

# Sins of the Mother

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"Love Mama!"

Jasmine scooped her fourteen-month-old into her arms. "You do love your mama, don't you?" She laughed.

Mae Frances rolled her eyes as Jasmine smothered her son's cheeks with kisses.

"Don't make no kind of sense, Jasmine Larson," her best friend said. "Teaching that baby to say that."

"What's wrong with him loving his mama?" But before Mae Frances could answer, Jasmine stood straight up and scanned the crowd that packed the new mall. In just seconds, her eyes like lasers, beamed in on her daughter, crouched in front of the pet store window. "Jacqueline!"

The girl's brown curls bounced when she jumped up, and then skipped back to where Jasmine and Mae Frances sat.

With a firm hand, Jasmine grasped her daughter's wrist. "I told you to stay where Nama and I could see you."

Jacqueline bowed her head. "But, Mama," she sighed, "I could see you."

"Well, I couldn't see you, so why don't you sit down for a moment and cool off."

"I'm not hot," Jacqueline protested. It was the look on her mother's face that made Jacqueline take three steps back and then wiggle onto the bench next to Mae Frances. With her eyes

on Jasmine, she buried her head on the shoulder of the woman she knew as her grandmother and then glared at her mother as if she never planned to love her again.

Jasmine shook her head, then her eyes widened when her rambunctious daughter rolled her eyes.

*No, she didn't.*

Jacqueline had never done that before and Jasmine opened her mouth to scold her, then just as quickly changed her mind. When her daughter peeked back at her, Jasmine rolled *her* eyes. Jacqueline giggled, and Jasmine laughed, too. But when Jacqueline moved to get up again, Jasmine stared her back down.

Jacqueline pouted and bounced hard against the back of the bench. But the silent tantrum didn't faze Jasmine. She planned to let her four-year-old (or fourteen-year-old depending on the day) sit and think about how she'd run off.

"Are you ready to go home?" Mae Frances grumbled.

As Christmas musik piped through speakers above, Jasmine realized this wasn't the best idea she'd ever had. But what was she supposed to do? How could she have missed this day? The new Harlem mall had only been opened for two weeks and this was the first big shopping day of the season; she had to make her own contribution to Black Friday.

Now as she looked at Mae Frances and Jacqueline - a set of ornery twins, with their arms folded and their lips poked out -

she wished she had thought this all the way through. Because if she had, she would have come alone.

"I wanna go home, too!" Jacqueline exclaimed as if she was in charge of something.

Looking at her son, Jasmine shook her head. "You don't want to go home, do you, Zaya?" she asked, calling him by the name that Jacqueline had given to him when he was born. Hosea had been too difficult for her to say, and no one wanted to call him Junior.

"No, no, no!" Zaya followed his mother's lead before he toddled over to his sister. "Yaki, Yaki, Yaki!" He called her by his own made-up name.

Mae Frances sucked her teeth and tightened the collar of the thirty-five year old mink that she loved. "Don't make no kind of sense, the way you manipulate that boy."

"He's my baby. He's supposed to be manipulated."

"Get away from me, Zaya!" Jacqueline exclaimed and pushed the toddler away.

"Don't do that to your brother," Jasmine scolded.

Jacqueline stood up, put one hand on her side as if she had hips and with the other, she squeezed her nose. "He! Stinks!"

Jasmine sniffed, then hoisted her son up into her arms. "Your sister's right." She grabbed the diaper bag from the

stroller and reached for Jacqueline's hand. "Come on, we've got to change Zaya's diaper."

Jacqueline folded her arms and sat back down next to Mae Frances. "I don't wanna go." With a pout, she pointed toward the pet store. "I wanna see the puppies."

"We'll see the puppies after," Jasmine said, still reaching for her daughter.

"Leave her with me." Mae Frances put her arms around Jacqueline. "No need for her to have to go with you when I'm here."

Jasmine's hesitation waned after just a moment. "Stay right there next to Nama," she demanded sternly. "And then, we'll go see the puppies, okay?"

Jacqueline nodded as she scooted back on the bench. With wide eyes and an even wider smile, she blew Jasmine a kiss. "I love you, Mama."

Jasmine laughed. Her precious little girl - always the drama queen.

Inside the restroom, Jasmine twisted through the long line of waiting women and as she made her way to the changing station, her cell phone rang. But just as she pulled her phone from her bag, it stopped.

She glanced at the screen. "That was your daddy," she told her son as she laid him on his back.

He giggled and reached for her cell.

"No," she said, taking it from his grasp.

His laughter stopped. His bottom lip trembled. His body began to shake. And before the first shriek came, the phone was back in Zaya's hands.

"Love, Mama," Zaya cooed as he pushed buttons.

Jasmine laughed. God had blessed her with a drama queen and a drama king.

That thought made her pause to wallow for a moment inside the wonderment that was her life. Who would have ever thought that she - Jasmine Cox Larson Bush - would end up in this place? She - the ex-stripper, ex-man-stealer, ex-liar, cheater, thief - there was hardly a sin that she hadn't committed. But that life, those abominations were far behind her.

Today, she stood as a proud wife and mother - the first lady of one of the most influential churches in the city. Today, her life was filled with leisure since it was difficult to call the work she did as first lady and with the Young Adults Ministry, a job. Today, each of her needs and every one of her desires were met. And she had a Central Park South apartment, a closet full of what seemed like endless racks of designer clothes, and an upcoming New Year's family vacation in Cannes to prove it.

This was God's reward for having turned away from her transgressions. As she glanced at her reflection in the mirror, her lips spread into a slow smile. Bountiful blessings. All she could say was, "Thank you, Father."

Seconds later, Zaya was back on her hip, her cell, back in her bag and she was back in the mall. But then, her steps became measured as she moved toward Mae Frances. Her friend's head was down as she pushed buttons on her cell.

Her voice was as deep as her frown as Jasmine yelled out, "Mae Frances?"

She looked up. "Did you just call me?"

Jasmine let the diaper bag slip down her arm. "Where's Jacquie?"

Mae Frances waved her hands. "She's right over there. With the puppies. Did you just call me?"

Before Mae Frances had finished, Jasmine's eyes were searching the crowd. With Zaya still in her arms, she pushed through the mass of men and women, arms filled with packages, children close at their sides.

"Where's Jacquie?" The question trembled from her lips to a young boy in front of the pet store. "The little girl who was here - where is she?"

His face was pressed against the glass, but still he answered, "She's gone."

But there was no time to ask him more. A woman, two giant steps away, grabbed the boy's hand.

"Didn't I tell you not to talk to strangers?" the woman admonished as she dragged the boy from the window.

Jasmine's eyes were wide as she spun around, clutching Zaya to her chest, searching the space around her. It had only been a minute, but terror was already crawling up and down her skin.

"Jacquie!" she screamed, through the holiday din.

She tried to keep herself in check as she gripped Zaya and barged through the pet store's doors. The stench of the animals did nothing to cover the fear that was already reeking from her pores.

"Jacquie!" she shouted, while inside, she kept telling herself that this was nothing; Jacqueline had just wandered off.

Pressing up one aisle, then rushing down the other, she hunted through the crowd.

"Jacquie!" she yelled, now not able to find any comfort inside.

Jasmine grabbed a pink apron wearing teenager crouched down in front of the cages. "Please," she said to the young man who was obviously one of the store's employees. "Have you seen my daughter?"

The blond spiked hair boy glanced at Jasmine and then looked around the store, his expression telling Jasmine that her

question didn't make much sense to him. "There've been a lot of kids here today," he answered before he returned to feeding the kittens.

"Jacquie!" she screamed one last time, as she rushed back through the doors.

Outside, in the middle of the passing crowd, Jasmine turned slowly, exploring each face, searching every space.

"Jacquie!"

Her distress went unnoticed; the holiday shoppers were buried under their own cares.

"Jacquie!" Now, her heart banged against the flesh of her chest.

Tears gushed from both she and Zaya by the time she hurried back to the bench. And inside the eyes of the woman she called her friend, Jasmine saw the same unadulterated horror that was inside her heart.

"Where's Jacquie?" she screamed at Mae Frances.

Mae Frances shook her head rapidly. "She...she was...right there," she cried as she pointed back to the store.

But Jasmine didn't bother to turn around. She didn't need to look at the store or anywhere else in the mall. Because in the space inside of her where truth lay, she knew.

As *Joy to the World* squeaked out from the speakers above, Jasmine knew that her daughter was gone.