

Chapter 1

Sweat popped off me, and my heart danced as I belted out lyrics until my lungs burned. I squinted against the harsh stage lights, trying to get a better view of the projection screen, focusing on the words to my first-ever karaoke tune.

I hadn't been on stage in years, and as I clutched the microphone and closed my eyes, I realized I still lived for the spotlight, just like I had when I was sixteen and had given the biggest performance of my life. This time around I started off a little shaky, but once I got my groove, my body took over, and I started vibing with the music and the audience.

I was on fire, and so were they.

They seemed to be holding their breath as I sang Whitney Houston's version of "I'm Every Woman," which I had loved when I was a kid. When I got my chance, I took it home, hitting notes I had forgotten I could hit.

It was like I was outside myself watching as I made the song my own, doing these crazy lyrical combinations that had the people shouting my name, Jasmine Richardson, and on their feet. When I finished, the applause was so loud, I thought I might go deaf. I couldn't stop the big grin that spread across my face. I was twenty-six years old, and I couldn't remember the last time I had felt this good.

Even after all these years, I still had it.

This was the attention I had been missing, I realized as I threw a nod of thanks to the crowd and left the stage.

Since I was the final act, I didn't wait backstage long once I was done performing. I stood with the rest of the contestants while the judges tabulated our scores, and I waited to hear my name called as the winner. I wondered why some of the people had even bothered to return to the stage. I know karaoke was mainly for fun, but they couldn't sing to save their lives, and even with the words on the screen, half of them still messed up, plus they had no clue how to work a stage or a crowd. I know if it were me...

Nah, it would never be me because even without practice, my routine was still tight.

I stood bouncing in place, probably looking like I had to pee, anxious to hear my name. I knew the judges' deliberation was just a formality. It was only a matter of time before I was given the title of Karaoke Queen.

I threw a glance at my friends, Maya Davis and Courtney Abraham. It was girls' night out, and I didn't realize how much I needed it until we were laughing over our latest work and relationship drama.

Karaoke was the last thing on my mind when Maya had called me at work that afternoon and suggested we go to a Mexican restaurant in lower Manhattan. Maya had raised a brow when I'd walked in with Courtney and introduced them since I didn't tend

to hang out with the people from work. I had only known Courtney for a few months, since she had started working as a paralegal in the Manhattan law firm where my uncle Henry and my nerdy cousin Daniel were partners.

This was the first time we'd had a chance to hang out outside the office, but she had invited herself along when I ran into her in the elevator as we were leaving work that evening, and I told her I was meeting up for a girls' night with my best friend. From the few times Courtney and I had run into each other at work, she reminded me of a more outgoing version of my other college roommate, Vanessa Adams, who had shared an apartment with me and Maya. Tonight almost felt like old times when Maya, Vanessa and I had hung out near the campus of our alma mater, New York University. Hilarity always ensued.

I surveyed the crowd, making a mental note to call Vanessa, who was now working as a reporter in Atlanta, as soon as I got a chance.

One of the contestants nudged me, and I realized I needed to move over a few steps, which allowed me to get a better look at the packed restaurant. Who knew karaoke was so popular? The building wasn't too far from one of the first places I had ever performed outside the neighborhood where I grew up in Queens, New York. I felt like I had come home, and I hadn't protested too loudly when Maya signed me up for karaoke. Maya knew I was as passionate about music as she was about teaching kids.

Back in college I had done a whole lot of deejaying and had even dropped a CD right after I graduated, but somehow when I wasn't looking, the gigs had slacked off, and while I was in law school, I had used my performing skills to wow my classmates during our mock trials. Now I was a general practice attorney helping people rather than entertaining them.

"Jasmine, you won," I heard Maya shout from the audience.

I shook my head to clear my thoughts again and realized most of the people in the restaurant were clapping and staring at me, probably wondering why I was just standing there rather than accepting my trophy and hundred-dollar check.

"...And the winner is Jasmine Richardson," the emcee said, and I figured it was more for show than anything since I'm sure he had said it before. I shook his hand, accepted my prize then headed back to our table.

"You did it," Maya said, giving me a hug before checking her phone, which she had been doing all night. I eyed her curiously, wondering if she had a new boo or something she hadn't told me about, and she put it down.

"Girl, I didn't know you could sing like that," Courtney said. "You really do have skills."

"I know this," I said confidently, picking up a tortilla chip, dipping it into salsa and popping it into my mouth before chasing it down with a sip of my margarita. We all burst

into laughter.

“Seriously, I’m surprised you don’t have a record deal or something,” Courtney said. “Why are you wasting your time working at a law firm?”

I frowned. Her comment about me wasting my time wasn’t cool. I was a lawyer. How could that possibly be a waste of time?

“Jasmine had a CD out back in the day,” Maya said, throwing me a glance as she tried to fill the awkward moment. “Then she was known as Jazzy J. She even had a hit song on the radio.” She pulled out her phone and showed Courtney the YouTube video of “One Love.”

“That was you in the video with Mocha Love and Triple T?” Courtney screamed. “I used to love that song.”

Apparently other people loved it too. The video had almost five hundred thousand views, which I thought was pretty cool.

I shook my head. That really did seem like a lifetime ago.

“You gave up music to become a lawyer?” Courtney asked, shaking her head.

“Not just a lawyer,” Maya said, coming to my defense. “Now she’s Jasmine Richardson, Esquire.” She flexed her fingers like she was showcasing each word. “She handles everything from criminal cases to family law—and she’s still notorious at New York University law school for her closing arguments.”

“And I’m licensed to practice in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut,” I said, raising my glass for a toast. “But tonight, just call me Karaoke Queen.”

We clinked glasses, and I patted my trophy, knowing I was going to put it on the mantel above the fake fireplace in the Brooklyn apartment Maya and I shared.

“What are y’all ordering?” I asked, grabbing a menu.

We decided on our meals, then placed our order with the waiter before focusing on the front of the dim restaurant where a cheesy mariachi band had taken the stage.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into performing,” I said to Maya, shaking my head as I devoured more chips and salsa. I had skipped lunch so I could research a case for a senior associate and performing on top of that had me starving.

“You know you’re glad you did it,” Courtney said.

“I guess,” I said and shrugged.

They looked at me in surprise.

“You were really good up there, Jasmine. Do you regret doing it?” Maya asked, scrunching her face in worry.

Maya and our roommate Vanessa were the only ones who knew how hard it had been for me to let music go. It had just been too hard to do with trying to keep up with my classes and spend time with my boyfriend, Kyle Adams.

I could no longer contain the grin I had been trying to hide. “The only thing I

regret,” I said, “is that I didn’t let you talk me into this sooner. I didn’t realize karaoke could be so much fun. I really needed this, you guys. Thank you.”

“Well, since you appreciate it that much, we’ll let you pay for dinner,” Courtney said, eyeing my prize check.

I barked out a laugh and nodded, making a mental note to keep an eye on Miss Courtney. Some of her comments were starting to get on my nerves. We went back to discussing our day until our food arrived. I guess Maya and Courtney were just as hungry as I was because the only sound at our table was forks scraping against plates.

“These enchiladas are so good,” I said, wondering if I would need to get an extra order after Courtney and Maya both took some.

I was just about to try some of Maya’s quesadilla when a movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention.

“Dang, he’s fine,” I said, checking out the guy near the hostess stand at the back of the restaurant. His presence had me doing a triple take.

He looked like he was about six feet tall, the perfect height for my five-six frame. The police uniform he wore might as well have been custom-made because even at a distance, I could see how well it fit him. I was a sucker for a man in a uniform and for pretty teeth.

I guess he felt me staring because his eyes met mine, and he said something to the hostess and started walking in my direction. I pretended not to notice as I tried to focus on Maya and Courtney who were yapping about a book they had both read. Although I saw their lips moving, I couldn’t hear a word they were saying because all my senses were tuned in to the guy like the latest episode of *Law and Order: SVU* was on. I couldn’t ignore the shiver that went down my spine when I felt him standing beside me.

“Excuse me,” the man said. I know I said he was a police officer, but he was a man first—and a fine one at that. His fine behind could arrest me anytime.

“Yes?” I said, turning to look at him. He looked even better close up. His hair was freshly cut, like he had just gotten out of a barber’s chair, and his cologne teased my senses.

“I just had to come over and tell you your performance was amazing. I’ve never heard a voice like yours,” he said, his hand resting on the back of my chair.

“Thank you,” I said, gazing at him then looking at the ground.

“But your voice doesn’t compare to your beauty,” he said, and I blushed.

“What’s your name?” he asked in this nice sexy voice that had me clearing my throat.

“Jasmine—Jasmine Richardson,” I said.

“Nice to meet you, Jasmine Richardson,” he said, extending his hand for me to shake. “Look, I’m not one to play games. I think you’re beautiful, and I really would like

to get to know you. Would you mind if I called you sometime?”

I smiled. “That’s really sweet,” I said, “but I have a boyfriend, and I really don’t think he would like that.”

“The question is whether you would like it,” he said.

I saw Courtney nodding out of the corner of my eye, letting me know if I didn’t like it, she didn’t have any problems loving it.

“Maybe,” I said, “but I love my boyfriend very much.”

“I’m sure he loves you too, and I must say he’s a lucky man.” The man’s gaze warmed me from the tips of my in-need-of-a-pedicure toes to the crown of my curly head.

I blushed again, silently cursing my light skin, which was showcasing how his words were affecting me. “I think I’m pretty lucky too.”

“Are you sure you won’t change your mind?”

I hesitated, then slowly shook my head. “How would you like it if some guy hit on your girlfriend and she took his phone number?”

“Oh, I’d be upset,” he said without hesitating. His clenched jaw indicated just how much he hated the thought.

“Exactly,” I said.

“Well, it was worth a try,” he said. “Nice to meet you, Jasmine Richardson.” He extended his hand again, and when I placed mine in his for him to shake, he squeezed it, and I shivered. I watched in a trance as he turned to walk away, wondering if I had just made the biggest mistake of my life.

“Wait,” I said before I could stop myself.

He turned around and walked slowly toward me.

“Yes?” he said. The way he was staring at me had me wanting to order a pitcher of iced water to pour over my heated body.

“You never told me your name, Officer.”

He nodded. “My name is Kyle—Kyle Adams.”

“Hey,” Courtney said, interrupting our moment, “didn’t you tell me your Kyle’s name is Kyle Adams?”

I didn’t even bother to respond as I slowly rose from my seat and threw my arms around my Kyle. “Hey, baby,” I said, giving him a kiss. “I missed you.”

After Kyle had graduated with a business degree from NYU, he had decided to sell the doughnut shop his father had owned and become a policeman. He seemed happy, but I worried every time he put on his uniform that he wouldn’t come home to me. I tried to be as supportive of him as he was of me, but I had my moments, especially with folks thinking that just because some cops didn’t respect the fact that Black Lives Matter, they could just roll up and shoot policemen. I believed in Black Lives Matter, but in my world, so did Blue Lives, especially the life of my man in blue.

"You act like I've been out of town. I was just at work," he said, returning my kiss. "I missed you more."

He helped me back into my chair then pulled up a seat right next to mine.

"How'd you know I was here?" I asked.

He grinned and quickly glanced at Maya. "I have my ways," he said.

Suddenly her continued texting made sense.

"Uh, hello. Don't you see me sitting here? You're not going to introduce me?" Courtney complained.

"Sorry," I said, but really I wasn't. I didn't even bother to look her way as I drank in the sight of my super-fine man. Even after all these years, I still got butterflies when I saw him. "This is Courtney, and you know Maya."

Kyle stood and shook Courtney's hand and gave Maya a hug. Courtney looked like she was about to complain that he hadn't hugged her too, but wisely decided to keep her thoughts to herself when I mean mugged her.

"So you saw me perform?" I asked, refocusing on Kyle.

He nodded. "Baby, you've still got it. You looked real good on that stage, like you were right at home."

"I felt like I had come home," I admitted. "You know this isn't far from the Apollo where Derrick and I lost All-District, right?"

His lips thinned the way they often did when I talked about my brother.

Kyle and I had known each other since we were kids, and he had tagged along for pretty much all of my performances and had even helped me promote them. Back then he had big dreams of being a record producer.

"Who's Derrick?" Courtney demanded, and I ignored her.

"You want to get out of here?" Kyle asked, picking up on my annoyance with Courtney.

I figured he must have really been missing me because it wasn't like him to be so rude.

I looked at Maya and Courtney. As much as I wanted to spend some time with Kyle, I had agreed to go out with them, and I didn't want to leave them hanging.

"Girl, if you don't go, I will," Courtney said. The more she talked, the more I realized she was nothing like my roomie Vanessa. Actually, she reminded me of my old friend Loretta Dennis. They were both loud and ghetto, although Courtney had an educated ghetto vibe since she had graduated from college. I hoped Courtney wasn't the type to steal my man the way Loretta had done when we were in high school.

"No you won't," I said with a little attitude. "Trust me, if you even think about it..." I left the threat hanging and eyed Kyle's service revolver. I was afraid of guns, but Courtney didn't know me well enough to know that. It wouldn't hurt for her to think I was

one of those crazy black chicks, especially when it came to my man and my money.

“You don’t have to worry about me going anywhere,” Kyle assured me.

“Really?” I teased. “How can I be sure?”

“Because...” Time slowed to a crawl as I watched him get down on one knee and pull a ring box from his pants pocket.

It took a few seconds for what he was doing to register. “W–What?” I finally managed to stutter. “Are you serious?”

I heard people gasping and whispering all around us, but my eyes were glued to Kyle. If I weren’t so shocked, I would have pinched myself to see if I was dreaming.

“Absolutely,” he said. He held out the ring so I could see it, and I realized it was the one I had shown him a few months ago when we had met for lunch and gone window shopping afterward. I had fallen in love with the one-carat emerald-cut platinum ring the moment I had seen it, even though I knew he couldn’t afford it. I really had thought Kyle wasn’t paying attention to me when I pointed it out to him, but obviously he was.

“Jasmine Richardson, I love you,” he said. “There is not a memory in my life that doesn’t have you in it. I want to make more wonderful memories with you. I love you with everything I have in me. Will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?”

I stared back and forth between him and the ring, not really sure what to say. I had pictured this moment in my mind so many times, and now that it was finally here, the tears and the words I had always dreamed I would say didn’t come.

“Kyle, you’ve done it,” Maya said. “It’s one of the few times in her life Jasmine is speechless.”

Her words seemed to break me out of my trance. I looked at my Kyle, the love of my life, and took a deep breath.

“I love you so much,” I said. “I would be honored to be your wife.”

He pulled me to him, and I felt like I was the princess in one of those Disney fairytales I used to watch when I was a kid.

Kyle was right. There wasn’t a memory I had that didn’t have him in it. I had found my Prince Charming, and this was the beginning of our happily ever after. My life just couldn’t get any better.