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Chapter 1

Prayer Does Work

*G*et out! Me and my kids need some space. I'm sick of everybody trying to console us. Leave us alone." My mom was screaming at the thirty or so friends and family members that came to offer their condolences after the funeral of my oldest brother, Jeffery Jr. Everybody called him Jeff.

Everyone stopped and looked at her. However, no one moved or walked toward the door. The tension was thicker than a plump, round turkey on Thanksgiving.

"Mom, here. Have some tea," I said, trying to soothe her.

She knocked the cup from my hand sending it flying across the room. I'd never seen my mother this way.

Mom went over to the front door, opened it, and said, "Yasmin, York, Yancy, and I are going to have to find a way to deal with this. My husband is down in Orlando in jail, while we're up here in Jacksonville grieving over the loss of my oldest baby. I just don't need no busybodies coming in here poking around. I know that most

of you mean well, but right now we just need to be left alone.”

Everyone quickly scurried to pick up their belongings, except my Uncle John. He was my dad’s younger brother. Mom’s steaming red eyes followed my uncle. He went over to my brother Yancy.

Uncle John put his hand on Yancy’s shoulder and said, “Son, I need you to step up and be the man.”

Yancy looked at my uncle with sad eyes and said, “Okay, Uncle John.”

My mom yelled to my uncle, “If your brother had been the man, then my boys wouldn’t be under so much pressure!”

“Yvette, come on now, girl. I’m just trying to do my brother’s part and look out for y’all.”

“John, if your brother wasn’t locked up he could do his own part. Like I said, I’m tired and I just need you to leave.”

“Okay, okay, Yvette,” Uncle John said as he headed toward the door. “Remember, I’m only one phone call away.”

As soon as Uncle John had closed the door, my brother Yancy blurted out, “I wish I could go and live with Uncle John!”

“Boy, if you don’t go sit down somewhere . . .” my mother said.

My brothers went to their room while my mom went to the bedroom that she and I shared. I couldn’t bear to sit inside our cramped apartment for one more second, so I went and sat on the porch.

It had been a week since my brother had taken his own life. Though things weren’t perfect before Jeff’s death, we had a lot of good times. We were a normal family. Now, I didn’t know what we had become.

A new school year was about to begin in a couple of days and Jeff had so much going for himself. He would’ve started his senior

year in high school—a highly recruited basketball player, one of the best in the state of Florida. All the girls liked him, but he had a strong thing going for our next-door neighbor Jada. Her brother, Myrek, was my good friend.

York, Yancy, and Yasmin. The triplets. People always asked, “What are the triplets up to? How are the triplets doing in school?” I hated being referred to as if we didn’t have names and different personalities. All of us are unique, but one thing we had in common was that we all looked up to Jeff. I had no clue how we’d survive without him. I hadn’t shed a tear during this whole chaotic week. My mom cried enough for all of us. York had become so angry that he was just looking for a way to relieve the craziness. Yancy was withdrawn and walked around in a daze.

Was I supposed to be the one to keep us all together? How could I? I was only a mere thirteen-year-old, headed to the eighth grade. I wasn’t anywhere close to being an adult. What did I know about how to make things right? We hardly ever went to church; but my grandma, or Big Mama, as my brothers and I called her, had taught us that we should pray and have faith no matter how bad things looked.

I wanted to believe deep down in my heart that God could make this not hurt so badly. But why wasn’t He making this all better? Why couldn’t I wake up from this nightmare? I had no answers, just tons of questions.

I placed my severely aching head between my wobbly knees and finally released all my tears that I’d been holding back, and I prayed.

Lord, please help my family. We don’t know what to do or how to keep going. I want to believe the verse that Big Mama taught me about

You, which says for me to trust in You with my whole heart and not lean to what I don't understand. But it's so hard to trust when it looks so bad, God.

Just then I heard a familiar voice. It was Myrek.

Most people call me a tomboy because I would hang out with my three brothers a lot. I usually play with the neighborhood boys too, but all summer I hadn't run with them like I used to. Actually, Myrek hadn't been playing with York and Yancy as much either. He was a great basketball player like Jeff and the two of them had been on the court most of the summer. I knew he would miss my brother as much as we would.

"Yasmin, I just came out here to sit with you."

"Thanks," I said as I wiped my face.

He continued, "I really don't know what to say. But my dad says that you don't always have to find words to say when something bad happens. Sometimes you can help people by just being with them."

"I guess that's true, Myrek, because I do feel better," I said, thinking about how I was praying when he came onto the porch.

"Cool," he said.

For the next thirty minutes we didn't say a thing. We were content just sitting in silence, occasionally looking at the sky.



I used to not care that on the first day of school I didn't have the latest clothes or sport the freshest hairdo. Going to school was all about learning, not trying to be fashionable. But as an eighth grader, somehow things had changed. Somewhere along the summer the things that once didn't matter now did.

Besides, with all that I had going on, it didn't seem right that I was focusing on material things. We didn't even have money to bury my brother. My mom had reminded Yancy, York, and me about that over and over again. Getting new school clothes was totally out of the question.

Actually, it was cool for boys to wear stuff a little roughed up, but when I looked around and saw all the girls looking fly, I hated me. My jeans that were purchased in the sixth grade and the hand-me-down tennis shoes that my brothers used to sport were a mess. Also, the braids I got before school let out last May were still in my head. I didn't look cute and I didn't feel cute; in fact, everybody that looked at me with their disapproving expressions let me know that I was not cute.



“I can't believe she's coming on the first day of school looking like that,” a popular girl named Perlicia said to her girlfriend Asia. “I know they live in Jefferson Projects, but even if she went to the dollar store she would look better than she does right now.”

Both of them just laughed. I always found females to be so fake and phony. So hanging with my brothers and Myrek was enough for me. We always said what we felt and moved on after releasing any tension. We never held grudges and were just there for one another. Perlicia and Asia had fallen out of their friendship so many times that I didn't have enough fingers to count them.

A part of me wanted to turn around and slap them in their faces. But, what good would that do for me ending up in trouble on the first day of school? None. Both of them needed to go study somewhere. They were enrolled in remedial English.

Not that there was anything wrong with that. Myrek and York were going to be in the same class. However, why laugh at somebody when you have shortcomings too? I hated that people could be so cruel. Why did they have to add insult to injury and make me the laughingstock of our hall?

It went from one group of girls whispering about me to another one getting started. Though I never stared anyone in the face, I could feel them staring at me. Their laughter was getting on my nerves too. All of the talk just wore me down. As tough as I had always been, standing up to anyone who ever confronted me, at that moment I just couldn't take it. I dashed off to the closest girls' bathroom I could find, went into an empty stall, locked the door, and bawled.

I prayed, I hate my life. You're supposed to be up there protecting me, making everything better. Why is it so hard? I look a mess. I feel a mess. I don't have any friends. I can't talk to my mom; she's still grieving. Can't You help me out?

"Oh no!" I cried, realizing my monthly had just started. I could have crawled under a rock and stayed there forever. With everything going on the last couple of days I hadn't been keeping up with my cycle. Plus, this was only the fifth month. It was still new to me. Even though I had on old jeans, they were a light color. Unfortunately, as soon as I checked my pants I knew they were ruined. And the first bell had just rung. I was late for class.

Didn't You just hear me, God? I need You to help, not make it worse. What am I supposed to do now?

This must've been what Big Mama meant when she said God will direct your thoughts if you pray and ask Him. Just then, I thought about the school guidance counselor, Mrs. Newman. York

and Yancy always talked about how cute she was. I remembered last year when I saw her in the hall she told me if I ever needed anything that I could come to her office. Back then I felt like I didn't have any major problems that I couldn't handle, so I never took her up on it. Now it was a different story.

After making a bootleg pad, which my mom had taught me to do in case of an emergency, I washed up and then checked the hallway. Thankfully, I was wearing one of my brother's shirts and I took it out of my pants and pulled it all the way down. I twisted my book bag toward my back so that it covered my bottom and practically sprinted to Mrs. Newman's office.

When she saw me, she quickly came from behind her desk and said, "Come in, come in. You're Yasmin Peace, right? I planned to send a note to your homeroom teacher today requesting that you stop in to see me."

I could only nod. It was hard to find words to say. On the inside and out, I was a wreck.

"Yes, and I know I'm supposed to be in class but I just need—" Then the tears started flowing.

"I know it's tough for you right now. I am so sorry about the loss of your brother Jeff. I remember him as a student here. He was a super young man."

"Well, he's gone now. He committed suicide. So what does that matter?" I muttered.

"It matters a lot," she said without hesitation. "The memories you have of him can last a lifetime. No one can take those away."

"I just don't understand why."

"Well, that's why I am here to help you. Sometimes you guys have so much on you and it feels like it's too much for you to bear."

“I mean, why would my brother do that? He knew we loved him.”

“Well, Yasmin, that’s a very complicated matter. I can’t say for sure why your brother committed suicide. However, I can tell you that young as well as old people can feel overwhelmed—as if they have no way out of their situations. That’s why it’s important to talk to someone you can trust and not hold in what’s going on inside.”

Keeping it real, I said, “Why should I talk to you? You can’t fix the problem.” I was hurting, in need of healing, and didn’t believe that she could fix my wounded soul.

She came over and put her hand on my shoulder and said, “Listen, I may not have the solution for you or your family, but I am here for you all to support you in whatever way I can.”

“Why do you care like that?”

She gently said, “Because I’m supposed to.”

I wondered what she meant by that. “Mrs. Newman, do you believe in God? I mean . . . are you a Christian?”

“Yes, Yasmin, as a matter of fact, I am. Being a Christian doesn’t stop unpleasant things from happening to us or those we love, but we can become closer to God during those times. As a result, we become stronger. I can’t make your pain go away, but I can walk through it with you and your family. Having faith and trusting that God will work it out can be very trying. You have made the first important step by seeking help, Yasmin. I commend you for that. You are so wise. I can tell you’re more mature than most of the students in this school.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Newman,” I said, wiping the tears from my face and realizing that I did need her. I almost hated to ask the next question. “Just one more thing, Mrs. Newman—do you have any maxi pads?”

She went over to her drawer and said, "I sure do, Miss Yasmin." Then she handed me a decorative bag with pads and other toiletries inside. "And here are some pamphlets for you to share with your family about grief. All I have left to do is write you a pass for class, and you'll be on your way."

Having her come to my rescue was an answered prayer. Maybe God did care about little ol' me after all. I sure felt better.



Going home on the bus on the first day of school, Myrek sat beside me. I was in a daze looking out the window. Talking was the last thing I wanted to do.

"What's up, Yas?" he asked. It was obvious that he had not been able to read my body language.

I wasn't smiling. I wouldn't even look his way. I wanted to be left alone. So I didn't respond, hoping he would get that, but he didn't. He asked again after butting me in the arm.

"What's up, girl? I know you heard me." He was just like one of my brothers; I was always able to tell him everything. So it made no sense to hold stuff back and be all self-conscious about what I was feeling.

Without thinking, I just blurted out, "Boy, can't you see I don't feel like talking! I don't feel well. I'm sick of my head itching with these braids that have been in for fifty thousand years. I had an issue that made me late for my first class. Besides that, every girl in the school laughed at me today. My day was the worst first day of school ever. Any other questions?" Seems like I'd forgotten everything that Mrs. Newman had said to me earlier.

“Since when do you care about what other girls think? That’s not the Yas I know.”

“I don’t know, Myrek, that’s what’s been getting me. I don’t want to look so dumpy. The whole tomboy look is starting to get pretty old. In fact, if I owned some lipstick, I wouldn’t mind putting it on.”

“What boy you trying to look cute for?” he asked, like he cared.

I rolled my eyes at him because it wasn’t really about a boy. *Where did that comment come from? Myrek is tripping,* I thought.

Defending my reasons, I uttered, “I want to be cute for *me*. I want to have style and class. Everyone thinks Mrs. Newman is beautiful and being in her presence makes me want to feel beautiful too. She’s not uppity and nasty. She’s fly. I don’t know. Maybe I’m talking nonsense. Who wants to be cute anyway, right?”

“Oh, I think you’re the cutest girl in school.”

I couldn’t even look at him when he said that. It felt sort of weird. Was he giving me a compliment? The guy who was always giving me such a hard time, just like my brothers, was saying nice stuff. Was he just trying to make sure that I didn’t cry anymore on his watch? Like the day of the funeral when he sat out on the porch with me and talked to me like a real friend.

“It’s okay, Myrek. You don’t have to say nice things.”

“Have I ever just said anything to you? Girls that cake all of that stuff on their faces, spray too much perfume, and wear tight clothes look stupid. I don’t know; you just keep it real and I like that. You shouldn’t want to change.”

Finally, we were at our stop.

York said, “Y’all getting off or what? Get up.”

Myrek didn't move. "You heard what I said, you shouldn't want to change. You don't understand. So I'ma help you."

"Help me? How?"

Thinking he was talking crazy for real, I pushed him out of the seat. The four of us walked from the bus stop home. Myrek didn't say another word.

An hour later, I was home alone.

Yancy went to the library. He was an honor roll student and always loved school, but now he was having a hard time with being so bright. He made straight As, but lately he was cool with getting a few Bs and lots of Cs. Most of the dudes in our neighborhood and even some at school teased him for being intelligent. He tried hard not to let folks know that it got to him.

York was hanging out in the neighborhood with his new crew that wasn't about nothing. Older boys that hung out playing loud music in their hoopties, dancing in the streets, and talking trash to everybody that walked by. York was on the verge of failing and it didn't even seem to matter to him. He barely passed to the eighth grade and his teachers said that he needed to start applying himself.

Being in the house alone was a big deal. My mom worked two jobs and came in really late. Because we shared the same bed, I didn't get much space on my side. Just to lie in the bed alone was so relaxing. I saw a couple of dresses hanging on her side of the closet and wondered how they'd look on me. I hopped up, put them against me, and looked in the mirror. I longed for a new look. I wanted to look at myself and like what I saw. A knock at the door disturbed my fantasy moment.

It was Myrek. *What did he want?*

"Hey, hey. Open up," Myrek said. "My sister wants to talk to you."

Jada used to be over here constantly with Jeff. Somewhere along the summer, they fell out with each other. Jeff seemed sad after that. *Why did she want to see me though?*

“What . . . what’s going on?” I said as I opened the door.

“Okay, I’m a leave the two of you alone. I told you that I was going to help you, Yasmin,” Myrek said before dashing away.

“What is he talking about, Jada?”

She came into the house with two big suitcases. “I’m gonna give you a makeover. I owe that much to Jeffery to do that for you. Myrek was telling me that you want to be gorgeous. You don’t want to look like a tomboy. ’Bout time, girl!”

“Jada, I’m not sure if I want a makeover. I mean, I don’t want to look phony.”

“Whatever. Let’s get these braids out of your hair, slap a perm in it, and hook you up. I have tons of clothes that are going to fit you. Ooh! You are going to be so cute.”

“I don’t have any money to pay you for anything.”

“Girl, you don’t need to pay me. I like doin’ this kind of stuff. Plus, when people see how different you look, they’ll ask who did your hair and stuff. It’ll be good advertisement for me. I could make money on the side doin’ this! You’re Jeff’s sister and we’re like family. I need to do this. I loved him, you know.”

As she jerked my head to the left and to the right taking out my braids, I endured the pain with anticipation. I didn’t know how the makeover was going to turn out, but I was overjoyed about the possibility of a change. If God sent her, if this was His way of helping me, I was grateful. I certainly had put in enough requests, asking Him daily to make my life easier. I guess I had the answer to my question: Prayer does work!

Chapter 2

Expresser of Emotion

*M*y new look was bangin'. Jada layered my hair with a few brown highlights to make my new do pop. All of her hand-me-downs looked good on me. She had a lot of stuff that even looked brand-new. People were definitely going to be paying attention to Yasmin Peace! It felt real good to be confident.

My mom was gone before we left for school, so she didn't even get to see the new me. My brothers—well, let's just say I was the last person York and Yancy were paying attention to. Quite the contrary. As soon as I dashed onto the bus after almost missing it, Myrek slid over, showing all his pearly whites.

He said, "WOW! Jada told me I was going to be surprised, but you look . . . Man, girl, I didn't know you was gon' look like that."

I had never had a boy look at me in any other way than someone to toss the ball to. For Myrek to be able to smile and not take his eyes off of me—just felt different.

When we pulled up to the school, he asked me, “Whose class do you have first? I’ll walk you there.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I want to.”

Getting off the bus, I said, “Look, I owe you a real BIG THANK YOU! I was really down about my appearance. You stepped in, in a big way, but I’m still the same old Yasmin. We’re still boys.”

“Looking at you, how could I ever think of you as my buddy again? I mean, you’ve got curves and stuff.”

“I also have a big brother that’ll beat you—”

What was I thinking? I didn’t have Jeff anymore. I was so caught up in having a new outfit, hairdo, and totally new appearance. Jeff was gone; when was I going to get that through my big skull? I felt guilty for enjoying my makeover.

I held my hand out and made a stop motion to Myrek; at the same time I started to run as far away from him as I could. I knew he would say that it was okay and that I still needed time to get over it. I also knew he’d try to make me feel better, but my brother was gone. Nothing could make me feel better, not a new hairdo or clothes. On top of that, I wasn’t used to wearing heels. When I ran down the hall, I stepped the wrong way and the left heel came off my shoe. I was so frustrated that I sat down on the floor next to my locker.

Why did Jeff have to leave? Why did this have to happen to my family? Why couldn’t God help him through his depression? Why did my father have to be in jail? I had so many questions going through my mind. Then the two mean girls, Asia and Perlicia, interrupted my thoughts.

Asia said, “Mmm . . . hmm. She got her hair done, but it’ll be a hot mess soon.”

“I wonder where she got that cute outfit from. Did you see her yesterday?” Perlicia remarked. “You wear your best stuff on the first day. Everybody knows that. Why does she look like a beauty queen today?”

Asia said, “Maybe she’s been dipping in that money everybody has been giving her family since her brother died, or maybe there was some kind of insurance on him. That’s why my grandma said she wasn’t going to take none out on herself because if we got the money we would just throw it away. Can you believe her brother committed suicide in the first place, how stupid!”

Okay, enough of the pity party, I thought. No way could I continue feeling sorry for myself. Yeah, it was one thing for them to talk about me. I could handle that. However, for them to say something about my brother, calling his act stupid . . . what gave them the right?

“Okay, you two are talking a little too much stuff right now. Yesterday I let you guys talk about me as if I wasn’t nearby. But I heard you. I have a lot on me right now. I am not the one to mess with! So what if I want to put on a dress, fix my hair, and look cute. It’s my business how I look when I come to school. Why do you have to be all in my business trying to figure out where the money is coming from? You ain’t give it to me. Or, do I need to help you stay in your place?” I let the tomboy in me come out, putting my fists in front of both of their faces.

Myrek came in between us and said, “Hey, there you are.”

Both of them got all giddy and silly. All of a sudden, they went from dissin’ me to throwing themselves at Myrek.

“Myrek, hey. It’s me, Asia. Don’t you remember me?”

The other crazy girl competed with her so-called friend. “No,

he remembers me, Perlicia. We were in a couple of classes together last year. I'm a cheerleader this year. I'll be yelling the loudest when you score your three-pointers. Shoot! Shoot!"

He gave them a half wave and then turned back toward me. "I was worried about you. You just ran off."

"I've gotta go to class. Myrek, I can handle me. Why don't you just stay here and talk to your groupies. I'm out."

I changed my shoes and put on the gym shoes that I had in my locker and then went to class. I was stressed. I was mad. Even in my most pitiful moment, I had to get backup. Figure out a way to maintain pride. This thing I was feeling was between me and God. Only He could help me through it. Forget everybody else.



Two weeks passed and I was beginning to hate school. Not for any reason in particular. Well, I guess there was a reason and it wasn't academics. Though I didn't consider myself an Einstein, the work that I'd done so far was a piece of cake. My teachers were cool. I wasn't sure if everyone knew what had recently happened in my family and had begun taking pity on me, but they all seemed overly nice.

It wasn't that I was tired in the mornings. I didn't even have to get up extra early. This year, school started thirty minutes later than it usually did.

It was probably because I was a loner for most of the day. As tough as I tried to be, who wouldn't want a friend? But a girlfriend? I wouldn't know where to start. But somehow I didn't feel comfortable hanging with the boys anymore.

When I got to my homeroom, Miss Bennett, who happens to

be my Algebra and homeroom teacher, said, “Yasmin, you’re just the person I’ve been looking for, come here.”

“Me? . . . why?”

“Yasmin, this is our new student, Veida Hatchett. I’d like for you to let her shadow you since you young ladies have most of the same classes.”

The next thing I knew, I saw this girl with light skin like mine, with pretty hair and hazel eyes. She was all smiles.

“Hi, Yasmin. Thanks for letting me hang with you. Again, I’m Veida,” she said as she extended her hand.

She had a French manicure and her teeth were perfectly straight. I wish I had the money for braces, though my doctor said I didn’t need to have them straightened for one crooked tooth. She even had on some sweet-smelling perfume. Veida was very well put together. I wanted to compliment her, but I didn’t know how.

So I was taken aback when she complimented me out of the blue. “You look like a model. I wish I had your height. I’d really be a model then.” She didn’t care how it sounded. She had no problem saying something nice to me. It was so cool.

I was sort of tall; well, not sort of—really tall. I looked down at most girls and intimidated most boys because I could look at the majority of them eye to eye.

“Thanks!” I was really humbled over her thinking that I had it going on.

“Wow, why are you looking at me like that?” she asked, not keeping any of her thoughts inside.

I liked this girl. She shot straight at it. She wanted to know something, so she asked me. No phoniness. No foolishness. Veida just kept it real.

“I hadn’t figured out a way to tell you that you were cool and cute and all that stuff. But I don’t know . . . me and conversations, it’s hard.”

She said, “Well, I know what you mean. It’s hard to say to another girl that you think she looks cute or that you like what she’s wearing. But my mom says that girls need to support each other more. And since it’s my first day, I don’t know anybody at this school—and that’s really hard. So I’m going to need you to introduce me to all of your friends.”

This Veida girl was going on and on, but I liked it. She was real about what she was feeling.

“Uhh . . . If you want someone to introduce you to people, you’ve got the wrong person. I don’t have any friends here. Particularly, no friends of the female persuasion.”

“I should have known!”

I couldn’t believe she said that. Did it look like nobody liked me? Did it look like I couldn’t hold down a friend? I just gave her a puzzled look.

“Oh, no! I mean, I should have known because you’re cool. You’ve got it going on. I had friends at my old school but they fell off one by one because girls are so jealous. Girls can be so mean and tear each other down. So it doesn’t surprise me that girls hate on you.”

“To be quite honest, this girly stuff is new for me. I’m a tomboy. My mom works all of the time and I hang with my brothers.”

“You’ve got brothers? I wish I had a brother. I have an older sister who gets on my *last* nerve! How many brothers do you have?”

She kept going on and on so much about her sister that I think she forgot that I hadn’t responded.

“Wait, Yasmin, weren’t you telling me about your family?”

Well, Lord, I thought. You know I was thinking about having a true girlfriend. Do I stay closed up? Do I scare her off and let her know that I’m grieving and make her feel obligated to be my friend. Yet, if I keep it to myself and not say anything, what kind of relationship are we truly able to start? Either she likes me for who I truly am or she doesn’t.

“Veida, I had three brothers.”

“Okay, you said *had*. What do you mean? Are they like step-brothers and stuff where they lived with you and now they live with your dad or something? ’Cause I forgot to mention that I have a stepsister too, but that’s a whole ’nother story.”

“No, no. I’m a triplet. It’s me and two boys.”

“Aww, that’s so cool!”

“But, I had an older brother too, and he died a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh . . . um . . . what happened to him?”

“I really don’t want to talk about it—not right now . . . not here.”

“Oh, I understand. I know it must be really hard for you. I am *so* sorry. I’ve never had anyone close to me die.”

She didn’t even know me and yet she was feeling my pain. Wow! Was I dreaming?

Before I knew it, the tears started, releasing what I tried to hide. I wanted Jeff back, but I also wanted a good friend. I knew the jury was still out on whether Veida and I could be tight buddies. Still, I silently thanked God because maybe He was giving me a true friend—not to replace my brother—but because He knew I needed one.



I didn't really know how to be a strong Christian, but Big Mama always said that if I prayed with a sincere heart, the Lord would hear me. Over the last ten days, He'd done just that. Veida and I were really becoming tight. It didn't matter to me that I didn't have a bunch of girlfriends. I had opened up to Veida so much: before school, during school, after school, during change of classes, and at lunch. I told her stuff I thought I'd never share with anyone.

"I hate Algebra," she said after Miss Bennett handed back our first major test. "I don't even know why I'm taking it now. I wanted to wait until the ninth grade, but NO! My mom wanted me to take it this year and you see this big 41 percent. What can I do with that, Yasmin?"

I was feeling good when I saw my 98 percent, but I didn't want to show it to her and make her feel worse.

Veida shook her head assuming mine was bad as well. "Is your score this low? This stuff was hard, huh?"

"I don't want to show it to you."

She snatched it from my hand. "An A, ugh. I'm such a dummy!" Tears welled up in her eyes.

I wouldn't say she was overdramatic, but it didn't take much for her to cry. I felt bad that she had flunked the test.

"I'll help you." I told her. "Ask Miss Bennett if you can take it again. It's the weekend. If you study, you can get this."

"How can we study together if we live in two different parts of town?" Veida asked.

"If she'll let you retake the test we'll figure something out."

That's all I had to say. Veida hopped out of her seat and headed over to Miss Bennett's desk to plead her case, like a debate team

member. Then she came skipping back over to her seat with a huge grin.

“She said all I need to do is study and she’ll let me retake it on Monday. Yas, how’d you know?”

“I figured since you’re new most teachers would try to work with you.”

At lunchtime Veida whipped out her phone and started dialing. When I tried to ask her something she put up an index finger and shushed me. What was she doing? I guess she either didn’t know or care that her cell phone could be confiscated for being used in school.

“Hey, Daddy. Can I go over to my friend Yasmin’s house so she can help me study for a big exam I have on Monday? I’m gonna ride the school bus with her. I’ll text you the address later. Thanks, Daddy. Love you. Smooches.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said with attitude as she ended the call. “I haven’t asked my mom and plus you don’t have a note. You can’t just get on the bus with me. I don’t know what it was like at the school you transferred from, but if they catch you using your phone here, they’ll take it and give you a detention!”

“Yasmin, please. I don’t get caught. Anyway, I have a good reason, right? I have to let my parents know and how else can I do it if I don’t call ahead of time?”

I guess she was right about asking her parents ahead of time. But the part about not getting caught, Big Mama always said that you might not get caught doing something every time, but that eventually your sin would find you out.

“My dad can handle the bus thing. If it makes you feel any better, I’ll text him right now and tell him to call the school ASAP

... There, it's done. If it's such a big deal, why don't you call your mom and ask her?"

I didn't know how to tell Veida that I didn't have a cell phone. The more I thought about it, she was an upscale, rich girl. I was poor and from the projects. I wasn't sad about it, but I wasn't trying to parade her in my home. Though we had talked about a lot, I hadn't let her in on the fact that me and my mom shared a bedroom.

In a state of panic, I said, "No, you can't come to my house."

Thankfully, the bell rang and I got my stuff and went out to the hallway. We usually walked together, but I didn't need to be around Veida right now. Unfortunately, she caught up to me.

"Look, Veida," I said, not beating around the bush, "I live in the projects. I don't know if that's a problem for you, but it is what it is."

"Girl, please, my cousins live in the projects. That's not a big deal. I'm not trippin' on that. I don't want to be your friend because of where you live, and I hope you know that I would never judge you. If we're really cool, it shouldn't matter where we live."

Then she pouted her lips out and gave me a pitiful puppy-dog glare. "Okay?"

Reluctantly giving in, I said, "Okay."

The school day flew by. I was sort of nervous bringing her home without permission. But my mom would be at work and it was for a good reason. After all, I had to help Veida with her math grade.

"Who is this fine hottie on the bus?" York yelled, unable to take his bulging eyes off my friend.

"There is nobody different on this bus," Yancy said, hitting him

in his arm until he looked up and saw Veida sitting beside me.

Yancy stared like he knew her. She batted her light hazel eyes back at him. What had I missed?

It never occurred to me that both of them would lose their minds when they laid eyes on her. I guess we never ran into each other because York was in remedial classes and Yancy had honors classes. The two of them were so silly, trying to beat the other down the narrow bus aisle to get to where we were sitting.

“Yancy, move, boy!” York said, elbowing him back. “Sis, introduce me; who is this?”

York picked up Veida’s hand and tried to kiss it. Before he could, she yanked her hand back. Then Yancy shoved him into the back of the bus.

“Y’all need to sit down back there!” The bus driver wasn’t playing.

“Those must be your twin brothers.”

We’re triplets! I thought, but I just nodded my head at that point. I didn’t even want to claim the two of them acting like idiots. Then I saw Myrek step onto the bus. I just waited for him to come over and drool too, but he didn’t. He smiled when he spoke to me, politely smiled at Veida, and then sat down.

“Who is that guy checking you out?” Veida said to me.

“It’s just my next-door neighbor.”

“Oh, that’s the guy you’ve been telling me about. Hmm . . . I won’t say nothing.”

“There’s nothing to say,” I replied as we both laughed.

When we got off the bus, I was stunned to see my mom’s car. She was at home. I hoped she hadn’t gotten fired because it made no sense for her to be home in the middle of the day.

Running into the house, I saw her on the couch and said, “Mom, what’s wrong?”

“I’m tired, girl! That’s what’s wrong!” She saw Veida behind me. “I know you ain’t got no company. This house ain’t cleaned up. I just want to rest.”

“Hi, Ms. Peace, I’m so sorry to just show up here. It’s my fault. I’m not doing good in Algebra and I asked Yasmin to tutor me. My dad is going to come and pick me up as soon as we finish. I promise I won’t get in the way. I could help her clean up, if that’s okay?”

“Clean up? Well, come on, girl. You talkin’ my language. See, Yasmin, that’s how you need to be. Where are your brothers? Tell them to get in this house now. Come on here, girl, and tell me about yourself. Come to think of it, I’ve never met a girlfriend of Yasmin’s.”

When I stepped outside, I couldn’t believe my brothers were fighting. York was on top of Yancy. Yancy had his hands around York’s neck.

“Y’all step back,” Myrek said, trying unsuccessfully to push them apart. “Over a girl, this is stupid.”

“Nah, I saw her first and then he gon’ try and rap to her. She ain’t trying to be with no nerd,” York said.

“At least I’ve got something going on. And who said you saw her first? She’s here so Yasmin can tutor her. She ain’t interested in sixth-grade classes, dummy,” Yancy said, pushing him back.

“Why does everything have to be so messed up? I hate it here,” I yelled.

Lately, I had been real sad a lot and kept everything to myself. But I was no longer going to hold stuff in, letting them think that

their actions didn't affect me. Their little fight wasn't just about Veida. They were hurting inside because of Jeff's suicide and my dad being in jail too. They needed to own up to what was going on with them, reach deep inside like I did, and be an expresser of emotion.