

Stars In Their Eyes – *Lolita Chakrabarti*

Jamal was a big star. One of the biggest that Britain had ever seen. Everyone knew his name. He'd performed with the greatest from Michael J to Whitney. His songs were worth a million, literally. He was a man who had everything and he was only thirty-three, a man in his prime.

He'd left England twelve years ago because America had called and that was where the big money was. He had gone without question, following his heart to fulfil his dream. Being a big star meant that a lot of people said yes even when they thought no and so Jamal had learnt to trust his own instincts and follow his nose.

He was not back in England publicising his latest album – a mixture of hip-hop and R'n B that was Jamal's own sound. The British press were tripping over themselves to interview the Brit done good, to get that exclusive comment from the mouth of a genuine star. But Jamal knew that these were the same people who hadn't been interested in him at the beginning, just another black kid going into music, nothing special they'd thought. He showed them. He also knew that these were the same people who would tear him to shreds if things went wrong, if his relationship backfired, if drink, drugs and rock 'n roll got the better of him. But for now they wanted him and it was his choice who he spoke to.

BB Jones, who ran her own PR company, and was doing very well thank you very much, was in charge of Jamal on this tour. The two didn't really see eye to eye. BB was really called Benedicta Blue, so it was plain to see why she chose to be called BB in this cool, hip, now world of modern spin and music. BB stood before Jamal with a list.

'Well American Vogue were delighted with the cover you did for them so British Vogue are planning to use the same photo. Touch, Vibe, NME, Muzik, Blues & Soul would be good to do I think...'

She droned on and Jamal feigned interest. The record company was paying for all this hullabaloo so he had to seem willing. This was his job.

The phone rang. Saved by the bell, thought Jamal, as he excused himself and answered it. BB looked through her papers.

'Yep?' he said.

'Sorry to bother you sir, but there's a young lady down here who says she's your cousin.' Came the pompous voice. 'Were you expecting a relative?'

'No, I wasn't.'

'I'll ask her to leave sir, sorry to bother you.'

Jamal looked over at BB, still sifting through her endless pile of memos and faxes. Something in him didn't want to have to knuckle down, to go back to it all just yet. 'Put her on,' said Jamal, 'I'll check her out.'

'Right sir.' Jamal heard the receptionist, with extremely high status, address the alleged cousin, 'it appears he'd like to speak to you.'

'Hello? Hello? Is that you Jamal?' came a young, excited female voice.

‘Yeah, who’s this?’

‘My name’s Jinelle.’ Jamal said nothing, used to getting calls from fans, used to being tricked into conversation. She continued, hesitant. ‘I’m 13...and I’ve come up from Birmingham to see if I could talk to you...for the school magazine. I’m a big fan of your music...and I go to your old school...and I sing too, kind of, I want to see how you got where you are cos I want to...sing...if I can...if they think I’m good enough.’

BB looked over at Jamal, impatiently, as if her time was more valuable than his. Something in him wanted to rebel, he felt like he was back a school being herded from class to class. ‘Come on up,’ he said, ‘Suite 740’. He hung up and walked over to an annoyed looking BB. Jamal grinned at her, ‘My first interview,’ he said and plonked himself down on the sofa and waited.

‘This is highly inappropriate, Jamal. They’re meant to come through me...that’s my job.’ BB could see she wasn’t getting anywhere. ‘Who is it? NME? Touch?’ The bell to the apartment rang, Jamal went to answer it. Jinelle came in. BB almost fell over. ‘Who are you?’ she asked the small black girl in a bottle green school uniform.

‘Jinelle Parker from Archbishop Masterson,’ said Jinelle as if she was on the BBC News. BB threw her hands in the air, let out a melodramatic sigh and left.

‘Thanks for seeing me,’ said Jinelle. ‘I didn’t think you would.’

‘S’alright,’ said Jamal as they sat down. Jinelle, who wore glasses, a brace and clothes that didn’t fit too well, took out an exercise book and looked so tidy and small that Jamal almost laughed. ‘So you sing?’ he asked to break the ice and free his smile.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘Ballads mostly, easy stuff.’ She shifted uncomfortably on the huge leather sofa. ‘I write too,’ she blurted out suddenly. Then remembering that she had come to interview Jamal she said, ‘I wanted to ask you how you got started.’

‘In the business?’ he asked.

‘In the very beginning. With music,’ she said.

Jamal looked at this young, hopeful girl in front of him and rather than spin her the usual cool sound bites that he saved for his interviews, he thought he had nothing to lose if he told her the truth. The plain, honest truth. ‘I wasn’t anything special at school. I grew up in the seventies where being black in Birmingham wasn’t hip, it was the opposite. You were not even considered attractive, nowhere in the league of being cool.’

‘Really?’ asked Jinelle, incredulous that this handsome star ever felt like that.

‘My mum always played music at home. Dennis Brown, Randy Crawford, Marvin Gaye. All the time you’d hear the tunes and so I thought it was perfectly natural to sing. I sang everywhere – in the bath, in the bedroom, drove my brother mad.’

The door opened slightly and a slightly repentant BB re-entered the room. She smiled patronisingly at Jinelle and sat down on the chair opposite as if invited. Neither Jamal nor Jinelle said anything. ‘I’m meant to be here for all your interviews,’ said BB sweetly. ‘I wanted to remind you that we have to go for the photo shoot in ten minutes. Just might be good to wind up with the little lady,’

BB smiled. Jinelle didn't.

'So who was your first and strongest influence then? Stevie Wonder? Jackson Five?' Jinelle asked as she gathered her things together, aware that she'd had ten very precious minutes of this megastar's time.

'Honestly?' asked Jamal.

'Yeah, honestly.'

'Mozart.'

Jinelle looked at Jamal surprised. She wrote down the single word, Mozart.

Jamal continued, 'My mum took me to an open audition at the church and the choirmaster chose three of us. I was nine at the time. After a year there I started singing in the cathedral choir till my voice broke and I couldn't sing there anymore.'

Jamal walked Jinelle to the door. 'I sing at my church too,' said Jinelle shyly.

'And are you good?' asked Jamal.

'I think I am, yes,' answered Jinelle.

'That's all you need to know.'

Jinelle thanked him for his time and was gone. He took a deep breath and turned round to face BB. 'Mozart?' she smiled as if she knew him, as if she was in on some joke he'd not even made.

He looked at her and then without thinking the words emerged. 'D'you know BB, you should never stop being surprised by people. Cos if you feel you know it all, then what else is there to learn? And after all the parties and press you can fill your life up with, it end empty really. Surprises are what keeps me going. Shall we go?' Jamal picked up his jacket and walked out of the room.

BB had never liked her own company and followed him like an obedient puppy.