



Too Little, Too Late: A Novel

By Victoria Christopher Murray

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Jasmine Larson Bush returns to her devious ways in this tale of two marriages -- each threatened by lies and betrayal.

She took marriage vows to be honest and true, but Jasmine's still hiding secrets to keep her husband, Minister Hosea Bush, by her side. When Hosea's ex-fiancée, Natasia, suddenly appears in New York, Jasmine knows it's not a coincidence. A former manstealer herself, Jasmine is very aware of Natasia's motives -- even if Hosea is not.

Complicating Jasmine's life is the secret she's kept from her baby's daddy. Luckily for her, Brian Lewis has problems of his own. His wife, Alexis, is convinced he's cheating on her -- but Brian's real betrayal is much worse. Revealing the truth to his wife could lead him back to the biggest mistake of his life...Jasmine.

Two marriages are in desperate jeopardy. Will Jasmine be able to scheme to save her own? Or will she have to choose between protecting her past and compromising her future? Even if Jasmine and Brian find the courage to stop the lies, it may be too little, too late....

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Editorial Review

Review

"Juicy Jasmine Larson Bush returns....Murray efficiently illustrates the importance of honesty and trust in marriage, and manages to contain Jasmine's outrageousness within the context of Christian faith." --
Publishers Weekly

About the Author

Victoria Christopher Murray is the author of more than twenty novels including: *The Ex Files*, *Lady Jasmine*, *The Deal, the Dance, and the Devil*, and *Stand Your Ground* which was named a *Library Journal* Best Book of the Year. Winner of the African American Literary Award for Fiction and Author of the Year (Female), Murray is also a two-time NAACP Image Award Nominee for Outstanding Fiction. She splits her time between Los Angeles and Washington, DC. Visit her website at VictoriaChristopherMurray.com.

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ONE

Even with the cold metal of the gun's barrel pressed hard against her temple, Jasmine's feet would not move.

"I want you out of my house."

Jasmine wanted to plead for her life. Beg for forgiveness and give him at least one hundred of the good reasons she had for telling her husband all of those lies. But her lips, like her feet, were frozen with fear.

"I said get out of my house."

The venom in his voice turned her fear into fight. And she fought with her words. "Please, Hosea, please forgive me for not telling you the truth before. But I'll tell you now; I'm forty-three, not thirty-eight."

The gun cocked.

She dropped to her knees and cried. "And I didn't tell you that I was married before because -- "

Hosea pushed the metal into her skin.

"Please," she begged more. "Please."

He pulled the trigger.

Jasmine screamed. Shot up straight in bed, her skin dripping with the same sweat that drenched their satin sheets for the many nights that this nightmare invaded her sleep.

"Darlin'?"

She heard the calm of her husband's voice, then felt the warmth of his arms. "Darlin', it's just a dream." The kisses he planted on her forehead were meant to soothe, but that didn't work.

"It's all right, darlin'," Hosea kept saying. "Just another one of those bad dreams."

He's wrong, she thought as she settled back in bed. This was not just a dream.

Even as the rhythm of Hosea's sleep breathing returned, Jasmine's eyes stayed wide open. She knew if she surrendered to unconsciousness, Hosea's words would come back. And those words -- far more than the gun -- made fear rise like bile within her.

In her nightmare, Hosea was as cold as the gun he held. As cold as he'd been on the day, about eighteen months ago, when he'd *actually* told her he'd wanted nothing more to do with her -- right after she revealed that he wasn't the father of their daughter.

For the millionth time Jasmine wished that her lies had ended there. But they didn't. And she knew if her secrets were uncovered her nightmare would turn into reality.

This dream was a sign, a warning -- she was sure. She'd had it two or three times over the past year. But in the last two weeks, the ghost of her deceptive past haunted her with an almost daily vengeance.

She knew the reason why -- it was because in ten days she and Hosea were renewing their vows.

"I want us to stand before God again," Hosea had told her when he first came up with the idea. "I want us to recommit."

Her eyes had widened with surprise. "Baby, don't people wait until their tenth or twentieth anniversary to do that?"

"There're no rules." He'd embraced her. "What's most important is the reason why. And with the way we started..." He'd stopped right there. Jasmine had closed her eyes and remembered the wonder of their first six months of marriage, and then the beautiful birth of their daughter. But when Jacqueline was barely twenty-four hours old, Hosea had walked away -- from both her and the baby. Yet God's grace had found its way to her through Hosea's heart.

"I forgive you" was all Hosea said when he came back to her. He'd held her and Jacqueline and explained that it was God who had put them together, so they were divinely obligated to work through whatever challenges they had.

From that day, he'd loved her, claimed Jacqueline as his own, and together they'd lived in matrimonial bliss. But in the middle of her heaven, she wallowed in hell, terrified that one day the rest of her lies would be revealed.

Now, the fact that Hosea wanted to renew their vows so that they could start afresh made her tremble in terror. How could she stand before God -- again -- and pretend that all was well?

I've got to find a way to tell Hosea.

But even as her spirit longed to stop the lies, she didn't have the faith -- or the guts -- to tell the truth. It was too risky; she could lose Hosea, this time for good. No, she couldn't take that chance. Her secrets would have to stay tucked away in the dark, and she'd just pray that they never came to light.

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TWO

The mission: to keep all of her secrets hidden.

And there was only one person Jasmine knew who could make sure that task was accomplished.

"Good to see you, Mrs. Bush." With his thick Lithuanian accent, the doorman greeted Jasmine as if he hadn't just seen her last week.

She waved to Henrikas and scooted into the elevator. Although she, Hosea, and Jacqueline had moved away a year ago, this Park Avenue building still felt like home. A minute later, the apartment door opened before she even had the chance to knock.

"I thought you were coming yesterday." Mae Frances spoke in her signature grumpy tone. But her eyes sparkled.

"Hello to you, too, Nama," Jasmine said, calling Mae Frances by the name that eighteen-month-old Jacqueline had given to the woman who, just three years ago, had been nothing more than the cantankerous old lady who lived across the hall. But now, Mae Frances was part of their family and the only grandmother Jacqueline would ever know.

Jasmine kissed her cheek, then swept into the apartment. She stopped, a *déjà vu* moment -- back to the first time she'd entered this space. She'd been shocked when she'd walked into this drab apartment that didn't match the woman who was always drenched in diamonds and furs and who was chauffeured through the city in a limousine. She remembered her pain when she discovered that it was all a façade, that Mae Frances was a woman living in poverty with a prideful heart too hard to ask for help. Mae Frances had been an unsaved soul whose eternal doom had already begun right here on earth.

But that was then. Now there was no darkness inside Mae Frances's residence. Today, the sun's rays pressed through the massive windows framed with designer drapes that Jasmine had bought and Hosea had hung. The aged, raggedy furniture was gone, replaced with the chic pieces that had once graced Jasmine's apartment.

"What are you grinning at?" Mae Frances grumbled, standing as erect and elegant as a dancer.

"Your apartment looks good."

"Umph." Mae Frances smoothed the new silk skirt that Jasmine had bought her last week before she settled onto the sofa. "I'm just holding this furniture until you and your husband move. You need to get out of that penthouse and find a home with a yard for my granddaughter." Her eyes scanned the room. "Then I'll give you back all of this fancy stuff -- I don't need it. What's this ugly color, anyway, aqua?"

Jasmine didn't bother to answer. She'd come to learn that this was just Mae Frances's way. Her tone, her words had nothing to do with her heart.

"I'm just doing this as a favor for you." Mae Frances continued her rant. Still, she was stiff, but her smile matched the light in her eyes.

"And we thank you."

They both knew she'd given Mae Frances the furniture. But while the woman Jasmine had come to love like a mother had changed much over the years of their friendship, her pride still remained. So, Jasmine let her keep her dignity and went along with whatever role Mae Frances wanted to play on any given day.

In an instant, Jasmine's smile was gone. "Do you have the information?"

Solemnly, Mae Frances nodded and handed Jasmine a slip of paper.

She took a moment before she glanced at the note: Kenny Larson. And next to her ex-husband's name was a number with a 678 area code.

"How did you get this?"

Mae Frances waved her hands in the air. "One of my connections."

Jasmine shook her head. She'd grown closer to Mae Frances than anyone besides Hosea. But still, her friend was a mystery. She had no idea how Mae Frances always had the hook-up. It was one of her connections who had helped Jasmine almost get away with keeping her daughter's paternity a secret. Dr. Jeremy Edmonds, an Upper East Side ob/gyn, had twisted the truth, making sure that Hosea believed Jasmine's lies -- all for a fee, of course.

Mae Frances stopped Jasmine's memories. "You need to make this call."

"What should I say?"

"Find out his intentions. Make sure he has no plans to mess up your life." Mae Frances tilted her head. "I still can't believe you were married before."

She nodded. "Kenny was my high school sweetheart. I was a cheerleader and he was the star of the football team, on his way to the NFL."

"Hmph. Guess that didn't happen."

Jasmine shook her head. "He got hurt in college. Messed up all our hopes of becoming rich and famous. We never even got close -- he ended up being nothing more than a numbers cruncher."

"So explain to me why you never told Preacher Man?" she asked, referring to the name she'd given Hosea the moment she'd met him.

"I don't know why," Jasmine whined. That was the truth. She had no idea why she'd told that lie. It made no sense now. But back then, when she was determined to become Hosea's wife, she was convinced that the lie was necessary; sure that Hosea -- a minister -- would never consider making a divorced woman his wife. She knew now that she'd been wrong. But what she wasn't so certain of was what Hosea would do if he found out. Even if he could forgive her for the lie, would he forgive how -- and for how long -- she'd hidden the truth?

That's why she had to make this call.

Jasmine's heart pressed hard against her chest as she dialed. She wasn't afraid of her ex -- just of the secret that he unknowingly held.

"Hello."

Jasmine didn't know why a woman's voice surprised her. "May I speak to Kenny?"

"Who's calling?"

None of your business was what Jasmine wanted to say, the Jezebel rising in her. She wondered what other words she could say to make this woman -- whoever she was -- even more insecure. But then, Jasmine remembered; she was no longer the woman who went after another woman's man.

"Tell Kenny it's an old friend."

The pause told her that explanation wasn'...

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