

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.