

Chapter 1

Protector from Harm

*A*t fourteen years old, I already knew about the stresses of life. However, I wasn't going to let the tough times beat me. I am a survivor; after all I'm from the hood. Someway, somehow I was going to find a way to love every part of my dysfunctional world. As I had learned from my middle school mentors, you have to look at life from a positive perspective.

Since it was Labor Day weekend, I was excited to be outside at the hopping neighborhood block party. So much had been happening in my crazy world. Yes, I had lost a brother to suicide over a year ago, and I miss him a lot. But things were finally looking up. Yeah! After six long years of being behind bars, my dad was out at last. Now he's a truck driver and lives near us in Jacksonville, Florida.

My brothers and I were glad to finally have Dad's strong presence in our lives. We would just have to learn how to love each other as a normal family again and find a way for our loss to make us stronger.

Also, my mom now has a steady job. She's not struggling and trying to make ends meet by working at dead-end jobs like she used to do. She still works hard, but having a career as a medical technician makes her feel worthy.

My two brothers, York and Yancy, and I are triplets. And they're still acting crazy. No one could tell stubborn York anything. And though Yancy is smart, he hasn't really been applying himself. He thinks he knows it all anyway. My folks were getting stressed with them acting out, so they decided they'd work together and stay on their sons.

My best friend, Myrek, and I are into each other. The guy who I now could admit had my heart was back in my life. He and I are about to meet up down the street.

"Hey, cutie pie," he said as he saw me approach the corner.

We used to live right next door to each other, but since our apartment caught on fire, we had to move to the other side of the complex. Jacksonville in September is still pretty hot, and to be outside at night on a long weekend—let's just say our projects were jammin'.

"Okay, so why you got that basketball?" I asked him, knowing that Myrek loved to play and hoping that he wasn't changing our plan to spend time together. I picked up on the clue that he wanted to go and play ball with the guys in our hood.

"Your brothers were just telling me about this little tournament going on against that wack team around the way," he explained. I knew that he was trying to justify why he was thinking about doing something different.

So I put my hands on my hips and said, "Come on now. We supposed to be doing our thing."

He came up to me and said playfully, “Tell me, how were we gonna kick it today?”

“I guess you’ll never find out if you’re gonna be playing basketball.” Pouting, I turned around and started walking back toward my place.

“Oh, see now, why you gotta do me like that?” He jogged around to the front of me and tossed the ball at me. The hard ball just missed hitting me in my nose.

“Ow!” I screamed extra loud.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

I swatted at him. “See, you tryna play!”

“I’m trying to play with you,” he smiled and said, realizing I was actually okay.

All of a sudden, York and Yancy came up full speed behind me. Yancy almost knocked me down and thought he was being funny. I rolled my eyes at them both. Couldn’t they see that I wanted time with Myrek?

“Quit bothering the brother. Let him have a little fun with his boys. Man, y’all just got back together and you already smothering him,” York scolded.

The three of them stood there waiting for a reaction out of me. My crazy brother York was really starting to get on my nerves. I wanted to take my foot and kick him in the knee so that he would fall down and run back home crying or something.

But, realistically, I couldn’t believe he was gonna call me out like that. He knew how much I had been tussling, wrestling, and all upset that Myrek was dating some other new chick at our school. This girl, Raven, had given me much drama by rubbing it all in my face because she and Myrek were an item. I had tried to push it off

like he really didn't matter and act like he was just my friend. But the closer I saw them getting and the more I saw him with somebody else, it really touched my heart that—you know what?—that was my place in his life. I mean, at least we had to give us a try. Myrek had wanted that for so long, but I was the one running in a completely opposite direction.

It was probably because of all the problems we'd been having. And besides, our parents were dating, which could be another complication. Well, now that situation was on rocky ground. My brothers and I secretly hoped that our parents would get back together. But knowing how much distance there had been between the two of them—was that even possible?

"Earth to Yasmin." Myrek interrupted my thoughts. "Hello, hello?"

"What? You wanna go play with them?" I said as I saw him looking at me with puppy-dog eyes. "Then, go play!"

But Myrek turned to the boys and declared, "All right, she's got an attitude, y'all. I'ma stay with my girl."

"Man, you know we can't beat them without you," Yancy pleaded with Myrek and York stood silently backing him up.

It was so cool because my brothers hadn't been getting along. But then the whole fire incident happened and that brought them closer. It was a pretty rough experience. York had gone into our next door neighbor's apartment to help her get out of the flames. Yancy had felt bad and wanted to go in after him. I don't know, but when York came out alive, something changed for us. Maybe it was because we had already lost our oldest brother, Jeff; I guess we all just knew that, as hard as life was, it's a blessing to have each other. So we were learning how to get along and how to care about one

another. We were beginning to understand that other people's feelings mean something.

Giving up on convincing Myrek to go along, my brothers went on down the street. I could tell Myrek really wanted to play when he kept fumbling with that stupid ball.

There would be plenty of times for us to be together and have fun. And I did care about his thoughts. So I said, "You know what? I'm just gonna head home. You can play."

Immediately, he got overly excited. "For real? I can play?" Then, without further hesitation, he said, "Come on. I'ma walk you back home."

"What you mean, you gonna walk me back home? I want to watch," I said, frowning like he wanted to keep me away from the action. Actually, I had just decided to change my mind.

"It's not gonna be nobody but dudes out on the court. You and me can hang out tomorrow. I just don't want you hanging around like that. They talk about girls that just hang out and stuff. Mm-mm, not my girl."

"Your girl? Wow. That sounds pretty good," I said to him.

"You look pretty good."

We walked hand in hand back to my place and it just felt so special. We hadn't agreed much in the past but now we were together. When we stepped onto my porch, he pulled me closer to him. I knew that he was about to kiss me. Just then my dad pulled into the driveway and shined his lights on both of us. We jerked away from each other.

Dad got out of his car quicker than if the engine was on fire and rushed up to us. "Hey, what's going on here! What is this?"

"Dad, you know Myrek," I said.

“I don’t think I know this Myrek because the Myrek I knew was your buddy. Son, what’s going on? You all up close on my daughter. I ain’t having none of that, young man. Uh-uh. And you’d better know it!”

Myrek was shaking. “I-I was just telling her good night, sir.”

“Well, you don’t need to tell her good night . . . blowing your bad breath all on her and everything—”

“Dad!” I said, hot that my father was ruining our time.

“Seriously,” he scolded, “y’all need to step back and always have three to four feet between y’all. If you can’t do that, y’all don’t need to be in the same space. You got it? And another thing, y’all are still too young to be dating anyway.”

“Dad!” I shouted again.

“I got you, sir,” Myrek said, quickly giving my dad respect. “Yas, I’ll holla at you later.” And he jogged off.

“I know he just told me what I wanted to hear. I’m gonna talk to your mama about this.”

“Dad!” I said a little softer this time, “he’s my boyfriend.”

But he was truly mad and said, “So you say. But your dad, whose opinion counts, says no way!”



Other than my dad embarrassing me and the trouble I went through with Myrek’s ex-girlfriend, the school year had really gotten off to a pretty good start. I liked all my teachers, and the class work in high school wasn’t too hard so far. And in spite of Dad’s opposition to it, Myrek and I had our thing and, whatever that thing was, we were straight.

Besides all of that, my relationship with Veida, Asia, and Perlicia

was now very cool. In middle school Perlicia and Asia had always gotten up under my skin. And Veida had betrayed my family. But thankfully, at the very end of that year, we had worked through all those difficulties.

I realized that all three girls weren't much different from me. I mean, we all had some type of problems at home. At first, I thought Veida didn't know what hard times were because her father was a lawyer and she lived in a huge house with her entire family. Her older sister was a senior this year and she really had it going on. But even though all that seemed right, her parents had some issues. Veida's dad was so busy with his legal practice that he wasn't paying enough attention to his home life. So everything wasn't so happy after all.

I wasn't expecting it but Veida got into a relationship with one of my brothers. Then the next thing I knew she started liking the other one. She also still liked a boy named Maurice from her old middle school. He went to high school with us too. Through all of that Veida became troubled. Her feelings were confused, and that led her to cause a lot of drama in my family. But, at the end of the day, she felt really bad about it all and now she's my girl again. We just vowed to be friends for real. We were not only modeling buddies who wanted to look good on the outside, but also girls who had each other's backs and would help each other build up our self-esteem.

Perlicia, on the other hand, was really a loudmouth. She wasn't polished around the edges. Maybe I could help her with that. She and I are gonna have to talk more seriously and really get closer. Our friendship should mean more than just being around each other because we both were popular.

And then there's my girl, Asia. Her mom was in a relationship and the guy came on to Asia. For the longest time, her mom didn't believe her. Thankfully, that was all resolved and her mom kicked the guy to the curb. But that crazy situation took its toll on Asia and her mom's relationship. Then Asia was trying to date this guy who was also a senior. She got in a little over her head when the guy wanted her to go farther than she was ready to go. She told me that she was done with him, so hopefully she left all of that alone. But she and I need to talk about that too.

"Come on, come on! We gotta get in there and get a good seat!" Asia said as she pulled my arm to catch up with Perlicia and Veida. The four of us were going to the dance team tryouts meeting. Being a Trojanette dance girl made freshman stock go up dramatically. There were twenty slots on the team: five seniors, five juniors, five sophomores, and five freshmen. The first fifteen positions had been filled the year before. So there were only five spots open. There must have been at least sixty girls in the gym who were salivating at the mouth, wishing and wanting desperately to be on the team.

The Trojanettes performed three numbers for the rest of us. We were gonna have to learn the numbers in a week. Those girls were sassy, sharp, and all that; just seeing their routines made me very intimidated. I've always danced around the house, but I definitely haven't had any real training or anything like that. Veida had taken ballet and tap for years, and Perlicia and Asia had been in a hip-hop class at a recreation center for a long time.

"Hello, ladies. I'm Gloria Smith, the dance team sponsor. As you can see, the Trojanettes are awesome. We come with it. We perform with excellence. And we get respect. We're looking for five girls who possess the pizzazz, skill, wit, and charm to join us. We

want girls who can come right in and be an asset to our team. So, come on out here and try to learn this first number.”

I didn’t want to get up out of my seat. I loved what I saw before me, but somewhere deep within I had no confidence to accomplish it. I couldn’t dance like that.

“Come on,” Veida said as she yanked me up.

“Yeah, we need to get up front so we can see,” Asia added.

The front? I thought. *I need to be way in the back.*

I went and stood out there with Perlicia, Asia, and Veida. But when they got comfortable in the front, I eased my way to the back. I hadn’t realized, though, that I didn’t get on the very back row. And I was actually standing in front of Raven and her girl, Shay. Now I was even more intimidated.

“I can’t believe he chose her over me,” Raven started telling her friend.

I just kept my cool and stayed focused on what I was trying to learn. According to Myrek, Raven was really bitter. But I couldn’t help but wonder if she could dance.

When I started dancing, I heard Shay say, “I don’t know, girl. She’s basically got two left feet. She’s tall and she’s all right, but she ain’t nowhere near as cute and tight as you and me. You can tell she doesn’t have any kind of dance training like you and me. Don’t worry; she won’t be making this dance team.”

“Okay now, let me see you do it,” Ms. Smith said as she walked toward me. I really had no clue what to do. “Sweetheart, if you plan to make this team you are going to have to practice at home and really pay attention. I know we’re moving fast; that’s why we need girls who already have dance experience. You’ve just got to work hard if this is something that you want. If it doesn’t work out, you

can always try out next year. A lot of girls who don't make it on the freshman team try out their sophomore year and bump some of the girls off the squad."

Then she patted me on the back condescendingly and walked away. What was I supposed to take from that? Was she trying to tell me that I was not gonna make the team? Did I just need to walk off and quit right on the spot? I was so frustrated, and it didn't help that I could hear the giggles behind me. I wanted to turn around and whack somebody. But instead I took three deep breaths and stayed in my element. I was trying to concentrate on the girls teaching the first number. The only thing I could do was give it my best to learn the part.



The practice was over about an hour later. Asia, Perlicia, and Veida came over to me as soon as we were dismissed. As we headed toward our lockers, they were chatting about how easy the moves were. I was so frustrated.

Veida said, "So, what's going on with you? Why weren't you right beside us? We got this down, girl. We're planning to practice a few more minutes before it's time to go home. Let's change real fast and meet right back out here."

Trying to be realistic, I said, "I don't think I want to do this, y'all."

"What do you mean, you don't wanna do this?" Asia said to me.

"I don't have it like you guys do."

"We can teach you," Veida chimed in.

"Yeah, girl. All you gotta do is work a little harder to the beat

and you'll make the squad. We checked it out and there wasn't a lot of competition. Most of those girls need to go home and try again—like never." Perlicia laughed, feeling really proud of herself.

The three of them slapped hands. They didn't understand that I was in that boat. I was nowhere near a dance expert. To make things worse, Raven and Shay walked up beside me and called themselves imitating me. I lost my balance and fell into my friends.

"Y'all really need to help your girl stay on her feet," Raven taunted.

"I know you ain't talkin', Raven. You were hiding in the back somewhere," Perlicia replied as she helped me to my feet.

Raven and Shay just laughed and walked away. I was very upset. I was a horrible dancer.

"I can't do this, y'all."

"Girl, don't even let her get to you," Asia said.

"She's just jealous about Myrek," Veida commented.

"I can go and take care of them chicks right now," Perlicia said as she took her fist, jammed it into her hand, and pushed it into me. "She don't know us."

I said, "Yeah, but they were back there with me and I wasn't that good. Okay?"

"We've got a week to practice," Veida encouraged.

All of a sudden, some girls came running out of the gym toward us yelling, "It's a fight! It's a fight!"

Seeing somebody go at it wasn't particularly where my mind was. I still needed to figure out if I should keep trying out for the dance team. Who would be crazy enough to be fighting after school anyway? Then it hit me; my brothers were trying out for basketball. Veida's ex-boyfriend, Maurice, was trying out too. That

sounded like a recipe for trouble. I just knew somebody from the Peace family had gotten into something. And they probably couldn't get themselves out of it without me there to intercede. So I took off running toward the boys' gym with my three girls right behind me.

When we got there, sure enough, I couldn't see exactly what was going on because a crowd of kids were gathered around. But I heard York's voice confronting somebody. "What's up, man? You gon' call my dad a jailbird and think I ain't gonna take care of that?"

"You gon' be joining him if you don't back off!" It was Maurice for sure.

York kept challenging. "All you doing is talkin', man. I punched you and you ain't done nothin'. Your little words can't hurt me, punk. Talkin' about my daddy. Wanna be a man? Talk about me. Do something to me. Hit me! I got this. I can take care of you right here, right now."

I could hear York clearly, but I didn't know where Myrek and Yancy were until a minute later when they showed up. As always, the word about a fight had traveled fast. "What's going on?" Yancy asked me.

"It's our brother. He's trying to defend Dad's honor."

As soon as she saw Yancy, Veida started melting. "Hey, how have you been?" she asked him.

"Ugh, we don't even have time for that," I said to her.

I pulled Myrek and Yancy over to the side. "Look, York is up there fighting."

"That ain't good because he's got a knife," Yancy reported.

"What?" I was shocked at that bit of news.

"Yeah. When we were dressing out, I saw it," Myrek added. "I tried to get him to leave it in the locker, but he put it in his sock."

What's all this about anyway? Why is he up there fighting? He had a good practice. The coach really likes him."

"Well, maybe you need to go and stall the coach so that he doesn't come in here and kick my brother off the team before he even gets on," I said to Myrek.

"Yeah, partner, that's a good idea. I got York," Yancy followed up.

York certainly was a hothead. He thought the only way to prove that he had it going on was to be violent with anyone who threatened him. And, honestly, he couldn't have learned that from my father because Dad never said that the only way to be a man is to knock somebody out. In fact, it was just the opposite. He taught us through his letters and the visits we had with him that the bigger person always bows out of a fight.

It was that crazy Bone. He's the one who had been putting weird ideas into York's head. To gain respect in our community, my brother thought the only thing that he could do was hang with the neighborhood thug. And that extreme thinking was about to get him locked up for sure.

When Myrek walked off, I turned to Veida and Perlicia, "We've got to figure out a way to get rid of these people and help break up this fight. I've got to get to my brother."

"I can handle it," Perlicia responded. Then all of a sudden she yelled, "The cops are coming!" Immediately everybody started scattering toward the nearest exits.

That gave Yancy and me free range to go up close to the action. Veida was right next to me. She quickly started talking to her ex-boyfriend to calm him down, and I went straight up to York.

"What is going on?" I started in on him.

“Look, York, man . . . so what he said something about our dad?” Yancy spoke up, trying to talk some sense into him.

“Just because you would let it go don’t mean I should. I ain’t as soft as you,” York shot back.

I could see Yancy getting ready to show our tougher brother that he wasn’t such a pushover. So I hurriedly got in between the two of them. “Okay, this is not the time or the place, guys. You two really need to get on the same page. York, come on. Let it go,” I pleaded.

I knew that he wouldn’t walk away so easily, but before York could say anything, I heard the other guy say, “Get out my way, Veida!” Maurice was shouting as he pushed her. He was getting louder and more determined to stay in York’s face.

“You need to back off,” Yancy said to the boy.

“Man, please. You can’t even keep your girl; I ain’t listening to you,” Maurice said as he moved in even closer to York.

Then York reached down and pulled the knife out of his sock. He pressed the button to let out the very sharp blade. The shiny object was sparkling, but the glowing sight definitely wasn’t pretty.

“Oh, what, I’m supposed to be scared now? Don’t play with me. I’m packing.”

“Oh, no! York, he’s got a gun!” I panicked and then I quickly sent up a prayer. *Lord, You see what is happening here. We need You to step in right now and help us get out of this situation before anyone gets hurt. Thank You for coming to York’s rescue before he gets into some real trouble. Amen.*

“Show it to me then, man,” York said, trying to keep me out of the way.

“I’ll show it to you if I have to,” Maurice said, stepping closer.

York moved the knife from behind him and was about to throw it, and I dived between the two of them. I couldn't let him hurt someone and get locked up for good. At that moment, I didn't care what happened to me physically. I had to save York from himself. It all happened so quickly. But suddenly, I became a protector from harm.