

CHAPTER 1

JAIR

Jair Nobles woke up with a jolt. It felt like the day before Christmas. For a moment he wondered why he felt so excited. Then he remembered. Last night he chatted on the computer with Keisha Jackson. Keisha was beautiful: light brown eyes, coppery smooth skin, and long dreads. She wore clothes that showed as much as she could while still following Capital Central High School's dress code.

Keisha was one of the most popular students at the school. She had just been elected president of the student government association. She hung out with Eva Morales, Joss White, and that whole in-crowd. Kids who never paid any attention to him. There was nothing she said that made it look

like she liked him, but at least she chatted with him. It was enough to give him hope.

He got out of bed, trying not to wake Royce and Marcel, his two younger brothers. He tiptoed into the living room. His mom's computer sat on a table. The table was missing a leg. His mother had propped it up with cinder blocks. The cinder block side was higher than the others, so the table wobbled every time he hit a key.

He retrieved the chat from the night before. He looked over everything he and Keisha had talked about: Mrs. Lewis's exam next week on the three branches of government, the upcoming field trip to the US Supreme Court, and people at school. She had even asked for his advice. As student government president, she had to choose an issue for the students to focus on during the year. Two years ago, the subject was tolerance toward students new to the US. Last year, it was tolerance for gay students. Keisha didn't know of any other groups that Cap Cent kids needed to be tolerant of, so she had asked Jair what he thought. He hadn't been able to think of a topic. But he was flattered she had asked his opinion.

He went back into his room to get dressed. He rummaged through the broken laundry basket on the floor to find a clean shirt. Nothing. A few pairs of his brothers' tighty-whities but none of his boxers and no shirts. He picked up a T-shirt from the floor and smelled it. He made a face and threw it down.

Jair couldn't remember when his mother had last washed clothes. Or made them a real meal. He was glad she'd finally found a job. She had been looking for such a long time. He hoped that her salary would soon start to help make up for all they lost when his dad was laid off from the post office. But her new job kept her away from home for the whole day. The doctors she worked for kept their office open for long hours. They needed to hire more office staff. His mother spent the day answering phones and dealing with angry patients who had been on hold too long. She was so tired when she got home. She didn't have energy to do anything. And his dad was useless.

He opened his closet and found a shirt that he sometimes wore to church. It was one of his best. He never wore it to school. But now that

Keisha had finally noticed him, he wanted to look good.

Jair picked up his blue Washington Wizards cap. He carefully placed it on his head. If he kept the back strap fairly tight, the cap sat up higher, making him look taller. He hated being so short. Back in middle school, he'd figured he just hadn't started growing yet. But now that he was in high school, it was looking more and more like he'd inherited his mother's shortness instead of his father's height. Most of the other boys in high school were taller than he was. He figured they were all secretly laughing at him for being short. He knew that was how he would feel if he were tall and was looking at a guy who was no bigger than a seventh grader.

He went into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator to find something to eat. He sniffed the open carton of milk. The smell made him cringe. Spoiled. So no cereal unless he ate it dry. Looked like he'd have to eat both breakfast and lunch at school. Again.

He started for the door. "Jair? Baby, is that you?" his mother's sleepy voice called from the bedroom.

He turned. “Mom? Don’t you need to get up?” he asked.

“I’m going to,” she said sleepily. “Get your brothers up and make sure they get dressed,” she added. “I’m just not up to it today.”

Jair had wanted to get to school early to try and hang out with Keisha. “Mom, I have something I gotta do,” he said. “Can’t you do it?”

“Boy, you disrespecting your mother?”

At the sound of his father’s voice, Jair felt his usual mix of fear and anger. He hadn’t realized his father was home. Since he lost his job, it seemed like he was never around. Which was fine with Jair. Fewer nights with his father in the apartment meant fewer chances of getting in trouble for something he did or had forgotten to do. When his father was home, he often had visitors—rough-looking guys who Jair didn’t know. None of them stayed very long. Jair stayed in his room when they came around because they made him uncomfortable.

Jair had no idea what his father did when he wasn’t at their apartment. All he knew was that when his father showed up, he brought trouble with him. It seemed like he was drinking more

too. And when he drank, the slightest little thing would set him off. Not a week went by that his father didn't hit one of them.

"No, sir," Jair said. "I'll get them up."

"And watch your tone," his father said.

"Yes, sir," Jair said automatically as he walked back to his bedroom.

He gave Royce a hard shove, then shoved Marcel.

"Hey!" they both protested.

"Get up, you losers," he said meanly. "I need to get to school, and Mom said you need to get going."

Neither of the younger boys made a move. Jair went to Royce—the middle brother—and pulled him out of bed, dropping him roughly on the floor.

Royce scrambled to get away. "Mom!" he wailed.

"Boys, don't make me come in there!" their father yelled from the other room. "Next time you have to be told, it will be my belt does the talking!"

"Get up!" Jair hissed to Royce. "I want to get out of here."

Royce headed for the bathroom.

“Jair’s got a girlfriend! Jair’s got a girlfriend!” Marcel sang from under his covers. “Jair’s so stupid, he left the computer on for everyone to see!”

Jair was furious. “You shut up, you little punk!” he yelled. He began hitting his youngest brother as hard as he could through the bedcovers.

“Dad! Jair’s hitting me!” Marcel yelled.

Jair felt himself being picked up. His father threw him against the bedroom wall with such force that he was dazed for a moment.

“You think you’re a tough guy? Picking on a little kid?” his father said coldly. “You ain’t so tough. You ain’t no bigger than a girl. And don’t you be cryin’ neither. There are no girls in this family.”

Jair bit his lip to keep his father from seeing how his words hurt. His stomach heaved with a mixture of hurt feelings and hatred. Bad enough that the other guys at school disrespected him for being so short. He had tried to make up for it by being one of the meanest, toughest kids in school. But he couldn’t do that with his father.

“Now get out of here before I beat your ass again,” his father said, walking out of the room.

Jair shook himself off and headed for the door. Even if he didn't see Keisha, being at school would be better than being at home.