

SAMPLE



This
Defiant
PRINCESS



nana prah



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CHAPTER ONE

Jake Pettersen had flown over five thousand miles from Vermont to West Africa to see someone he'd met online. On a social media site about superhero movies, of all places.

Was he crazy?

Sure, the conversations he'd had with Amira over the past year had left lasting impressions, leaving him contemplating issues which had never crossed his mind before. She had a witty personality that made him laugh out loud in public places. It had been impossible to resist her beauty and elegant mannerisms.

So why was he afraid of meeting her face-to-face for the first time? What if the woman he'd come to know and respect turned out to be an illusion? Or worse, a disappointment. He'd built her up in his mind as perfect. Or at least, perfect for him. What if she wasn't?

A year of daily communication should've equipped him with the ability to get to know

the real her. Not even a method actor could be that good at hiding their true self for so long.

His best friend and business partner, Calvin Shepard—always up for an adventure—had decided to tag along. Now that they'd landed, Jake was glad he hadn't travelled alone.

The 'fasten seatbelt' sign switched off. He unbuckled himself from the economy seat and waited for his turn to disembark.

Calvin shifted to the aisle. "Ready to meet the woman of your dreams?"

Jake tilted his head from side to side, eliciting the popping sounds that made others cringe. How could he answer? Was she the woman for him? He'd developed feelings for her, but how would he recognize if she were his? The questions threatened to give him a headache, and yet, his mind had never once revolted at taking the journey.

His synapses fired with the exhilaration of being so close to meeting her in person. Whether Amira was the woman he was meant to be with for the rest of his life or not, they were great friends, and that settled any nervousness he may have had.

"I'm ready to meet my friend."

Calvin chuckled. “You didn’t drag me all the way to Africa to meet a *friend*.”

“I didn’t drag you anywhere.” Jake pointed to the front of the plane, indicating for Calvin to follow the others. “You jumped into my damn suitcase mumbling something about Africa being a place you had to visit before you died, and then begged me to let you come with me.”

“Funny how two people can have such different memories about the same event,” Calvin tossed back over his shoulder.

They walked along the tunnel leading to the large international airport and exited into the inner dome where they waited to get through the surprisingly long line at immigration. Before he’d started talking to Amira, he’d never heard about the African country of Bagumi. He hadn’t expected so many foreigners to be visiting. Amira had mentioned that it was a popular tourist area, but it was easier to see it than just imagine.

Calvin hitched the strap of his carry-on bag higher on his shoulder. “And yet, here we are. On a spontaneous trip, all for love.”

“More for a meet and greet.”

Calvin rolled light brown eyes skyward.

“Spare me, Jake. You can at least be honest to yourself.” Calvin drove him forward with a slap to the shoulder. “Be willing to accept what happens with Amira. Here’s to hoping fireworks blow up the roof, and you’ll have found the woman you’re meant to be with.”

Leave it to his oldest friend to declare the ultimate truth.

His excitement rose once they’d gone through passport control, retrieved their luggage, and then customs before heading in the direction of the airport’s exit.

They stepped out into a large lobby area where people waited with broad smiles and expectant faces. Up front and centre stood a dark-skinned man with a poster bearing Jake’s last name.

Jake looked to the left and right of the man, expecting to see Amira’s dark, almond-shaped eyes searching for him.

His shoulders fell in disappointment. Why hadn’t she come to the airport to meet him?

As they strode towards the man with the sign, his expectations rose once again. Maybe she’d stayed in the car to avoid the crowd. But that didn’t make sense because she loved being

around people. How many times had he called her an attention-seeker when she'd told a story about always being the life of the party?

He extended his hand to the man holding the sign and spoke some of the few words in her language that he'd absorbed when she'd attempted to teach him. "Hello, my name is Jake Pettersen."

The older gentleman's eyes widened as his bushy brows rose.

"Hello. My name is Runako," he returned in his language with a smile. "I am your driver. Welcome to Bagumi. It is a pleasure to meet you," he continued in a rhythmic rise and fall of accented English.

"This is my friend, Calvin Shepard."

Runako nodded at Calvin. "Welcome to Bagumi. I am sure you will both enjoy your stay." He reached for Jake's bag.

Not accustomed to people carrying anything for him, he held on to his things.

"I'll take care of my own luggage." To soften the rejection he added in the dialect, "Thank you."

This brought a wide smile to Runako's face. "Please follow me," he said in English.

They did as instructed. The unexpected stifling atmosphere once they stepped out of the air-conditioned airport snatched Jake's breath away. The combination of the sun beating down so close that he swore he could touch it, along with the suppressive humidity made standing on the sweltering pavement a tortuous event for the short time it took Runako to open the car door.

Sliding into the back seat of the vehicle, he took in deep gulps of the cool air the running engine emitted. Amira had warned him about the weather, but he hadn't taken it seriously. He'd been to Cancun back in college and had survived. What else had she mentioned about her country that would end up testing him?

He looked over to see Calvin grinning and shook his head. "Didn't the heat bother you?"

"Not one bit." Calvin's laughter mocked him. "I'm not the idiot who flew to a country which nearly kisses the equator all trussed up in a suit."

Compared to Calvin's more laid back and cooler look of a pair of light khakis and a polo shirt, Jake had been the one to make a mistake in wardrobe. He'd desperately wanted to

impress Amira with one of the few suits he owned.

He removed his jacket and tie, unbuttoned the top two buttons of his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves. He could only hope the sweat saturating his shirt would dry by the time they reached the hotel.

Runako pulled out of the temporary parking space, and soon, they found themselves in a city the likes of which he'd find in a large US state. The road was smooth as they whipped past skyscrapers creating the skyline.

After about fifteen minutes, the landscape shifted to a more suburban scene. The homes varied in size from mansions to moderate-sized. Jake rested his head against the seat and enjoyed the change in scenery as homes were replaced by thick copses of trees with occasional villages consisting of interspersed neat, cottage-type houses.

After an hour and a half, Runako took a left off of the main road. Thirty minutes later, a palatial edifice came into view as if they'd come upon a mirage.

“Welcome to the Palace of Bagumi,” Runako announced with pride. “The home of King Saene and the royal family.”

Jake shook Calvin’s shoulder to wake him. What were they doing at the king’s palace? “Will we be taking a tour before we’re sent to our hotel?”

Runako caught his gaze in the rear view mirror with a quirked brow. “This is where you’ll be staying.”

CHAPTER TWO

Amira Saene paced in her eldest brother's office. Zawadi, the next king of Bagumi, watched her for a moment, shook his head with a deep frown, and returned his attention to his computer.

Adrenaline wouldn't allow her to sit as she waited for Jake to arrive. When had her stomach ever been tied in such knots? As a princess, she'd been trained to remain cool and composed at all times. It would've been ideal for her nerves to remember that as she gnawed on her manicured nails.

Why hadn't she broken protocol and gone to the airport to meet him? Resisting her favourite treat of peanut brittle had been easier than forcing herself to stay in the palace to receive her guest as decorum demanded. It also might've made things easier if she'd told Jake who she really was, but she hadn't. The way he'd treated her like a regular person had kept her lips sealed about her status as a princess of a prominent country in West Africa.

She glared at Zareb, the youngest of her older twin brothers and the chief of palace security. When she'd requested permission for Jake to visit, she'd pleaded with Zawadi not to tell anyone about her relationship with him. Meeting someone on the Internet these days wasn't a crime, but she doubted her family would agree.

Zawadi had insisted on informing the hardest member of their family. She'd had to relent because of the current instability in Bagumi. The neighbouring kingdom of Ashani had become more violent with direct attacks on cattle herders over the past month. Disputes over the water rights of the river between their two countries would lead to war if her father didn't defuse the situation soon. Although a smaller country, Ashani held a powerful army. Too many lives would be lost if they fought.

Zareb hadn't been happy about Jake coming into the country in the first place, but not even he had ever been immune to her charms, or incessant whining. Sometimes, being the youngest and the only female in her mother's line had its benefits.

“Amira, you will not speak during the questioning,” Zareb ordered.

She pinched her lips together to keep from arguing. He wouldn't hesitate to fulfil his earlier threat of kicking her out of the office altogether. She gave a curt nod and strode to the window. Too bad Zawadi's office faced the back portion of the palace's extensive grounds instead of the front where the driver would drop off their guests. Maybe seeing him from afar would settle her racing heart.

She jumped as a knock sounded on the near-impenetrable Bubinga wood. Inhaling and then exhaling twice as long through her nose like she did while practicing yoga did absolutely nothing to calm her.

“Come in,” Zawadi said.

His secretary opened the door. “Your Highness, the two guests you were expecting have arrived.”

“Thank you. Please escort them in.”

Amira swallowed the nothingness drying her throat. Every cell in her body vibrated at a higher frequency, and she swore she could've evaporated.

“Amira.”

She pivoted her head towards the voice of her eldest brother. When had he gotten up to stand beside her?

“Sit down.”

With stiff legs, she toddled to one of the gold and maroon armchairs across the room. As taught in her multitudes of etiquette classes, she lowered herself onto the seat and crossed her legs at the ankles.

The door opened again, and all composure bolted as she leapt to her feet. The man she'd gotten to know over the past year entered, sucking all the air out of the room. He strode past her towards the desk. The scents, sounds, and coolness of the room dulled as her vision, attuned only to him, heightened.

His commanding presence dwarfed her more than his six-foot, broad-shouldered frame did. How many times had she longed to run her fingers through his thick, light brown hair to feel if it was really as silky soft as it appeared while they'd chatted on Skype? She'd often fallen asleep thinking about his brilliant eyes which reminded her of light sapphires with subtle varying hues of blue within. Even on camera, the dynamics of his irises had been vivid.

A high forehead, sharp nose, strong jawline, and that luscious mouth. A full, pink bottom lip with a slightly thinner top one which she'd imagined running her tongue along. Her face heated at how far her imagination had taken her with this man.

And now, he stood in front of her and her brothers. The next king of Bagumi along with the most disciplined and strictest man in possibly all the world.

She sank into her chair with all decorum forgotten and prayed.

A sound from the corner of the room had Jake turning to see what his peripheral vision had glimpsed when he'd walked in. For a moment, he shifted his eyes away from the imposing men standing before him and spied a woman. His gaze flung back to do a double take, escorting his body with it as he stared at Amira.

He feared his already hyperactive heart would fail with the increased effort that seeing her had wrought.

The cream-coloured top tucked into a dark pencil skirt emphasized her slim waist and full hips with the added pleasure of highlighting her

lovely brown skin. Her dreadlocked hair, normally flowing over her shoulders when they spoke, was now pulled into a high bun.

He couldn't take his gaze off of her dark eyes as something unfamiliar and undefinable struck him, making him ultra-aware of nothing but her presence as a strange longing flipped in his stomach. Without a thought, he took a step towards her.

His outstretched arm was restrained by a vise grip.

“Please have a seat, Dr. Pettersen.”

The voice which penetrated his mind sounded muffled.

How could he be anywhere but close to Amira? She drew him to her, and he had no will to resist. What would it be like to finally stroke a finger along her cheek? To lean in and touch his greedy lips to hers and breathe in her scent? What did she smell like? Taste like? Never in his life had he had such a strong desire to absorb someone's essence into himself.

Distress at discovering the intensity of his attraction to her should've pushed him to run out the door. Instead, desire heated his skin and

released gravity's pull, willing him to float closer.

Was she as mesmerized? Needing to touch? Or was it just his imagination?

"Jake."

He recognized Calvin's insistent voice as a hand waved in front of his face, obscuring his view of the most beautiful woman he'd ever encountered. He slapped it away.

"Our hosts want us to have a seat," Calvin said in a loud, slow tone.

Hands on his shoulders pivoted him.

As if he were awakening from a deep sleep, the room came through as hazy until he blinked several times. What had just happened? Shaking his head, he scrubbed a hand down his face. Maybe it had all been a vision?

Once he'd sat in the chair, he turned and found Amira standing where she'd been a few seconds ago. He stayed attuned to her as he forced himself to return his attention to the meeting.

Had the room been this tense when they'd entered?

The narrow eyes of the fierce man glowering down at him as if meaning to do

harm did nothing to dim his euphoria. Instead, he focused on the less annoyed man behind the desk. The penetrating dark eyes reminded him of Amira's as he got the impression he was being analysed and judged.

“Dr. Pettersen and Mr. Shepard. My name is Prince Zawadi Saene, and this is my brother, Prince Zareb—” he paused and looked between him and Calvin, “—our head of security. Welcome to Bagumi.”

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