

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 up 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 hooties, 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!