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## Chapter 1

# Stronger Each Day

*Y*asmin, you and your brothers need to come over to my house right now,” Myrek said to me over the phone with great urgency in his voice.

“Huh? What are you talking about?” I said to my next door neighbor and best buddy of many years.

I was really confused about why he sounded panicked. My mom had just come back from Myrek’s apartment. Mr. Mike, Myrek’s dad, had asked her to come over to discuss the situation about Jada, Myrek’s sister. My brother Jeffery Jr., whom everybody called Jeff, used to date Jada. Well, now Jada says that she is pregnant—and that Jeff is the father!

Though my tough brother York wasn’t at all happy about it, my smart brother Yancy and I certainly thought this was great news. I wasn’t naïve or anything. I know that it is not God’s plan for a teenage girl to be pregnant. But because of what my grandma, Big Mama, always said could come out of a mess, I had hope that

God will bring a miracle into these circumstances. After explaining the situation to my brothers and me, Mom realized that she'd left her Bible at Myrek's house, so she went back to get it.

"Yas, please don't ask me no questions. Seriously, could y'all come on over here?" Myrek said as I heard loud talking behind him.

My mom was over there cutting up. Why though? She had just said that we needed to be prayerful and God would work everything out. It had only been months since Jeff took his own life. Just when I was getting over the fact that I would probably lose every connection I ever had with him, I find out that I will have a niece or nephew, keeping a part of Jeff in this world. What could possibly be going wrong now?

Quickly, I slid on my slippers and hung up the phone without saying bye.

I looked at York and Yancy. "Let's go. Mom's over there showing out."

"I told y'all this isn't our fight. This isn't our business," York said, not wanting to get up out of his seat. "Jada is too young to have a baby. Besides, whatever that girl wants to do with her body ain't got nothing to do with us."

"Yeah. Like Jeffery would want her to kill the baby?" Yancy said to York. "We gotta be his voice. We gotta do whatever we can to make sure she knows that she's not in this alone. So get up and let's go over there. Now!"

I couldn't believe Yancy grabbed York's collar. I knew that wasn't going to go over well. The two of them started pushing and shoving each other back and forth. It was just killing me how every five minutes they were getting into it about something.

"Guys, this isn't about us. Mom is over there fussing with

Myrek's dad. Can't we just keep whatever we feel to ourselves and go bring Mama home?"

York said, "Mama's grown. What about this don't you understand?"

"I understand that she's our mom and obviously it's a big enough deal that Myrek thought we could help by being over there. It's not like I'm putting my nose into something that I'm supposed to stay out of. We were basically asked to come over and help. If you want to sit here and do nothing, or if you two want to stay here and argue, then fine. I'll go by myself." I opened our apartment door and stood in the doorway with my body facing right.

"I'll go," York said, knowing that I made a very valid point.

The front door of Myrek's apartment was wide open.

"You just can't go around giving no demands, Yvette," Mr. Mike said to our mom. "Jada is my daughter. She's going to do what is best for her. All of us are struggling in these projects. We're barely able to take care of the kids we got now. You workin' two jobs. I'm working seventeen hours.

"How we gonna be able to take care of a grandchild? And your son ain't even here to help. I'm sorry if this hurts. I'm sorry if I'm saying the tough stuff, but I'm being real. Jeff's gone and we need to move on. Jada has a future that includes finishing school. And having a baby just ain't a part of that future."

My brothers and I were standing behind our mom.

"You not gon' tell me that y'all gon' deal with this without me!" Mom said, fussing. "Are you tellin' me that she's not gonna have the baby?"

Finally, he said, "Y'all need to get your mom up on out of my

apartment. This is my daughter and we gon' deal with it how she needs to."

No one seemed to notice that Jada was in the corner crying. Our parents just kept going back and forth at it. They were getting so loud and crazy that obviously this girl could not take anymore of it. Suddenly, she ran outside and I followed her.

"Jeffery, why'd you have to leave me? I'm sorry I told you it was Bone's baby. I just thought it would be better. I didn't want to mess you up and keep you from going on to college. I didn't know you were gonna take it so hard. Please forgive me, God. Please forgive me!" Jada sobbed.

I was going out there to console Jada, but hearing what she said made me stop as if I'd come to a stop sign and a policeman was waiting to give me a ticket if I proceeded. And then when I was able to move, when I could go forward to comfort her, it was like my car broke down. How could I comfort a girl who basically was confessing to the fact that she was probably the reason why my brother took his own life?

Now granted, I found out that he owed Bone money for not throwing the high school state championship game. I'd also learned that his grades were horrible and he probably wasn't going to get a chance to go to college after all. But I still knew Jeff to be so strong. None of that made me think he'd be that down. But this? I believe that he loved Jada. If she told him that she was having someone else's baby, he would have been devastated. I screamed to release my pent-up frustration.

Jada turned around and said, "How long have you been standing there?"

“Long enough,” I said with one hand on my hip. “Why’d you lie to my brother?” I demanded.

“I don’t know. I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I could pull this off. I didn’t think he would end everything. I was fooling myself that Jeff wouldn’t care. Please, please forg—”

Getting close to her face, I snarled and said, “Please what? My brother’s gone. We don’t have no real reasons or answers why he did what he did. If you told him this terrible lie, then of course he felt helpless and weak. How could you? And you don’t even know if you want the baby!”

Jada looked at me with tears streaming down her face and said, “Yasmin, you have no clue about what I’m going through!”

I was overcome with the sick feeling grief brings. At that point, I ran back to my own apartment. Sitting on the bed that I shared with my mom, all I could do was rock back and forth.

*Lord, I thought I knew You were there. You’ve proven to me that You care about me, but why does each day seem to be harder? Why can’t I just feel good? Why can’t I just get good news? Why can’t I be a normal eighth-grade girl? Drama free?*



“Wait a minute. I’m not taking no handouts from nobody. What’s all this food for?” I heard Mom say in an irate way.

I was surprised to see my counselor and pastor’s wife, Mrs. Newman, and my English teacher, Miss Bennett, at our apartment. They said they had come on behalf of the *Reach Out and Touch* ministry from our church. The baskets of food they brought sure smelled good. So good that my brothers had come out of their bedroom to find out what was happening.

“Mom, what you sayin’? We hungry,” York said to her as his eyes got really wide, staring at all of the food.

“Boy, I told you, you might be getting bigger but you are not grown up in here. I didn’t ask for no handouts. I don’t want no handouts. Thank y’all very much, but go to somebody else’s house. The lady next door on the left, Sandra, got two little kids. And believe it or not, she’s struggling worse than me. Take the food to her.”

“Mom!” I said, feeling really embarrassed that my mother had such pride. My grandma had fussed at her about being too prideful to accept help. She couldn’t even accept a blessing.

The first time that we visited the church, Pastor Newman’s message moved my whole family and we joined the church. Then the minister over the new members’ ministry explained to us the importance of not only being a member but of having a relationship with Jesus Christ. Mom even left the service saying that she was happier than she’d been in a long while.

“Mom, how come we can’t accept it?” I asked.

“Because—in case you forgot, Yasmin Peace, I’m the one who makes decisions up in here,” she said sharply.

They were being nice to us and bringing us a meal when, truth be told, earlier in the day Mom was trying to figure out what we were gonna eat. I could understand not wanting to take handouts if you didn’t need it, but she’d already said we were struggling. She had two jobs and was still behind on the rent and utilities. Coupled with the way my brothers ran through the food stamps, we needed help.

Mrs. Newman said, “You know, I’m sorry, Mrs. Peace. The church wasn’t trying to make you feel like you can’t do this. We know you didn’t ask for a handout. It’s just that this is the end of

the holiday season and we'd like to bless grieving families who have suffered a severe loss. This is just a little something to start the New Year off with a victory."

Miss Bennett stepped forward and said, "Yes, she's right. So many people get so much during the time when they actually lose a loved one, but after that, sometimes they still need folks to come by and show them some love. That's what we're all about."

Mrs. Newman chimed back in and said, "We can imagine the holidays had to be tough, but we were praying for you guys. If you need anything, the church is here to help. Please take this ham, fried chicken, green beans, rice, macaroni and cheese—"

"Aw, come on, Ma. You gotta let us get that," York said.

"Shut up, boy!" she said to him. "Go sit down."

"And we've got black-eyed peas," Mrs. Newman continued. "Can't start the New Year off without black-eyed peas. If you prefer us to take this food next door to your neighbor, we can do that. But we'd certainly love to give it to you all. Maybe you can invite your neighbors over here to share with you. There's plenty enough."

Mom looked at my brothers who were practically drooling like they couldn't wait to tear into the food. Then she looked over at me and saw that I was a little salty because she had sort of embarrassed me in front of our visitors.

Then she said calmly, "Just so you know, this isn't a handout. We appreciate it. Kids, let's put everything in the kitchen."

We laid the spread on the kitchen table. My brothers were smiling from our place in Jacksonville all the way to Miami.

Before Mrs. Newman and Miss Bennett left, they asked if we could circle up in prayer and thank God for His many blessings. My mom said that was a great idea; my brothers, who acted as if



they hadn't eaten in years, reluctantly grabbed hands.

We walked over to the table and Mom just hugged me. "Thank you, baby," she said as she gave me a kiss on my forehead.

"For what?" I said still having a slight attitude.

"Just because. Just because," was all that she said.

Maybe I did need to keep trusting God. Maybe He was working in my mom's heart after all. Though I was still so bummed out with her, I had to force a smile on my face because of her change of heart. It sure felt good having her arms around me. Something was definitely working.



"Ooh, this sure is a lot of food," Mom said after Mrs. Newman and Miss Bennett left. "Yas, why don't you go next door and see if Miss Sandra is at home."

"Yes, ma'am," I said and headed to her apartment. As I approached the door, I didn't even have to knock; I could tell there was no one home because it was so quiet. Usually, you could hear the kids playing and making noise inside their apartment. Besides, her car wasn't parked outside in its usual spot.

Miss Sandra was an interesting character. She had two young kids: a five-year-old daughter, Randi, and a son, Dante, who was almost two. She worked at the grocery store stocking items on the shelf, and she also worked nights at a second job.

Back last spring, I remember when she and my mom got into it. Mom had caught her leaving the kids at home alone while she was out trying to make ends meet. When Mom threatened to call the Department of Children and Family Services, also known as DCF, Miss Sandra just broke down. Ever since then, my mom was

trying to do all she could to help the lady. We watched the kids, and we shared our food with them.

But after Jeff died, Mom just shut out all that helping others. One day I heard her mumbling that she could barely help her own children. How was she going to help someone else raise theirs? After that, we didn't know who was taking care of her little babies, but I knew my mom still cared about them.

"They're not there, Ma," I said, coming back to our apartment. Then she put on her shoes.

"Where you going?" York said to Mom. "We 'bout to eat. I know you gotta go to work, but can't you even eat with us?"

"Boy, calm down and mind your own business. Y'all set the table and warm up the food. I'm grown, don't ask me no questions," she said.

Yancy cracked open the door to find out where Mom was going; surprisingly, she went right over to Myrek's house.

My brothers and I stood in the doorway eavesdropping.

"I'm sorry things got a little out of control the other day, Mike," my mom said. "I have some food. It's New Year's Day and everybody deserves a good meal. Would you and the kids like to come over and eat with us?"

"Yvette, why would we want to do that? You're trying to tell my daughter what she's got to do with her baby."

"No, it's not gonna be none of that. I learned my lesson. Though I got strong views, I've just been praying about it. Some stuff I can't fix, like my ex-husband being in jail when I need him, you know? You just gotta learn how to roll with the punches and move on."

"See, why she gotta be talking about Dad to him?" York said as

the three of us listened. "I don't want them coming over, eating our food. We got a refrigerator that's empty. We can have leftovers and grub for days. I sure hope he says no."

"Quit being selfish," I said to York.

"Yas just wants Myrek to come over here, Yancy," York said, getting under my skin like a bad rash.

"Yeah, she just wants Myrek to come over here," Yancy teased as he messed with my hair.

I wasn't even thinking like that. Myrek and I were cool with each other. We decided we had some feelings for each other, but we just want to be friends. We weren't trying to have nothing serious going on.

My two brothers had their issues. I still couldn't believe that Yancy hated being smart and detested being teased by his peers so much that he had started getting bad grades just so he wouldn't have to take accelerated classes. And finally he gets a girlfriend, Veida Hatchett. She was supposed to be my friend but had dropped me the first time I didn't like her being so fast with my brother.

And York wasn't any better, wanting to act like we had more than we did. He felt the need to dress in the fliest clothes so bad that he was willing to steal for them. Then he was arrested and had to perform community service.

Both of those things were stressing my mom out so bad. And then for her to find out that there's a chance that a part of my oldest brother could still be here on earth made her wrestle at night. I'm sure that's why she was unable to sleep at night; she was carrying so much on her. Yet she treated me like I was a kid and wouldn't talk to me like a friend who could take some of this stuff

off of her. But I do feel bad that even though I didn't want to show her any resistance, I still gave her lip—more than she deserved.

"Let's get ready for our guests, y'all. Mom asked us to get the food ready. Let's just do it, okay?" I told them, trying to be a good daughter.

"You act like they're comin'," York said.

"Mom's over there asking them," Yancy said. "What else are they eating? They're just like us. Poor, trying to make it. They'll be over here for some food."

Sure enough, ten minutes later my mom came through the door with Mr. Mike, Myrek, and Jada. Myrek and I looked at each other with such awkwardness. We had been best friends since forever. But why did it feel different now? Maybe it was just because we were growing up. I thought he looked quite handsome in his new sweater that he must've gotten for Christmas—but I wasn't going to tell him that.

Teasing him, I said, "Make sure you don't eat up all the chicken legs. You know that's my favorite part."

Blushing and nodding, Myrek said, "For real, though, I'm glad your mom came over. My dad was fixing chicken noodle soup."

Jada said, "Hey, Yasmin."

I remembered the last time I had seen her, she was confessing that she had really hurt Jeff with some of the things she'd said to him. At that moment, I thought I could never forgive her. But then it was as if God pinched me. I had to move past this.

I said, "Can I talk to you for a second?"

"I'm really not up to it, Yasmin. I just can't deal with the stress. My dad and your mom have talked about this enough. I really want a good meal and then I'm going back to bed."

"I'm not gonna stress you out, but I do want to talk to you. Mom, we'll be right back," I said, heading to my bedroom. I wasn't taking *no* for an answer.

Sitting down on my bed, Jada said, "Okay. What? I was wrong and I'm sorry."

"Well, I'm sorry too for acting all high and mighty like I was judging you. I know you didn't mean for Jeff to go over the edge. He made that decision for himself. I guess I just wanted to let you know that I don't hold you responsible. That's all."

Looking surprised, Jada said, "Thanks, Yasmin." We hugged and then she and I headed to the kitchen.

Just then, I heard Mom and Myrek's dad laughing. For two people who weren't getting along a few days before, they were certainly acting chummy now.

"This ain't even gonna happen and go down like that," York said.

"What?" I asked.

"Myrek and Yancy are talking about getting the two of them together. That is not gonna happen as long as I'm here. No way."

I didn't know how I felt about that, even though my parents were divorced. With the divorce and my dad still being in jail, it didn't mean that he and my mom couldn't get back together when he got out. Mom had made a lot of sense when she said some stuff wasn't for us kids to get into. But whatever Myrek's dad was saying to her, it sure felt good to see her smile. The meal was a blessing to both of our families.



When I returned to school after the Christmas break, I thanked my English teacher, Miss Bennett, for coming by to help

my family. I also went to my counselor's office to thank Mrs. Newman and to just talk.

"Mrs. Newman, I'm sorry that my mom didn't want to accept the help at first." Needing to vent, I went on, "You just don't even know. She is so strong. She does it her way, but it's like I don't even have any say over anything. Like she doesn't care at all what I think. Sometimes I get so tired of her acting like that. I don't have any hope that she's ever going to change and see me as the young woman I'm trying to be. Lately, York and Yancy have made bad choices. Then with my brother Jeff taking his own life—it's been really hard on her."

She touched my shoulder and said, "Listen, Yasmin, you just told me she's going through a lot. Don't lose hope in her. I believe your relationship will get better. You and your whole family will bounce back stronger from all that you had to deal with last year."

"Most people we minister to act as if they think they deserve stuff just being given to them. Your mom's not like that. She has integrity. She wants to provide for and take care of her kids. She may seem overprotective, but she's just a mama bear who's had some cubs wander a little too far away. And because your mom knows that you haven't, she just wants to do everything in her power to make sure you don't stray. There's love, honor, and strength in her."

I told Mrs. Newman about the drama between Myrek's family and mine and how my mom went over there with her Bible and then ended up really getting into it with Mr. Mike. Then a couple of days later Mom invited the family over to share the dinner that the church had blessed us with.

"Well, Yasmin, as you can see, just because a person is a Christian doesn't mean that they don't get angry and maybe say or do

some things that they wish they hadn't. The important thing is that your mother extended herself to another family despite the conflict between you all. I'd say that your mom is really demonstrating the love of Christ—even in her own pain. And at the very least, thank God that she took the Bible with her!"

We had been through so much. And we weren't totally healed; the pain and the loss of Jeffery still hurt so badly. I had no idea what would happen with Jada, and I worried about York and Yancy going through their own tough times. I also had major concerns about my mom trying to keep our family on track. However, I knew I had to keep giving it all to Him.

Through it all, thankfully, God hadn't forgotten the Peace family. We were getting stronger each day.

## Chapter 2

# Remember You Can

I can't believe you didn't see that fine guy on TV last night," Veida said, hardly letting me eat my lunch.

"What channel? What show? What was it about?" I asked.

"It was on channel 56, the new high school drama, *Georgia Sky*. That brother was so good looking. I would get with him in a minute."

"What's Georgia Sky?" I asked, knowing that another big reason why I didn't see it was because we don't have cable.

"It's a teen drama based on some books." Veida looked at me like I was clueless.

Next thing I knew, Perlicia plopped her tray down beside us. She had to have been eavesdropping. She was ready to jump into the A and B conversation that didn't C her anywhere in it.

Perlicia said, "Ohh, are y'all talking about that Dakari character on *Georgia Sky*? He is slamming; such a cutie."

Of course, I should have known Asia wasn't too far away. She



always followed Perlicia. I wondered if she'd ever get a mind of her own. But Asia sat down too, and the three of them couldn't stop talking about how they wanted to be with this guy from TV.

I couldn't believe how graphic they were getting as they described the things they imagined doing with boys. Before our break for the holidays, Perlicia and Asia weren't really digging Veida. However, listening to them talk about their fantasies, you would think they were best friends.

"Okay, enough talk about sex already," I finally said, as Perlicia described something she'd seen on some adult channel she wasn't supposed to be watching.

I was just appalled. My mouth couldn't close. They wanted bigger chests to make the guys look at them more. Then they started naming guys in our eighth grade class and talking about how good or bad they thought their bodies were.

I silently prayed, *All right, Lord, I am right in the middle of a conversation that is repulsive to me. I can't even say these girls are supposed to be my friends. Our worlds are colliding. I have to sorta hang out with them. They're not even talking about what they did over the Christmas break. They're just talking about things Your Word says we can't do until marriage. Am I supposed to get my tray and move to another table? The only problem is, the girls over there seem to be focused on the same impure thoughts. Help me, Lord. Help me because I seem to be the only one who cares about pleasing You.*

"Quit being such a goody-goody," Veida said, seeing that I was very uncomfortable with their topic.

"Oh, I wish y'all could see this one guy from my old school that I used to date," Veida said as Perlicia and Asia inched closer, trying not to miss all the details she was about to spill.

"His name is Gabriel and last year it was like he was a seventh-grader trapped in a senior's body," Veida bragged.

"Oooohhhhh," Perlicia said. "I bet his chest was ripped. I can see him, girl! That fine Gabriel."

Veida said, "Yeah, and when he played basketball, you could really see his chest. All the girls were fighting over him."

I just looked at Veida like I couldn't believe she was saying this in front of me. After all, she and my brother Yancy had serious crushes on each other. Yet, if it wasn't some guy on TV she couldn't wait to go out to Hollywood and find, she was drooling over some boy she used to go to school with.

"What, Yasmin? Don't look at me like that. I'm sorry. I'm just a thirteen-year-old girl who's changing. I used to think about books and pleasing my parents, but now all I can think about is pleasing myself. Plus, my parents don't do everything right either. So why should I? You know what I'm sayin'?" Veida boasted, raising her hand for Perlicia to give her a high five.

Asia became a little distant. At first she seemed to be so into what was being said. I wasn't trying to figure out why she seemed to change. However, I was surprised by that.

"Okay, but what about pleasing God?" I asked as I stood up, unable to take any more of their drama.

Then they looked at me like I was crazy.

"Yeah," I said. "Pleasing God. He wants us to keep our minds pure, not all in a gutter somewhere. You know there are diseases out there, teen pregnancy, all kinds of craziness."

"I want to know more about that," Asia said, finally speaking up.

"As goody-two-shoes as you are, Yasmin, if you came down to

reality you'd know all that stuff people talk about doesn't even apply to us middle schoolers," Perlicia said. "We're not trying to go all the way. Just a little fun won't hurt nothing."

Veida nodded as if that comment made complete sense. I knew how girls became pregnant but a lot of girls didn't have correct information.

Asia started asking questions and saying what she'd heard about sex and pregnancy.

"Just because a boy touches you, what's the big deal . . . it's not sex," Veida said.

"Yeah, Veida, but that's what it will lead to. I know for sure that isn't a safe zone. So, Asia, don't believe their hype," I said.

Perlicia added, "As far as diseases go . . . they can cure everything nowadays anyway, even AIDS. Look at some of the big celebrities who have it. They're still around."

I hated that I didn't have the facts to dispute their claims, but none of that mattered anyway. If God wasn't happy with my actions and He told me I needed to wait, then that was all I needed to be concerned with. Why my classmates couldn't see it that way really bummed me out.

"Grow up, Yasmin," Veida said to me as I grabbed my tray and left them to their disgusting chat.

I tried to shove my lunch tray into the little hole for the ladies to clean it but it wouldn't go. I was getting so mad and then Mrs. Newman came over to me.

She said, "Okay, Yasmin, what's going on?"

"Ugh, it doesn't matter. I just feel like a first-grader trapped inside an eighth-grader's body."

"What do you mean? You're developing into a fine young lady.

You're just where you should be for your age. What's the matter?" she asked.

"All of the things girls my age are concerned with don't bother me at all, don't phase me at all, don't make me want to do it at all. I know they think I'm weird."

"So you've had a little lunchroom conversation with your girls, huh? You can't compare yourself to anybody else, and unfortunately, a lot of these girls around here are way too fast. You don't even know the half of it. They chase boys, skip school, and end up in a world of trouble. Unfortunately, most of them live to regret their bad decisions."

"I might be the only girl in school who doesn't care about all that. I just feel so out of place. Why does feeling the way God says I should stink so much?"

"We've got to do something about that around here because whenever a good girl thinks she is in the wrong, it's time for the adults to step up and add some clarity."

"Yeah, my friends know how they can get pregnant but they don't seem to understand or care about behavior that can lead them to sex. They think there are cures for all diseases, so it is no big deal to have sex."

"Yes, it's a very big deal. You have your cycle, then you go too far with a boy—and you *can* get pregnant. There are many sexually transmitted diseases, and everything *isn't* curable. I'm glad we talked about this, Yasmin. You are on the right track. Just because there is chaos around you, don't you go down the wrong path. Stay true to what you know is right. And even if you have to stand alone, keep standing."

I thought about what I knew in my heart to be true. It reminded

me of the Scripture I'd learned in church: "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee." I didn't want to do anything that would displease God. God was truly in my world because He knew how much I really needed to hear what Mrs. Newman said.



When Yancy, York, Myrek, and I got off the bus later that day, Bone was sitting on his car. He called York to holla at him. But before York started over there, I told him that he needed to just keep it moving because Uncle John had already warned Bone about messing with us.

"Yasmin, please. You trippin', girl. I can talk to him if I want to. This ain't none of your business. You just try and keep up with yo' silly little friends and stay outta my business," York said.

"Man, Yasmin's right," Yancy said, "you got a hard head. You know Bone doesn't have anything good to say to you."

"Both of y'all need to mind yo' business. I don't answer to y'all," York said.

As we got closer to Bone and his homies, I noticed a gun in Bone's waistband. Everything in me was scared.

York stopped to talk to him and the rest of us stood close by. We might've been scared but we were all in this together.

York looked at us and said, "Y'all go on. I'll catch up with you. I gotta take care of something." Bone and his boys were looking us all up and down.

Then one of his boys said to Myrek, "What you lookin' at?"

Myrek just stared him down and then Yancy said, "Come on, y'all. Let's go."

Myrek couldn't stand Bone and hated the fact that his sister Jada used to kick it with him.

I didn't want to leave York there, but Yancy said that was a choice that York was making. He was going to have to deal with the consequences.

I was so mad. Yancy and Myrek were too. Myrek and I were walking very fast. I guess we were trying to beat our anguish away by hurrying.

"The two of y'all might as well run," Yancy said, trying to crack a joke.

Bone was big trouble and to see a gun up close like that was too personal to laugh about. We dodged a big bullet. It hurt me so to know that York still felt obligated to that thug.

When we got around the corner, I said to Yancy and Myrek, "Did y'all see that gun Bone had?"

Both of them said they'd seen it.

"You know they still ain't found them kids from a couple of summers ago. Everybody says Bone had something to do with it," I said.

"Somebody needs to take him down," Myrek said.

"I don't understand why the police can't throw away the key with that dude. He needs to be locked up," Yancy said.

Myrek said, "Naw, somebody needs to take him out! If only I could—"

"Myrek, don't talk like that. We're not like that. We're going to school. We're not going to drop out. We're going to get our education so we can get out of this hole we live in."

Out of my two brothers whom I shared our mom's stomach with, I had to admit Yancy wasn't the aggressive one. If there was

a way that we could watch videos of right before we were born, York was probably the one kicking both of us. He just came out rougher and tougher.

"York always thinks he's a man and can handle everything for everyone. I'm sick of him tryin' to act all hard like Dad. Doesn't he understand he'll end up in jail too?" Yancy asked.

Then we saw York coming. Inside I was happy to see he was still in one piece. At least he was done dealing with Bone for now.

"Y'all looking like somebody stole your wallets!" York said.

Yancy and Myrek just looked at him and began walking ahead of us.

I had to be tough with York to let him know he needed to leave Bone alone.

"Why you actin' like you bad?" York asked me.

I started, "You don't owe him a thing. You don't have to try and defend our honor, thinking you got to work with a criminal to pay off some debt he said Jeff owed him, I don't even know if I believe that anymore."

"Yasmin, I believe it, so I'll take care of it the way I want to. I'm not going to let him push my sister around. I don't even want him messing with Yancy. Yancy ain't big and bad. It's not like he can handle himself with those guys. You just need to stay out of it and make sure he does too. I'm gonna handle what I got to handle. I wish I knew them books like y'all do, but that's just not my thing."

"It's because you don't try. You spend more time out here in the streets than you do in your books."

"Whatever, Yasmin."

"Just don't hang around them. You can get hurt. Please." I pleaded with him, trying not to come off too whiney.

“Just know that I got to do this. As far as Uncle John protectin’ us . . . he ain’t here. I gotta do what I gotta do. He can’t protect nobody and he’s way down in Orlando. I got this. I just came to bring my book bag home,” he said as we approached the door. “I gotta roll with Bone right now. If Ma asks where I am, you gotta cover for me and make sure that Yancy keeps his punk mouth shut.”

I didn’t even get a chance to tell my brother that I wasn’t going to do it. I was so scared and didn’t want anything to happen to York. But as the wind started blowing in the cold January air, I felt like God was saying, *Let Me be God and take care of York. You just go home and take care of you.* As I entered our apartment, I thought, *Who better to put my hope in?*



“Oh good, we got an assembly and I can sleep,” my knuckle-headed classmate Nelson said to me.

His partner just hit him in the chest and he started laughing.

“No, this will be inspiring. Someone is coming to talk to us and get us ready for the writing exam—we gotta listen,” I said.

“You listen,” Nelson replied, mocking me.

There was an eighth-grade test mandated in the state of Florida that we had to take; it would determine our writing aptitude. The school we attended didn’t have the best test scores in the county and a lot of us were nervous. The test wasn’t going to keep us from going on to high school, but it would determine our placement in classes.

I didn’t really know what I wanted to be in life, but I did know some type of writing would be involved in whatever I chose. I wanted to be successful in high school and go on to college. I



wanted to put my best foot forward on work that people would be judging me on. So, I was a little nervous. Yep, paying attention to the speaker was something I knew I had to do.

"All right, class," Miss Bennett said to everyone. "All the English classes are attending this assembly, and I don't want my class to be the one with students who don't listen. You give respect to this lady. Take in all the things she has to say because she can be doing so many other things with her time. Anybody who clowns, acts up, or embarrasses me will be given an in-school suspension."

Nelson asked, "Aww, come on, Miss Bennett. What if the lady is boring?"

"Boy, you definitely need to be listening to any pointers on how to write. I'm serious, you guys. No drama," she said.

"Yes, ma'am," we collectively said as a class.

When we got to the cafeteria there was a big poster of our speaker on the wall. Her name was *Stephanie Perry Moore*. She had all these books that she'd written. Most speakers we had would be sitting in a chair waiting to be announced, but she was at the door greeting all of us. She even told me that she loved my smile.

Then she said to Nelson, "Look at you, looking all fly today." He started smiling. I think she won him over.

The buzz going around was that the character from the TV show that Veida and Perlicia were so crazy about is based on her books.

"Guess you won't be talking now," I teased.

Nelson said, "Oh, shut up, Yasmin."

Miss Bennett's tough talk along with Mrs. Moore's greeting wasn't enough for everyone in the eighth-grade class to pay attention. Clear across the room Perlicia and Asia were laughing. Prin-

cial Caldwell got their attention and they hushed for a little bit, but I could tell that they were not into this at all.

Then our principal introduced our speaker. "I know quite a bit of planning has gone into getting Mrs. Stephanie Perry Moore here to talk to you guys. I've heard her before and you're in for a treat if you just sit back and listen. Like I tell you guys every time we have a speaker, they got theirs; listen to what they have to say so you can get yours.

"Some years ago, Mrs. Moore wrote the first African American Christian teen series entitled, *Payton Skky*. Since that time she has continued to be a trailblazer in young adult Christian fiction. She lives with her husband and three children and loves speaking to teens, telling them how they can be cool but still do it God's way. She came to us because a couple of our students have been in love with her books. So let's give it up right now for Mrs. Stephanie Perry Moore."

Hardly anybody clapped. Our students weren't the most polished bunch and we usually went with the flow. If one person booed, most would do that as well. Thankfully, no one did this time.

"How many of you guys have a dream and want to be successful? How many of you want to make a million dollars?" she asked, immediately taking the stage and not caring about how into it we were or weren't.

I could tell her goal was to get us into what she had to say. She had done it because everybody raised their hand.

"We all want to be somebody. Well, if you give me the next twenty minutes of your time, I promise I can help you achieve that dream or goal."

Perlicia and Asia were talking loudly again. Mrs. Moore walked over to where they were and placed her hand on Perlicia's shoulder.

"Everyone might not be into what I have to say, but that's okay. Let me just keep it real with you guys for a minute. Don't miss out on your blessing. If you want to take something from this talk, don't get caught up in what your friend is doing or saying to distract you. Stay focused for just a little while because at the end of the day, it's up to you to seize the moment.

"I appreciate your principal and your English teachers inviting me here today. However, today is not about me. So we are not going to talk about my books, shows, and all that. I'm standing before you because as an eighth-grader I had to take a test in Virginia that was similar to the one that you'll be taking. It may surprise you to know, but I took remedial English in the ninth grade. Yeah, I was one of those kids who laughed and joked with my friends, and cut up in class. I was real cool, popular, and had it going on . . . I thought I was all that."

A lot of us laughed. Some people stood saying, "Yeah that's me." It was obvious that we were into what she was saying.

"You see, while I was laughing, cutting up, and joking with my friends, they could flip the switch and I could not. When it came time to getting the work done, they understood the verbs, the prepositions, and everything else. And when I needed to take the test, I couldn't do it. My ninth-grade teacher at Matoaca High School, Mrs. Pulley, said to me, 'You can either take this seriously and set your life back on the right track—and get to learning where you want to go—or you can keep fooling around and flunk out.'"

I really hoped York was listening. I wanted him to know he could do it. He just needed to apply himself.

She continued, "You guys have a decision to make right now too. You can decide that you have to focus on getting what you need and doing what you need to do for yourself so that eventually you can achieve what you want to do. That next year I was in the creative writing class. That teacher aced me out of remedial English and I went on to bigger things. I never looked back when it came to the area of creative writing. Now I have over twenty-five books in print. But again, it's not about me today, it's about you. You've got a writing test coming up. You know all of the material. What's the first thing you do when there is a question posed to you?"

Veida raised her hand.

"Yes, ma'am," Mrs. Moore said, pointing to Veida.

"You understand what the question is asking, and then you start with an introductory topic sentence."

"Correct, and what are you supposed to do next?"

Yancy raised his hand and smiled, looking over at Veida as he said, "You write three sentences or more that support the main idea."

"Exactly, and before you wrap up that first paragraph, you need one more thing."

I raised my hand and said, "You need a closing sentence."

"Perfect, then there are three more paragraphs, which make up the body and contain information on all three points. After that what's next?"

Myrek raised his hand and said, "You have a closing paragraph that's basically the same as the first paragraph but you rework the sentences so you don't say the exact same thing."

"Exactly. Remember, guys, it's not about writing just to ace a

test. I mean, yes, that's great and we want you to do the best you can, but this test is about setting you on the right high school path to get where you want to go in life. It took me seven years to get my first book published. During that time of personal setbacks, defeat, and inner turmoil, I remembered how I had to persevere in my ninth-grade year to make up for what I didn't get right when I took the eighth-grade writing test. You don't want to keep looking back to set your life right. Take advantage of it right now. You've got all the knowledge upstairs," she said as she pointed to her head.

"When it comes to taking that test, just remember you can."