated herself on the porch while simultaneously praying for inspiration, her phone chimed signaling an incoming text message. Jada rummaged through her purse and pulled out her phone to hit the mute button, but paused when she realized that the message was from Derrick.

DERRICK

Hey. We need to talk about today. Can you meet me at my place?

Jada stared at the phone for a long minute before responding.

JADA

There is nothing to talk about. What happened today looked really bad. I quit.

Jada's phone chimed instantly, as if Derrick had anticipated her response.

DERRICK

Don't give up on this. I have an idea. Come over and we'll talk about it.

As Jada sat contemplating Derrick's words, her phone chimed again with Derrick's address. She sighed. Today had already been disastrous for her budding career. What else did she have to lose?

Before she could rethink it and change her mind, Jada raced up the steps and opened the front door. "I'm running out on a quick errand," she yelled, hoping that the girls could hear

her. Then she locked the door without giving them a chance to ask questions, or worse, offer to go along with her. The last thing she needed was to have her daughters looking on while she rehashed the costume room debacle with Derrick.

Jada pulled up Derrick's address and was surprised to find that he only lived one block away from the theater. Within twenty minutes, she was parked in front of his building, wondering how she had come to a place where she was willingly attending clandestine meetings with unmarried men in their apartments.

A niggling voice in the crevices of her mind told her to turn around and go back home. She had already pushed too many boundaries for one day. She should go home, tell Ronny everything that happened, and pray that he would be understanding. With any luck, he would just chalk this all up to one big I-told-you-so moment, and they could move past this knowing that he had been right all along about her career goals.

While that option made the most sense, it didn't sit well with Jada. Going home would mean admitting defeat. It would mean giving up on her crochet business for good. It would mean resigning herself to spending the rest of her life as a housewife in an unfulfilling marriage.

Jada didn't know if she could live like that. Especially now that she had had a taste of her dreams coming true. So she pushed the voice of reason aside, got out of the car, and walked up the front steps. Derrick's apartment was on the first floor of a three-family home. Jada took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

"It's open!" Derrick's voice called from the other side.

Jada opened the door and walked inside. She was immediately struck by the dingy décor. Derrick always seemed so put together in public. The worn futon, dirty card table, and the posters of musicians taped to the walls screamed college freshman, not suave theater director. The lit candles and romantic slow jazz oozing from a speaker on the floor that was

surrounded by dust bunnies didn't seem like Derrick either. Was he expecting a date after she left? Where was he anyway?

At that moment, the toilet flushed, and Derrick stepped out of the bathroom. Jada blinked rapidly and then averted her eyes, but not before taking in Derrick's bare, hairy chest and loose-fitting athletic pants that hung low enough to reveal the blue silk boxers underneath.

"What are you doing?" Jada gasped. "Why aren't you dressed?"

Derrick chuckled. "Relax, Jada. This is how I dress when I'm at home. Plus, I'm expecting some alone time with a very special lady."

"Really?" Jada looked up, her interest in Derrick's love life leading her to overlook his state of undress. "I didn't know you were seeing anyone. Do I know her?"

"Well, that's part of what I wanted to talk to you about." Derrick took Jada's hand and led her to the futon. "I think I might be in love with her, but it's complicated."

"Sound's serious." Jada eyed the futon, and gingerly sat on one of the few sections that wasn't covered in unidentifiable stains. "Why is it complicated?"

Derrick gave a dramatic sigh. "She's married."

"No," Jada gasped. "Derrick, please tell me you weren't dumb enough to get involved with a married woman."

"I know it sounds like a bad idea, but she's not really married. Her husband is a loser who doesn't see how special she is. I do." His lips quirked up in a small smile as he reached for Jada's hand. "I know we'd be perfect together."

Jada froze. What was happening? He couldn't mean...He didn't actually think...*What?*

Jada took a shaky breath. "Derrick, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I'm madly in love with you."

Jada stared at him in stunned disbelief, unable to respond to the questions and hope in his eyes. It wasn't until he leaned

in for a kiss that she sprang into action.

“Are you insane?” Jada shouted as she pushed him away. “Have you actually lost your mind?”

“Jada, baby, I—”

“Don’t ‘baby’ me!” Jada screeched as she leapt from the futon. “Do you have any idea how crazy you sound? My reputation is ruined because of your antics at the theater today. I came here for help, and you, you’re here trying to do what? Seduce me?” She gestured to the candles with disgust.

Derrick stood and held up his hands in an attempt to pacify her. “Jada, you don’t understand. I’m trying to help.”

Jada was incredulous. “Help? How does this help?”

“What happened today only looks bad because everyone thinks that you’re happily married to your husband. That makes what we have look like just a fling, but that’s not what this is. You don’t love him, and he’s no good for you.” Derrick’s eyes pleaded with her to agree with him as he pressed on. “Leave him. Leave your miserable marriage and choose me. We’re good for each other. People may talk for a while, but I promise I’ll be here for you, and we’ll show them that this isn’t wrong. This is true love.”

“True love?” Jada repeated Derrick’s words not knowing whether to laugh, cry, or scream with frustration. “Derrick, we’ve only known each other a few weeks. I care about you as a friend, but that’s it. I’m not leaving my family to be with you.”

Derrick shook his head. “Don’t lie to yourself. You know we’re more than just friends. I know you feel what’s between us. You’re always looking at me, smiling at me, touching me.”

“I don’t touch you.” Jada’s protest lacked conviction.

“But you let me touch you. I know you want this.”

Derrick moved towards her, and Jada scrambled around the card table to put some distance between them. She held up her hand to prevent him from moving any closer. “Derrick, please. I need to think.”

He took a step back and smiled at her, clearly taking her willingness to think about it as a good sign. Jada's mind raced. What had she done? Derrick was right. She did laugh and smile around him a lot, and she hadn't exactly shied away from his hand holding either. She wasn't fooling anyone, not even herself. She had been attracted to Derrick and had led him on. This entire mess was her fault, and she needed to put a stop to it.

"Derrick, you've been amazingly supportive and a good friend. But you're right. This goes beyond an innocent friendship." She took a deep breath and continued. "Which is why I don't think we should be around each other anymore."

"You can't be serious." Derrick's eyes narrowed as Jada scooped up her purse. "What? Were you just stringing me along? What about all the flirting you did and the times you complained to me about your husband? What was that?"

"You're right," Jada sighed as she headed towards the door. "I didn't mean to, but I led you on, and I'm sorry. The bottom line is, I'm a married woman. I love my children, and I love my husband. I am not leaving them. Not for you. Not for anyone else."

As she spoke, Jada realized the truth of her words. Her marriage might not be perfect, but she did love Ronny, and she had never had any intention of leaving him. The thought had never even crossed her mind. She had been a fool. Befriending Derrick had been playing with fire. She had allowed herself to get singed, but thankfully she was coming to her senses before her entire marriage went up in flames. She had to get home to Ronny, tell him the truth, and do whatever she needed to do to make her marriage right.

Jada reached for the door handle but was stopped by Derrick's firm grip on her shoulder.

"Baby, don't do this." He pleaded. "I know you're afraid, but please take a chance on us."

Jada wrenched her shoulder out of his grasp. "Derrick, there is no us. I'm married. Coming here was a huge mistake. This entire friendship was a mistake. I'm leaving."

Jada reached for the door handle again, but Derrick slipped in front of her and blocked the door with his frame.

“I can’t let you just walk away like this, Jada. You love me. I know you do.”

Jada’s eyes grew wide and she took a cautious step backwards. She had always felt safe around Derrick, but now it dawned on her that coming here may have been an even bigger mistake than she realized. The determined look in Derrick’s eye made it clear to Jada that she had put herself in real danger.

“No one likes a tease, Jada.” Derrick took a predatory step closer and Jada scrambled around the card table, desperate to keep some distance between them. “Don’t play innocent now that you’re here. We both knew where this would lead.”

Jada shook her head in denial as she looked around frantically for another exit. She glanced at the doors behind her. Where did they lead? She didn’t want to run the risk of getting trapped in a closet or bedroom, but she had to find a way out of there.

God, please help me. Derrick took another step forward, and Jada reached down and flipped the card table over, hoping to hit him. He sidestepped the table, leaving a tiny opening for Jada to reach the door. She rushed forward and grabbed the handle, as Derrick caught her about her waist, tearing her shirt in the process.

As Derrick tried to haul her away, Jada twisted the handle and yanked the door open. She opened her mouth to scream for help, but choked on the sound as she took in the sight of the man standing before her.

There, standing on the front porch, with an annoyed expression on his face and his arm raised as if he had been on the verge of pounding down the door with his fist, stood Ronny. Jada didn’t think she had ever been so happy to see anyone in her life.

“Ronny,” she breathed, almost sagging with relief.

Ronny's annoyance turned to shock and then morphed into a cold rage as he took in Jada's tear-soaked face and shifted his eyes to Derrick, who was still crudely groping her, oblivious to Ronny's presence.

"Take your hands off my wife!" Ronny roared before storming into the apartment and ripping Derrick away from Jada with so much force that Derrick yelled in pain. Still clutching Derrick's arm, Ronny propelled him backwards and slammed him into the wall.

"Hey man—" Derrick's protests were cut short when Ronny twisted Derrick's arm at an unnatural angle with one hand and shoved his free forearm into Derrick's throat.

"I'm going to say this one time," Ronny growled. "You don't touch my wife. You don't talk to my wife. You don't text my wife. If I ever suspect that you are even *thinking* about my wife, I will kill you. Understand?"

Derrick's eyes bulged with fear as he nodded as best he could against Ronny's forearm.

"Good." Ronny increased the pressure against Derrick's throat before releasing him and stepping away. He turned towards Jada and visibly flinched as he took in her tearstained face and torn blouse. His rage deepened, and without any warning he spun back around and slammed his fist into Derrick's face.

Jada's eyes widened as she watched Derrick clutch his nose and crumple to the ground, blood slipping between his fingers. With effort, she pulled her eyes away from a writhing Derrick and turned her attention towards Ronny who stood over him, breathing heavily.

Who was this man? In all their years of marriage, Jada had never seen Ronny so...feral. He radiated a rage and power that Jada hadn't known existed beneath his calm and steady exterior. She found herself strangely drawn to him, yet terrified.

As if sensing her scrutiny, Ronny turned, grabbed her by the arm, and strode out of the apartment without sparing

Derrick a second glance.

When they got to Jada's car, he yanked the door open.

"Get in," he clipped.

"Ronny, I—"

"Get in the car, Jada."

She could tell by his tone that he was barely controlling his anger, but she couldn't stop herself from asking, "How did you know I was here?"

He gave her a withering look. "Our phones are connected. Remember?"

Jada's mouth formed an "o" as she let his statement sink in. Years ago, they had gotten a family plan that allowed them to check each other's phones, but she had never used that feature. In fact, she had completely forgotten about it. Waves of mortification washed over her as she thought back to all the texts she had shared with Derrick. Most of them had been innocent, but there were a few that bordered on flirtatious. And then there were the ones sent today. The ones talking about the costume room and inviting her over to his apartment.

"That's right." Ronny's smirk was bitter. "I know all about your little fling with theater boy."

Jada shook her head. "No, Ronny, it wasn't a fling. I know it looks bad, but Derrick and I were only ever friends."

"I read the texts, Jada. I may be just an unsupportive, uneducated plumber, but I'm not the idiot you two seem to think I am." Ronny folded his arms over his chest and glared at her. "Look me in the eyes and tell me this is the first time you let him put his hands on you."

When Jada couldn't answer, Ronny shook his head and scoffed. "That's what I thought."

"Ronny, please." Jada reached out to touch his arm but froze when he jerked back in disgust. Even in the height of their biggest arguments, Ronny had never rejected her touch. "Ronny?"

“Jada, there is nothing you can say that would explain away the fact that you’ve been texting about me to another man, and that I found you in that man’s house with him half naked and his hands all over you.”

“That’s not fair,” Jada protested. “You know I didn’t want him. I was trying to get away.”

“That’s not the point, Jada. You shouldn’t have been there in the first place.”

Jada stood silently as she watched Ronny pace back and forth while rubbing his hands over his head as if trying to erase the memory of another man’s hands groping her body.

“I mean, do you have any idea what it felt like when I read your texts?” He stopped pacing and stared at her. “I’ve always trusted you, Jada. Always. You’ve always been a part of me. Do you have any idea what it did to me to see you calling another man your partner, and telling another man how much better he is than me?”

Jada bit her lip as shame flooded her. She had been so sure that her friendship with Derrick was harmless, but her actions had clearly hurt her husband. She wanted to beg for his forgiveness, but then a thought occurred to her, and her eyes snapped up.

“If you trust me so much, why were you reading my text messages?”

“I only started reading them yesterday. After seeing you two together at Mercy’s birthday party, I got a bad feeling.” Ronny gave a one shoulder shrug. “I just wanted to reassure myself that everything was fine.”

Jada winced as the guilt returned with a vengeance. She imagined her husband looking for comfort and coming across her incriminating texts instead.

“Then today,” Ronny continued, “when I saw him invite you to his place, I knew exactly what he was up to, but I couldn’t believe you would fall for it. I actually drove home first expecting to see you there making dinner. It was a punch

in the gut to realize that you left. That you actually—” Ronny’s voice broke, and he shook his head unable to finish.

“Ronny, I—”

Ronny held up his hand to silence her. “I don’t want to hear it, Jada. Just go home.”

Jada nodded and got in her car. She had already done so much damage. She could give him this.

“I’ll see you at home,” she called out, but Ronny was already backing away from her car.

“I don’t think so.”

Tendrils of panic curled around her heart. “Wait. What do you mean?”

Ronny shrugged. “I’m not sure I have a home anymore to go back to.”

Ronny turned and walked off to his truck, but not before Jada saw the raw pain exposed in his wounded eyes. As she watched him drive away, Jada was struck with the realization that she had never seen her husband looking so defeated. Her steady, predictable man now seemed broken and lost. She had done this to him. She was responsible and she had absolutely no idea how to make it right.

As she watched his truck’s taillights disappearing into the night, Jada had the sinking feeling that nothing would ever be right again.

Chapter Eleven

If this was what she had to look forward to as a single mother, then Jada was ready for death.

Her daughters hated her. Not in the typical teenage, “You’re so mean. I hate you,” way. That would actually be welcome at this point. No, Jada’s daughters truly hated her. They despised her. Either that, or they were doing a really good job of pretending to hate her.

It had been six days since she had stupidly made the decision to go to Derrick’s apartment, and every one of those six days had been torture.

On Monday, Jada had sent the girls to bed early, ignoring their questions about her torn clothes and Ronny’s whereabouts. She had crawled into bed acutely aware of the fact that this was the first time she had slept alone in thirteen years. It was also one of the few times in her life that she had cried herself to sleep.

On Tuesday, Jada went for her weekly trip to the grocery store and returned to find that Ronny had used that time as an opportunity to swing by the house and pick up most of his clothes. Apparently, he had also taken it upon himself to check in on the girls and let them know that he would be away for a while, but they could call him if they needed anything. Needless to say, by the time Jada walked through the door, laden with grocery bags, Mercy and Grace were both in tears and had already decided that the separation was entirely Jada’s fault.

This belief was confirmed on Wednesday when Jada sat Grace down and told her that she could no longer be in the play and they would not be attending that evening's rehearsal. When Jada explained that they were pulling out of the play because she had had a disagreement with Mr. Smith, Grace had flown into a tear-filled rage. She accused Jada of being selfish and ruining everyone's lives on purpose. Jada tried to assure Grace that there would be other plays and other chances to perform in the future, but Grace wasn't interested in Jada's promises. She labeled Jada the worst mom ever, and then stomped out of the room screaming, "You're a miserable person and you just want everyone else to be miserable too. No wonder Dad left you!"

Jada had just sat there in stunned silence. Grace was outspoken, but she had never been outright disrespectful before. Jada knew that she should punish her, but being pulled from the play was punishment enough. Besides, she had the sneaking suspicion that Grace's assessment of her wasn't far from the truth.

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday had all been filled with a growing sense of tension as Grace refused to apologize for her harsh words, and Mercy joined her sister in treating Jada like a diseased worm. Homeschooling was an awkward affair for everyone. The girls seared Jada with rebellious glares as she gave instructions, and then completely ignored her as they worked on their assignments, sending the clear message that she wasn't worth their time or attention.

But today, today was Sunday, and Jada's relationship with her daughters had officially hit an all-time low.

When Jada's alarm went off at 7:30 AM, she hit the snooze button and pulled the comforter over her head intent on sleeping the day away. The early alarm usually meant that it was time to wake up and get the girls ready for the Sunday morning youth group that met before the regular service, but Jada had no intention of going to church. Neither did she have any desire to try and force an interaction with her daughters who had made it clear that they wanted nothing to do with her.

She nestled into the covers, trying to recapture the fleeting reprieve from shame that only came with sleep. She was just about to drift off when she heard a knock on the bedroom door.

“We’re going to youth group with Jenny. Her mom’s already here to pick us up,” Grace called from the other side of the door. It was a statement, not a request for permission.

Before Jada could respond, she heard Grace’s footsteps racing down the hallway, followed by the sound of the front door slamming. Jada gritted her teeth. She understood that Grace was mad about the play, but the disrespectful and rebellious attitude needed to be nipped in the bud. Jada decided to have a stern talk with the girls as soon as they got home.

Unfortunately, that talk did not go quite as smoothly as she had hoped. Barely two hours after the girls left, Jada sat in the living room reading through the dozens of unanswered texts she had sent to Ronny. She hadn’t heard from him all week and was beginning to doubt that he would ever forgive her. She was trying to talk herself out of sending him yet another text message when the front door banged open, causing Jada to jump with surprise.

“Is it true?” Grace’s eyes were wild.

“Is what true?” Jada stood from the couch and reached out to comfort her daughters, but something in their eyes stopped her in her tracks. “What happened? Why are you home so soon?”

“We had to leave youth group early.” Mercy’s voice was filled with accusations. “We didn’t want to ask Jenny’s mom for a ride, so we walked.”

“Walked? Why?” Jada shook her head in bewilderment.

Grace ignored her mother’s question and repeated her own. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?” Jada asked, desperate to know what had made her daughters so upset that they would leave church hours early and walk six miles. “Sweetie, I don’t understand.”

“What she’s trying to ask,” Mercy cut in, “is it true that you are a dirty, cheating, whore?”

“Mercy!” Jada scolded as she looked at her eldest daughter in horror. Mercy had always been a sweet, quiet, respectful child. Jada was surprised that Mercy even knew what that word meant. Dread wrapped itself around Jada and squeezed tightly as she realized what must have brought about this uncharacteristic outburst.

“What?” Mercy challenged. “It’s all over the church. Heck, it’s all over the town. Our mother slept with the theater director to get Gracie a leading role.”

“No!” Jada gasped and shook her head. Is that what people were saying about her? Is that what her daughters believed?

“I always thought you loved us, but I never thought you loved us enough to cheat on Daddy.” Mercy’s tone was mocking, bitter. Jada barely recognized this version of her daughter. She had to set the record straight.

“That’s not true,” she protested.

“It’s not true that you love us?” Mercy’s eyebrows shot up in surprise before she cleared her face of all expression. “That figures.”

“No, of course I love you. I love you both very much.” Jada inhaled deeply through her nose. “It’s not true that I slept with Mr. Smith.”

“Really?” Mercy asked, some of the fight going out of her.

“Then how come everyone at youth group says you did?” Grace asked. “How come I can’t be in the play anymore?”

Jada sighed. This was not a conversation that she wanted to have with her children, but her selfish decisions had impacted their lives. They deserved an explanation.

“Girls, sit down.” She gestured towards the couch and waited until they were seated before continuing. “I love you both, and I love your father, but I may have made some bad decisions.”

“I knew it!” Grace jumped up. “You lied to us. You did sleep with Mr. Smith.”

“No, I didn’t,” Jada reassured her as she placed her hands on Grace’s shoulders and gently moved her back down to the couch. “I never slept with him, but I did become friends with him, and I may have given him the wrong impression.”

“You think?” Grace mumbled. “Even I thought you guys were too close.”

“You did?” Jada stared at her daughter in surprise.

“Mom, everyone did. Mr. Smith hated everyone, but he was always super sweet whenever you were around. I thought he must have had a crush on you.”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

Grace shrugged and looked away. “I trusted you.”

Jada winced. How many people had she hurt with her selfish choices? Everyone who was important to her trusted her, and she had taken that trust and trampled it like garbage.

“So why does everyone think you slept with him?” Mercy prodded.

“Well,” Jada drew out the word, reluctant to share the truth with her daughters. “He kissed me in the costume room and Mrs. Brown and Mrs. Taylor walked in on us.”

“You kissed him?” Mercy’s angelic face was twisted with disgust. “So you did cheat on Daddy.”

“No, he kissed me. I *never* kissed him back.” Jada knew that her words were falling on deaf ears. She could practically see the last drops of respect her daughters had for her evaporating before her eyes. Perhaps she had said too much.

“Is that why Daddy left?”

Unable and unwilling to go into the details of the events at Derrick’s apartment, Jada simply nodded.

“Is that why Mr. Smith gave me the role?” Grace whispered. “Because he was into you?”

Weighed down by defeat, Jada sank down on Ronny's recliner. "I don't know," she admitted.

The sound of Grace's whimper confirmed Jada's suspicions. She had definitely said too much. She wished she could take back her words, but it was too late.

"Don't listen to her, Gracie. You're a wonderful actress. You didn't need her to get that role." Mercy put a protective arm around her baby sister as if shielding her from Jada. "Let's go."

Jada watched helplessly as her two girls turned their backs on her and headed down the hallway towards Gracie's room. They were almost at the door, when Mercy turned around and pierced Jada with a look of pure hatred. "And I don't ever want to hear another lecture from you on purity or waiting until marriage. You're nothing but a hypocrite, and Daddy deserved better."

"Mercy, I—"

"No." Mercy cut her off. "For weeks, I've been asking you to spend more time with me. And you promised me that we would. But then you kept blowing me off to spend time with your new boyfriend." She shook her head in disgust. "I wish you weren't my mother."

With that, the girls walked into the bedroom and closed the door firmly behind them. Jada stared brokenly at the door for several long moments before her legs gave out and she collapsed on the floor in silent tears.

She had ruined everything. Everything. Her daughters hated her. They would never trust her again. And Mercy's words made it clear that every lesson she had ever taught them, every moral she had ever tried to instill in them, every biblical truth she had ever made them memorize, would now be seen as worthless trash because of her actions. She had been their role model, and she had failed them in the worst way.

Her husband hated her. He no longer felt at home in the house that he had worked so hard for. He no longer trusted her

or saw her as a partner to love and cherish. Her unanswered texts and phone calls meant he no longer wanted any form of communication with her. And honestly, she couldn't blame him. She had been an ungrateful and selfish wife. Mercy was right. Ronny did deserve better. At this point, she wouldn't be surprised if he showed up with papers demanding divorce.

No sooner had the thought crossed her mind than she heard a loud banging on the front door.

"Oh Lord, please no," Jada sobbed. "Please let him give me another chance."

With trembling hands, she pushed herself to her feet and stumbled towards the door. She took a deep breath and wiped away the tears and snot as she readied herself to face her husband. Ronny might not want anything to do with her anymore, but she was ready to beg him for a second chance.

"Ronny, I'm so sorry," Jada began as she opened the door. "I know you're angr—" Her words trailed off as she took in the two women in front of her. "What are you doing here?"

"Girl, please." Imara smirked as she brushed past Jada and made herself at home in the living room. "Of course we had to come over to knock some sense into you."

Simone reached over and gave Jada a quick hug before walking over to the couch and taking a seat beside Imara. "What Imara meant to say is that we heard about you and Derrick in church today and came here to offer you our support."

"Support?!" Imara sputtered. "This woman cheated on her husband. I'm not here for support."

"We don't know if that's true, Imara," Simone stated calmly. "Aren't you the one who always says we shouldn't listen to rumors? Besides, Ronny looked sad, but he didn't look like a man who had been cheated on."

"I guess you're right," Imara grudgingly agreed. "I can hold off on the butt whooping for now, but I need answers."

"Hold on." Jada held up a hand to stop her friends' bickering. "You saw Ronny? At church?"

“Where else would he be on a Sunday? He knows he needs Jesus, unlike some people.” Imara gave Jada a pointed look which she chose to ignore.

“Imara, cut it out,” Simone chided. “Can’t you see she’s been crying? She’s obviously upset. Plus, we haven’t even heard her side of the story yet.”

“Well, she better start talking,” Imara shot back.

“Can we get back to Ronny?” Jada cut in.

“Oh, *now* she cares about Ronny.” Imara rolled her eyes.

“Stop it!” Simone snapped at Imara before turning to Jada. “Yes, Ronny was at church today. He slipped in late and sat in the back by himself.”

“How was he?” Jada asked, hungry for information.

“He looked okay. But I could tell he was sad. Lonely.”

“He looked like the love of his life ripped his heart out and spat on it.” Imara stated.

Simone glared at Imara, and then turned back to Jada. “Ignore her. Ronny didn’t look that bad. I wanted to talk to him after the service, but he slipped into the back office with Pastor Jerry.”

“He met with the pastor?” Jada questioned.

“Mhmm.” Imara nodded. “Probably to talk about you.”

Jada threw her hands up and turned to Imara. “What is with you? What do you want from me? I have had the worst week. I feel horrible about what I did. I messed up. I know that. The last thing I need is for you to come here and dump all over me. What I need is my friends and some good advice.”

Jada watched as a range of emotions played across Imara’s face before she sighed and leaned forward, shoulders slumped. “I’m sorry, Jada. I know I’m not helping things. I’m just... frustrated. I mean, how could you do this to Ronny? To your family? And the thing is, I warned you. I told you to be careful with Derrick, and you still slept with him. I mean, you were literally flirting with the man at Mercy’s party. That’s cold.

How would you have felt if Ronny was chatting up some girl right in front of you?”

Yeah,” Simone agreed. “We love you and are here for you, but we’re kind of disappointed that you would do this to Ronny and your family. You’ve always been a Christian role model for me, so this is hard for me to wrap my mind around.”

A heavy wave of shame swept over Jada. Simone was a new Christian, and she had often expressed the fact that she saw Ronny and Jada as the perfect Christian couple. She was on dating apps, hoping and praying to find what Jada had. And Jada had been a terrible witness.

Instead of praying and seeking God when her marriage got difficult, she had become bitter and complained to everyone, including Simone, about Ronny. Instead of trying to deepen her intimacy with her husband, she had looked for affirmation in her crochet business and her friendship with Derrick. Instead of seeing her marriage as a gift from God and a chance to be a witness, she had picked at every flaw and had actively torn down the very relationship she was supposed to be building up.

She hadn’t asked God about the crochet, or her friendship with Derrick, or anything really. She had just plunged ahead doing what she thought was right and hoping God would bless it. And look where that had gotten her.

“You’re right.” Jada’s voice shook as fresh tears threatened to fall. “I haven’t been a good Christian and I’ve let you down. I’ve let a lot of people down, and I’m sorry.”

Simone’s sympathetic smile gave Jada the courage to continue. “I should have listened to you both about Derrick. You were right about our friendship being dangerous. And things did go beyond what was professional, but I never slept with him.”

“I knew there had to be more to the story.” Simone grinned.

“Oh, thank God!” Imara looked as if she was ready to pass out from relief. “Girl, you almost gave me a heart attack. Why

didn't you say something sooner?"

Jada shrugged. "I guess it's because my friendship with Derrick relationship wasn't entirely innocent."

Jada proceeded to tell her friends everything. She shared about the text messages and the flirting. She relived the disaster in the costume room. And finally, she told them all about Derrick's apartment including his declaration of love, his aggressive behavior, and his fight with Ronny.

"Wow. Ronny actually punched him?" Simone was wide eyed.

"I didn't know he had it in him," Imara commented.

"Me either," Jada admitted. "I've never seen that side of him before."

"I think it's kind of romantic, the way he defended you." Simone's voice was wistful.

Jada shook her head. "I don't think Ronny has any romantic thoughts towards me anymore. He hasn't been home all week, and I haven't heard from him since I left Derrick's apartment."

"What about Derrick? Have you heard from him?" Imara asked.

"No." Jada shook her head. That was the only silver lining of this torturous week. Ronny must have really scared Derrick because he hadn't sent so much as a text. It was as if he had simply vanished.

"Good. Let's hope it stays that way." Imara gave a satisfied nod. "What we need to do now is focus on you and Ronny."

Jada's lip quivered and the tears she had been holding in spilled over and slid down her cheeks. "I don't think there is a me and Ronny anymore." She drew her knees up to her chest and curled herself into a ball. "He hates me," she whispered.

"Ronny could never hate you," Simone reassured her.

"That's right," Imara agreed. "A man who hates his wife doesn't go all macho protector the way Ronny did with you at

Derrick's apartment. And a man who hates his wife wouldn't be meeting with Pastor Jerry. He would be meeting with a divorce attorney."

"But he won't even answer my texts," Jada wailed.

Simone rushed over to her and began rubbing her back in soothing circles, but Imara remained cool and practical.

"Well, he's hurt," she stated. "You need to give him time to heal. And you need to do something a lot more productive than sitting around here blubbering."

"Like what?" Jada sniffled.

"Like praying."

Praying. At Imara's suggestion a sense of peace came over Jada, and she realized that she should have been praying all along. She knew she couldn't fix her marriage on her own. After all, her own efforts had gotten her into this mess. Any further efforts on her part would only make things worse. No, it was time to invite God to take over. He was her only hope.

Jada and her friends knelt together on the living room carpet and spent the next few hours praying. Jada repented of her sinful behavior and begged God to forgive her. They prayed that God would touch Ronny's heart so that he would forgive her as well. They prayed that God would restore Jada's marriage and make it stronger than ever. And finally, they prayed that God would heal Grace's and Mercy's hearts and allow Jada to rebuild her relationship with them.

By the time they finished praying, it was dark outside and Jada's knees ached, but she felt lighter than she had in ages. She knew that God had forgiven her and she felt much better knowing that her marriage and her relationship with her daughters were in Jesus's hands.

Shortly after the prayer session, Imara and Simone headed home. They left Jada with hugs, words of encouragement, and the promise to call and check in on her every day until Ronny came home. When she closed the door behind them, Jada silently thanked God for blessing her with loyal friends.

As she made her way back to the living room, she saw her phone light up on the couch. She rushed over and snatched up the phone, eager to confirm what she already knew in her heart.

The text was from Ronny. He wanted her to meet him at the church in the morning.

Jada smiled. God was on the move.

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Chapter Twelve

“Sorry I’m late,” Jada gasped after bursting unceremoniously into Pastor Jerry’s office.

As she took in her husband’s stony glare and Pastor Jerry’s amused expression, Jada wanted to kick herself.

She had been looking forward to this meeting ever since she received Ronny’s text last night. She had praised God for giving her the chance to see Ronny and had even picked out her outfit before going to bed: an olive-green, ankle-length skirt that Ronny loved and a flattering purple blouse.

Then she woke up this morning and everything went wrong. Mercy had some type of stomach bug. She had walked into the living room and promptly thrown up all over the carpet and Jada’s carefully selected outfit.

By the time Jada had cleaned up the mess and tucked Mercy back into bed, she was running late. She barely had time to throw on a clean sweat suite and pull her hair into a frizzy bun, before checking on Grace to make sure she wasn’t sick as well and then racing out the door.

She was grateful that Mercy’s illness had prompted the girls to call a ceasefire. Mercy had let Jada baby her without complaint, and Grace had allowed Jada to kiss her on the forehead before leaving. Jada knew that this change in attitude was probably only temporary, but it was something. Still, Jada hated being late for her meeting with Ronny.

By the time she made it to Pastor Jerry’s office Jada felt frazzled and overwhelmed. When she took in Ronny’s pressed

khaki pants and light blue button-down shirt, she felt underdressed. Most days, Ronny wore jeans and a t-shirt with his plumbing company's logo printed on the front. His dressy-casual outfit told Jada that he had put some effort into his appearance today while she had shown up in sweats.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," Jada repeated.

"It's fine." Ronny's voice was laced with frustration. "It's not like this marriage was ever a priority to you anyway. Why would I expect you to be on time?"

Jada winced at Ronny's words, but she couldn't blame him for his assumptions. She had always acted as if she took her marriage and his love for granted. But she was determined to change that.

"No, I wanted to be here on time. I even had a nice outfit and everything. Then Mercy got sick and threw up on me, so I had to change into this." Jada gestured towards her unflattering outfit.

At her explanation, Ronny's face softened into an expression of concern. "Is Mercy alright?"

Jada nodded. "Just a stomach bug. She'll be fine."

Ronny studied her as if assessing the truthfulness of her words. Seemingly satisfied, he nodded and gave her a small smile. "I hope you made her your special peppermint tea. That always settles my stomach."

"Of course." Jada's smile was tentative. "I left a big mug of it right beside her bed with extra sugar. Just the way she likes it."

Jada caught a glimpse of appreciation in Ronny's eyes that warmed her. She knew she hadn't been the best of mothers, but Ronny always seemed happy whenever she did anything special for the girls. Maybe he still saw something nurturing in her. Maybe they were going to be alright.

Pastor Jerry cleared his throat and broke in. "Great. Glad everyone's okay. So, let's jump into the reason you're both here today."

Pastor Jerry's words hit Jada like a bucket of cold water, and all of her wishful thinking was washed away. Ronny wasn't going to magically forgive her simply because she made her daughter a cup of tea. He was hurt and angry. She had some serious groveling to do.

She gripped the armrest of her chair for support and turned towards her husband. "I know. We're here because I messed up. And I'm so so so so so sooo sorry. I promise I will never befriend another man again. I will never even talk to another man again. But please, let's not get a divorce. Just come home.

Ronny's eyebrows shot up. "You think I want a divorce?"

Jada blinked. "Um...yes? I mean, you haven't been home all week and you've been ignoring me."

Ronny studied her. "Answer me this. Did you have sex with Derrick?"

"Of course not!" Jada cried. "You were there. You know that I wasn't interested in sleeping with him."

Ronny's whole body seemed to relax. "I know. And I also know that I vowed to love you and be faithful to you 'till death do us part.' Divorce was never an option. The only way I would ever even consider divorce is if you were to cheat on me."

Jada closed her eyes and willed herself not to shed the tears of relief that threatened to overflow. Ronny still loved her, and he didn't want a divorce. Her marriage wasn't over.

When she felt Ronny's warm, calloused hand encircle hers and give her a reassuring squeeze, she lost all control, and her body shook as tears streamed down her face. She clung to Ronny's hand, blubbering. "I was so scared. I thought I ruined everything. You were gone all week and I just didn't know what to do."

Ronny stood and gently pulled her towards him. He wrapped his arms around her murmuring soothing words. "Shh. It's okay baby. It's going to be okay. I stayed away because I just needed some time, but I'm not going anywhere. I've got you."

Ronny held Jada and rocked her back and forth until her sobs subsided and her shuddering breath returned to normal. Jada clung to him, relieved and grateful to be in his arms again. She knew she didn't deserve him. She had hurt him, and yet here he was, comforting her.

After several long minutes, she reluctantly disentangled herself from Ronny's embrace and tried to bring her emotions back under control. She felt awkward and embarrassed and couldn't bring herself to look at him.

A loud clearing of a throat reminded her of the presence of the third person in the room. She looked up to see Pastor Jerry shifting uncomfortably in his chair.

"Yes, well. That was...interesting." He handed Jada a box of tissues and waited for her to wipe her face before continuing. "Jada, it's clear that you two love each other. But from what Ronny's told me, it's also clear that you have some serious problems in your marriage. I think that those problems led to what transpired between you and the theater director."

Jada nodded in agreement and felt the heat rise to her face, mortified to know that the pastor, and probably the entire congregation, knew about her emotional affair.

"Marriage is hard," Pastor Jerry went on. "The Bible tells us that young couples need support to help them navigate the challenges that come with marriage. I've spoken with Ronny, and I feel very strongly that what you both need is Biblical counseling."

"Counseling?" Jada echoed.

"Yes." Pastor Jerry leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk. He steepled his fingers as he studied Jada. "Have you heard of Titus 2?"

When Jada shook her head, Pastor Jerry explained. "In the apostle Paul's letter to Titus, he speaks about mentorship for Christian women. He calls on the older women in the church to mentor the younger women, 'that they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, to be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good,

obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.””

Jada wrinkled her nose. Pastor Jerry’s description sounded like an oppressed housewife from the 1940s. “You want me to be like the women in Titus 2?”

Pastor Jerry shook his head. “Not necessarily. I’m saying that I think you need an older woman to mentor you and teach you how to navigate some of the challenges that come with marriage and motherhood.”

Jada pursed her lips as she considered the pastor’s words. Maybe she did need a mentor. She loved Ronny and the girls, but she hadn’t been happy in her marriage in quite some time. Deep down, she knew that she was failing as both a wife and a mother.

She looked at Ronny. “What do you think?”

“I don’t think it could hurt,” he replied. “I’ve asked Pastor Jerry to mentor me and help me with some of my issues, and I think a good female mentor would be good for you too.”

Jada turned back to Pastor Jerry. If Ronny was willing to go through this counseling process, she could do the same. “Okay. I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful!” Pastor Jerry clapped his hands together. “I have just the right mentor for you. In fact, she’s waiting downstairs in the counseling suite.”

“She is?” Jada was surprised at this rapid turnaround. A minute ago, she had never even heard of Titus 2, and now she had a mentor.

“Yes.” Pastor Jerry was practically beaming. “Why don’t you go downstairs and meet with her now while I spend some time with your husband?”

“Okay,” Jada responded as she reluctantly rose from her chair. She had been hoping to spend some more time with Ronny. There was so much she still needed to know. When was he coming home? What issues did he need counseling for?

But it was clear that she was being dismissed, at least for the time being. Jada gave Ronny a fleeting smile before grabbing her purse and making her way out of Pastor Jerry's office.

She was halfway down the stairs before it dawned on her that she had no idea who her mentor was. She thought of all the older women in the church who might qualify for the position. Pastor Jerry's wife was the first woman to come to mind. The church's first lady was painfully shy and usually kept to herself. She tended to work behind the scenes, and Jada had picked up on the fact that she often went out of her way to avoid people. The few conversations that Jada had had with her had been strained. Jada grimaced in remembrance.

What had she signed up for? She had said that she would do anything to make her marriage work, and she meant it. But she didn't see how counseling sessions that were comprised of awkward silence were supposed to help her marriage.

Jada chewed her lips in agitation as she walked down the brightly lit hallway that led to the counseling suite. The walls were decorated with pictures of the congregation that had been taken at annual church picnics starting with last summer's and going back over seventy years to the founding of the church. The first few pictures were brightly colored and radiated joy, but as she walked further down the hallway, she was met with unsmiling faces staring out at her from black and white photographs.

Jada slowed her steps to study the pictures of men dressed in their Sunday best and women in elegant dresses and fancy hats. The couples in the pictures looked so put together. Jada imagined that they all had happy marriages, not the mess that she and Ronny had found themselves in.

Jada reached the counseling suite and pasted an overly bright smile on her face before knocking on the office door.

"It's open!" a friendly voice called.

Jada pushed the door open, and her smile morphed into a confused frown.

“Jada! I’m so glad you agreed to be my mentee.” Mrs. Brown beamed and rose from her chair rushing forward with outstretched arms before engulfing Jada in a bear hug. However, she let her arms drop and quickly backed away when she felt Jada stiffen at her warm greeting. “I take it you’re not too happy to see me. Didn’t Pastor Jerry tell you I was going to be your mentor?”

Jada shook herself and gave a weak smile. “Sorry. Of course it’s good to see you. I’m just...where’s Pastor’s wife?”

“The first lady?” Mrs. Brown’s brow wrinkled in thought and then her face cleared as understanding dawned. “Oh, she doesn’t do counseling. She’s a dear saint and a wonderful prayer warrior, but,” Mrs. Brown’s voice dropped to a mock whisper as she leaned forward, “she’s not too good with people.”

Mrs. Brown shuffled towards the middle of the room and motioned for Jada to follow her. A round wooden table was set up with a teapot and teacups decorated with an intricate design of roses, vines, and bluebirds. A tray of what looked like homemade cookies made the welcome table complete.

Mrs. Brown took a seat and invited Jada to take the empty chair beside her. Jada eyed the upholstered rocking chairs with a raised brow. Cookies? Rocking chairs? What kind of counseling session was this?

As if she could read Jada’s mind, Mrs. Brown chuckled and said, “I know that tea and rocking chairs aren’t typical for a mentoring session, but I always felt these sessions could get a little stuffy. I remember when Henry and I almost got divorced and I came here for help. I almost peed my pants I was so scared. So, when I joined the mentorship ministry, I decided my office would always be nice and cozy.”

Jada blinked. “*You* almost got divorced from Mr. Brown?”

Henry Brown doted on his wife. It was a well known fact that he dropped her off at choir practice every Tuesday night, and would sit in the back pew just to watch his wife and admire her organ playing. They seemed genuinely happy

together, and Jada had always thought they were the perfect couple.

“Mmhm.” Mrs. Brown nodded. “That man was a mess, and so was I. Don’t get me wrong. We have a great marriage now, and I wouldn’t trade him for anything. But there was a time when I could have happily smothered that man to death in his sleep.”

Jada’s mouth dropped open. She had often been irritated by Ronny and his controlling ways, but she had never wished him dead or considered killing him.

Mrs. Brown took in Jada’s shocked expression and laughed. “Oh, yes. We had our share of problems. In his younger days, my Henry had a roving eye. He never cheated on me, but it was so embarrassing to walk down the street with him and see his eye follow every pretty little thing that walked by. And I was no saint either. I used to love me a good party. There were many nights when Henry came home from work expecting a hot dinner and instead found that his wife had left him a peanut butter sandwich and a note telling him she was off dancing at the club again.”

“Really?” Jada’s eyes were wide as she tried to picture this saintly, spirit filled woman gyrating at some night club. “What happened?”

“Well, we were fighting every chance we got and were just about to call it quits when an old friend of ours invited us to church. I don’t know why we agreed to go, but I’m grateful that we did. After a few weeks, Henry and I both gave our lives to God. I stopped going to the club and Henry was home more, but we were still fighting like cats and dogs.

“Then one day we invited the pastor over for dinner. He wasn’t in the house ten minutes before Henry and I started going at each other. The pastor pulled out his Bible right there at the dinner table and said, ‘You two need counseling.’”

Mrs. Brown shook er head and chuckled. “Girl, did we ever! I had no idea what it meant to be a Christian wife, and Henry didn’t know what being a Christian husband meant either. But Pastor was persistent, and he showed us what the

Bible teaches about marriage. It took time and hard work, but Henry and I now have a marriage that is built on the Bible, and we are happier now than we have ever been.”

“So that’s the secret?” Jada asked. “I just have to base my marriage on the Bible, and everything will suddenly be alright?”

She respected Mrs. Brown, but this explanation seemed a little too simplistic.

“Well, it might not be perfect. Lord knows Henry and I are still growing as a couple. But we have a peace and a firm foundation. The Bible saved our marriage. That’s why I decided to become a mentor. God helped me, and He wants me to pass on what I’ve learned to others.”

Jada took a sip of tea and sat back in her rocking chair. She had been a Christian her entire life and believed that Jesus was the Son of God and her savior. She went to church most Sundays, and she read her daily Bible verse on her app most mornings.

But she had never really thought about the Bible as a source of marital advice. Sure, it said stuff about not committing adultery and not getting divorced if you can help it. But was there more? And would it work?

Jada glanced over at Mrs. Brown who rocked back and forth contentedly in her chair, nibbling on a cookie as she waited for Jada to process her thoughts. Mrs. Brown seemed happy. Anyone could see that she had a good marriage and a husband that adored her. But more importantly, she seemed to be at peace with herself and her life.

Jada was tired of being miserable. Tired of feeling as if she wasn’t enough. As if she was a horrible wife and an even worse mother. As if she was wasting her life and her crochet talent. As if she should be doing...*something*. She was so restless, and that restlessness was ruining everything she touched.

She needed peace. She needed what Mrs. Brown had. Taking marriage advice from the Bible might seem odd, but

Jada was willing to give anything a try.

“Okay.” Jada set her teacup down and curled her legs under her as she prepared to give Mrs. Brown’s teaching her full attention. “Let’s do this.”

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Chapter Thirteen

I am a helpmeet. I am a helpmeet.” Jada forced her grimace into a smile as she lugged a heavy basket of laundry into the master bedroom.

She had always hated laundry day. It all seemed so pointless. She spent hours sorting and washing and folding clothes, only to see the laundry basket fill up all over again. She especially hated doing Ronny’s laundry. Mercy and Grace were still children, and she didn’t mind taking care of them. But Ronny was a grown man. Worse, he couldn’t even be bothered to throw his dirty clothes in the laundry bin. Instead, he tossed them on the closet floor for Jada to pick up.

Normally, Jada would spend her entire day grumbling under her breath about Ronny’s laziness as she did her chores. But today, thanks to Mrs. Brown, she was trying something new.

During her first counseling session with Mrs. Brown, they had discussed the reason for marriage. Mrs. Brown had pulled her worn Bible from her purse and read to her from the second chapter of Genesis. “And the LORD God said, It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him.”

Jada had been confused by Mrs. Brown’s choice of verse. “I don’t get it. What does that have to do with my marriage?”

Mrs. Brown smiled patiently at Jada and leaned forward to select a cookie from the tray. “Well, this passage gives us a glimpse into the first marriage. Adam and Eve were the very

first couple and God Himself was the matchmaker. This verse shows us the role that God gave Eve in her marriage.”

Mrs. Brown held up two fingers. “She was to be a good companion for her husband. God said it wasn’t good for Adam to be alone. And she was also to be a helpmeet. So in the first marriage, the role of the wife was to provide companionship and help.”

“That’s it?” Jada asked. “That’s all a wife is supposed to do? Be a glorified sidekick and servant?”

Mrs. Brown laughed and shook her head as she took a bite of her cookie. “I wouldn’t put it quite like that,” she said, clearly amused by Jada’s skepticism. “Let me ask you something. What do *you* think your role as a wife is?”

“I—” Jada closed her mouth and her lips twisted into a frown. She hadn’t really thought about her role before. “I guess I thought my role was to make Ronny happy, be his best friend, and help him achieve his goals. And he’s supposed to do the same for me. We’re supposed to be partners. Equals.”

Mrs. Brown nodded. “Well, you are equals. Both of you have equal value as human beings before God. But you’re also different, and you both have different roles to play in your marriage. Your role is to be a companion and a helper.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jada admitted.

“Jada, you are a bright young woman with lots of gifts and talents. I’m sure these talents can pull you in all different directions. But when you get married, God gives you a new role and that role comes first. Every day, you should be showing Ronny kindness and looking for ways to help him and make his life better.”

“Seriously?” Jada wrinkled her nose in disgust. “What about Ronny making my life better? You do know we had a little thing called the feminist movement, don’t you?”

Mrs. Brown chuckled. “I’m well aware of the feminist movement. In fact, I used to be something of a radical feminist myself. But I have found that the Bible brings me more peace and joy than any social movement ever did. As a rule, if God’s

Word and society's values are at odds, I just go ahead and side with God.”

Jada reached for her teacup and took a few sips to gather her thoughts before responding. “Okay, as a Christian, I know that God's ways come first. But you do understand that you sound like something out of the dark ages, right? And what about work? Does God just expect me to stay at home forever and never have a job? I mean, no offense Mrs. Brown, but you sound a bit...sexist.”

“No offense taken, Jada. You sound just like I did when I first learned about biblical roles in marriage. And to answer your question, whether or not a wife works outside the home is a decision that is made by each individual couple. After all, I work at the theater, but Henry and I decided that working was right for me. Some husbands need a wife to help them by keeping house and taking care of the kids. Others may decide that it's best if the wife works and helps to make ends meet. It varies.”

Jada worried her bottom lip between her teeth as she thought about Mrs. Brown's words. “I don't know,” she said. “I know my marriage is a mess, and I know I need God's help to fix it. But this seems so backwards. I mean, I want more freedom to explore my own dreams, not more guilt tying me to the home.”

Mrs. Brown pursed her lips. “Jada, you had more freedom when you were working in the theater. Let me ask you, did it make you happier? More fulfilled?”

“Of course,” Jada answered automatically. But at Mrs. Brown's raised eyebrows, she paused to really consider the question.

When she had first been given the opportunity to work, she had been overjoyed. After all, she had always wanted to sell her creations. She had even been convinced that God had opened the door for her. But if she was being honest, she had to admit that she felt overwhelmed.

Working at the theater was thrilling, but also draining. There was the constant pressure to impress Derrick with her

designs and creativity. She wasn't just crocheting for herself or because she loved it. She had had to alter her own plans to fit Derrick's expectations.

And then there was the feeling of guilt that came from neglecting her family. Mercy had spent several hours at home alone. Jada had told herself that she was leaving Mercy alone in order to support Grace, but that was a lie. When she was at the theater, she had barely paid Grace any mind. All of her attention had gone to Derrick and her crochet.

And even when she was at home, she wasn't really present. She was working on designs or crocheting costumes instead of helping the girls with their schoolwork, cooking healthy meals, or snuggling with Ronny on the couch. Ronny had had to pick up the slack and cook meals. And he did it without complaint while Jada gave all of her attention to her new career.

She was sure that there were women who could balance taking care of their family while starting a new career, but she wasn't one of them. Truth be told, she hadn't even tried to juggle her responsibilities. She had simply clutched her career goals with both hands and let everything else tumble to the floor.

Jada looked up to find Mrs. Brown watching her out of the corner of her eye as she poured herself a fresh cup of tea.

"No." Jada shook her head slowly. "I don't think I was happier, and I'm pretty sure my family wasn't happy either." She covered her face with her hands and sighed. "I'm a mess."

Mrs. Brown gently removed Jada's hands from her face and gave them a squeeze. "You're not a mess. Just confused." She smiled and leaned back in her rocking chair. "How about we try things God's way? We can start with a baby step this week."

"Okay, what do I do?"

"First, I want you to realize that taking care of Ronny and raising your daughters isn't some bit part or backstage job you do while waiting for your breakout role to come along. It is a

leading role that God created just for you. When you are picking up dirty socks, or cooking a meal, or helping your precious daughters with a lesson, I want you to remind yourself that what you are doing is important to God. You are exactly where He wants you to be, doing exactly what He wants you to do.”

Jada nodded. She had never thought being a housewife was a calling from God before, but it did give her work more weight. More purpose.

“Good.” Mrs. Brown smiled. “Now, for the next week, I want you to wake up every morning and ask yourself, ‘how can I be a helper to my husband today?’”

That baby step had seemed simple enough to agree to, but Jada was finding that it was harder in practice.

On Monday, after meeting with Mrs. Brown, she had rushed home and cooked Ronny’s favorite meal of stewed chicken and dumplings. While Ronny had politely eaten the meal, he had largely ignored Jada. Instead, he focused all his attention on the girls who peppered him with questions about his whereabouts the past week.

On Tuesday, Jada had decided to be a helper by scrubbing both bathrooms until they sparkled. She usually just gave each toilet bowl a cursory wipe, but this time, she got down on her hands and knees and scoured every inch of those bathrooms. Again, her efforts went unnoticed. Ronny came home from work, gave her a head nod, and then proceeded to ignore her for the rest of the night while he played video games with the girls. Jada thought about trying to join in, but she got the distinct feeling that she wasn’t welcome.

Now, she was in her room, folding Ronny’s underwear, and she was sure these efforts would be met with a similar lack of appreciation. Yet somehow, Ronny’s lack of response didn’t bother her as much as it would have had this happened a few weeks ago. She knew that Ronny was hurt and needed time, but it was more than that.

She had a newfound peace in knowing that she was exactly where she was meant to be, doing exactly what she was meant

to do. That restless feeling that she had struggled with for so long all but vanished when she remembered Mrs. Brown's words. She was doing something that helped Ronny, and that meant that she was doing what pleased God.

She had been so afraid of wasting her life and her talents that she had been willing to risk everything, including her family. And while she had resisted the idea at first, it was so freeing to know that her life was meant to be spent in service of her family. Yes, she could have other goals, but the most important thing was right here.

Isn't that what Ronny had been trying to tell her all along? If only she hadn't been so stubborn, she would have saved her family and herself a lot of hardship. She couldn't make Ronny forgive her, and she knew enough to give him the space he clearly needed. But she could work on filling her God-given role that she had foolishly neglected for so long. And while she worked, she prayed.

She prayed that God would help her be a better wife. She prayed that her relationship with Ronny would be healed, and they would be able to build a strong marriage. She prayed for forgiveness. And she prayed for her daughters.

She knew that she had failed them. She had neglected them, resented them, and let them down. Both of her girls were hurting and disappointed in her, and she didn't know how to make it right.

"Lord, please give me wisdom," Jada murmured as she put the last of Ronny's clothes away in his closet. "I'm sorry for not coming to you before, but I'm willing to do things your way now. Please help me to be a good mother. Show me how to fix my relationship with my daughters."

Jada walked out of Ronny's closet and found Mercy standing in the bedroom doorway.

"Mom, I need your help."

"You do?" Jada tried to hide her surprise. Although Mercy had allowed Jada to care for her when she was sick, she had become cold and withdrawn as soon as she had regained her

health. Yet here she was seeking Jada out for help. Could this be an answer to prayer? Jada silently prayed that she wouldn't mess up this up.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“I think I may have pooped myself in my sleep.”

“What?” Jada’s brow wrinkled in confusion. She rushed across the room to feel Mercy’s forehead with the back of her hand. “You had an accident? Are you sick?”

Before Mercy could answer, Grace burst into the room, her face wet with tears. “Mama, Mercy’s dying! She didn’t want to tell you, but she’s bleeding from her bum. And this morning, she had brown and red goop all over her nightgown.” She hiccupped a sob. “I tried to tell Daddy before he went to work, but he didn’t even care! He just scrunched up his nose like I said something funny and told me to talk to you about it,” Grace wailed.

“Grace, I’m not dying,” Mercy tried to reassure her sister, although Jada could see the fear in her eyes. “I’m just...sick.”

Jada pulled both girls into a hug as understanding dawned on her. “Everything’s alright girls. I know exactly what this is, and it’s nothing to worry about.”

“It’s not?” Grace sniffled.

“Nope.” Jada gave her a squeeze. “In fact, it’s perfectly natural. Have I talked to you girls about having your periods?”

Mercy sagged with relief. “Is that what this is?”

“Mmhmm.” Jada kissed the top of Mercy’s head before releasing the girls from her embrace. “Why don’t you go shower and clean up, and I’ll get you some supplies.” She turned to Grace. “And you can wash your face and then come downstairs to help me make your sister a special tea.”

A few minutes later, after she had gifted Mercy with a set of cotton sanitary napkins and showed her how to use them, Jada found herself in the kitchen teaching her youngest daughter how to make the soothing raspberry leaf and stinging

nettle tea that her own mother had taught her how to make many years ago.

“And this really helps?” Grace asked as she cautiously sniffed at the steam coming from the tea mugs. “It smells funny.”

“I think it smells nice.” Jada leaned over to inhale the aroma. “I drink this every month, and it helps with my cramps and my mood.”

“Your mood?” Mercy walked into the kitchen wearing a smile and a fresh outfit. She eyed the tea mugs skeptically. “Maybe you need to increase your dosage.”

“Hey!” Jada protested playfully, putting her hands on her hips. “My mood hasn’t been that bad. Has it?”

The girls glanced at each other and then looked away. Uncertainty wound its way up Jada’s chest. Had she been rude and moody towards the girls without knowing it?

“I saw that look. Tell me the truth,” Jada coaxed, trying to keep her tone light.

“Well...” Mercy shifted uncomfortably, unable to look Jada in the eye.

“What she’s trying to say is, yes. You can be a real grouch,” Grace piped up.

“Not exactly,” Mercy corrected. “I mean, you are moody, but it’s more than that.” She hesitated before continuing. “Sometimes I get the feeling that we’re not important, or that we’re bothering you.”

Jada blinked as she took in Mercy’s words. This was worse than she’s thought. Had she been so wrapped up in achieving her insignificant dreams that she had made her own daughters feel expendable. The answer to that question was evident in the hurt that lurked in the girls’ eyes.

“Sweetie, I’m so sorry,” Jada said. “Why don’t we sit down and talk?”

Jada led the girls to the living room and handed them each a mug of tea before sitting beside them on the couch.

“I owe you both a huge apology. I know the past couple weeks have been...weird, and I haven’t been the mother you needed me to be. I let myself get caught up in...well, it doesn’t matter what happened. What matters is that I let you down. I’ve been a horrible role model for you, and I’m sorry.”

“Is our family going to be okay?” Grace asked.

Jada’s heart broke. “Of course it is, sweetie. Your dad and I love each other, and we love you both very much. We’re going to be fine. I promise.”

The pain in Jada’s heart eased when she saw the girls relax. They still trusted her promises. That was something.

Jada had somehow convinced herself that her girls didn’t need her as much now that they were older. But it was now painfully clear to her that they needed her just as much in their adolescence as they did when they were in diapers. They depended on the foundation that she and Ronny provided. And now that they were on the precipice of their teenage years, they would need her support and guidance to help her navigate all the pitfalls, challenges, and hormonal changes that were ahead of them. God had blessed her with two beautiful daughters, and she was determined not to take any more of her time with them for granted.

“Mercy? Gracie?” Jada reached over and took both of her daughters by the hand. “Do you think you can forgive me for not being the mom I should have been? It doesn’t have to be right away. But do you think that in a few weeks or mont—”

“I forgive you.” Mercy cut Jada off with a fierce hug before joking, “I mean, how could I not? You did just save me from dying.”

Jada blinked back tears as she returned Mercy’s hug. “Thank you, sweetie. Although I don’t think that getting your period is the same as dying.”

“I forgive you too.” Grace joined the group hug.

“Thank you, Gracie.” Jada kissed the top of her head. “I love you both very much.”

“We know,” Mercy said sheepishly. “And we’re sorry about the other day when we called you a...well, we’re sorry for being rude.”

“All is forgiven.” Jada gave her girls a final squeeze before leaning back in the couch. “Do you know what the best part of having your period is?”

“Definitely not this tea.” Grace wrinkled her nose as she took another tepid sip, followed by an exaggerated shudder.

“Well, the tea is a nice perk,” Jada teased. “But I also like that it gives you an excuse to pamper yourself.”

“What do you mean?” Mercy asked.

Jada raised a conspiratorial eyebrow. “How about instead of doing schoolwork, we spend the rest of the day eating popcorn, watching movies, and having some girl time right here on the couch?”

“Alright!” Mercy did a fist pump in the air.

“Periods rock!” Grace exclaimed as she threw herself backwards on the couch. “I was supposed to have a history test today.”

“I know.” Jada grinned. “But don’t you worry. It will be there waiting for you tomorrow.”

“Way to ruin it, Mom,” Grace grumbled.

Jada laughed at her daughter’s theatrics. “I’ll make the popcorn while you two pick out a movie.”

As Jada walked to the kitchen, she praised God for answering her prayers. He had given her another chance to be a good mother to her daughters. She only hoped that somehow, He could help Ronny forgive her as well.

Chapter Fourteen

So, how are things with you and Ronny?” Mrs. Brown rocked back and forth in her chair as she enjoyed an oatmeal raisin cookie.

Jada made a mental note to bake a batch of brownies for their next meeting. If Mrs. Brown was serious about being her mentor, it was only fair that Jada help out with the snacks.

“Things are...okay.” Jada paused to think before continuing. “Ronny moved back in, and we talk, but it’s very surface level. Like we don’t really know how to be around each other anymore. I miss the way we used to be.” She shook her head. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I even miss our cheesy dates at Pizza Palace.”

“Hmm.” Mrs. Brown took a sip of tea. “We’ll just have to keep praying that things go back to normal.”

Jada would give just about anything to go back to a time when Ronny trusted her. When he would talk about his day and look at her like she meant something to him while they shared a greasy hamburger pizza at their table with the wobbly leg.

These days, Ronny seemed to look right through her, if he looked at her at all. He said he wanted to work on their marriage. He said that he would love her “till death do us part.” He said he was open to counseling. But things between them were definitely strained, and Jada had no one to blame but herself.

She still looked for ways to help him every day and still tried to be a good companion. But she didn't know how to get things back to the way they used to be. And she was beginning to fear that the longer they stayed estranged, the harder it would be for them to rekindle any form of friendship or true romance.

On top of that, there was still a small part of Jada that wasn't entirely sure she wanted things to go back to the way they used to be. She now realized that God wanted her to put her marriage and children first, and she was eager to obey. Honestly, it was a relief to know that she was doing exactly what God wanted her to do.

But at the same time, she wasn't sure she wanted to go back to a marriage where Ronny called all the shots and all of her dreams had to be pushed aside. Was there some way that she could please God and still have a voice in her marriage? Was there a way to serve her family and still do what made her happy?

“Mrs. Brown?”

“Hmm?”

“What if I don't want things to go back to normal?” Jada held up a hand to sooth the startled look on Mrs. Brown's face. She hurried to reassure the older woman before she choked on her tea. “I'm not saying I want to leave Ronny or anything crazy like that.”

“Whew!” Mrs. Brown drew a hand across her forehead in a dramatic display of relief. “For a moment there, I thought I had completely failed as a mentor.”

Jada laughed. “No. You're a great mentor. It's just that things between Ronny and me weren't that great even before I met Derrick and started working at the theater.”

“What do you mean?”

Jada fiddled with her napkin as she contemplated the last few years of her marriage. “Honestly, things were just kind of...stale. We had the same date every week. We talked about the same things. Even sex was routine and scheduled. And I

felt like Ronny only saw me as a mother to the girls, not a partner with her own dreams and ideas. I never really felt like I had a say in the marriage.” Jada sighed. “I want to be a good wife, and I want my marriage to work. I just don’t want to go back to feeling trapped.”

Jada peeked up at Mrs. Brown to find that she was looking at her with a sympathetic smile. The woman’s kind demeanor loosened a knot in Jada’s stomach that had been tied since she entered the office. She knew that she had messed up by forming a friendship with Derrick, and a part of her worried that her foolish choices meant that she had forfeited the right to complain or to want more from her marriage. But Mrs. Brown’s understanding expression soothed her fears.

“Sounds like Ronny’s got a bossy side. Just like my Henry. There was a time, back in my wilder days, when that man would have tied me up and kept me at home if he could have. Of course, he would have had to catch me first.” Mrs. Brown winked at Jada, eliciting a smile before asking, “Has your marriage always been unhappy?”

“No.” Jada thought back to the beginning of their relationship. “Ronny and I used to have a lot of fun. He was my best friend, and he used to push me to go after my dreams. I remember when I made him a sweater for our anniversary, and he would wear it all the time and brag about me to anyone who would listen. Telling them I would be a big-name designer someday. I felt like I could do anything with him by my side. Then the girls came along, and everything changed.”

Jada frowned as she thought of the ways Ronny had slowly become more serious and focused on building his own plumbing business. Their lives had become more regimented, and they lost the spark that Jada had loved. That was around the time that Jada’s own zest for life had died as well.

Mrs. Brown rocked back and forth in her chair, a thoughtful look in her eyes. “It sounds to me like Ronny is a good man who got so caught up in providing for his family and creating a stable home for his children, that he plain forgot about romancing you and meeting your needs.”

Jada eyes stung with tears as she realized the truth of Mrs. Brown's assessment.

"Have you talked to Ronny about this?"

"I tried, but..." Jada shrugged, unable to find the words needed to capture her defeat.

Mrs. Brown shook her head. "Sometimes, men get such bad tunnel vision, it takes the hand of God to shake them out of it. But I guess that can be true for us women too." She reached forward and held Jada's hands. "I think it's time we asked God to do a little shaking."

As Mrs. Brown prayed, silent tears crept down Jada's face. She had spent so long feeling frustrated about her marriage. She had been angry at Ronny, and maybe even a little angry at God. But now, she had hope that maybe God would intervene and things in her marriage would change.

After the prayer, Mrs. Brown got up, walked to the back of the room, and started rummaging through her desk drawers while tactfully ignoring the fact that Jada was wiping away tears with a napkin.

"I got you something. I was planning on giving it to you in a later session, but something tells me now might be a good time."

Jada perked up. "Mrs. Brown, you've already done so much just by being my mentor. You didn't have to get me anything."

Mrs. Brown practically bounced with excitement as she handed Jada a silver gift bag. "Open it!"

Jada opened the bag and removed the mint green tissue paper. Underneath, she found a shimmering purple jersey scarf. "It's beautiful," Jada breathed.

"It's a head covering. Like the ones I wear." Mrs. Brown gestured to her own elaborate head wrap.

"I've always admired your stylish wraps," Jada shared. "But I never thought I could pull one off."

“They are pretty stylish.” Mrs. Brown’s eyes twinkled. “But they’re about more than fashion. The Bible encourages wives to wear head coverings as a reminder of the importance of their marriage and how precious they are.”

“Really?” Jada frowned. “I’ve never heard that before.”

Mrs. Brown nodded. “It’s not taught in many churches today. The practice kind of died out when the feminist movement came along. But back when I was a girl, most women wore hats or some kind of head covering to church.”

Jada thought back to the pictures of church picnics that lined the hallway leading to the counseling suite. All of the women in the older pictures had worn hats or scarves. “I thought that was just the fashion back then.”

“True,” Mrs. Brown agreed. “But that fashion was based on the Bible.”

At Jada’s confused expression, Mrs. Brown explained. “In the Old Testament, women would wear veils as a symbol of their married status and to show that they embraced their role of being a faithful helpmeet to their husbands. For example, when Rebecca met Isaac, the first thing she did was put on a veil, or headwrap, as a sign of submission to him as her husband.”

“Okay...” Jada said slowly. “That’s fine for the Old Testament. Why would Christians do that now?”

Mrs. Brown laughed. “I had a feeling you might say that. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul commands women to cover their heads when they are praying or prophesying. In 1 Corinthians 11, he explained that this practice was used in all of the early churches to show headship.”

“Headship?” Jada asked.

“Yes.” Mrs. Brown nodded. “Husbands come under Christ’s authority, and wives come under their husbands’ authority. Christian women were required to wear head coverings as a sign of respect to their husbands and as a signal to everyone who saw them that they were under the authority and protection of their husbands.”

Like most of the biblical advice that Mrs. Brown shared, this sounded a bit sexist. Still, Jada was intrigued. “And Christian women had to wear this every day?”

Mrs. Brown leaned back in her chair. “Technically, the Bible only tells women to cover their heads when they are praying or prophesying. But I like to wear my wraps all the time. When I put on my wraps, I feel like a queen putting on her crown. It reminds me of the important role God has given me in my marriage, and it helps me to have a right attitude towards Henry. But it also reminds me that I am precious in God’s sight. It reminds me that I am loved and protected by both God and Henry.”

She leaned forward and patted Jada’s hand. “You don’t have to wear the wrap if you don’t want to. But I hope that just having this wrap reminds you that although you are a helper and a companion, you are *not* a doormat. You are a daughter of the King, and your words, your gifts, your thoughts, and your dreams should be just as precious to Ronny as they are to God.”

When Jada left the counseling suite a half hour later, her mind was swirling with thoughts about marriage and her role as a wife. She was still determined to try things God’s way, but she wasn’t sure if she was stepping into the freedom that God gives or regressing to the days when women were seen as their husbands’ property. Still, she had to admit that Mrs. Brown’s descriptions of head coverings sounded beautiful, and a part of her wished that the church had never given up the practice.

As she walked through the parking lot, she was surprised to see Ronny’s truck parked a few spaces down from her car. Did he have a counseling session with Pastor Jerry today? He hadn’t mentioned it. But then again, he hadn’t mentioned much of anything to her recently.

She turned back towards the church and saw Ronny walking down the front steps. She could tell from the tightness in his gait and his downturned face that he was upset about something. Her heart ached and she longed to go to him and sooth him like she would have done in the early years of her marriage. Back then, there were days when he would come

home stressed about some hiccup in his plumbing business, and Jada would wrap her arms around him and run her hands up and down his back as she murmured words of encouragement and assurances. He would relax in her arms and Jada would feel as if her heart would burst with love. It was a heady feeling, knowing that she had the power to anchor and quiet this husband of hers. When had that changed?

As Ronny drew closer, Jada couldn't resist the urge to call out to him and pull him from his dark thoughts.

“Ronny?”

Ronny's head snapped up and his eyes scanned the parking lot. His entire body froze when his eyes locked on her.

“Hi.” Jada took a tentative step towards him.

“Jada.” Ronny swallowed and blinked as if trying to determine whether she was really there. “I...was just thinking about you. Why are you here?”

Jada lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “I was meeting with Mrs. Brown.” At Ronny's blank look, she added, “She's agreed to mentor me. I'm learning a lot.”

“Right.” Ronny fidgeted with his car keys. “I've been meeting with Pastor Jerry. He's helped me to see some things about myself. About us.”

“Really?” Jada took another step towards him. “Like what?”

Ronny tilted his head and studied her for a long moment. So long in fact, that Jada thought he might not have heard his question. Finally, he expelled a long breath through his nostrils and asked, “Are you busy right now?”

Jada blinked. “What?”

“I think we should talk. Do you want to maybe go on a picnic?”

A picnic? Ronny hadn't asked her on a picnic since their first date. She took in her husband's hopeful expression even as he jammed his hands into his jeans pockets in an attempt to appear nonchalant.

A slow smile spread across her face. “I would love to.”

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Chapter Fifteen

Jada pulled her car up beside Ronny's truck in the parking lot. The entrance to the state park was just like she remembered it. The only difference was the new black top road that replaced the gravel lot that had been there fourteen years ago.

Ronny stepped out of the truck, holding the drinks and sandwiches he had purchased at the corner store on the way. He also grabbed an old work blanket that he kept under the passenger seat of his truck.

He looked at Jada and nodded towards the field in front of them. "Pick a spot."

Jada gave him a small smile and then picked her way across the field, being careful not to trip on fallen branches or crush any wildflowers on the way.

While she tried to appear calm, she found Ronny's silence unnerving. Was he still mad at her? When he said he wanted to talk, did he mean that he wanted to reconcile or was he looking for a chance to vent his frustrations? If he wanted the latter, why had he bothered to invite her on a picnic? He could have just yelled at her in the church parking lot. Not that Ronny had ever really yelled at her before. He had always been calm and patient. But this was such new territory that Jada didn't know what to think anymore.

Remembering her decision to trust God with her marriage, Jada took a deep breath and silently prayed for God to give her wisdom and to be with them on this picnic.

She finally chose a peaceful spot that overlooked the lake underneath the shade of an oak tree. She helped Ronny spread out the blanket and then bowed her head as Ronny blessed the food.

“Dear Jesus, please bless this food and our time together. Give me wisdom and understanding. Help me to be the husband that Jada needs and please let her know how precious she is to me and how much I love her and miss her. I know she deserves better than me, but she’s mine and I won’t give her up.”

At his words Jada’s eyes flew open. She found Ronny staring at her, eyes wide with embarrassment.

“I, um...That last part was supposed to be silent.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Guess I’ve been praying that so often it just kind of slipped out.”

“Really?”

Ronny swallowed and his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. “Jada, I’m so sorry. At first, I blamed you for what happened with Derrick. But then I realized, you never would have felt like you needed Derrick if I had been a better husband.”

What? Jada shook her head. “No Ronny. That’s not—”

Ronny held up his hand to stop her protests. “Jada, stop. I know the truth. You’ve been asking me for a while now if I’m happy with our marriage, and my answer was always yes. But I’ve finally figured out that what you really meant was that *you’re* not happy with our marriage.”

He looked at her, eyes bleak. “I’ve never wanted anyone but you. From the first day that I met you, I knew that you were the woman God had for me. I’ve been talking to Pastor Jerry about my role as a husband, and we agree that my role is to lead this family while I love you, protect you, and provide for you. I thought I was doing that.” He gave a hopeless shrug. “But somewhere along the way I must have failed you.”

“Failed me?” Jada wrinkled her nose. “Is that what you think? Is that why you’ve been avoiding me?”

Jada's mouth fell open in disbelief when Ronny shrugged and looked away in embarrassment. Her heart clenched as she realized anew how much she had hurt this man. Her strong, confident husband, who always had a plan and always knew what to do, now saw himself as a failure. She had to make this right.

She reached over and took his hand in hers. "Ronny, you never failed me."

"I know I have, Jada. I mean look at the Tremont Plaza deal. You were counting on a new kitchen, and I let you down. That's probably what pushed you to take on a new job in the first place."

Jada shook her head furiously. "Ronny, honey. Please believe me that money had nothing to do with this."

Ronny's response made Jada fear that her words were falling on deaf ears. "I saw my mom struggle and work hard to provide for me, and I promised myself that my wife would never go through that. I never wanted my children to have to watch their mom work. And I thought I was doing good. Maybe the plumbing business wasn't growing as fast as it could have, but we were doing okay. I—"

"Ronny, stop." Unable to bear one more second of watching the man she loved torture himself, Jada threw herself at him and wrapped him in a fierce hug. "You're a good husband and a good provider. I love you, and I'm so sorry that I hurt you. But you haven't failed." She pulled away and looked him in the eye. "I'm the one who messed up. I'm the one who was so focused on my goals that I forgot about how important my marriage is. How important *you* are. Can you forgive me?"

Jada melted when Ronny's signature cocky grin spread across his face. "You still love me, huh?"

She leaned over and bumped him with her shoulder. "How could I not?"

Ronny's tension eased for a moment before he pulled his hand away and his face clouded with confusion. "If I didn't

fail you, then why did you do it?"

Jada sighed and looked up at the tree branches above her as though hoping the right words would be written on their limbs. When no inspiration came, she took a deep breath and shared the truth. "I guess I felt trapped."

"By me?" Ronny's eyes furrowed.

"No." Jada chewed her lip. "Maybe." She sighed again. "When we first met, you were my biggest fan. You believed in my dream of starting a crochet business, and I believed in your plumbing dream. You made me feel like I had a partner. And we used to go out and do things together. We had fun. Everything was more...spontaneous." She shrugged and peeked up at him. "But then things changed."

Ronny nodded. "Okay. But why didn't you talk to me?"

"I tried." Jada threw her hands up in the air. "You didn't want to hear it. You just wanted me to give up on all of my goals and stay home all day and be a perfect housewife. Everyone was happy but me, so I just went along with what you wanted, hoping that eventually things would change."

Jada plucked a handful of grass and rolled the blades in her hand. "Then I met Derrick and thought that working in the theater would help me find my place. He was a friend who believed in me like you used to. We were just friends, but then it went too far." Jada cringed at her own selfish words and tossed the blades aside.

Ronny scooted closer to her. When he finally spoke, his words were gentle. "Do you still hate being at home? I've noticed that you've been taking on more projects around the house. Thank you for that by the way."

Jada shook her head. "Actually, Mrs. Brown is helping me to have a new perspective on being a stay-at-home wife. I'm not saying I love it, but it's growing on me."

Ronny nodded. "I'm sorry I stopped being your biggest fan. And I'm sorry for getting so comfortable that I stopped taking the time to really listen to you."

Jada rested her head on his shoulder. "It's alright." She looked up at him. "I could really use a hug."

Almost before she finished her sentence, Ronny had her wrapped in his arms and pulled tight against his chest. "I've missed this."

Jada inhaled his spicy scent and breathed a blissful sigh as Ronny's voice rumbled through his chest and tickled her cheek.

"You know," she murmured as she snuggled closer. "I could use a kiss as well."

"Yes Ma'am." Ronny quipped before smiling down into her eyes. "I love you, Jada," he breathed before pressing his lips softly against hers. Jada melted in Ronny's arms and in the promise his kiss brought.

After several minutes, they broke apart. Jada grinned shyly at her husband. "I guess we should eat these sandwiches." She gestured at the soggy Italian subs that lay on the blanket attracting ants.

"We could." Ronny grinned back at her. "Or, we could go home, get dressed up, and head to a restaurant before we go dancing."

Jada looked up at him to see if he was serious. "A date?"

Ronny nodded.

"Not at Pizza Palace?" Jada asked suspiciously.

"I think it's time we gave Pizza Palace a break."

"Wow! I'm impressed," Jada teased.

"And while we're shaking things up, I hope you don't mind if our Wednesday night bedroom routine become a little more...unpredictable." Ronny studied her with one eyebrow raised.

"I won't mind at all. Feel free to be as unpredictable as you want," Jada murmured.

Ronny threw his head back and laughed. He stood up and held out his hand. "Come on my love. Let's get you home."

Home. There was no place Jada would rather be.

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Epilogue

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One Year Later

Sorry we're late. Did we miss much?" Simone whispered as she and Imara slid into their seats next to Jada and Ronny.

"You didn't miss anything," Jada whispered back as she leaned over to give her friends quick hugs. "Mrs. Brown just told the audience to turn off their phones."

"Oh! Good reminder." Simone typed out a hurried text and hit send before powering off her phone and sliding it into her purse.

Imara rolled her eyes. "Let me guess. Another message to your mystery man? You've been texting this guy for almost a year now. Don't you think it's time you two met?"

"Don't try to bring me down, because it's not possible," Simone replied in a singsong voice.

Imara shook her head at her friend and removed her own phone from her pocket. Instead of powering it off, she put her phone on silent and began filming the theater and the set.

"What are you doing?" Jada whispered.

"Please. They are going to have to drag me out of here if they want to stop me from catching every second of my girl's debut on camera." She turned her phone towards Jada. "Smile. I want to get a shot of the costume designer. Especially since you look so nice in your fancy headwrap."

"Thanks," Jada muttered as she reached up to pat the teal scarf that covered her twists in an elegant regal wrap. "But I'm

not the costume designer. I simply donated some of the pieces I made to Mrs. Brown to help her with the play.”

“And wait till you see them.” Ronny wrapped an arm around Jada’s shoulder and gave her a proud squeeze. “My baby really outdid herself with her crochet designs.”

Jada beamed under Ronny’s praise. A year ago, she had been willing to give up her crochet dreams for the sake of her family, but apparently, God had other plans.

A month before the first performance of *Little Women* was set to open, the board had fired Derrick after some of the actors caught him in a compromising position backstage with the music director. Derrick left town shortly afterwards and headed back to New York. Apparently, the music director, a married woman, was so convinced that she had found true love that she quit her job, packed her bags, and left her family behind to chase after him. Jada felt sorry for the woman’s family, and thanked God every day that He had saved her from making the same foolish mistake.

With opening night right around the corner, and no acting or musical director on staff, the production had been scrapped. A few weeks later, Mrs. Brown was promoted and took on the roles of new acting director and interim musical director. With full decision-making power, she decided to put on a new musical adaptation of Queen Esther.

Grace had won the coveted role of Haman’s wife, and Mercy surprised Jada when she volunteered to help out backstage with the set designs. Jada suspected that Mercy’s sudden interest in theater had to do with a certain boy from youth group who also happened to be a part of the crew, but she wasn’t complaining. She was happy to see Mercy getting out of her shell, and she already had several workable speeches about purity and the opposite sex ready to go for their next mother-daughter date. They were scheduled to go to an art exhibit together the following week, and Jada would have to find a way to bring up the topic of boys in a way that seemed organic.

Mrs. Brown had asked for Jada's help, and with Ronny's support, she had designed and created several costumes for the show. While Jada no longer wanted to build a crochet empire, she could see herself making more costumes for Mrs. Brown in the future. Plus, she was toying with the idea of creating an annual custom line that the church could raffle off to raise funds for one of their many charitable programs. She still needed to flesh out the idea with Ronny before presenting it to Pastor Jerry.

As the lights dimmed and the curtains rose, Jada snuggled into Ronny's embrace. "Proud of you baby," Ronny murmured as he pressed his lips to her forehead.

Jada released a contented sigh. It might not be the glamorous life that she had hoped for, but it was the life that God had for her. *Yes.* Jada smiled as she watched her youngest daughter walk confidently across the stage. She had finally found her place, and it was infinitely better than any dream.

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About the Author

Ariel Nathan is a middle school English teacher, a book addict, and a homemaker. When she is not writing, she is spending time with her family and enjoying nature in New England. This is Ariel's second book.

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