

L e s l i e   M c G i l l



# FIGHTER

BOOK 1

## 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.

L e s l i e M c G i l l

# CAP CENTRAL

## FIGHTER

The new kid would get what was coming to him. Jair swore it. Nobody crossed him and got away with it. But Zander knew how to fight. Jair was humiliated. And worse. The fight made YouTube. He looked weak. Stupid. Small. He vowed to get even. Someone said they knew where he could get a gun. That's what he was going to do. That would prove he was not to be pushed around. Ever.

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L e s l i e   M c G i l l

# RUNNING SCARED

BOOK 2

## CHAPTER 1

# RAINIE

Rainie stood on the edge of her bed. The small wall mirror showed only the middle of her five-foot-seven frame. Turning sideways, she looked at her butt. It still stuck out. No matter how much weight she lost, she still looked fat. She wished she hadn't eaten that piece of chicken at dinner last night. She had only eaten half of it. And she hadn't touched the mashed potatoes or corn. But she shouldn't have given in to her hunger.

She used to love her mom's fried chicken. But that seemed a lifetime ago. Back when her dad was still around. Before her mom started working at DC's Bar and Grill. Before Daymon Jenkins started hanging out at their house. Commenting on Rainie's figure. Looking her up and down, even while he was pawing her mother.

Before Rainie started locking her bedroom door at night.

Before she decided to become invisible.

What she saw in the mirror made her feel sick. She'd simply have to keep losing weight. She pulled out the scale she had hidden under her bed and stepped on it. Down to one hundred two pounds. But if she leaned on it, the needle moved a bit toward the right. Rainie shook her head in disgust. If she was going to lose this fat, she just couldn't eat anything today.

She carefully slid the scale back under her bed. She leaned forward to look at her face in the mirror. Strange. Her skin had gotten really dry, but her face had been breaking out more than usual lately. Her hair seemed to be drying out too. When she tried to style it, she would find clumps that had fallen onto her dresser.

She pulled on some warm-up pants and a long-sleeved T-shirt. Then she layered another T-shirt on top of that. Despite the Washington, D.C., heat and humidity, she always seemed to be cold.

"You still looking in that mirror?" her mother

yelled up the stairs. “Rainie Burkette, how many times I got to tell you—”

Rainie started down the hall.

“Man, hard to believe she can even see herself in that mirror, skinny as she is,” she heard Daymon say.

As she made her way down the stairs, she stopped to listen.

“I don’t know what to do with her,” her mother said with a dramatic sigh. “I’ve been cooking same as always. She says she’s just not hungry.”

“Used to have some meat on her,” Daymon said. “Had herself a cute little shape. Now she’s some scrawny thing. Looks like a scarecrow. Look like she has some disease or something.”

Rainie’s heart soared at his words. It was working! If she could just get skinny enough, maybe he would quit looking at her the way he did.

She heard a chair scrape on the floor. “But now her mama’s a different story!” he said with a dirty laugh. “Her mama’s got something here and here and—”



“Oh, Daymon, stop!” her mother said in a little girl voice, giggling. “Not with the girls still here!”

Rainie knew the silence that followed meant that her mother and Daymon were kissing.

Jesika’s bedroom was at the top of the stairs. Rainie glanced up as her door opened. The nine-year-old pretended to throw up as she walked to the bathroom. Rainie clapped her hand across her mouth to keep from laughing. She thumped loudly down the remaining steps.

“Okay, I’m leaving,” Rainie said, walking into the kitchen as if she hadn’t heard anything.

Her mother broke away from Daymon, looking guilty. Her face was flushed and her hair was untidy. She was still in her nightgown, which clung to her curves and was cut low.

Rainie looked away in disgust. Since meeting Daymon, her mother had changed. Almost overnight, her mother had turned trampy. She wore clothes that were too tight and too young. She didn’t even try to hide that she and Daymon were fooling around.

Rainie knew that her mother was badly hurt when their dad left. Ever since the divorce, the

mom she knew was gone. The mom who always had time to listen to her girls and was there for them. In her place was a cheap-looking stranger who only had time for Daymon. Rainie couldn't remember the last time she'd had an actual conversation with her mother about anything. All they seemed to talk about was upcoming plans. She desperately missed her "real" mom and hated this new cheap version.

Rainie knew that Daymon was the reason her mother started dressing like she did. She suspected it was because Daymon was so much younger than her mother. Besides the changes he'd caused in her mother, there was another reason Rainie hated Daymon.

He scared her. When he was in the house, Rainie was always aware of him. He followed her with his eyes whenever she walked. He also touched her. A lot. Pretending that these touches were accidental. Sometimes, when she was in the bathroom, she could hear him outside the door.

She tried telling her mother once how he made her feel. The conversation didn't go well.

"Honey, you're getting old enough to



understand that men're gonna look all they want. It's what they do. And the more they look, the better you know *you're* looking. I don't understand why you'd want him to stop. Just shows how pretty you've gotten."

"Mom, he's your boyfriend! I don't like him looking at me."

It was at that point that the conversation took an ugly turn. "Well, what are you doing that's making him watch you so much? You tryin' to catch his eye?"

Rainie was crushed. Her mother should have backed her up, not blamed her. Rainie decided she would do all she could to try to be invisible. She stayed in her room as much as she could, coming out only when her mother made her join them for dinner or when she was leaving the house.

And she quit eating.

Not eating made her feel strong. As if she—and only she—had power over her body. But not eating hadn't taken the weight off fast enough. So she started running. One thought kept her going: the calories she was burning off. But no matter what she did, she never felt

that she looked thin enough. She'd lost more than twenty-five pounds since the summer. But when she looked at herself, she still thought she looked fat.

She wondered about the other changes she'd noticed lately. Her ratty hair and skin problems. She kept thinking that her skin was breaking out because she was getting her period. But so far, nothing. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had a period. She wondered if running could be having an effect on her cycle. She made a mental note to look it up on the Internet the next time she was on a school computer.

She grabbed her backpack from the floor where she'd left it when she came in late last night. She hoped her mother hadn't noticed. She always did her homework in her room, so the backpack still in the kitchen meant she hadn't done any work. Again. But with working at FreeZees, a frozen yogurt shop, and running, she never seemed to have time to study anymore.

But her mother didn't notice the backpack. "You aren't wearing all those layers!" her mother said in horror. "In this heat? What's wrong with you lately? You comin' down with somethin'?"

“I get cold in class. They have the air conditioning turned way up,” Rainie lied. She suspected that if her mother saw her arms and legs, she’d be worried. Although Rainie looked fat to herself, other people had started commenting on how skinny she looked.

“Wait, you haven’t eaten any breakfast!” her mother said in a worried tone. “Rainie, you got to eat. I could make you something.”

“C’mon, Gabby, she’s fine, she’s just fine,” Daymon said. “Back when I was working at Coolidge, most kids just ate breakfast at school.” Daymon used to be the janitor at a neighboring high school. Rainie had once asked her mother why he didn’t work there anymore. But her mother got angry, accusing Rainie of being nosy. Rainie suspected that her mom didn’t know why Daymon had lost his job.

Daymon put his hand on Rainie’s mother’s hip and looked at Rainie with an evil smile. “Time for you to go, girl, and give us some privacy!”

Rainie felt sick at the disrespectful way he treated her mother. “I’ll eat at school,” she lied, ignoring Daymon. “I don’t want to be late,” she

added, kissing her mother's cheek and heading for the door.

"Ain't you gonna kiss me good-bye?" Daymon said with a leer.

*In your dreams, creep,* Rainie thought. She didn't even look his way. "I'm working at FreeZees after school, so I'll see you later, Mom."

"Okay, baby," her mother said. And then, "Daymon, stop! Not yet. Jessie's still here."

Rainie slammed the door as hard as she could.

L e s l i e M c G i l l

# CAP CENTRAL

## RUNNING SCARED

Rainie's grades were slipping. Good grades were a lifetime ago. Back when her dad was around. Before her mom's boyfriend started hanging out at their house. Commenting on her figure. Looking her up and down. Before she decided to stop eating. Become invisible. Her friends were alarmed, especially Joss. She knew times were tough for Rainie's family. But she felt like there was more going on. Something serious. And she was going to figure it out.

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