



Chapter I

Anything worth having is worth fighting for. And you need to decide if you're going to fight for your man."

Sheila Rushmore's best friend, Cassandra, barked the words almost like it was an ultimatum. Sheila agreed with her. Sort of. The problem was that Sheila wasn't sure who or what she was fighting with. Ace had been her man for the last two years. They'd never had a problem. Nothing more than the disagreements and miscommunication that an average couple would have anyway. Until now.

He said nothing was wrong. But womanly instincts told Sheila that Ace was pulling away. There was something building a dividing wall between them. Slowly, brick by brick. When they were together lately, his thoughts seemed afar off instead of on her like they used to be. Something—or someone—was keeping him from the ultimate commitment that Sheila wanted—marriage.

Sheila was more than ready to jump the broom over into marital bliss. After two years of enjoying Ace all to herself, she'd start trying to have a child. Right now, Ace said that he was perfectly content with the two teenage daughters he already had. Of course, Sheila believed, that would change once they were joined in holy matrimony. As long as she was pregnant by the time she reached the defined high-risk pregnancy age of thirty-five, things would be great.

Something in Sheila's gut had always told her she'd have a son. She'd raise him to be a responsible, God-fearing man like Ace, not the good-for-nothing man like her older brother had become. The more Sheila thought about it, maybe she would hold off having a child just in case it brought more pain than joy. Her brother's lifestyle had etched wrinkles across her mother's face long before it was time. Having a child could be postponed, but a husband was another thing.

Sheila turned up the temperature on her ceramic curling iron. "That would make sense if I knew what I was fighting," she told Cassandra, who had turned her attention to Sheila's armoire. Sheila parted her hair into small sections. Ace would be arriving before she knew it, and she wanted to look like a flawless diamond amidst a rack of costume jewelry.

Cassandra slid a gold bangle on her arm and twirled it around her wrist. Both of the women's cheap jewelry had been tossed out when they decided to step up their game. No more living by the mantra "fake it 'til you make it." It had become "do whatever you need to do to get it."

Except when it came to one thing. The diamond engagement ring. As far as Sheila was concerned, she should've had a rock on her ring finger by now. She was smart, educated, and didn't have three kids hanging on her dress hem to drive Ace away. She wasn't a missionary, but she wasn't a downright heathen either. Her motto

was the same as what the old folks used to say: “*God ain’t through with me yet.*” At least she was trying.

Sheila wrapped her jet-black tresses around the barrel of the curling iron. Ace loved her hair when it was full and bouncy, like on the hair-care-product ads in *Essence* magazine. If there was one thing Sheila knew, Ace could never complain that she didn’t keep herself up. Even before their relationship, she prided herself in being meticulous about her looks—arched eyebrows, manicured nails, regular facials, her amber skin conditioned daily with cocoa butter and regular exfoliation.

Sheila’s maxed-out credit cards and her checking account that teetered on empty between paychecks probably told a little too much about how much she liked to take care of herself. But Sheila worked hard, and she believed in pampering herself. Ace appreciated it too, and every now and then, he treated her to a day at the spa. That was another good thing about Ace. He wasn’t stingy with his wallet.

She’d spotted him sitting alone at the bar in one of the restaurants in Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson Airport. She slid up on the stool beside him and waited patiently until he looked up from the newspaper he was reading. When their eyes locked, Sheila knew she’d already reeled him in. By the end of his forty-five-minute lay-over, he’d left enough money for the Sprite he was nursing as well as for her meal. Sheila gave him her home and cell numbers on the back of her business card before he put on his pilot’s hat and walked down past the gates in terminal A.

It had taken Ace two weeks, but he’d finally called. The rest was history. And now, Sheila was concerned about their future.

Sheila swept a comb through her hair and picked up her hand mirror. “Me and Ace are going to be okay. I’ve been praying about it, and . . .”

“Praying about it?” Cassandra nearly choked on the bottled water she had turned up to her mouth. “Sister, open your eyes. A

woman's gut feeling is rarely wrong. You need to find out who the contender is so you can be prepared to take her out. Two years is too long to walk away without the championship belt."

"But I don't have proof of anything," Sheila said. "He just seems distracted. That's all."

Cassandra blew out a sigh of frustration. "If you've learned anything about men in your thirty-two years on this earth, you should've learned this. Men are only distracted by two things. Women. And more women." Cassandra tossed this week's weave over her shoulder. "But you're a grown woman. Do what you want to do. But if I were you, I'd use my faith *and* some common sense."

Cassandra had a good point, Sheila thought, as she watched her friend abandon the jewelry armoire and rummage through her walk-in closet. If Cassandra didn't know anything else, she almost had the psyche of men figured out. If Cassandra even smelled a hint of deception with one of the men she was dating, she unleashed her private-investigator skills. She was a pro at catching her men in compromising situations. The kind where they could do nothing but confess their wrongdoings and beg for Cassandra's forgiveness. But she never took them back. Ever. Cassandra went on to the next man waiting in line.

That person right now was Hinton, a man she'd met at an after-work mixer one Thursday night. And though Cassandra didn't believe in dating more than one man at a time, there was always a well-to-do man on the back burner.

But for Sheila, there wasn't anyone else, nor did she want there to be.

"Here." Cassandra came out of the closet and tossed a red, low-cut dress on Sheila's bed. The tags were still on it. "Wear this."

Sheila picked up the dress and hung it back in the closet. Until she looked at the tags, she didn't remember that she'd forked over almost three hundred dollars for a dress that only had about fifty dollars worth of fabric.

“I’m wearing what I have on,” Sheila said, pushing back the closet door so she could look in the mirror hanging on the inside of it. “Black is always sexy and I don’t want to overdo it.”

Cassandra took the red dress back out of the closet. She draped it across her curvy silhouette and stepped in front of Sheila. “There’s no such thing as overdoing it.”

Sheila retreated to the bed and slid on her pointed toe pumps. “I’m officially ignoring you now. I need to get ready,” she said, fastening a gold pendant cross around her neck. She didn’t plan on using a dress to lure Ace. She just needed to use her feminine power in another way. Find out what was really bothering him and tend to his needs. She always wanted to be the one Ace ran to when he needed a place to lay his head.

Cassandra interrupted her thoughts. “Since I’m being ignored, I’m leaving,” she said, picking up her Coach purse—the one she’d convinced Sheila to give her after she’d borrowed it for a date with Hinton. “And if you’re not going to use this dress for its intended purpose, it’s going with me. Hinton invited me to a birthday party of one of his coworkers next week. I’m sure it’ll be a bunch of investment bankers and their stiff wives. This dress will bring a little excitement to the night.”

Sheila walked Cassandra to the door of her high-rise apartment, lighting a few of her candles along the way. She wanted romance to welcome Ace at the door. After being with his teenage daughters all weekend, he’d appreciate some time to relax before they left for dinner.

“Candles won’t help you keep a man,” Cassandra said. “You’ve got to do better than that.”

“Bye, Cassandra.”

Cassandra opened the coat closet and pulled out her leather jacket and a folded shopping bag. “I’m just saying. Are y’all still on that celibate kick? That’s probably what’s wrong with him. It doesn’t take

a rocket scientist to know that a man has needs. God made them that way.”

“Bye, Cassandra. And don’t worry about what goes on behind our closed doors. Ace isn’t going anywhere.” Sheila said it more to convince herself.

“As long as you have a plan.” Cassandra saluted her friend then turned and marched down the hall like there was a crowd of admirers watching her exit. She didn’t bother to stop when she looked back over her shoulder and said, “Call me when you’re ready to go to war.”