

CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND
SECRET WEAPON

This year, it feels so good to be King.

CHAPTER 1

I WANNA LET YOU IN on a secret: Being picked last in anything sucks.

The first couple of times it happened, I told myself it was because the kids I was playing with didn't know basketball is in my DNA and I have skills—that I'm destined to be the greatest NBA player to come out of Birmingham, Alabama, since my idol, basketball legend Darrell Spencer.

The next few times, I told myself it was because I'm barely five feet tall.

Then I made myself believe it was because the other kids were just jealous I play the tuba.

After that...

Who am I kidding?

I've been making up excuses for why I'm always picked last for as long as I can remember, and since I'm eleven now, that's a pretty long time.

The truth is the last couple of years, I've sort of gotten a reputation of being a bad basketball player. I mean, a guy misses a few baskets, accidentally scores for the other team a couple of times, and after a while, word gets around.

All those thoughts were going through my head as I stood around with a group of guys at P.E. during the first game of the year at my new school.

Now, you may be thinking I should be expecting to get picked last, but you would be wrong. Even though most people still considered me pretty short, I had grown a few inches over the summer, and I had God on my side. Not only had I been practicing all summer long with my best friend, Malik Davis, but I was at a new school, Stephens Middle School, which was supposed to be a school for smart kids near Roebuck, a community in Birmingham. My new school was clear on the other side of town from my old one near my neighborhood in Oxmoor Ridge. Momma thought I needed a fresh start because last year had been pretty bad for me. There was no way these kids knew my reputation.

They didn't even know my name—Kingston Evan Marshall—or that I come from royalty. At least that's what my momma says.

If the kids are as smart as my momma, Tiana, said they were when she insisted I take the test to get into Stephens, then the boys would have no trouble understanding they needed to pick me for their team.

I stood on the basketball court with the other guys, trying not to look too confident. Over the summer, I had gone to a basketball camp sponsored by Grover High School for a couple of weeks, and after working with Grover's star player Noah Benjamin, I had found out something amazing: I have a sweet spot.

If I stand in just the right spot in the three-point zone, I could sink a shot every time.

I just needed for the other guys to give me a chance.

I stood there imagining how impressed everyone would be, how they'd all want me on their team, how word about my skills would spread and our school's basketball coach would seek me out personally to be on the team.

I was so busy daydreaming that it took me a second to realize the teams had almost been picked, and there were only two of us left.

One of the team captains looked from me to the other kid—some nerdy guy with really thick glasses who looked like he'd jump if I said *boo*.

"What's your name?" one of the captains asked, pointing to me.

I grinned and stuck out my chest. "Kingston—Kingston Evan Marshall—but my friends call me King," I said.

"I'll take Kingston," the guy said, frowning at me and brushing his straight brown hair out of his face. I hustled over to my team, too excited to even ask what his name was or to think about the fact that he didn't consider me as a friend since he hadn't called me by my nickname.

For the first time in my life, I was making moves. I wasn't the last one to be picked.

Progress!

I'LL LET YOU IN ON another secret: Even though you're not the last one to get picked, that doesn't mean the other players will pass you the ball.

We only had about five minutes left in P.E., and my team was down by two. I still hadn't been able to show my teammates that I had a sweet spot. I waved my arms for the millionth time, signaling I was open, but just like they had been doing the entire game, my teammates ignored me. Determined I was going to show them my skills, I hustled up the court, praying that a miracle would happen and I would get the ball.

I stood jumping in place, wildly waving my arms when I saw my teammate looking for someone to pass to. When he saw I was the only one open, he shook his head and rolled his eyes then released the ball. I



watched in amazement as it came flying toward me. It took a few seconds for it to register when it was actually in my hands. I dashed toward my sweet spot, but this huge guy was blocking me. I made a mental note to check to see if he had been left back a few grades because seriously the guy had to be a senior in high school. He even had a moustache and chin hairs.

“Shoot it,” someone yelled.

When others started yelling, too, I tried to dodge my opponent to get to my sweet spot, but it was like trying to bulldoze a full-grown tree. This guy wasn’t moving. Finally, when the bell rang signaling P.E. was over, I knew I had no choice but to go for it. I lunged the ball toward the basketball goal, silently urging it to go in so I could add three points to our score, win the game, and have my teammates put some respect on my name—if they even remembered it.

The ball sailed through the air in slow motion. I stood there holding my breath along with the rest of my teammates.

I watched in amazement as the ball fell slowly, slowly, slowly.

Nothing.

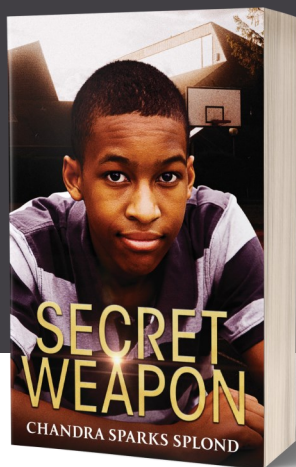
But.

Air.

My teammates groaned in unison then walked off the court without even acknowledging me. I headed back to class, wondering what kind of impact this was going to have on the school year.

I’ll let you in on another secret: Sometimes life sucks.





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ABOUT THE BOOK

Growing up is hard to do, especially when you're eleven-year-old Kingston Evan Marshall. Now that he's in middle school, King can finally leave the annoyances of elementary school behind—or can he? Between trying to get respect on the basketball court—and from the class bully—and hoping to make his mother understand he's not a little kid anymore, King has a lot going on. Can he find the secret weapon to make this the

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Chandra Sparks Splond is an editor, speaker and award-winning author and blogger. She is the owner of West End Publishing, LLC., and was the consulting editor for Arabesque romance at Kensington Publishing. She has also edited for Random House, Moody Publishers, Kimani Press, and Hyperion, as well as several *New York Times*, *USA Today* and *Essence* bestselling authors. She was a copy editor for *Good Housekeeping*, *Newsday* and *The Morning Call*, and has written for *Black and Married with Kids*, *Brides Noir*, *Weddingpages*, and *Romantic Times*.

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