

Prologue

June 5, 2004

This was not the way Jasmine planned to spend the night before her wedding.

Her fingers squeezed the toilet's edge as she crouched over the commode, her knit dress hiked high around her hips.

Celebratory sounds drifted into the bathroom from outside. The cheers continued, the toasts kept coming - all without her. It didn't matter. It wasn't like she had many friends or family there to celebrate with her.

Tomorrow, her sister, Serena, godbrother Malik, and their two assistants, Gabriella and Tina, would be sitting alone on the left side of the church if they kept with tradition.

At least her fiancé was loved and respected enough to fill the church with hundreds who would see her fantasy come true. Even now, she anticipated the "oohs," and "aahs," that would ring through the sanctuary when the oversized doors of City of Lights at Riverside Church opened and everyone saw her draped in the fifteen-hundred-dollar designer dress. Then there would be the horse

driven carriage that would carry her and her new husband to the reception at Tavern on the Green.

Jasmine took another deep breath, and pushed herself up. But her stomach rumbled and she sank onto the toilet seat.

"Jasmine?"

She almost groaned at Gabriella's Spanish accent. Jasmine didn't like her. Just put up with her because Malik wouldn't have it any other way.

"Jasmine?"

"I'm in here, Gabriella."

"Are you all right? You've been gone for awhile."

"I'm fine," Jasmine said, not rising. "I'll be right out."

"Are you sure?"

Jasmine closed her eyes. *Leave me alone.* "I need a moment."

She heard the door swing open, then close muffling the joy from the party and returning her to her silent sanctuary. All she wanted to do was rush home and collapse into bed, but that couldn't happen. Any minute now, her fiancé was liable to start banging on the door, wondering where was his 'Darlin'.

She stepped outside the stall and wobbled across the Italian tiles. Grabbing a tissue from her purse, she dabbed at the perspiration on her forehead. She kept her glance away from the mirror. Didn't want to look into her eyes. Didn't want to see the question because she already knew the answer.

Finally, she allowed herself to glimpse at her reflection.

"Am I pregnant?" she whispered to her image. She had to fight to keep the tears away. Fight as hard as she did to keep the nausea away.

"Oh, no," she cried. "Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no!"

Book One

January, 2004

The Night

I

Fell in Love

Chapter 1

Jasmine swung the designer dress in front of her as she gazed into the mirror. "Can you believe this is a size six?"

Serena leaned against the silk pillows stacked against the bed's headboard. "I can't believe you bought all these things," she said to her sister. "How are you going to pay for this?" Serena motioned toward the bags and boxes strewn across the room.

"You didn't answer my question," Jasmine said, fixing her eyes on her reflection.

"You didn't answer mine."

Jasmine faced her sister with raised eyebrows. "Why are you worried? Dad left us...."

"Not enough for you to be going off like you're Oprah."

Jasmine sighed. That was what was wrong with Serena. She lived life in the middle. She lived in a middle-class neighborhood, with a middle-class job, trudging through her middle-class life. But there was nothing 'middle' about Jasmine. She lived outside of the box where she knew all the abundant blessings could be found.

"Can you believe this is a six size?" Jasmine repeated, turning back to the mirror, this time with a silk pantsuit draped in front of her.

A slight smile crossed Serena's lips. "You do look good, girl."

Jasmine smiled, too. She'd worked hard to lose twenty pounds and get in top shape for her mission.

"Wish I could do that." Serena sighed.

Jasmine said, "I thought you'd joined *Curves*."

Serena waved her hand in the air. "Girl, I'm a *Curves* dropout. The women there were looking at me like they wanted me to really exercise. I pretended I had to go to the bathroom, and snuck out the back door."

Jasmine laughed. "Well, you should take up running, like I did." She didn't mention that along with her almost-daily sixty-minute runs, she'd spent hundreds of dollars on laxatives in the last three months.

Serena said, "I ain't running nowhere. I've decided that I am perfectly fine in my size eighteen." Serena squinted as her sister primped in front of the mirror. "Seriously, Jasmine. I'm worried about you."

"No need. I'm just preparing for my new life in New York. I plan on having much sex in the city and I've got to be ready."

"Girl, you need Jesus," Serena said, holding a Bible above her head. "That's why I bought you this."

"I've already got one of those."

"You can't have too many," Serena said, as she tucked the book inside the nightstand drawer. "With the way you're acting, you need Jesus all around you."

"I don't know what you're talking about. You, of all people, know how much I love God."

"And I would know this how?"

"Like you never noticed who was sitting next to you every Sunday the last two years."

"Honey, there are plenty of unsaved folks parked in pews all across America."

"Well, I'm not one of them," Jasmine said, thinking how she'd changed since she'd asked Jesus to come into her heart. Not only was she in church every Sunday, but she had even remained celibate her first year in Florida. Almost three hundred and sixty-five days - and she had counted every one of them. "I gave up a lot for the Lord."

Serena laughed. "What did you give up?"

Jasmine faced her sister. "I gave up married men. I may not be all holy like you, but I'm making progress."

Progress indeed, Jasmine thought. Two years ago, she'd made a list of promises: Besides swearing to never

again have sex with a married man, she vowed to never miss a Sunday service. And, she pledged to never tell a lie - if she didn't have to. She was living the Christian life and was pleased that she'd kept her commitments to God.

Serena sighed. "I pray for you, girl. I pray everyday."

"You don't have to worry; all I'm doing is getting my groove back."

Serena shook her head. "That's why you bought all these clothes? To have sex?"

"No, silly. The clothes are an investment."

Serena glanced around the master bedroom of the condo her sister had just purchased. "I thought this apartment was an investment."

Jasmine shook her head as if she was tired of explaining this. "I'm investing in my life. These clothes are going to help me find my next husband."

Serena moaned.

"You can groan if you want," Jasmine said, now holding a black knit mini dress in front of her. "By this time next year, I'm going to be Mrs. Somebody Important."

"Why is getting married suddenly so important to you?"

Jasmine had asked herself that question so many times. It wasn't that getting married was important. It was that

she'd been single long enough, and it wasn't like she was getting younger. It was time to settle down - again.

"I just want to be married. And you know how I get when I want something."

Serena peered at her sister and Jasmine could almost hear her thoughts.

Jasmine said, "I'm fine."

Serena kept her stare on her sister for a bit longer. "I hope so," she said before she stood and, with her hands, pressed the wrinkles from her jeans. "Well, Big Sis...." Serena slipped into her down overcoat.

Jasmine held up her hand. "I told you not to call me that anymore. I don't want you making a mistake around anyone." She returned to admiring herself in the mirror. "Remember, I'm thirty now."

"Oh, Lord." Serena looked up at the ceiling. "Forgive me, Father, for calling on you like that, but this child needs some help." She returned her glance to Jasmine. "How are you thirty, when I'm thirty-five, and you're almost five years older than me?"

"Not anymore."

"Please."

"I mean it, Serena. I'm thirty now. Look at me," Jasmine said, sweeping her hand down her side.

"You need to look at your birth certificate."

Jasmine waved Serena's words away. "Like anyone is going to ask to see that."

"What about your driver's license?"

"I'll think of something. Your job is to just remember that I'm thirty."

Serena held her hands up. "Whatever. Listen, what time are we leaving for church tomorrow?"

"Malik said he'd meet us at the hotel at ten-thirty. We're going to take a cab uptown."

"Uptown?" Serena grinned. "You got the lingo down."

"Honey, I'm a New York City girl for real."

"Whatever you are, I'm outta here," Serena said sliding into a pair of gloves. "I want to pack tonight so I can make the three o'clock train. If I miss that one, I'll have to wait until seven. And I want to get away from this cold, girl. A week in New York in January is enough for me."

Jasmine laughed at her sister, the Florida girl, wrapped snuggly in a white down coat, looking like the Michelin man. "You're still going to take the train home?"

"Yeah, I like the ride."

"You only like it because it's free."

"Duh, who doesn't like something free? Jerry didn't work at Amtrak all those years for nothing," she said, referring to her husband who had passed away six years before.

"I don't understand you. We've got all this money from Daddy's insurance policy. Why don't you fly? Take one of those cheap flights from New York to Florida."

Serena shook her head. "I'm fine. It only takes twenty-four hours and I'll get a lot of reading done." She shrugged. "I love the train."

"You love being cheap. Besides, I thought you'd be rushing home to see Carl," Jasmine teased.

Serena rolled her eyes. "I'm not rushing home to see anyone."

But Jasmine didn't miss the smile that lit Serena's face. Since her husband passed away, Serena hadn't shown interest in anyone. But a few months ago, Jasmine had invited one of her coworkers, Carl Cosby, to church. She had no plans of introducing Carl to Serena - until she saw the way the self-proclaimed nerd kept glancing at her sister. It was a casual introduction that Jasmine expected to go nowhere. Her sister had made it clear that her focus was on God, her children, and work. But then, Serena accepted Carl's invitation to dinner.

Jasmine had been thrilled. She prayed that Carl could bring her sister some happiness.

"Anyway," Serena continued, "You may think I'm cheap, but we'll see who'll be calling who for a loan in a year."

"I'll lend you money if you need it," Jasmine kidded. "I'll be married to a rich man by then."

"Whatever. Anyway, give me a hug."

"I'm going with you."

"You're still staying at the hotel? I thought you'd want to sleep here tonight with all your new clothes since your bed arrived today."

Jasmine wrinkled her nose. "No way," she said looking around as if the room disgusted her. "Look at these walls. Who ever heard of a purple bedroom?"

"It's not purple, it's plum."

"It's ugly. I don't know what that girl Sheila was thinking," Jasmine said referring to the woman who had sold her the upper East side condo. "The woman has no taste." Jasmine grabbed her purse and full-length mink from the bed. "My decorator will be here on Monday with the painters and a week from today, this place will look like someone with class lives here." She slipped into her coat and then linked her arm through her sister's. "Okay, Hon, where should we go for dinner?"

Serena shook her head as she looked her sister up and down.

Jasmine said, "Don't say anything about my new coat. Just tell me where you want to eat."

Serena rolled her eyes. "I saw a diner on the corner."

"Honey, you need to recognize where you are. Ain't no diners around here."

"Well, wherever we go, I don't want to spend a lot of money," Serena said, as they stepped into the carpeted hallway lined with gilded mirrors.

Jasmine sighed. Her sister was getting on her nerves with this useless chatter. Their father had left them almost a million dollar insurance policy. Sure, they had to split it, but it was tax-free money. Jasmine wanted to make sure her father's passing a year ago was not in vain. His money was being used well.

Along with the apartment, she had a closet full of new clothes, a high-profile job, and enough optimism to fill Yankee Stadium. She'd made the investment; now all she had to work on was getting the return.

"Don't worry about dinner," Jasmine said. "I'll pay."

Serena crossed her arms as they entered the elevator. "I'm telling you, a year from now you're going to be calling me."

"You got that right. I'll be calling you and inviting you to my wedding." Jasmine pressed the button for the lobby. "Just make sure you call me your little sister," she said as she slid her Chanel sunglasses on her face.

"Lord, help her," Serena mumbled.

But Jasmine ignored her sister's grumbling. The wheels in her head were spinning. She was a thirty-year-old, New York City girl, on a mission.