

BRONX SKIES BROADWAY LIGHTS



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DEDICATION

To every young voice still waiting to be heard—
This is for you.

To the dreamers who scribble lyrics in the margins of
school notebooks,

To the kids who rehearse in mirrors with hairbrush
microphones,

To those who feel unseen, unheard, and
underestimated—

May you always know your worth before the world
catches on.

To the families who carry us,

To the mothers who fight behind the scenes,

To the siblings who cheer the loudest—thank you for
holding the light when it got dim.

This story stands because of you.

Because of every hallway whisper turned into a roar.

Because of every “no” turned into a “watch me.”



And to the Bronx—

You gave this voice its rhythm.

This book is yours as much as mine.

Keep rising. Keep singing.

You don't need permission to take the stage.

You already belong there.



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CHAPTER 1: MORNING

RHYTHMS ON ALEXANDER

AVENUE

The street noise started before the sun even touched the buildings. Thirteen-year-old Kendra Rivers opened her eyes to the sounds that belonged only to her block. Sirens wailed far off, sharp and fast. A reggaetón beat bumped from a car stuck at the light under her window. The heavy clatter of the #2 MTA subway drifted through the cracked glass, shaking faintly as it roared by on the tracks close to Alexander Avenue.

Kendra lay still for a moment, letting the noise fill her ears. She stared at her bedroom ceiling, the old paint peeling just a little in the corners. Her breath slowed. Today would be another long one. She already knew.

Her small room felt crowded but safe. The walls were supposed to be lilac, but barely any soft color showed



anymore. Broadway posters covered almost every inch—Wicked, Hamilton, Moulin Rouge. The faces of Beyoncé, Misty Copeland, and Zendaya all stared back at her. They weren't just decorations. They were goals. They were her people. Kendra sat up slowly, rubbing her face with both hands.

Across from her bed was the corkboard where her affirmations lived. They waited for her on bright pink sticky notes and tiny notebook paper. "Bronx girls belong on Broadway." "Power in my voice. Purpose in my feet." "One day soon."

Her bedspread, soft teal velvet, lay tangled from her restless sleep. The plastic tiara on the windowsill caught the early light from the streetlamp outside. Kendra reached for it, turning it slowly in her hand. She whispered under her breath.

"Not yet. But almost."

The sound of soft feet padded past her door, the light shuffle of sneakers still stamped with cartoon rockets—Marvin Rivers was already up in his eleventh year. Kendra swung her legs out of bed, toes meeting



the cool floor, and grabbed her old house sweater from the hook on the door.

Stepping into the tiny kitchen, she found her brother sitting at the table, rubbing his eyes. Marvin, only eleven, had the same warm brown skin and full dark curls she wore in neat cornrows. His cheeks were round, his shoulders still thin, but he grew fast.

“Morning,” Kendra said. She lifted the lid on a small pot and stirred black-eyed peas and rice, warming on low heat from the night before. Marvin’s bowl waited. She scooped a portion, added a squeeze of ketchup on top, and set it in front of him.

Marvin yawned and nodded. “Hey.”

Kendra fixed another bowl for herself. The peas were soft, the rice fluffy, the ketchup bright red.

“You got your socks on?” Kendra asked, watching him eat. Marvin glanced at her and kicked his foot under the table to show her the white sock.

“Clean hoodie too?”



Marvin looked down and tugged at the gray hoodie's sleeve. It was the same one he wore almost every week. Kendra had washed it the night before, folded it neatly, and laid it on his chair so he wouldn't forget.

"I guess."

Kendra smiled. "No guessing. We don't play around with that at school. Teachers love to look for something to say."

Marvin spooned the peas and rice into his mouth instead of answering.

Kendra got up and walked to the small window over the sink. She stared down at the block she knew by heart—the tall brick buildings. The mural of a hip-hop legend was sprayed bright on the side of the old corner store. The metal gates were pulled halfway down over Mr. Santiago's bodega. A delivery truck was double-parked with the back doors swung wide open.

She watched two kids down the hall bounce a basketball across the broken concrete. A car alarm



blared, ignored by everyone. Two older women in long coats ambled past, heavy plastic shopping bags swinging at their sides.

Behind her, Marvin chewed loudly.

Kendra spoke without turning around. “Don’t forget your homework folder.”

“I won’t.”

“You forgot it last week.”

“Only once.”

Kendra smiled again, softly this time. She knew this routine. She had lived it since Mama started working at Lincoln Hospital full time and extra shifts. Kendra did the mornings now: get Marvin up, check his clothes, and pack his bag. They would walk the same direction for a few blocks; Marvin turned in at PS 92, she would keep going toward the station for M.S. 110.

The small black microwave blinked again at the wrong time. Kendra ignored it. She grabbed two spoons and



wiped down the table as Marvin finished the last bite of peas and rice.

“You’re ready?” she asked.

Marvin nodded and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Kendra gave him a quick once-over: clean face, brushed hair, and tied shoes. He was good.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

They both grabbed their backpacks. Kendra took one last look around the tiny kitchen. She smoothed out the towel hanging crooked on the oven door.

“Come on, the train’s not gonna wait for us.”

The front door creaked open, letting in the cold hallway air and the muffled sounds from the street below. Their apartment was on the third floor. Kendra heard the faint noise of a television coming from the neighbor’s door, someone’s baby crying, and the loud laugh of Mr. López from down the hall.

They stepped into the stairwell, the walls marked up with names and drawings from kids who had lived



there before. The smell of cleaning bleach and old dust filled the space. Kendra held Marvin's backpack strap gently as they walked down. The stairs groaned under their steps.

At the bottom, the heavy building door stuck like always. Kendra gave it a hard push with her shoulder. The cold air of Alexander Avenue brushed her face right away. She zipped up her thin hoodie tighter.

On the sidewalk, the world was already moving fast. Cars honked. A delivery bus hissed past, but Kendra kept her eyes on the crowded crosswalk. Kids with bright book bags hurried along. A group of teens laughed as they balanced breakfast sandwiches in foil.

A flash of navy caught her eye—Mama was waiting near the corner. Shashawna's CNA uniform was deep navy blue from collar to cuff, both top and pants neatly pressed. A vibrant yellow scarf looped once around her neck, and her long, well-kept locs framed her smiling face.

"You got him up and dressed?" her mom asked, stepping forward quickly.



“Of course,” Kendra said. “I packed his homework too.”

Shashawna smiled weakly. The tired lines under her eyes showed how many hours she had worked at Lincoln Hospital. She leaned down and gave Marvin a quick kiss on the cheek. Then she placed a soft hand on Kendra’s shoulder.

“You’re the best. I couldn’t do this without you.”

Kendra’s chest tightened a little, but she nodded. She wasn’t used to the words. “It’s okay, Mama. I got it.”

Shashawna checked her watch and sighed. “Lincoln Hospital won’t wait, baby.” She kissed Kendra’s forehead, and the yellow scarf brushed Kendra’s cheek. “Be good. Look after your brother. I’ll see you after my second shift.”

Shashawna hurried toward the bus stop with a wave, locs swaying behind her. Her tired steps blended into the crowd as she disappeared into the busy morning.



Kendra stood briefly, stared after her, and then looked down at Marvin. “Come on. Let’s move.”

They crossed the street, carefully stepping over a puddle frozen on the edges. The deli man was already pulling up his metal gate. Two doors down, the bakery filled the air with the warm smell of bread. Kendra’s stomach grumbled. They walked past the mural of a smiling hip-hop legend wearing a crown. Marvin tapped the wall gently as they passed, as he always did for good luck.

Block by block the crowd thinned. They reached the tall fence of PS 92. Kids swarmed the gate, bright coats flashing. Kendra crouched and zipped Marvin’s jacket higher.

“You good?”

He nodded hard. “Yep.”

She squeezed his shoulder. “Straight to class.”

Marvin ran into the yard, waving once before disappearing.



Kendra turned, pulled her hoodie tighter, and headed for the subway alone.

The closer she got, the louder the sounds became. The rumble of trains under the streets, the scrape of wheels, the shuffle of people's feet, all mixed in a familiar rhythm.

She reached the station steps. This time, no small hand tugged hers. She descended quickly, scanned her MetroCard, and stepped through the turnstile.

Down the block, the neighborhood world opened up. The corner bricks were cracked. The air was heavy and warm, full of the smell of old rubber from passing strollers and fried food from the breakfast cart near the crosswalk.

A saxophone player in an oversized coat stood beside the curb, his case open for coins. His music rose and fell above the crowd. Kendra paused briefly, letting the smooth notes wrap around her ears. It always made her feel calm, even in the rush.



Marvin hurried at her side, still crunching chips. Kendra guided him past parked cars and double-parked service vans.

The sidewalks were packed with people: a man in a suit reading the newspaper while walking, a teenager with headphones bobbing her head to music only she could hear, a mother juggling two small children and a stroller.

Kendra leaned against a lamppost, letting her backpack rest on the brick base. She reached up and smoothed the edge of one of her two cornrow braids with her fingers. She had worked hard to part her hair straight that morning, checking it in the mirror twice before leaving the apartment. Her school shirt under her hoodie was neatly pressed. Last night, she had ironed it flat with careful hands, smoothing out every wrinkle. She had also folded Marvin's clothes and laid them on the chair for him.

She reminded herself of today's route: walk Marvin into PS 92 near East 174th Street, then head north



along Allerton Avenue to reach M.S. 110—there was no time to waste.

The traffic lights clicked from red to green. The sound of idling engines started to rise, deep and growing louder every second. Kendra stood straighter. Her heart always beat a little faster at this part of the day.

Cars rolled through the intersection, spraying mist from last night's rain. She guided Marvin across when the WALK sign blinked.

They found a spot near the guard's post by the school fence. Kendra wrapped her hand around Marvin's backpack straps, gave them a snug tug, and crouched to zip his jacket higher.

She stared out over the playground pavement—flickers of gym-class chalk marks passed by in flashes. The steady chatter of the front entrance and the hum of students stepping inside made her feel safe. She liked this sound. It felt like home. It was noisy, wild, and alive, just like the Bronx.



Her mind wandered as she stood again. She thought about school and the audition flyer still taped to her bedroom wall. The words were burned into her memory: “Youth Theater Auditions. Vocalists and performers wanted.” Auditions would come soon, before summer break, just like she promised.

Her stomach flipped a little. She had been practicing for weeks. In the mornings and evenings, whenever she had a free moment. But still, she wondered if it would be enough.

The crossing guard raised a hand as buses braked along the curb. Kendra shifted closer to Marvin and held his shoulder.

“Are you thinking about it again?” Marvin asked, looking up at her.

Kendra blinked. “About what?”

“The play thing. I can tell.”

She gave a small laugh. “You know me too well.”



“You’re gonna get it,” he said. “You always get stuff when you work hard.”

Kendra smiled. “Not always.” She rubbed the edge of her thumb against the cool strap of her bag. “But I’m gonna try.”

They moved with the flow toward the gate. The screech of old hinges echoed, and staff reminded the kids of homeroom times.

“PS 92, next bell in five,” the dean called. Marvin slipped through the metal doorway. Kendra reached for his hand to squeeze once more, then let go.

They climbed the school’s front steps two at a time. Cold air hit Kendra’s face when she left him at the side entrance. The Bronx morning was wide awake. People called to each other across the road. Cars beeped their horns as they squeezed through traffic. The wheels of delivery carts clattered on the pavement.

Kendra knew these streets well. Every crack in the sidewalk, every faded mural on the corner walls. She turned north, passing bodegas with bright awnings



advertising hot sandwiches and cold drinks. She walked past a line of stores, where men leaned against doorframes, drinking coffee from paper cups.

The buildings stood tall around her. Some of the brownstone bricks were chipped and worn, but they stood firm. On one block, a mural of a dancer covered the entire wall. The dancer's arms reached out as if calling to the people walking by. Kendra glanced up at it and smiled. It was one of her favorite murals.

A bundle of seventh-graders in matching navy sweaters hurried ahead. She recognized their chatter—same teachers, same bell schedule. That familiar wave of hallway gossip meant she was getting close to M.S. 110.

Old Mr. Morales sat on the front steps of his building. His cane rested next to him. He lifted a hand as Kendra passed.

“Morning, Kendra,” he called out.

“Morning, Mr. Morales,” Kendra answered politely.



Two women stood nearby chatting in Spanish, shopping bags hanging from their arms. A little girl jumped rope on the sidewalk, her braids swinging with each hop. The steady slap of the rope against concrete filled the air.

At the next block, she slowed just long enough to tighten her shoelaces and tuck loose headphone wires back in her pocket.

The familiar green and yellow sign of Mr. Santiago's store hung above a side street, but she kept her pace; no time for another stop.

Music thumped from a shop speaker; the beat matched Kendra's quick steps. Someone shouted across the street.

Ahead, at the mailbox, Jada waited.

Jada leaned against the old blue metal, scrolling on her phone. Her dark braids were pulled up into a high ponytail. She wore her favorite denim jacket with small patches she stitched herself—sewing is one of her talents—and a sketchbook stuck out of her



backpack pocket, hinting at her love for drawing stage outfits. Her earbuds hung loose around her neck.

Kendra knew the look. Jada was deep in her world.

As she got closer, Jada looked up. Her sharp eyes softened when she spotted Kendra.

“You good?” Jada asked.

Kendra gave a quick nod and pulled her hoodie tighter around herself.

“Yeah.”

Jada slid her phone into her pocket and stood up straight.

“You sure?” she asked again, her tone quieter this time.

Kendra didn’t answer right away. The noise of the street filled the pause. Jada waited. She always waited.

Kendra let out a slow breath. “I’m good.”



Jada nodded but didn't look convinced. She bumped Kendra lightly with her elbow as they started walking.

“Let me know if you wanna talk later. I can bring my guitar over if you need a practice break.”

Kendra sipped her cold Malta, its familiar sweetness grounding her.

They walked on together, the two of them moving through the busy streets of the Bronx, where every block had a voice, every building had a story, and every step brought Kendra closer to whatever came next.



CHAPTER 2: BRONZEVILLE

MIDDLE SCHOOL BATTLES

The bell blared as Kendra and Jada turned the corner near the school gates. The building of Bronzeville Middle School stood long and gray, with tall wire fences and chipped green paint around the windows. Kids rushed through the front doors, shouting, laughing, and strolling like the day was too long.

Kendra tugged Marvin's arm gently and pointed to the entrance.

"Go on. See you later."

Marvin nodded, quickly waved, and hurried toward the fifth-grade hallway. He belonged to PS 92's upper grades, not to her world here. Kendra watched him go, waiting until he disappeared around the corner before stepping toward the main doors herself. Jada stayed beside her, quiet.



Inside, the hallways were packed. Lockers slammed shut. Backpacks bumped against shoulders. The sharp smell of cleaning supplies and the warm scent of breakfast sandwiches kids had snuck in. Kendra tightened her grip on her backpack strap.

The seventh-grade floor was worse. It always was. The blue sign over the stairwell shouted “M.S. 110 – Bronzeville Campus,” stamping the grade wing like a brand. The noise dropped just a little when she stepped off the stairs. Kendra could feel the stares. Girls leaned against lockers, whispering behind cupped hands. Boys leaned back with loud laughs, their sneakers scuffing the already worn floors. Groups stood in tight circles. There was no space left for anyone who wasn’t already claimed.

Kendra moved past them, keeping her head high but her eyes forward. She knew how it worked. She knew which hallway corners belonged to which group: the track girls near the trophy case, the basketball boys crowding near the gym doors, and the art club always sat on the benches by the science wing. She belonged to none of them.



The girls near the water fountain barely looked up, but Kendra could hear them.

“She’s the one who sings, right?”

“I heard she’s doing some audition thing.”

“She thinks she’s special.”

Kendra’s stomach tightened. She kept walking. Jada stayed close, her mouth in a tight line.

They reached Kendra’s locker. The metal door stuck, as it always did. Kendra gave it a slight yank, and it popped open with a loud clank. She shoved her backpack inside and stared at the books piled unevenly.

“Don’t listen to them,” Jada said softly.

“I’m not,” Kendra answered, but even she could hear the doubt in her voice.

The first bell rang again. Kids scattered quickly—Mr. Johnson’s rule in 7-3 homeroom was clear: “in seats before the second bell or lunch detention.” Kendra



grabbed her math book and closed the locker with a dull slam.

As she turned toward class, Essence walked by. Essence was tall, her brown skin glowing under the hallway lights. Her hair was laid perfectly, her long braids tied neatly with gold beads that clicked as she walked. Essence always walked like the hallway belonged to her.

Today, Essence wore brand-new white Jordans. They shone with not a single scuff or crease. The red logo popped against the white leather. Kendra's eyes caught them even though she didn't want to stare.

Essence stopped, smiled slightly, and tilted her foot just enough for the shoe to show better.

"Fresh from Fordham Road," Essence said, loud enough for Kendra and a few others nearby to hear. "Mom said I could get 'em since I got straight As."

A couple of girls giggled behind her. Essence smoothed her braids and waited.



Kendra held her math book tightly. She looked down at her sneakers. The fabric was worn thin near the toes. The white rubber had turned dull from too many walks and too many quick dashes to auditions in the city. The laces were still neat and clean from the careful way Kendra had scrubbed them last night. But they were not new. They had never been new.

“Good for you,” Kendra said, her voice flat but steady.

Essence gave a slight nod, which meant she had won whatever silent battle was going on, then turned and walked away, her braids bouncing as she disappeared down the hall.

Jada leaned closer.

“Ignore her.”

“I know.”

They started walking to math class. Kendra’s mind raced as they walked. She hated how that one moment stuck in her chest. She knew it was just a pair of shoes. But somehow it felt like more.



Kendra slid into her seat as Mr. Johnson began writing fractions on the board. Jada sat two rows behind. The class quieted slowly. Mr. Johnson's voice filled the room. He handed out the weekly "7-grade quick check" worksheet, exactly ten problems, timed for eleven minutes—middle-school pace, no excuses.

Kendra stared at her notebook. The numbers blurred together, and her pencil tapped against the side of the page.

She breathed slowly and told herself it didn't matter. She told herself her shoes were just fine. They got her everywhere she needed to go. They took her to school. They carried her to the studio. They danced across the cracked sidewalks of Alexander Avenue.

Her sneakers had stories. Essence's Jordans didn't.

Kendra pushed the thought away and focused back on the board. Mr. Johnson's tall frame moved slowly across the front of the room, his brown jacket wrinkled at the elbows. The whiteboard was already covered with long lines of fractions and equations. His marker squeaked as he added more.



The numbers felt too big, too many. They crowded the board and twisted into a blur. Kendra stared hard, trying to lock in on just one problem, but the shapes slipped around her head like water through fingers. Her pencil hovered over her notebook, still and unsure.

“Kendra,” Mr. Johnson called from the front. “Can you read the next one for us?”

Her heart jumped. She glanced down at the mess of numbers. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

A soft tap hit her arm. Kendra turned slightly. Alyssa sat beside her, leaning sideways so her words wouldn’t carry far. Alyssa was small and wore oversized glasses that always slipped down her nose. Her long black hair was tied back in a loose ponytail.

“Breathe, K,” Alyssa whispered. “Step by step. You got this.”

Kendra let out the breath she didn’t know she had been holding. She blinked fast and stared back at the



board. Slowly, she read the numbers out loud, her voice shaky at first, but then a little stronger with each word.

Mr. Johnson nodded. “Good. Now work it out.”

Her pencil finally moved—one number, then another. She copied the fraction neatly, drew the line, and started solving. Alyssa smiled and turned back to her work.

The rest of the class passed in quiet focus. When the timer beeped, Mr. Johnson reminded them, “Seventh-grade mastery means showing your process—no work, no credit.” Kendra knew she hadn’t done every problem perfectly, but she had finished. That was enough for now.

The bell rang loud and sharp. Books slammed shut, and chairs scraped back. The class filed out fast, heading for the next period.

Science was next. Kendra and Alyssa walked side by side through the crowded hallway. The noise bounced off the walls: shouts, laughter, and locker



slamming. Near the lockers, a group called the “Sketch Crew” stuck neon sticky notes with quick doodles on friends’ doors; farther down, the honor-roll squad compared quiz scores, waving papers like flags.

In the science room, long black tables stretched across the space. Beakers, test tubes, and small burners sat ready. The air smelled faintly of vinegar and metal. Ms. Elmore stood at the front, her white lab coat crisp and short curls tucked behind her ears.

“Today we’re going to observe chemical reactions,” she announced. “Safety goggles on, everyone.”

Kendra slid on the goggles and tied the thin strap behind her head. She looked sideways at Alyssa, who grinned under her pair.

Each table had clear bottles filled with different liquids. Ms. Elmore explained the steps: add baking soda to vinegar and watch the reaction.

Kendra and Alyssa worked slowly. Kendra measured carefully, her hands steady as she poured the vinegar



into a glass beaker. The clear liquid swirled at the bottom. Alyssa passed her the spoon of white powder.

“Ready?” Alyssa asked.

Kendra nodded. “Go.”

The moment the powder hit the vinegar, bubbles exploded upward in thick, foamy waves. The hiss and fizz filled the air as the reaction raced upward and spilled over the rim. The whole table backed away, laughing and cheering.

Kendra stepped back, too, watching the foam slide down the sides of the beaker. Something about it felt familiar—the wild mess, the sudden burst, the rush of it all. It was messy but exciting, unpredictable but controlled if she paid close attention.

Like everything else in her life, she thought.

The clean-up took longer than the experiment. The bell rang just as they wiped the last foam from the tabletop. Kendra tugged off her goggles and followed the crowd out of the room.



Lunchtime came at last. The cafeteria was always loud, crowded, and full of rules that weren't written down. Where to sit. Who to talk to. What to wear. Kendra had learned how to stay out of the mess.

She and Jada headed for their usual spot outside, by the metal fence near the back of the school yard. The sun was out today, weak but bright, and the metal bars of the wall felt warm under her hands.

Jada handed her half an empanada wrapped in a napkin. The warm dough and seasoned beef inside smelled rich and sharp.

"Cafeteria food is scary," Jada said.

Kendra laughed softly. "I wasn't hungry anyway."

But she took a bite. It tasted good. She chewed slowly, watching the other students run and shout across the yard. A soccer game had started in one corner. A group of girls sat cross-legged in the grass, braiding each other's hair.



Essence passed by with her group, laughing loudly. Kendra caught sight of the shining white Jordans again and quickly looked away.

Jada nudged her.

“Forget them.”

“I know.”

“You’re better than shoes.”

Kendra breathed in and out slowly. The bell rang again, loud and sharp, sending everyone scrambling for the next class. Jada grabbed her bag from the ground and slung it over her shoulder.

“C’mon. Let’s go.”

The two of them joined the steady stream of kids walking back inside. The narrow hallways filled quickly. Sneakers squeaked against the tile floor. Lockers slammed. Teachers’ voices called out reminders. Kendra moved through the noise, her head down and her thoughts elsewhere. She wasn’t ready for what came next.



Cafeteria time always felt different. Loud. Unpredictable. The air was thick with the smell of pizza, mashed potatoes, and overcooked vegetables. Kendra walked in with Jada and paused for a second.

There she was.

LaShonda James.

LaShonda stood in the middle of the room, surrounded by a circle of kids leaning in close, their faces tilted up, smiling, waiting. She wore long, dark braids piled high on her head, small silver hoops in her ears catching the overhead lights. Her dark blue hoodie and black jeans looked ordinary, but it didn't matter. She had a way of standing, as if the whole room belonged to her.

Kendra's eyes locked on LaShonda as the girl opened her mouth and started to sing.

The first note floated softly and easily, like she wasn't trying. The words flowed smoothly, and every line was perfect. LaShonda swayed slightly as her voice soared higher, filling the noisy cafeteria, cutting through the



mess of trays and voices. Her friends clapped along softly. Others around the tables turned to look, their conversations forgotten.

Kendra froze, her tray in her hands. Jada walked two steps ahead, noticed Kendra wasn't moving and stopped.

"Come on, K," Jada whispered.

But Kendra stayed where she was, her eyes still on LaShonda. She knew the song. It was a popular one. But somehow LaShonda made it sound new. Better.

Jada came back and pulled gently at Kendra's sleeve.

"You jealous?" she asked, her voice quiet but teasing.

Kendra blinked fast and shook her head. "No."

Jada raised one eyebrow.

Kendra glared, heat rushing to her face. "I said no."

They walked toward the far table in the corner where they always sat. Kendra set her tray down carefully



and slid into the seat. She picked up her plastic fork and stabbed the soft pile of mashed potatoes on her tray.

Jada sat across from her, watching.

“It’s okay to be jealous,” she said after a minute.

Kendra clenched her hand tighter around the fork. The cheap plastic bent slightly under her grip. “I’m not,” she whispered. But the words tasted bitter.

LaShonda finished her song, and laughter and applause spread across the room. She smiled widely, flashing perfect white teeth, and tilted her head slightly as if to soak in every bit of the attention. Her group clapped the loudest, their voices rising above the rest.

Kendra tried to focus on her food. The potatoes were lumpy and cold, and the carrots beside them looked sad. She pushed the food around her tray, her appetite gone.



A shadow fell across her table. Kendra looked up slowly.

LaShonda stood there.

They stared at each other for a second. Kendra swallowed hard and lifted her chin.

“You good over there?” LaShonda asked, her tone light but sharp at the edges.

Kendra stared back, refusing to drop her gaze. “I’m great.”

LaShonda’s lips curved slightly into a knowing smile. She tilted her head, letting the silver hoops catch the light again. Then, without another word, she turned and walked back to her circle of admirers.

Kendra let out a slow breath and set her fork down. Her hands were shaking just a little.

Jada leaned in.

“She was testing you.”



“I know.”

“You didn’t back down.”

Kendra nodded. But inside, she didn’t feel strong. The notes of LaShonda’s song still echoed in her ears, soft but sharp, refusing to fade. They stuck there, sitting heavy in the back of her mind. She hated that.

The bell rang again, sharp and cold. Chairs scraped back. The crowd broke apart as everyone hurried off to class. Kendra stood slowly, picking up her untouched tray, and followed the flow of students out the door.

As they walked, Kendra whispered under her breath so low that only she could hear.

“She sings well. So what. I’ll sing better.”

The hallway swallowed them up, and the day moved on.



CHAPTER 3: CHASING THE DREAM ON THE SUBWAY

The cold wind pushed against Kendra as she stepped out of the building. She zipped her thin jacket to her chin and tightened her hood. The streets buzzed as they always did. People walked fast, cars honked, and the distant sound of a delivery truck backing up echoed down Alexander Avenue.

She checked the time on her phone. She had to move.

Her legs carried her fast over the cracked sidewalks. She passed the usual spots—the bakery with the warm bread smell, the corner store with its fruit stand out front, and the mural of the dancer whose arms reached toward the sky. Kendra tapped her fingers against her thigh as she walked, her nerves building with every step.

She reached the subway entrance and hurried down the steps two at a time. The smell of metal and damp air hit her right away. The lights flickered slightly over



the tiled walls. A group of kids crowded around a phone, laughing loudly. A woman in a long coat stood near the wall holding tight to her grocery bags.

Kendra moved through them, tapping her OMNY Student Card against the reader. The familiar beep gave her the green light. She pushed through the turnstile and walked toward the platform.

The train's rumble echoed somewhere deep in the tunnel. She stood near the edge, gripping the strap of her small bag tightly. Her palms were sweaty, and she wiped them on the sides of her jeans.

Today was the day.

The southbound #2 rolled in from 149th Street—Grand Concourse and carried her straight to 125th—exactly the order she had rehearsed, checking every passing signal so she wouldn't miss Harlem again.

The doors slid open with a whoosh, and people poured out. Kendra stepped in and found a spot near the metal pole. She wrapped her fingers around it



tightly as the doors closed and the train jerked forward.

The subway car swayed and rocked with the movement. The wheels screeched around a bend. Kendra stared out the window, but the tunnel was primarily black. Faint lights flashed by. The inside of the car was full. A man in a puffy coat tapped on his phone. A teenager leaned against the door, nodding to music through big headphones. A small boy sat on his mother's lap, pointing out the window at the darkness.

Kendra shifted her weight and tried to steady her breathing.

Her heart raced.

She had been to auditions before. Those rooms still haunted her.

One memory hit hardest. Last spring she'd confused East 36th with West 36th Street, wandered blocks under towering office glass, and arrived late, tears drying on her cheeks while a security guard told her



the casting table had packed up. She had walked the length of Midtown twice that day, feeling the city stretch wider with every wrong turn.

Last winter, she had waited for hours outside a small theatre downtown. She remembered the snow blowing sideways and the way her toes went numb in her thin boots. The producer had barely looked at her when she walked in.

“Name?” he had said without smiling.

“Kendra Rivers.”

“Sing.”

No introduction, no warm-up. Her voice had come out too soft, too unsure. She had tried to recover by the second verse, but the woman at the table had already scribbled something on a notepad—“Too young. Too raw.”

Another time, a panel stopped her mid-chorus to say she sounded “too much like Rihanna—come back when you find your tone.”



At yet another doorway a receptionist blocked her path because no adult stood beside her. Kendra had lied, said her mom was parking the car, but the woman only shook her head at the empty curb.

The rejection still burned. Kendra clenched her fists now at the memory.

The train rocked through the tunnel. She kept her eyes forward.

125th Street arrived faster than she hoped. The brakes screeched as the train slowed. The doors opened. Kendra stepped out, and the sharp, cold air of Harlem hit her. She walked up the stairs and onto the busy street.

The sidewalks were crowded. Street vendors called out, selling hats, scarves, and phone cases. A man played smooth notes on a trumpet under a scaffolding beam. The noise of the city filled her ears and wrapped around her.

She tightened the grip on her bag and walked east.



The Victoria Theatre stood ahead of her. The tall building rose over the block. Its old lights were dim, but the bold letters on the black marquee spelled out a message that made her breath catch.

AUDITIONS TODAY

Kendra stopped across the street and stared up at the building. The front glass doors reflected the busy street behind her.

This was bigger than any audition she had done before.

The Victoria Theatre was old. Mama once told her that legends had performed there long before Kendra was born. The history of it pressed against Kendra as she stood there.

She took a step.

Then another.

Her legs felt heavy, but she kept going.



At the corner, she paused again. The voice of the scarf woman whispered back into her memory.

Too Bronx.

Kendra's fists tightened around the strap of her bag.

Not today.

Today, she would walk through those doors.

She crossed the street with quick steps and pulled the heavy door open. The lobby was dim and quiet. A long table was set up against one wall. Behind it, two women and a man were flipping through headshots and résumés.

The woman with short curly hair looked up first.

"Name?"

Kendra swallowed hard but made her voice clear.

"Kendra Rivers."

The woman nodded.



“Sign in. Wait until you’re called.”

Kendra stepped to the side, signed her name on the sheet, and sat on the hard plastic chair lined up along the wall.

The hall was long and lined with faded posters of past shows. Kendra stared at them. She read each title quietly. One day, she promised herself that her name would be on one of these.

Her stomach turned as she sat there. The door to the audition room opened and closed again and again as other hopefuls walked in and out. Some came out smiling, while others shook their heads and walked away quickly.

Kendra tapped her fingers against her leg and whispered under her breath.

“You belong here.”

The assistant stepped out holding a clipboard.

“Kendra Rivers?”



Kendra stood up quickly, her legs stiff from waiting. She followed the assistant down a narrow hallway with faded blue carpet and scuffed walls. Her heart raced so loudly she thought the assistant might hear it. They stopped in front of a large wooden door.

“Good luck,” the assistant said without looking up.

Kendra walked in slowly. The bright stage lights hit her face, making the room seem even bigger. Three people sat at a long table in front of her. A man with glasses wrote something on a paper. A woman in a purple scarf rested her chin on her hand. The third judge, a woman with short gray hair and sharp eyes, leaned back with her arms crossed.

Kendra stood on the taped X in the center of the stage. She swallowed hard and clasped her hands to keep them from shaking.

“Name?” the woman with gray hair asked.

“Kendra Rivers.”

“Song?”



Kendra gave her answer quietly. The piano player nodded. The soft opening chords floated through the empty room.

Kendra opened her mouth. The first note was shaky. She closed her eyes for a second and pulled her shoulders back. Her voice grew stronger, filling the room. She hit each note clearly and steadily, letting the music guide her. Her chest burned, but she didn't let up.

When the last note faded, silence filled the space. The woman in the scarf tapped her pen twice on the table, and the man with glasses whispered something to the others.

"Thank you, Kendra," the woman with gray hair said. "We'll be in touch."

Kendra nodded, whispered, "Thank you," and walked out. She felt dizzy as she stepped back into the hallway, and her hands trembled. She pressed them against her thighs to calm herself.



Outside, Harlem's cold air hit her like a wave. The noise of the street pulled her back. Car horns, people shouting, the rattle of shopping carts on the sidewalk.

Kendra kept walking until the big red doors of the community center came into view. The center was home. It smelled like old books, floor wax, and the faint hint of sweat from dance class. Colorful posters covered the walls: after-school tutoring, dance classes, music nights.

As soon as she walked inside, Ms. Alvarez spotted her. She was short and wide, with soft brown skin and big, round glasses that always slid down her nose. Her smile lit up her whole face.

"Kendra!" Ms. Alvarez called, rushing over. She wrapped Kendra in a tight hug. "How did it go?"

"I did it," Kendra whispered.

Ms. Alvarez pulled back and held Kendra's face between her warm hands.



“Listen to me, mija. They don’t know what they missed before. You keep showing up. Go prove them wrong.”

Kendra nodded hard.

The dance studio door opened. A loud voice called out, “Rivers, let’s go! Warm-ups!”

Kendra rushed inside. The studio was bright and wide, and the mirrors on the walls reflected every move. Girls stretched along the floor, and the speaker blasted a fast beat.

Kendra dropped her bag, kicked off her sneakers, and joined the line. Sweat dampened the air. The teacher, Mr. Chris, clapped his hands and pointed to Kendra.

“You’re late. Get ready. You’re running today’s final combo.”

Kendra’s eyes widened. Her legs ached from walking, nerves, and holding herself so tight all day. But she nodded.

The music started.



Her body moved through each step—sharp turns, strong arms, quick footwork. Her chest heaved as sweat dripped down her back. The wood floor vibrated under her feet.

“Again!” Mr. Chris shouted.

Kendra did it again. Her legs shook, but she held the rhythm. The beat pounded in her ears. She pushed harder, her muscles screaming, her breathing ragged.

At the end of the set, Kendra dropped her arms and bent over, gasping. Her T-shirt clung to her back, and her socks slid a little on the smooth floor.

Mr. Chris gave a quick nod. “That’s what I want.”

Kendra stood upright, wiped her face, and smiled through the burn.

Later, as the sun set over Harlem, Kendra strolled to the corner where Jada waited. Jada leaned against a metal pole, a plastic bag in her hand. Her braids were tucked under a knit cap.

“You alive, superstar?” Jada teased.



Kendra nodded, too tired to speak.

Jada pulled out a cold bottle of Malta and a small bag of plantain chips and handed them over.

Kendra opened the bottle and took a long drink. The cold sweetness slid down her throat, easing the dryness.

The sky had darkened as they reached the station. The heavy doors creaked when Kendra pushed them open. The sound of trains rumbling below shook the ground under her feet. They walked down the steps, past the worn tile walls and old posters that curled at the edges.

Kendra tapped her OMNY Student Card and walked through the turnstile. The platform was half-empty. A few tired workers leaned against the walls, staring blankly ahead. A man in a long coat paced slowly, mumbling to himself. The wind from the tunnels whipped her hair across her cheeks.

The train's rumble grew louder. The lights flashed as it screeched into the station. The doors opened, and



Kendra and Jada stepped inside. The car smelled like damp coats and metal. Kendra grabbed the cold pole and stood as the doors shut with a beep.

The train jerked forward, pulling them back into the darkness.

Kendra stared out the window at the flashing lights and black walls. Her body ached, her feet throbbed, and the weight of the long day weighed heavily on her shoulders. She leaned her head lightly against the cold window.

Each train ride home felt longer at night. The same walls, sounds, but somehow different when the streets were dark. The bright energy of Harlem had faded. Now the rhythm of the Bronx pulled her back.

As the train rocked, her mind spun. Had she done enough? Had the judges believed in her? Was her voice strong enough? Were her steps sharp enough?

Kendra squeezed the plantain chip bag in her lap.

No answers came.



The train passed stop after stop, and people came and went. Jada sat beside her, quiet, eyes closed, resting her head against the pole.

At last, the train slowed at their stop. The doors slid open with a tired hiss. They stepped out onto the platform. The familiar cracked floor tiles and broken lights welcomed them back.

They walked up the stairs and into the cold air of Alexander Avenue.

The streetlights cast long, thin shadows. The buildings stood tall, lined in straight rows. A dog barked somewhere far away. The smell of fried food drifted from a small takeout window where two men laughed over a shared meal.

Kendra and Jada walked side by side. They didn't talk. They didn't need to.

At the corner, Jada paused.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Jada said.

Kendra nodded. "Thanks."



Jada smiled. “Always.”

Kendra turned toward her building and climbed the worn steps. The heavy door stuck, like always. She leaned her weight into it until it scraped open.

Inside, the hallway was quiet. The faint scent of bleach mixed with old paint. Kendra climbed the stairs slowly, her legs heavy.

When she opened the apartment door, the warmth inside hit her. The small living room glowed dimly from the streetlights outside. Marvin lay curled on the couch under a thin blanket, his school papers spread messily on the table.

Kendra slipped off her shoes and hung up her coat. She walked quietly into the kitchen, where the small fridge buzzed softly. She pulled out the leftover rice and scooped some onto a plate. She warmed it in the microwave, listening to the hum fill the quiet.

Marvin stirred as she placed the plate in front of him.

“You forgot to eat,” Kendra said gently.



Marvin sat up slowly, rubbing his eyes. “I was waiting for you.”

Kendra smiled and handed him a fork.

“Eat. You’ve got school tomorrow.”

He nodded sleepily and started to eat.

The front door opened softly. Shashawna walked in, her hospital badge still clipped to her wrinkled uniform. Her shoulders sagged. Dark circles framed her tired eyes. She pulled off her coat and shoes and sat heavily in the kitchen chair.

Kendra walked over and hugged her.

“You’re home.”

Shashawna smiled weakly. “Just for a few hours. I go back in the morning.”

Kendra poured her mother a glass of water and placed it before her.

“I auditioned today,” Kendra said after a long pause.



Shashawna looked up. Her face softened.

“How did it go?”

“I don’t know yet,” Kendra admitted. “I gave it everything.”

Her mother reached out and squeezed her hand.

“That’s all you can do, baby. I’m proud of you.”

Kendra smiled a little. “Thanks, Mama.”

Later, after Marvin finished eating and crawled into bed, Kendra tucked him in and smoothed his blanket.

“Good night, Marv.”

“Night, Kendra.”

Kendra stood up and tiptoed to her small room. The soft hum of traffic outside floated in through the cracked window.

She took off her clothes and laid them on the small ironing board. Slowly, she pressed the iron back and forth over her school shirt until every wrinkle



disappeared. She folded it neatly and placed it on the chair for the morning.

Kendra sat on her bed and stared at the peeling wallpaper. The old patterns were fading, but still covered the wall before her. The cracked windowsill held her plastic tiara, a small stack of handwritten lyrics, and her worn audition notebook.

She reached for the tiara and held it in her hands.

“They said no,” she whispered into the dark. “Now I’ll make them say yes.”

The city sounds drifted on, and Kendra sat quietly, ready to try again tomorrow.



CHAPTER 4: THE HARLEM STAGE AND THE RIVALRY

Kendra stood still, breathing steadily but deeply as the noises of the Victoria Theatre filled the backstage space around her. The air was thick and heavy. The floor was sticky in spots, and the faint smell of sweat mixed with the sharp bite of rosin dust. The metal pipes above groaned and knocked at odd moments, making her heart jump each time. A single bare lightbulb swung gently in the corner. Someone had left a half-full cup of cold coffee on top of a crate, its bitter smell drifting through the warm space.

The walls were painted black and covered in scratch marks and chipped paint. Old posters were taped carelessly near the door. Faint voices of the audience drifted through the thick curtain like soft waves. The distant scrape of chairs and the murmur of conversations rose and fell.



Kendra stood on the worn X made of peeling gaffer tape in the middle of the stage entrance area. Her legs were warm from the stretches she had forced herself to do repeatedly before call time. She flexed her ankles again, trying to shake out the nervous energy.

Her fingers trembled slightly as she tightened her grip on the crumpled sheet of music she had folded and unfolded too many times that morning. The edges were soft from her touch, but the words were clear, staring up at her—her song, her audition.

Across the narrow space, the door creaked open.

LaShonda stepped inside.

LaShonda moved with sure steps, chin up, her long braids brushing against the back of her black rehearsal hoodie. She wore plain black leggings and clean white dance shoes. Her expression didn't change when she spotted Kendra standing alone under the light.

LaShonda stopped near the side of the room, stretched her arms back, and slowly cracked each



knuckle, the sharp sound snapping through the heavy air one by one. Kendra winced at the sound but didn't move.

LaShonda's stare met Kendra's. There was no smile, no greeting. She wore the same sharp, bold look in school when teachers called on her or when kids gathered around to hear her sing at lunch. Yet deep in her eyes flickered a quick spark of regard, as if she weighed Kendra not just as a rival but as someone worthy of the fight.

Kendra glanced down at her sheet, her palms damp against the soft paper. Her chest tightened.

She whispered so quietly that she could only hear, "Breathe. You're ready."

The rehearsal director, a tall man in a grey zip-up sweater and black sweatpants, stepped into the room and clapped loudly. His name was Mr. Powell, and his booming voice echoed through the backstage halls.



“Let’s move!” he shouted. “We start in five. LaShonda, Kendra, you’re both up first for vocal warm-up and stage marks.”

Kendra stepped forward quickly, folding her paper tightly in her hand and slipping it into her pocket. The cold sweat on her neck sent a chill down her spine as she followed Mr. Powell past the curtain to the side of the stage. The thick black fabric brushed against her arm.

LaShonda walked ahead, her steps calm and even. She didn’t look back.

Kendra stopped just short of the stage, where the taped marks stretched across the floor in faded white and yellow lines. She stood on her assigned X again, and the floor creaked softly under her sneakers.

The orchestra pit lay empty before her, and rows of red velvet seats stretched far into the darkened theater. The spotlight shone onto the center of the stage but dimmed the rest of the space. Kendra could barely make out the faces of the stage crew moving silently between the props and backdrops.



Mr. Powell pointed. “You two, stand center. Vocal warm-up first. Get in position.”

Kendra shook her arms loose and strolled toward the center stage. LaShonda was already there, hands on her hips, head held high.

Kendra took her place next to her. They stood side by side, staring out into the dark. The bright white circle of the spotlight lit the worn wooden planks beneath their feet.

Mr. Powell called out notes.

“La, la, la,” he directed.

LaShonda sang first. The notes rolled smoothly and efficiently from her mouth. Strong, steady, clear. Kendra listened, her heart sinking a little. LaShonda made it sound simple, like breathing.

Kendra swallowed hard as Mr. Powell nodded to her next.

She opened her mouth and matched the notes. Her voice wavered on the first sound, but she adjusted



quickly. She closed her eyes briefly and focused, pulling from the hours of practice, the memory of singing in the small apartment, and the echoes of her mom's soft humming on late nights.

The next round of scales came smoothly. The tension in her shoulders loosened slightly.

Mr. Powell clapped once. "Good. Take a breath. We start blocking next."

The two girls stepped off center as the crew shifted pieces on the stage. The narrow bench and backdrop were wheeled into place. The bright white mark on the floor waited for Kendra. She walked over slowly, feeling the rough surface of the wood under her thin dance sneakers.

Mr. Powell pointed. "Kendra, you'll start from center stage. This is your moment. The song starts here. Let's hear it."

Kendra swallowed hard. The heat in her chest rose again, but she stood straight. She felt the smooth fold



of the paper still in her pocket. The words were already inside her. She didn't need to look.

The big, dark space of the Victoria Theatre spread out ahead of her. The walls seemed to breathe around her as the quiet settled heavily. The music director nodded at her and placed fingers on the piano keys.

Kendra closed her eyes.

The first note slipped from her mouth, raw and full, cutting through the empty room. The sound was sharp, unpolished, but honest. It filled the air with something neither pretty nor soft—honest.

Her voice shook at the start, but steadied by the second line. She pushed the sound forward, loud and bold. The song “Rising” poured out of her chest with weight. The melody carried the feeling of the Bronx streets—the cracks in the sidewalk, the rumble of trains, the fast shuffle of people moving toward something bigger.

Kendra could feel her voice bend on the high notes, not like glass but more like rough and edged stone.



She leaned into it and let the words hit hard. The chorus came, and she lifted her arms slightly, feeling the sound rise with her.

The room stayed frozen.

The piano stopped on the last note. Silence fell heavy.

Kendra opened her eyes.

The casting table had stopped writing. The man with the glasses stared straight at her, pen still held above his paper. The woman with the scarf lowered her chin slowly, her eyes locked on Kendra. The woman with short gray hair leaned forward in her chair, hands clasped tightly on the table.

Kendra held still, her chest rising and falling with each sharp breath. She felt shaken, but proud. The silence pressed, yet inside it she heard her own promise answering back—louder than any applause she could imagine.

She shifted her eyes just for a second to the side wings of the stage.



Standing just beyond the dark curtain, LaShonda watched. Her arms were crossed over her chest. The tiny silver headband she always wore caught the faint light from the side of the stage. It shimmered coldly as she tilted her head slightly. A slow nod—barely there—passed between them: rivalry sealed with respect.

LaShonda's face was unreadable. She said nothing, only stared.

Kendra stared back for a breath, then slowly stepped off the center mark. The soft scrape of her sneaker on the wood sounded loud after the power of her voice filled the room.

Mr. Powell stood. "We'll stop there for now."

Kendra nodded and took two careful steps back into the shadows of the wing. Her heart was racing again, not from fear but from the energy from standing her ground. She tightened her grip on the edge of her T-shirt, trying to quiet her breathing.

The stage crew moved quickly, adjusting the lighting marks and shifting small props. Kendra kept her feet



planted, waiting for her next cue. The pianist tapped out a few soft notes, signaling her to return.

Mr. Powell motioned. “Kendra, we’re going to take it from the bridge. Hit the key change. Give it everything.”

Kendra walked back to the center. The worn gaffer tape under her foot was warm, and the spotlights burned hot on her skin. She wiped her palms on her pants and slightly nodded to the pianist.

The music started low, building slowly. Kendra breathed deeply and lifted her voice to meet it. The notes climbed higher. Her chest tightened as she reached for the next pitch. It came fast. The key change was sharp and sudden. For a brief second, her voice slipped. Her stomach clenched. The high note nearly flattened her, but she didn’t back down.

She caught herself and shifted the melody into a new rhythm, breaking from the written score into scatting lines. Her voice darted rough and bold, weaving unexpected notes into the structure. Each sound fell



and bounced back like rhythms from the streets she walked daily.

Her eyes stayed shut. Her arms lifted slightly at her sides. Kendra let her voice cut loose, knowing it wasn't polished, knowing it wasn't perfect, but knowing it was real. Gritty and honest, the sound filled every corner of the silent theatre.

She breathed in and pushed out the final words, clear and sharp. "Every note got an echo!"

The last word cracked at the edge, raw and exposed. Kendra held it steady for another second before letting it go. The echo faded into the thick silence. She froze, staring at the dark rows of empty seats. Inside, a steady courage settled: whatever came next, she had spoken her truth.

Behind the curtain, LaShonda had slipped from her holding spot. Her sneakers barely sounded against the old wood as she tried to step closer. The faint sound of her bracelets clicking together gave her away. She moved with the smooth confidence that usually worked in her favor.



But security noticed.

A tall man with a black blazer and a short radio attached to his belt stepped quickly into her path. His voice stayed low, calm but firm. “You’re not allowed backstage once the scene has started. Please step back.”

LaShonda stopped. Her jaw tightened. She glanced around the man, trying to catch a better glimpse of Kendra standing in the light. The velvet ropes stretched between two brass posts blocked her path. LaShonda’s fingers closed tightly around the fabric, but she stayed put.

On stage, Kendra stood alone. She did not know about LaShonda being held back. She stared into the dark theatre, breathing heavily. Her chest moved up and down as the last vibration of her voice disappeared into the still air.

The room stayed quiet.

No applause. No whispers. Just thick silence that pressed into Kendra like a weight.



Kendra did not move. She stood tall and still, letting her arms rest at her sides. Her fingers curled tightly into fists, her nails digging into her palms. She didn't know if they loved it. She didn't know if they hated it. All she knew was she had claimed the space. That final cracked note's echo still floated unseen above her head.

She whispered to herself, barely moving her lips. "I was here."

From the casting table, the woman with gray hair leaned back in her chair. She scribbled something in her notes. The woman in the purple scarf rested her chin on her hand again, but this time with a faint smile at the corner of her mouth. The man with glasses tapped his pen softly twice, staring at the X on the floor where Kendra stood.

Mr. Powell broke the silence. "All right. That's it for today."

Kendra blinked hard and stepped back slowly, her knees shaking, but her steps were even. She turned



toward the wings and walked with careful strides into the dim backstage.

The crew kept moving, rolling props, adjusting cables. The music director spoke softly to one of the assistants. The familiar chaos of preparation filled the space again, but Kendra let it wash over her without hearing.

She reached the side wall and leaned against the cool painted bricks. Her head tilted back and stared at the exposed metal pipes running along the ceiling. They knocked gently occasionally, a soft reminder of the old theatre's rhythm.

She closed her eyes again and breathed slowly. She had done it. Not perfect. Not smooth. But true.

Her hand brushed the crumpled music sheet still stuffed into her pocket. Kendra gripped it tightly. It was her anchor. Inside, she catalogued every mistake and every triumph, promising herself to polish the rough edges before stepping into the house spotlight next time.



LaShonda passed by a few minutes later, walking with quick, sharp steps. She didn't speak. Her head stayed high, her expression complicated and unreadable. As she drew level, she gave a tiny nod—half challenge, half salute—before disappearing down the corridor. Kendra didn't call out. She watched her go.

The moment was over. The next one waited.



CHAPTER 5: FIRST STEPS ON VICTORIA'S STAGE

The morning light pushed through the cracked edge of the bedroom window. It fell across the uneven floor, climbing up the side of Kendra's bed and reaching the corner where Marvin's backpack lay half-zipped.

Kendra sat at the edge of her mattress, tugging at the sleeve of Marvin's hoodie. The cotton clung together from the wash, but she smoothed it flat, folding it carefully. Beside her, a small pile of socks sat waiting. She sorted them, gently matching colors and rolling pairs, placing each in the old shoe box Marvin used like a drawer.

The apartment was quiet except for the sound of traffic outside and the soft hum of the refrigerator. Kendra could hear the shower water stop. Their mother, already dressed in her CNA uniform, was moving fast in the kitchen.



Kendra didn't look up until she heard the rustle of plastic bags being gathered.

"You packed his snack?" Shashawna asked, stepping into the room and fixing her ID badge on her chest. Her shoes squeaked slightly on the linoleum.

Kendra nodded. "Fruit cup and graham crackers. And a juice box."

Shashawna adjusted the strap on her bag. Her uniform, a navy blue top and navy blue pants, looked stiff and smelled like soap. Her curls were pulled back, and her eyes already had the tired edges of someone starting a second day before the first was over.

"Be good," she said quickly. She reached over and gave Marvin a kiss on his forehead, then rested her hand on Kendra's shoulder. "Look after your brother. I'll see you after my second shift."

Kendra nodded again. "Got it."



The door clicked behind her mother as she left. The hallway air rolled in, cold and smelling faintly of bleach.

Kendra turned to Marvin, who was still struggling with one of his sneakers. His brown curls were messy, and his face still held the softness of sleep.

“Come on, we’re late,” she said.

He groaned but grabbed his backpack. Kendra handed him the hoodie, already warm from her hands.

Outside, the chill of the Bronx morning hit their faces hard. The sun was still low, sliding between the tall buildings. Kendra held Marvin’s hand as they walked fast past the corner store, past Mr. Morales sweeping the front steps of his building, past the slow-moving school bus that always turned too wide on the corner.

Marvin’s school, PS 92, stood a few blocks away. Its tall gate rattled as students poured through, dragging their feet or running fast.



Kendra paused at the edge of the gate. She bent slightly, tugging the zipper up on Marvin's jacket.

"You good?" she asked.

He nodded, eyes already on the playground. "Yeah."

Kendra gave him a short hug, then watched him run inside, his backpack bouncing. She didn't move until he disappeared past the double doors.

Turning back, she wrapped her arms tight around herself and walked toward the subway entrance. The streets were louder now. Cars honked, vendors opened carts, and music played faintly from a passing car window.

Down in the station, Kendra tapped her OMNY student card against the glowing reader, felt the soft beep land like a promise, and pushed through the turnstile. The platform was crowded. People stood shoulder to shoulder, staring down the tunnel or checking phones. A woman in a tan coat held a steaming cup of coffee. A kid with headphones bounced quietly to a beat only he could hear.



Kendra stood against the wall, sliding her backpack forward. She unzipped the front pocket and pulled out the folded paper she had slept beside. The corners were soft, the ink faded.

Her lyrics.

She read them quietly to herself.

She mouthed the words.

“I rise because they said I couldn’t. I walk because they said to stop. I sing because I’m still here.”

She read them again.

The train arrived with a loud screech. Kendra stepped in, grabbing the pole beside the door. Warm doo-wop floated from a phone speaker, plantain scent drifted from a foil packet, murals flashed past the window, and an autumn draft slipped through the car each time the doors opened. Her hands tightened around the pole as she rocked slightly with the movement.



This wasn't just any ride. Today she was heading back to the Victoria Theatre. Not to audition. This time, she had been called.

She didn't know if it meant she was chosen. Not yet. But the callback was real.

As the train pulled into 125th Street, she stepped off and walked up the stairs, light flooding the space as she rose. Harlem was already moving—people in line at food carts, loud music spilling from storefronts, taxis pushing through the crosswalk.

Kendra kept walking, the folded lyrics still in her hand.

She stared up at the theater as it came into view. The black marquee letters hadn't changed: **CALLBACK REHEARSALS TODAY.**

The doors weren't open yet, so she waited on the wide concrete apron outside the entrance, the metal railing cool under her palms.



She took out her phone and opened the voice memos. She played back her recording, letting her voice fill her ear. She listened to her own notes, her own breath between lines, the way the end of each phrase shook slightly.

She looked up at the sky.

“I’m not trying to be perfect,” she whispered. “I’m trying to be ready.”

When the theater doors finally opened, she walked in slowly. The same woman from last time sat behind the table. She gave Kendra a small nod.

“Sign in. Wait in the back hall,” she said.

The waiting room was fuller than before. Some kids sat alone, heads down. Others whispered to friends, comparing notes or warming up.

Kendra found a spot on the floor and sat cross-legged, holding her lyrics open.

She whispered the lines again.



When her name was called, she stood and walked calmly toward the stage entrance.

She didn't look behind her.

The stage smelled the same—old wood and dust, and something sharp like sweat.

Mr. Powell was there again. So was the pianist. The three judges sat in their usual seats.

She stood on the center X.

She didn't wait for a cue.

She nodded to the pianist and opened her mouth.

Her voice came out steady.

She hit each note clearly.

The lyrics felt new in her mouth, like they were hers again, not just memorized lines but truth.

Halfway through the song, her voice dipped. For a second, she almost lost the pitch.



She closed her eyes.

She pushed through it.

She thought about Marvin. About folding his hoodie.
About Mama leaving before the sun rose. About every
train ride. Every “no.”

The song ended.

She kept her eyes shut for two more seconds before
opening them.

The theater was quiet again.

The woman in the scarf nodded.

Mr. Powell cleared his throat. “You’ve got something.
Don’t stop.”

Kendra nodded. Her throat tightened, but she didn’t
cry.

She stepped off the mark and tiptoed backstage.



In the hallway, LaShonda leaned against the wall, waiting for her turn.

Their eyes met.

Neither girl spoke. LaShonda's eyes narrowed slightly, then shifted downward before locking back on Kendra's face. She didn't blink. She didn't smile.

But she didn't look away either.

Kendra paused. Just for a second.

She gave a small nod, not big, not bold, just enough.

LaShonda blinked once. Then nodded back.

Kendra kept walking. Her steps were light, but her heartbeat still pounded from the performance. She moved past the curtain, the crew still shuffling props and checking lights. She pushed open the side door and stepped into the sharp Harlem air. The wind caught her face fast, cold and sudden.

She let it hit her. Let it cool her down.



The street noise wrapped around her as if the world had waited outside. Car horns. Music from a passing speaker. Someone is shouting two blocks over. The rhythm of Harlem picked up where she'd left it.

She pulled her phone from her coat pocket. A buzz filled her palm.

A text from Marvin.

Marvin: They're talking about you at school, sis.

She stared at it for a second.

Another buzz.

Marvin: Mr. Rogers played your video on the smartboard. No lie.

Kendra's mouth lifted slightly. The corner of her lips curled before she could stop it.

She tucked the phone into her pocket and stepped toward the station.



She moved faster now. Down the steps. Her fingers pressed the OMNY reader once more, the green arrow flashing, and she felt the same spark of belonging. She pushed through the turnstile and walked toward the edge of the platform.

The #2 train roared into the station.

Southbound.

The doors opened. She stepped in, grabbing the pole with her right hand and settling her feet apart just enough to stay balanced.

The seats were mostly full. A few tired eyes glanced up. Nobody looked twice.

Kendra reached into her pocket again and pulled out her phone. The screen glowed in her palm.

She opened the app.

Her feed was filled with videos.

Her.



Her voice.

Her stage.

Clips from the Victoria Theatre flooded her screen.
One shot had caught her full solo from the balcony
view. Her arms lifted as the final note echoed.

Views were rising.

Ten thousand.

Twelve thousand.

Fourteen.

People were sharing it. Leaving comments.

Who is this Bronx girl?

She sings like she means it.

Real. Raw. Strong.

Kendra stared at the screen. Her thumb hovered over
the pause button but didn't press it.



She let the video keep playing, her voice filling her ears over the low rattle of the subway. The train rocked slightly, and the wheels below her hummed against the tracks.

A new message popped up on her screen.

Alyssa: I saw it. Everyone saw it. Girl, that was everything.

Jada: You already know I cried watching it. Also, Essence was pressed. Big mad.

Kendra smiled again, this time wider.

She slid the phone into her coat and let her head tilt slightly against the pole.

The train moved fast. The tunnel lights blinked in and out. Stations passed by: 110th, 96th, 72nd. The city rolled backward while she stood still.

She thought of the first time she had taken the train alone for an audition. She was twelve. Her mom had to work a double, so she wrote a note and told the staff she'd meet her mother at the venue.



But she had gone to East 36th Street instead of West.

She'd stood on a corner surrounded by office buildings, holding her music sheet, her voice stuck somewhere in her chest.

She had cried on that corner. Not loud, not wild, just quiet tears, burning fast down her face.

She'd missed the audition that day.

Another time, she made it to the right place.

She had practiced her song for a week, but after singing three notes, the judge stopped her.

"You sound too much like Rihanna," he said, not even glancing up. "We don't need another copy. We're looking for something new."

Kendra had nodded and left the room before he finished writing on his sheet.

She had walked home in silence.



No one had clapped then. No video had been shared. No comments. No likes. Just the rumble of the #2 train and the soft thud of her steps on the cracked sidewalk outside her apartment.

But today?

Today, Harlem had heard her.

And maybe... someone else had too.

The train pulled into 149th Street–Grand Concourse. The doors slid open.

She stepped out.

The platform smelled like old metal and warm concrete. Her feet moved fast toward the stairs. She passed a boy wearing the same uniform from PS 92 as Marvin. He looked up, did a double-take, then whispered something to his friend.

She kept walking.

Out onto the street.



The Bronx air greeted her again.

She turned the corner, walking past the mural of the dancer with arms stretched wide. The one she always glanced at, the one that had faded over time but still stood proud.

She paused now.

Stood in front of it.

She stared at the painted eyes.

“I did it,” she whispered.

Not all of it. Not yet.

But one part.

The beginning.

Kendra adjusted her backpack on her shoulder and walked on. She passed the bodega, nodded at Mr. Santiago, and turned down her block.



Her building came into view. The windows lined up like familiar faces.

She climbed the stairs slowly. Her legs were tired. Her hands ached a little. But it felt different this time. Not the ache of trying. The ache of doing.

Inside the apartment, the smell of rice lingered. Marvin was sitting at the table, still in his hoodie, still scrolling his phone.

He looked up when she came in.

“You trending,” he said like it was normal.

Kendra dropped her bag on the floor.

“Let me see,” she said.

Marvin turned the screen toward her. A video had over 100,000 views. Her voice filled the small living room. The echo of the Victoria Theatre was in their apartment now.

Kendra sat down beside him.



“You sound just like yourself,” Marvin said.

Kendra rested her elbow on the table and leaned her chin into her hand. She didn’t speak right away. Her voice in the video felt both far away and close. Like it belonged to someone else, and yet it didn’t. She heard every breath, every crack, every high note she fought to keep steady.

“Is that good?” she finally asked.

Marvin didn’t even look up from the screen. “It’s real. That’s what makes it good.”

She looked at him. He was still wearing the hoodie she had folded that morning, the sleeves pushed halfway up his arms. His sock had a hole near the toe. She smiled without thinking.

Outside, the sun was fading. The streetlights had started to flicker on, one by one. The faint glow made the window paint shimmer, even though it was cracked.

Kendra stood up. “I gotta go.”



Marvin raised his eyebrows. “Back to Harlem?”

She nodded, grabbing her bag. “First full rehearsal.”

He gave her a slow nod, then returned to watching her video on loop.

Kendra stepped out of the apartment. The hallway was quiet, and the light overhead buzzed and blinked. Her feet moved quickly down the stairs, skipping the creaking second step.

Outside, the street had cooled. The air wasn’t as sharp now, just heavy with the end of the day. A man shouted across the block, calling for someone. Kids chased each other with scooters. Music floated from a window, and some old soul tune made Kendra’s steps fall in rhythm.

The train station was half full. She raised her OMNY card again, felt the gentle tap, and breathed out as the gate clicked open. She walked through the gate, and leaned against the cool tiled wall as she waited. Her fingers curled around the lyric sheet she had shoved



into her coat pocket. She didn't open it. She knew the words already. They lived in her.

The train screeched into the station. She stepped in. The ride was short this time, with only a few stops. She was southbound again, and her stop came fast.

125th Street.

She climbed the stairs and came out into the evening light. The city glowed around her. Headlights bounced off the glass buildings. A couple of street vendors were still packing up, folding tables and counting bills. She passed them without slowing.

She turned left.

The Victoria Theatre stood tall at the end of the block, its old sign lit up in gold. The letters still spelled out the same thing:

REHEARSAL TODAY – CAST ONLY

Her sneakers scuffed the sidewalk as she approached the side of the building. The main doors were closed. But she didn't need those anymore.



Tonight, she had a key pass.

She walked to the stage door. The security guard stood there like before, thick jacket, radio clipped to his belt, arms crossed.

“ID?” he asked, even though he recognized her.

Kendra pulled it from her backpack pocket and handed it over.

He checked it, nodded once, and pushed the door open.

“Go ahead, Miss Rivers.”

She stepped inside.

The hallway stretched long and narrow. A few people stood in the distance, chatting softly, already in warm-ups. Light buzzed from the overhead bulbs. The air smelled like old wood and fresh paint. Her sneakers squeaked faintly against the floor.

Kendra walked through, each step heavier than the last.



The space opened wide ahead of her.

The stage.

It wasn't the same as yesterday. It felt changed.

The red seats stretched across the dark theatre. 199 of them, all empty. The walls were black. The floor, scuffed and scratched, still glowed slightly under the overhead lights. A long mirror leaned backstage. Tape lines marked steps, positions, paths.

She took another step forward. Her heart thudded in her chest. She let her hand brush the side curtain.

This was real now.

She was here again. But this time not for an audition.

This was hers.

Behind her, a voice rang out, sharp and familiar.

“Guess they kept you.”

Kendra turned.



LaShonda stood just inside the backstage entrance, arms crossed, jacket open, silver hoops swinging from her ears. Her tone dripped with something between sarcasm and challenge.

Kendra didn't blink. She didn't look away.

"I earned it," she said. Clear. Calm. Full.

LaShonda's lips curled slightly, almost like a grin, but not friendly. She stepped forward once.

The security guard stepped into the hall behind her.

"Cast only beyond this point," he said.

LaShonda glanced his way, then back at Kendra. Her eyes held something else now—not anger, not jealousy. Something more complicated. She gave a short nod and stepped back without another word.

Kendra turned toward the stage again.

She walked down the hall, through the wings, and onto the wooden floor.



The spotlight wasn't on yet. But she didn't need it.

She moved to the center.

The taped X still waited.

She stood on it.

She closed her eyes for one breath, then whispered low enough only she could hear.

“The world is a stage... and I... I'm ready.”

Her hands lifted slightly.

She sang.

There was no piano. No cue. Just her voice, rising slow and sure.

It filled the air around her, climbed over the red seats, brushed against the ceiling. It circled the black walls and settled deep into the quiet.

It wasn't about the judges now. Or the other girls. Or the clicks or comments.



This was about claiming the space. This was about being present.

Each word she sang pressed into the air like a step forward.

She was walking with her voice.

Moving with it.

She didn't rush.

She didn't push.

She let the sound build and break, natural and whole.

When she finished, the silence didn't feel empty.

It felt full.

Full of all the quiet things she had once swallowed.

Full of the long walks.

The missed trains.

The early mornings.



The rejections.

The videos with no views.

The street corners where she cried alone.

The paper lyrics folded in her pocket so long the edges went soft.

She let the silence wrap her now like a warm coat.

Behind her, someone clapped softly.

She turned.

Mr. Powell stood near the wing.

He nodded.

“That’s the tone we need,” he said. “Keep it.”

She nodded back.

She stayed on the X one moment longer, then stepped off, shoulders straight. The theatre didn’t feel bigger anymore. It felt like it was exactly her size.



CHAPTER 6: REHEARSAL ROOM

RESILIENCE

Kendra's eyes barely opened as she walked down the stairs of her building. The air outside was thick and cold, and the streetlights still blinked against the dark. Her hoodie was zipped up all the way, and her breath came out like smoke as she pulled her arms tight against her body. She moved slowly, one foot in front of the other, backpack heavy against her shoulders.

At the corner, the street was quiet. Only the corner deli was awake, its lights buzzing under the metal gate. A delivery man stacked crates of milk by the door. Kendra didn't wave. Her hands were deep in her pockets.

Down the subway stairs, the tiles were wet and the lights hummed above her. A few people waited on the platform—most of them quiet, half-asleep, not talking. A man in an orange vest leaned against the wall sipping something hot from a tall cup.



Kendra stood near the pole and stared at the dark tunnel ahead. Her eyes felt tired, and the soft ache in her calves reminded her of rehearsal. She let her head lean against the cold metal behind her. She didn't want to think yet.

The train came loud and fast. The doors opened and she stepped in. She found an empty seat by the window and let her body sink into it.

Her head touched the glass.

Outside, the lights flashed by fast—blurry signs, pieces of old posters, spray paint on concrete. It felt like the city was still sleeping while she was already moving. The rumble of the train wrapped around her as she closed her eyes for a second, just to breathe.

“Don't be nervous,” she whispered into the window. “You already did it once.”

She reached into her bag and touched the paper with her lyrics. She didn't need to read them. She just wanted to feel the folds. Her fingers pressed against the soft creases, and she breathed out again.



At Allerton Avenue, she stepped off. The sky above was turning gray-blue. Light was trying to break through. She walked the rest of the way to school with her hood up, shoes quiet on the sidewalk. A bus rolled past, and a kid tossed his backpack onto the seat through the open window.

The closer she got to M.S. 110, the louder the world became.

A group of girls were already outside the gate, talking fast. One of them looked at her, then leaned into the other and whispered something. Kendra kept walking. She didn't change her pace. She didn't look away.

Inside, the building smelled like floor cleaner and breakfast sandwiches. Her sneakers squeaked on the tile as she moved through the front entrance. The halls buzzed, even this early. Teachers were unlocking doors. Kids stood in groups near lockers. The echo of laughter bounced off the walls.

As she reached the seventh-grade wing, she could feel it.



The shift.

The turn of heads.

She didn't need to hear the words to know people were talking.

"She's the one from that video—"

"Wasn't she just in the back last month?"

"I saw her on TikTok. My cousin reposted it."

Some voices were quiet, unsure.

Others were louder, harder.

"She's not even that good."

"She got lucky."

Kendra walked slower, eyes forward. She passed a row of lockers where three girls leaned against the wall, arms crossed. One of them—Keyana, one of LaShonda's friends—gave a small snort as Kendra passed.



“Guess anyone can get famous now,” she said loud enough.

Kendra kept her steps even.

Her locker was near the end of the hallway. The blue paint was chipped and the handle stuck if you pulled too hard. She adjusted her grip and opened it with a soft tug.

Jada’s voice came from behind her.

“You’d think you robbed someone the way they looking at you.”

Kendra turned and gave a half-smile.

Jada wore her usual patchwork jacket with small red buttons and a scarf wrapped high around her curls. Her backpack hung low, one strap slipping from her shoulder.

“They mad ‘cause you’re not in the back row anymore,” Jada said, leaning against the locker beside hers.



Kendra didn't answer right away. She looked down at her books, her fingers brushing the spines. Her heart still thudded a little, like it hadn't caught up with her feet yet.

"I didn't do anything to them," Kendra said softly.

"That's what makes it worse," Jada said. "You didn't ask. You just showed up and took your spot."

Kendra closed the locker gently and leaned her forehead against the cool metal for a moment. Her hands pressed flat against the locker door.

"I just wanted to sing," she whispered.

"I know," Jada said. "But now they know too."

Kendra turned around.

The hallway stretched long in front of her, buzzing with kids, papers, laughter, eyes.

"I feel like I'm standing on something thin," she said, rubbing her arms.



“You are,” Jada said. “That’s how you learn balance.”

The bell rang sharp and high. Doors opened and kids moved fast toward their first class. Kendra picked up her books and started walking.

She passed LaShonda’s group by the bathroom.

LaShonda wasn’t laughing. She wasn’t even talking. She just looked at Kendra.

For a second, their eyes locked.

Kendra didn’t look away.

Neither did she.

They passed each other in silence.

No smiles.

No words.

Just a look.

A steady, careful look.



In homeroom, Kendra sat at her desk. Mr. Johnson walked in a moment later, tall and serious with his coffee mug and clipboard. He didn't say anything about the video. He didn't say anything at all.

But when he passed her row, he tapped her desk once—soft, almost quiet—then kept walking.

She didn't know what it meant.

But she felt it.

All through math, her brain moved slower than usual. The numbers danced across the board, and her pencil left smudges on her paper. She tried to focus, but her mind kept floating back to the theatre. To the spotlight. To the silence after the last note.

She stared at the numbers again and whispered to herself.

“Come back. You're in school now. Focus.”

But her fingers kept writing the lyrics in the margin of her notebook, not the answers.



After class, she didn't rush out.

She waited until the hall was empty before heading to her locker again.

Jada met her there, peeling an orange, her fingers sticky with juice.

"You good?" she asked.

Kendra nodded slowly.

"I think so."

Jada offered her a slice.

"Let them talk," she said. "You've got rehearsal after school, right?"

"Yeah," Kendra said. "Every day this week."

She tucked the orange slice into her mouth, chewing slow. The sweetness stayed on her tongue as she closed her locker and walked with Jada to their next class. The rest of the day moved in pieces. Science,



history, lunch. People stared. Some whispered. A few said nothing at all. Kendra kept her head up.

After the final bell, she didn't wait. She waved goodbye to Jada at the door and turned down the street fast, cutting past the crossing guard and down toward the train station.

She had her rehearsal bag already packed from the night before—extra shirt, dance shoes, water bottle, lyric sheet folded in the side pocket. She made it to the subway just in time, swiped her OMNY card, and stood near the edge of the platform.

The #2 train roared up loud and fast.

Kendra stepped on and grabbed the pole.

The ride to Harlem didn't feel long anymore. It felt like part of her now. She knew every light, every bend, every stop. People packed into the car, their shoulders brushing hers.

Someone's speaker played old doo-wop low from a jacket pocket. A lady across the car peeled a small



plantain with her fingers. The scent drifted through the space. Kendra closed her eyes and let it sit in her nose.

Her hand touched the inside of her pocket where the lyric sheet rested. She didn't take it out. She didn't need to.

She stepped off at 125th Street and climbed the stairs two at a time. The light outside was sharp and yellow now. The buildings stood tall. The streets were noisy again. Carts clanged. A man sold beaded bracelets near the corner.

Kendra walked straight to the Victoria Theatre side entrance. She didn't pause this time. She pulled her ID from her backpack and showed it to the guard. He nodded and pushed the door open.

"Evening, Miss Rivers."

"Evening," she said back.



The hall inside felt familiar now. The air held heat from bodies already moving. The stage ahead was lit, but she didn't walk there. Not yet.

Tonight was studio rehearsal. Upstairs.

She turned left and climbed the narrow staircase to the second floor.

The rehearsal studio was wide, with mirrors across one wall and bars nailed into the opposite side. A speaker stood in the corner, wires wrapped tight.

Three other girls were already stretching. Kendra dropped her bag, pulled off her school hoodie, and stepped into the open floor.

Her T-shirt stuck to her back from the quick walk, and her socks slid a little on the polished wood. She bounced on her toes, loosening her legs.

The choreographer, Ms. Ray, walked in five minutes later.

"Back line, warmup drills!" she called out.



Music started.

Kendra moved fast. Right foot, slide. Left foot, pop.
Arms sharp. Shoulders still.

The beat was heavy and fast.

She kept pace.

Her breath came harder by the third round.

Sweat rolled down her neck. Her shirt clung tight
under her arms.

But she didn't slow.

Each step was a mark. A reason. A strike against fear.

Someone missed a count.

Ms. Ray clapped her hands. "Focus! The stage don't
wait for you. You match its speed."

Kendra swallowed hard and locked her eyes on the
mirror.

She wasn't the best dancer in the room. Not yet.



But she wasn't the weakest either.

She found the count. Hit the pivot. Planted her foot.

Again.

Again.

Again.

Thirty minutes passed. Then an hour.

Ms. Ray turned down the music.

"Combo time," she said.

They broke into rows.

Kendra watched the steps one more time. She nodded to herself, then moved into position.

Music jumped again.

She followed the lead. Her arms moved with purpose. Her knees bent low. Her back straightened.

She caught the turn and stayed balanced.



Not perfect. But stronger.

She heard someone clap from the wall.

It was the assistant.

“Nice, Kendra,” she said. “That’s the angle.”

Kendra didn’t smile.

She just breathed.

Her chest rose and fell in steady rhythm.

After the third run, they got a five-minute break.

Kendra stepped back to her bag. She pulled out her water bottle and leaned against the wall.

Her phone buzzed.

A text.

Ms. Alvarez: You okay, mija?

Kendra wiped her forehead with the back of her hand.
Her fingers were sticky from sweat.



She typed back.

Still standing.

Then she put the phone down and closed her eyes for a second.

She listened to the shuffle of shoes, the low talk, the stretch of limbs.

She opened her eyes and looked at her reflection again.

She looked tired.

But not broken.

Ms. Ray clapped again.

“Back up! This is where the work starts!”

Kendra stood straight.

She walked back to her place.

Another hour passed. Then another half.



By the end, her legs shook when she stood still.

But she didn't stop.

After the final set, they all sat on the floor.

Ms. Ray circled the room.

"You will mess up. You will fall. But you will not give up," she said. "You showed me that tonight."

Kendra leaned her head back against the wall.

She didn't speak.

She didn't need to.

The ache in her arms said everything.

The sore in her calves said more.

She changed into her hoodie and picked up her bag.

Outside, the sky had gone dark.

The air hit her face cold again.



She zipped her hoodie higher and crossed the street without rushing. Her legs moved slower now. Her whole body felt used. But it was the kind of tired that made sense. She liked knowing why she was sore.

The walk to the station was quiet. A few people stood near the curb waiting for the bus. Lights from small stores blinked in red and green. Music played low from one shop still open—old-school, steady. She didn't stop. She just moved forward.

At the station, she tapped her OMNY card and passed through the turnstile. The platform was nearly empty. One man leaned on the wall, humming. Another sat hunched on the bench, holding a small brown bag.

Kendra stood near the far end. She didn't look at her phone. She didn't need music. The beat still lived in her chest. The song they rehearsed kept repeating in her mind. Over and over.

The train came with a rush of cold wind and squealing brakes. She stepped on and found a seat near the back.



The ride home felt long.

She leaned against the window, her head tilted slightly. She didn't sleep, but her eyes stayed closed. Her arms wrapped tight across her chest. She thought about the steps they drilled. She thought about her place on stage. She thought about Mr. Powell's voice from last week. "Hold your space."

She repeated those words now in her mind. Over and over.

By the time she stepped off at 149th Street–Grand Concourse, the streets had emptied. The block was quiet, except for a few headlights and the hum of an old vending truck shutting down.

She turned the corner, her feet dragging.

Inside the building, the hallway light buzzed. One bulb flickered. She knew which stair creaked and stepped past it.



Their apartment door was locked. She turned the key gently. Inside, it smelled like leftover rice and the faint sweetness of laundry soap.

The clock on the microwave blinked 12:03.

Midnight.

Marvin was already asleep on the couch, curled under his blanket. His tablet rested on his chest, dark screen facing up. His sock had slid halfway off. His curls were messy again.

Kendra set her bag down without a sound.

She opened the fridge and took out the rice container. Her stomach turned from hunger, but she didn't eat right away. She scooped some into a bowl and put it in the microwave.

While it warmed, she walked to the small pile of laundry still waiting by the couch. Her hands moved without thinking. Fold, smooth, stack. Marvin's pants. His long-sleeve shirt. Socks rolled into tight little



balls. His light jacket. All of it folded in a small clean pile.

The microwave beeped. She took the bowl and sat at the table. She ate slowly, one spoonful at a time. It wasn't hot anymore. But it was enough.

She finished half and saved the rest.

In the quiet, she grabbed her small notebook and a pen. The pages were full now—scribbles from her bag, notes from her train rides, ideas from her walks between school and rehearsal. Some lines were crossed out. Some pages held just one phrase. But every word felt like her.

She flipped to a blank page and started again.

“Late night voice, Bronx feet, tired hands. Still moving.”

She underlined the word still.

Next page. Another line.

“Folded socks. Warm hands. No time to pause.”



She let the pen rest. Her hand ached. She leaned back in the chair and looked toward the window.

Out in the hallway, someone walked past. Keys jangled. Then silence again.

Her phone buzzed once on the counter.

She stood and picked it up.

A new video notification. LaShonda.

She opened it.

It was her. LaShonda, standing in a lit studio, dressed sharp, hair slick, mouth close to the mic. The camera quality was clear. The sound polished. Her run was perfect—high notes bright, smooth transitions, tone tight and full.

The caption under it read: “Bronx girls try. Harlem girls deliver.”

Kendra stared at the screen.

She didn’t flinch.



She didn't reply.

She walked to the mirror.

She picked up her lyric sheet, already creased, corners bent.

She held it up and faced her reflection.

She sang.

Soft at first.

Then louder.

She missed a note.

Again.

She fixed it.

Again.

She sang until her voice cracked.

Her chest burned. Her throat tightened.



Again.

The light above the mirror buzzed, flickered, then steadied.

Again.

She didn't record herself.

She didn't post it.

She didn't check the comments.

She just stood there and filled the quiet with sound.

Her own.

After a while, she sat back down.

She drank a glass of water.

Then she laid out Marvin's clothes for the morning.
His uniform shirt. His jeans. The hoodie with the tiny
rip on the sleeve.

She placed his socks on the chair beside it.



She double-checked his homework folder, tucked into the side of his backpack.

The clock now read 1:10.

She sat on the edge of her bed. Not under the covers. Just still.

The notebook lay beside her, pages open.

She read her own words again.

Still standing.

She whispered them this time.

Still standing.

And again.

Then she lay down, arms crossed on her chest, breath even.

She didn't dream.

But she remembered every step.



CHAPTER 7: A SONG IN THE GALLERY

The hallway outside the dressing rooms was busy with the noise of first-week nerves. Crew members walked fast, calling out short words like “Props!” or “Places!” One dancer stretched near the mirror. Someone laughed too loudly. The sound echoed off the black-painted walls.

Kendra sat on a low bench, already dressed for the opening preview. Her shirt was tucked, her shoes laced tight, her hair pulled back neatly. She held her script, but she wasn’t reading it. Her thumb pressed the corner of the paper repeatedly, bending it in a rhythm she barely noticed.

Through the thin curtain that separated backstage from the lobby, she could hear voices rising—audience voices. Strangers. People from the neighborhood. Maybe a teacher. Maybe someone from Mama’s job.



Maybe nobody she knew. It didn't matter. They were here now.

She stood up and looked down at her hands. Her palms were dry. Good. No sweat. Her stomach still felt tight, but it wasn't fear exactly. It was like her whole body was waiting for something to begin.

Mr. Powell passed her with a clipboard in hand. "Ten minutes, Rivers. Check your mic."

She nodded.

Instead of heading to the wings, she walked through the narrow hallway toward a quiet side door she had noticed before. It had a brass handle and a small black sign. *Laura and Frank Baker Gallery*.

She pushed it open gently and stepped inside.

The room was cool and quiet. The walls were lined with photographs, all in black and white. Soft light came from above, touching each frame just enough. The air smelled faintly like wood polish and something older—maybe paper, maybe time.



Kendra walked slowly past the first row. There were no crowds in here, no mirrors, no loud voices. Just the faces. Some people were alone in their photos. Others were mid-performance. One man stood with his saxophone, head bowed. Another photo showed a group of girls with their arms in perfect sync, frozen mid-step.

She stopped in front of a picture near the back. It was larger than the others. A woman stood in the center of the stage, her arms wide, her eyes locked on the camera. Her dress was simple, her shoes scuffed, but her mouth was open wide—caught mid-note.

Below the frame, a brass plaque read: *Della Greene, 1963.*

Kendra stepped closer.

The woman's eyes didn't move, but Kendra felt something pull. She leaned in until her nose was almost at the glass. Her breath fogged the surface just a little.



She reached out and ran her finger across the edge of the frame. The wood was smooth. Her fingertip touched the glass, just barely.

The woman in the picture didn't smile. But her eyes held something Kendra knew. A question. A hunger. Not for food, but for more. More room. More voice. More truth. She had seen that same look in the mirror last week, just before the callback. The same look she carried down the subway stairs when no one was watching.

Kendra whispered, "You wanted it, too."

The gallery stayed quiet.

She looked around again. Every face on these walls had stood on this stage before her. Their shoes had touched the same wood. Their voices had filled the same air.

She stood there longer than she meant to.

Footsteps came from the hallway.

A girl peeked in and said, "They're calling for places."



Kendra blinked and stepped back.

“Coming,” she said.

She gave one last look at the woman in the photo. Then she turned and walked out of the room, letting the door close soft behind her.

Backstage, the crew was already in position. A tech checked her mic and gave her a thumbs-up. Her castmates stood near the curtain, whispering lines or shaking out their hands. LaShonda leaned against a table, eyes closed, mouthing words.

Kendra took her spot at the edge of the curtain. Looking down at the floor, she saw the small white tape mark with her name.

She stepped onto it and breathed in.

She didn’t think about her hair or her shirt or how many people were out there. She thought about the gallery. About the woman from 1963. About being seen and staying true.

She whispered to herself, “Let them hear it.”



A quiet hum slipped from her throat as she stood just behind the curtain. It wasn't loud. It wasn't perfect. But it was hers. The sound curled in her chest and floated out slowly.

The stage air felt different now. Full, but calm. That small hum grew, soft but steady, bouncing off the floor, sliding along the ropes above her head.

Kendra closed her eyes for one more second, letting it grow.

Behind her, someone paused. A stagehand with a clipboard, maybe. He turned slightly, listening. But before he could ask what it was, Kendra had already moved. She stepped out into the light.

The spotlight didn't feel as heavy this time.

The music swelled behind her. The piano lifted into the air like it had waited for her voice.

Kendra opened her mouth and sang.

The first note cracked.



Her chest tightened for just a second. But she didn't stop. She pushed forward, her eyes shining, her hands curling lightly at her sides.

She didn't sing pretty. She sang true.

Her voice hit the back of the theater, bounced against the red velvet chairs, and circled above the heads of the people who had come to watch.

Each word felt pulled from deep inside her.

She sang about rising. About moving. About being counted.

Her voice wavered once, then caught strong again. The crowd stayed quiet. She didn't look at them. She didn't need to.

Her heart beat hard as the chorus climbed. She lifted her chin. Her fingers shook, but her voice didn't.

When the last note came, she held it. Not to impress. Not to win. Just to say she could. Just to say she had the right.



The room went still.

Not silent. Just still.

Kendra lowered her hands slowly. Her body trembled.
Her knees wanted to buckle.

Then she felt it.

A clap.

Then more.

The crowd stood. Some people shouted. One person
near the front whistled loud.

She blinked fast.

Mr. Powell didn't stand. But he nodded once from the
side, sharp and proud.

Kendra took one small step back.

She didn't smile. Not yet.

A boy from the cast, Isaiah, stepped from the wings.
He was tall and thin, with short twists and smooth



skin the color of deep caramel. He always wore black sneakers and fingerless gloves, even during rehearsal.

He was known for beatboxing. Loud. Fast. Full of rhythm. Harlem style.

He walked up to her with a slow grin.

“Beast mode, Bronx,” he said.

Kendra bumped her fist against his, quick and quiet.

She nodded.

“Thanks,” she said.

They walked off together toward the back of the stage. The rest of the cast moved around them, some getting ready for their own scenes, others whispering, still caught in the moment.

Kendra sat on a crate near the curtain. She took a deep breath and rubbed her palms against her knees.

Isaiah sat beside her.



“You okay?” he asked.

“Yeah,” she said. “I think.”

“You shook them,” he said. “For real.”

Kendra looked at him. “Did I?”

Isaiah leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

“People stood up. They don’t do that for everybody.”

She didn’t say anything.

Inside, she still felt the echo of the note. The one she held with everything she had.

She reached into her hoodie pocket and pulled out the folded paper. Her lyrics. The corners were soft. The words smudged from how often she held them.

She smoothed it out on her leg.

Isaiah glanced at the page. “That yours?”

Kendra nodded. “Yeah.”



He tilted his head. “You write too?”

Kendra shrugged. “Just for me.”

He smiled. “Bet it’s good.”

She didn’t answer.

Mr. Powell called for everyone to reset for the final group number. Isaiah stood and offered a hand.

Kendra took it.

They walked back toward the light.

Later that night, when the crowd had left and the theater was dark again, Kendra stayed behind.

She sat alone in the front row.

One light still glowed above the stage.

She stared at it.

The echo from earlier still floated somewhere near the ceiling.



Her throat was dry. Her legs were tired.

But she wasn't ready to go home yet.

She stood and walked up the center aisle.

She climbed the small steps at the front of the stage
and stood in the center again.

She looked out at the empty seats.

"Della Greene," she said softly.

The name from the gallery.

"I saw you."

She closed her eyes.

She sang one line.

Just one.

Soft and low.

Then she turned and left the stage behind.



The night air outside hit her fast.

Cool and sharp.

Her phone buzzed.

A message from Marvin.

They posted the video. You're up to 40K views.

Then another.

You looked serious out there like a boss.

Kendra smiled to herself.

She pulled her hoodie tighter around her shoulders and walked down the block, shoes clicking against the sidewalk.

She didn't check the video.

Her feet moved fast past the crowd gathered outside the theatre. The noise of people talking, clapping, and calling each other's names filled the block. A few cast



members stood near the side entrance, some still in costume, some already pulling off jackets and boots.

From the third row, Rico Blaze—one of the community rappers featured in Act Two—threw up his hand.

“She got that concrete fire!” he yelled out, voice booming across the sidewalk.

Kendra didn’t stop, but she gave a small wave back without turning her head too far. Her cheeks burned, but not from shame. It was too much attention all at once. She needed space to breathe again.

Inside the theatre, people buzzed around like the show had just lit a fuse. Some laughed loud. Others wiped their eyes. A girl near the entrance was already trying to sing Kendra’s solo under her breath while recording herself on her phone. Another group crowded around a stage door taking selfies.

Jada burst out from backstage, breathless. Her box braids bounced as she ran, phone high in the air.



“Kenny!” she shouted. “You trending—everywhere. Even TikTok!”

Kendra blinked. “What?”

Jada spun the phone toward her. Kendra’s face filled the screen in one freeze-frame moment—arms stretched, mouth open mid-note, eyes locked on something deep inside herself.

“Somebody caught the whole solo,” Jada said, words rushing. “With the beatbox behind it and everything. Your voice. That drop at the end. Boom. It’s all over my feed. People saying stuff like ‘Realest Bronx voice I’ve heard in a minute’ and ‘She sound like she mean every word.’” She paused. “I didn’t even post anything yet!”

Kendra’s breath caught.

“You think it’s too much?” she asked.

“No,” Jada said quickly. “I think it’s exactly enough.”

Kendra smiled a little, then wiped sweat from her temple with the sleeve of her hoodie.



They stood for a minute in the hallway, the noise of the lobby fading behind the door.

“You hungry?” Jada asked.

Kendra shook her head. “Tired.”

Jada nodded. “Same. I’m getting picked up. You good getting home?”

“Yeah.”

“You sure?”

Kendra nodded again, more firm this time.

They bumped fists. “Later, superstar,” Jada said with a smirk and jogged toward the exit.

Kendra turned slowly and walked through the theatre, then out the side door into the night.

The air hit colder now, sharper. The buildings stood quiet around her, windows lit, horns beeping in the distance. She crossed the street and made her way to



the train, sneakers dragging a little with each step.
Not from sadness. Just worn out.

The station was almost empty. She scanned her card
at the OMNY reader. The soft beep echoed in the
silence, and the gate opened.

She stood on the platform alone. No music. No
cameras. Just the sound of the tunnel breathing out
warm air ahead of the train.

The subway lights grew near. Kendra stepped in when
the doors opened. She found a seat near the back. One
man slept with his head leaned against the glass. A
woman read quietly, her shopping bags on the floor.

Kendra pulled her phone out and placed it face-down
in her lap.

She looked at her own hands.

They were dry. A little rough from the rope pull
during Act Three. But steady. Her nails were chipped.
Her fingers had ink smudges from notes she wrote in
her lyric book earlier that day.



The ride was long. Past Harlem. Past Central Park.
Into the Bronx again.

By the time the train rocked into 149th Street–Grand Concourse, she stood up slowly, shoulders slumped from the weight of the evening.

She stepped off and climbed the stairs.

The Bronx air felt different than Harlem. Not quieter, just familiar. Like it didn't care about who she was on stage, only who she was walking up the block with a backpack and tired legs.

Her building came into view. Lights were on in only two windows. One of them was hers.

She climbed the stairs, slow this time. Each one creaked like always.

The hallway smelled like mop water and old paint. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the house key.

Inside, the apartment was still. The lamp on the counter glowed softly.



A sticky note waited on the fridge in Marvin's handwriting.

CONGRATS. I SAVED THE LAST POP-TART.
YOU'RE WELCOME.

Kendra smiled and peeled the note off with her fingers. She stuck it on the corner of the cupboard.

She reached for the toaster and pulled the foil pack from the box. There was one left, just like he said. She slid it in and pressed the lever down.

The hum of the appliance filled the kitchen.

She didn't turn on the TV. She didn't check her phone.

She sat at the table.

One hand under her chin. The other tapping a quiet rhythm on the table.

When the Pop-Tart popped up, she grabbed it, not caring that it was still too hot. She broke it in half and took a bite.



The kitchen light flickered once. Then held.

She chewed slowly, eyes fixed on nothing.

She was still in her hoodie. Her laces were still tied.
Her music notebook was still in the side pocket of her bag.

But something had shifted.

She reached into the bag, pulled out the notebook,
and flipped past the folded corners and worn pages.
There, in the back, a blank spot waited.

She picked up a pen from the table and started to write.

Her lines were uneven. Her letters leaned too far. But
the words came out steady.

New lyrics. About lights. About fear. About fire in your
chest that won't go out even after the music stops.

She paused after a while. Let her hand rest. Looked
around the kitchen.



One glass in the sink. One shoe left by the door. One brother snoring down the hall.

Tomorrow she'd ride the train again.

She'd step back into the rehearsal room.

She'd pull her voice forward again, note by note.

Not because of the views. Or the reposts. Or the applause.

But because there was more inside her to give.

She whispered under her breath.

"More tomorrow."

She folded the page and slipped the notebook back into her bag.

Then she stood, brushed crumbs from the table, and turned off the light.

The apartment stayed quiet.

But her heart kept singing.



CHAPTER 8: DRESS

REHEARSAL MADNESS

She brushed crumbs from her shirt, zipped her hoodie, and picked up her bag. Her sneakers slid against the quiet floor of the apartment. Marvin had already gone to bed, his school folder beside his pillow. She moved softly past his door, the hallway dark except for the light spilling from the kitchen.

Outside, the night air was colder than before. Her breath came out fast in the wind, but her legs kept moving. The trains were still running. The Bronx was still alive, and so was she.

The next day brought something new. The posters outside the Victoria Theatre had changed. Now they read: *“Rising – Harlem Showcase Premiere – Sold Out.”*

Kendra stood under the marquee for a moment, hands in her coat pockets, head tilted back. She didn’t take a picture. She didn’t text anyone. She just let her



eyes take in the bold black letters. She wasn't in the title, but she was in it. In the building. In the cast. In the story.

Inside, the lobby buzzed louder than usual. People stood in lines. Some held clipboards, others fixed lights. Kids from other boroughs leaned against walls, checking their phones. Parents clutched folded programs. Someone from the crew walked by holding a box of cables. The sound of laughter, doors closing, and heels on tile swirled together.

Kendra ambled toward the back, where the cast gathered near the rehearsal room. Isaiah had his hoodie half off and was beatboxing under his breath. One of the older dancers stood stretching against a wall. Jada rushed past, holding two water bottles and a box of hairpins.

"You good?" Jada called over her shoulder.

"Yeah," Kendra answered. "Just got here."

"Costumes in five!" a voice shouted. It was Dana, the stage manager. She always wore all black and carried



three clipboards. Her headset was already buzzing.
“Check your tags, zip your racks, no swaps after this!”

Kendra headed down the narrow hallway toward the dressing area. The mirrors lined up along the walls reflected busy faces—some nervous, some steady, some staring hard at themselves like they were trying to pull something up from deep inside. She squeezed past a girl fixing her eyeliner and nodded to a dancer pinning a strap in place.

Her costume was simple: dark jeans, black boots, and a fitted red top with the word “*RISE*” printed boldly across the chest. She changed fast, stuffing her street clothes into her bag and tying her sneakers by the laces so they wouldn’t get lost.

The backstage door creaked open behind her. LaShonda stepped in, holding her costume across one arm. She didn’t speak. Kendra didn’t either. Their eyes met in the mirror. Both still, both unreadable.

LaShonda moved to the far end of the table, set her outfit down, and started changing. Her face was calm, her mouth flat. Her long braids were pulled back into



a tight low ponytail. Her nails were short, clean, and painted pale pink. She looked like someone who planned every move.

Kendra looked back into her mirror. Her braid was neat, not perfect. Her top was snug across the shoulders, but it didn't matter. She touched the small paper note she had tucked into her pocket. A lyric she'd written the night before. It was only five words, but they meant everything.

Keep your sound, always.

Dana's voice came again, louder now. "Places! Ten minutes!"

Costume techs rushed through the hallway, calling out last-minute checks. Someone walked by holding a box of replacement earrings. Another tech unrolled a long tape line for a prop marker. The backstage lights flickered once and came back strong.

The cast moved toward the wings. Everyone was in place. Some stood stretching, others quiet with their eyes closed.



Kendra stood at the left wing, nearest the edge of the stage. The black curtain swayed slightly in the air. Her hands were cold, but she didn't shake. She pressed her palms flat against her thighs and breathed in.

On the opposite side, LaShonda stood with her arms crossed. She didn't move. Her foot tapped once against the floor, soft and slow.

The stage between them felt wide.

Someone behind Kendra whispered, "It's packed out there."

Another answered, "They said even the mayor might come."

She didn't turn. She didn't answer. She stared straight ahead.

The hum of the crowd came through the walls now. Loud but distant, like a low sea. She could hear phones buzzing, the flap of a program page, and a baby squealing before being hushed.



“Two minutes!” someone called from the pit. It echoed sharply through the floorboards.

Dana’s voice snapped through the headset. “Clear all hallways! No delays tonight!”

Kendra wiped her hands on her jeans. She bent her knees once. Rolled her shoulders. She didn’t say a word.

LaShonda lifted her chin, still watching the curtain.

Kendra whispered to herself, “It’s just one more step.”

Behind her, Isaiah gave a short beat with his fingers against the doorframe. Just four taps. Kendra heard it. That was enough.

Her voice wasn’t ready. Her legs weren’t fully rested. But she knew the rhythm. She had walked it, sung it, stayed with it.

A tech brushed past her, adjusting a stage light. The spotlight tilted, checked, and stilled. The board operator gave a thumbs-up from behind the booth wall.



Dana's voice again. "Curtain in thirty. Let's move."

Kendra took one step forward and tightened the silk sash around her waist. The red fabric caught on her thumb, then slid gently through her fingers. It felt soft, smooth, almost like it was breathing. She gave it one more knot. Not too tight. Not too loose. Just enough to remind her—this costume was hers. This role was hers. It didn't belong to anyone else.

Around her, the quiet grew heavy. The air backstage no longer buzzed with last-minute shouts. Everyone was still now, waiting—the lights above dipped low. The stage was seconds from opening.

She looked down once. Her boots were tied, her sleeves rolled to her elbows, and the sash was firm.

The light changed.

Her cue hit.

Kendra stepped forward, her heel hitting the wood. One beat. Two. The music hadn't started yet. This part was just her.



She reached the mark. The light snapped on.

She didn't blink. She didn't sway.

She lifted her chin.

Then the words came.

“They told me my voice was too big for my body...”

It rang through the theatre. It was not loud, not soft, just clear—the kind of clear that people feel before they know why.

She stepped to the left, following the blocking, eyes up but not too far. The sound filled the space and rolled through the rows. Not a single seat creaked, and not a single breath came from the crowd.

Kendra continued, each lyric folding into the next.

“I opened my mouth and they flinched...”

She didn't look for the judges. She didn't search the shadows for the rows of city guests or news cameras. This wasn't for them.



She moved into the middle of the stage and stopped. Her arms at her sides, fingers stretched. She pressed her feet into the floor and sang the following line.

“They said sing smaller. I sang louder.”

That’s when the beat kicked in. Low. Slow. A Harlem drum rhythm. She heard Isaiah’s mouth click echo from the side wing. His beatbox started the build.

LaShonda entered from the other side of the stage, just as rehearsed. Her steps landed sharply and cleanly. Her eyes didn’t meet Kendra’s, not yet. Her solo came next.

But in that moment, they shared the same spotlight.

Kendra hit the next turn, her voice riding the beat.

“I’m not background. I’m not a shadow. I’m center.”

The dancers joined in now, flooding the stage. Their sneakers pounded against the wooden floor in time, quick steps. Cross turns—a ripple of arms. But Kendra stayed on her mark. She didn’t move fast. Her job was to remain still and deliver the lines.



LaShonda's voice cut in, her note smooth and firm.

"I was raised on roof noise and train hums..."

She moved past Kendra, just inches away. Her hand brushed the edge of Kendra's sleeve—not planned, not staged—but neither paused.

Kendra's following line came fast.

"And I carry sound like breath in my hands."

By now, the lights had lifted, and the whole stage glowed. The red and gold curtains shimmered behind them. Rows of velvet seats stretched back, all filled. Faces turned upward. Cameras tucked low behind the last row blinked silently.

The scene pushed forward.

The whole cast joined the center.

Choreography turned tight. The singers moved in circles, voices overlapping. Each line braided into the next.



Kendra stepped forward again, arms wide.

“Every girl they tried to mute...”

A breath.

“Still sings.”

The crowd didn’t clap. Not yet. They weren’t sure if it was the end. The music hadn’t stopped. But the moment felt full.

She breathed out slowly and let the next cast member take the spotlight.

She backed up three steps, careful not to bump anyone.

Isaiah gave her a low thumbs-up from the side.

Dana’s soft voice rang through the headset behind the curtains: “Scene transition. Go black in five.”

Kendra ran lightly off stage with the others. Her boots landed quietly now, the heavy part done.



She reached the wings and ducked behind the curtain, chest rising fast.

A costume assistant passed by, whispering, “Nice one.”

As they passed, another actor touched her arm, mouthing, “That hit.”

Kendra leaned back against the black wall and closed her eyes for half a breath.

The fabric of her sash stuck slightly to her waist. Sweat.

She looked down. Her hands were shaking.

She didn’t try to stop it.

“You did that,” she said, barely above a whisper. “You did that.”

The lights changed again. Blue now.

She had thirty seconds before the next scene.



A tech walked by with a headset, motioning three fingers toward the floor—her next mark.

Kendra adjusted her top and stepped toward the curtain again.

LaShonda stood to the left, hands on her hips, breathing through her nose.

They didn't talk. But when LaShonda turned slightly, she gave a slow nod.

Not wide. Not friendly. But real.

Kendra nodded back.

Their solo duet was next.

The music started.

A slow, low piano. Then the soft beat again.

They walked side by side to the front.

No words yet.

Then together.



“We rise in the middle...”

Their voices split.

LaShonda sang the next part.

“...with Harlem heat in our teeth.”

Kendra followed.

“...with Bronx in our chest.”

They finished together.

“...and rhythm in our feet.”

That was the line.

That was the line they had fought to get right. The one that always slipped in rehearsal. But tonight, it landed.

The crowd didn't wait. They clapped loudly. One cheer came from the back. Then more.

They weren't supposed to clap yet.



Dana's voice broke through the headset, half-laughing. "Keep going. Don't break."

They didn't.

The lights faded slowly.

Scene change again.

Kendra walked backward, eyes still on the seats.

Her chest was still full. But this time, not with fear.

It was something heavier. But warmer.

Like every long walk to school.

Every missed train.

Every time someone said no.

She carried all of that right now.

Backstage again, she pulled off her red top and handed it to the crew. She changed into her final costume—just black pants, a gray hoodie, and her real sneakers—the ones she wore every day.



The last scene was hers alone.

She had one verse.

One final verse.

The lights dimmed.

She stood at the back of the stage and took one step forward.

She could see only the first two rows. But she didn't need to see more.

She let the words come slowly.

“They told me small girls from loud blocks don't belong on big stages...”

A pause.

“But I stayed loud anyway.”

She looked up.

“And now...”



A beat.

“I’m not asking.”

The light stayed still.

Then slowly dropped to black.

Silence.

Real silence.

Then a wave of sound.

Clapping. Yelling. Not from the script.

From the people.

Kendra didn’t move.

She closed her eyes, just for one more second.

Then walked off stage. Not fast. Not scared.

Just walking.



Backstage, the crew was moving fast. But someone handed her a water bottle. Someone else pulled her in for a hug. Dana's voice was softer now, saying something like, "Beautiful work."

Kendra sat on the bench near the prop rack.

She took off her sneakers.

Folded her sash.

Pressed the small lyric note into her bag.

Isaiah passed and tossed a hoodie at her.

"Yo," he said. "Beast mode."

Kendra pulled the hoodie over her head, her costume shirt still clinging damp to her back underneath. Her arms moved slowly, sore from the turns, the blocking, and the weight of holding it all together. She sat still on the bench, heart still climbing down from the high of stage lights and heat and eyes. Everything around her buzzed—tech crew calling for resets, someone dragging a set piece across the floor, the quiet crackle of a headset nearby—but she stayed in her spot,



hoodie now loose around her shoulders, bottle of water untouched beside her.

LaShonda stood just beyond the side curtain, not far from where Kendra had exited. Her arms were crossed over her chest, one foot tapping lightly on the floor, but she hadn't moved. Her eyes were locked on the space Kendra had just walked off from. She didn't say anything. Didn't shift. Her jaw was tight, shoulders set, but she didn't turn away. Her usual circle wasn't near her, and her phone wasn't in her hand. She just stood, still, and quiet.

Backstage had its rhythm now. The last song started. Kendra wasn't in it. She watched the screen by the prop table, where the live feed showed the stage. Dancers moved through the final steps. Voices layered over the beat, rising together like a closing door. The camera shifted slightly, then held still on the last image of the stage as the lights changed.

Then the final note hit.

It came from her.



They had changed the blocking last minute. Dana's voice had asked her during break, "Can you handle it? One more shot. Solo out."

She had nodded without even thinking.

Now that note was rising through the space again. Her voice didn't hit perfectly. It cracked. It stretched. But it didn't fall. It didn't run.

Her hands had shaken. Her breath had caught. But when it came time, she let it loose. Not polished. Not soft. But real. It filled the room.

And when it dropped—

Silence.

Not the usual pause-for-effect kind of silence. Not the wait-for-cue kind.

This was the breath-holding, edge-of-seat kind. The kind that comes when nobody moves.

Then the noise hit.



The first stomp came from the back row. A sharp sound against the wooden floor. A whistle. Then claps. Then more. A whole crowd on its feet.

They didn't just clap. They shouted.

"Kendra!"

Someone yelled it twice. Then more joined.

She heard her name. From rows of people, she couldn't see.

From kids. From old folks. From people who had no idea what she had to fight through just to get to that X onstage.

She stayed backstage. She hasn't stepped out for the bow yet.

She needed a second.

Her throat was still tight. Not from crying. She wasn't crying.

Just full. Too full to talk.



The screen still showed the crowd. People were on their feet.

She stood slowly and stepped toward the wings again. Isaiah bumped her shoulder gently as he passed, going toward the curtain.

“Go get your bow,” he said, not smiling, just saying it like a fact.

She walked forward. The light from the stage spilled sideways, catching her feet first.

LaShonda was still there—same spot.

As Kendra stepped closer, LaShonda turned her head.

Their eyes met.

And LaShonda didn’t speak.

Didn’t smirk.

Didn’t nod.

But she didn’t look away.



No glare.

Just silence.

Kendra walked past her, not fast, just one step at a time.

She took her place beside the others. The cast lined up in a curve.

She saw Dana offstage, fingers in the air, counting them in.

Then they all stepped forward together.

Lights full up.

The curtain held, then opened.

They bowed.

And the noise came again.

Louder now.

Brighter.



Kendra smiled once—just once-and only for herself.

Then she stepped back and let the others take their moment.

She had already had hers.

She had sung it.

Broken or not.

It was hers.



CHAPTER 9: THE BROADWAY CALL

Even after she left, the theater's lights were still in Kendra's eyes. The night outside was sharp and cold, but her chest was still warm from her name rising off the crowd's lips. She walked home slowly, her shoes tired, her hands stuffed into her hoodie pockets. Her phone buzzed again and again, but she didn't check it. She didn't want to break the quiet that had wrapped around her since the curtain closed.

When she got to her building, the front door stuck again. She leaned her weight into it, shoulder tight, and the door gave in with a groan. The hallway light blinked, and the familiar scent of floor cleaner and cooking oil filled her nose. She climbed the stairs without rushing. Each step felt part of the same rhythm she had kept all night—steady, grounded.

She opened the apartment door and stepped inside.



Marvin was wide awake, standing in the living room with his socks half off and a newspaper shaking in both hands.

“Look!” he shouted. “Sis! Look!”

He waved the paper so hard she had to duck to catch it. The front page was wrinkled, but there she was—a photo from last night, right in the center. The spotlight was frozen behind her, her arms lifted, her mouth open mid-note. Her name was printed in bold under the picture.

“Bronx Voice Breaks Harlem Stage Wide Open.”

She stared at it momentarily, her fingers brushing over the edge of the photo. Marvin’s smile was wide, his front teeth slightly crooked, and his eyes glowing like his face in the paper.

“Everybody at school saw it,” he said, dancing a little in place. “Mr. Gordon said you should teach the music class. For real!”



She smiled softly, folding the paper and putting it on the table.

“That’s wild,” she said.

“You’re famous,” he whispered like it was a secret. “Do famous people still fold laundry?”

She laughed, reaching over to tug him into a quick side hug.

“Famous people still do chores,” she said. “Especially in this house.”

Marvin groaned but leaned into her anyway. “I saved you the last Pop-Tart.”

“Good move,” she said.

Just then, the front door opened. Kendra looked up as her mother walked in, shoulders slumped, badge still clipped to her wrinkled uniform. Shashawna dropped her bag near the kitchen counter and didn’t even remove her coat immediately. Her curls were pinned back, loose pieces falling near her eyes.



She looked at Kendra, then at the folded newspaper on the table.

“You on the front page,” she said, her voice flat with shock and pride. “They see you now.”

Kendra stepped toward her. “I made tea.”

“I could cry,” Shashawna said, sitting slowly on the edge of the couch. “But I’m too tired.”

“You don't need to cry,” Kendra whispered.

Shashawna nodded and rubbed her eyes. “You did that.”

Kendra poured tea into two mugs—one for herself and one for her mother. She didn’t rush. The steam rose gently as she stirred sugar into both cups. She handed one over without speaking, letting it rest in her mother’s hands. The warmth was enough.

Marvin yawned from the corner. His shoulders drooped now, the night's excitement finally falling off him.



“Come on,” Kendra said, setting her mug down. “Bed.”

He opened his mouth to argue, but she raised one eyebrow. He closed it again.

“Okay, okay,” he said. “But you gotta sing.”

She walked with him into the small bedroom they shared. His blanket was half off the bed, and his shoes were still under the desk. She picked them up, placed them by the closet, and helped him climb under the covers.

“Just a short song,” he said.

“I got you.”

She sat at the edge of the bed, brushed the hair back from his forehead, and started humming. Not loud. Just enough. A melody without words, something she had made up long ago. Marvin’s eyes closed fast.

His breathing was slow and even when she reached the tune's end.



She stood, tucked the blanket tighter, and turned off the light.

The tea had cooled in the kitchen, but it tasted sweet when she took a sip. Her mother had fallen asleep, head tilted back on the couch, her cup resting near her lap.

Kendra didn't wake her.

She crept, picked up the laundry basket, and folded the towels. The hum of the old fridge filled the space around her. She folded slowly, edges lined up neatly. Her mind didn't rush ahead or drift back. It stayed right where her hands were.

One towel. Then another.

A soft sound escaped her lips—just a hum again. Then a low note. Then words.

“I rise... I rise...”

She didn't think about where the melody came from. She didn't force it. It came easily now. She sang as she



worked, her voice steady and soft. Not for anyone to hear. Just for herself.

A knock on the door made her jump.

She set the towel down and walked over, checking through the peephole.

It was Jada, her hair under a scarf and her jacket zipped high.

Kendra opened the door quickly and stepped aside.

“You serious?” Jada asked. “You gonna just end the night and not tell me?”

Kendra grinned. “You saw it?”

“Girl, I watched it three times,” Jada said. “I cried. Then I screamed. Then I played it again.”

Kendra sat on the floor, back against the wall. Jada joined her.



“I saw LaShonda,” Jada said. “She didn’t say anything. Just walked straight out. No talk. No side-eye. Just... gone.”

Kendra nodded once. “It’s okay. She was watching, though.”

“Everybody was.”

They sat quietly for a second.

“Are you ready?” Jada asked.

“For what?”

“For what comes next.”

Kendra stared at the small window. The street outside was still. A slow car passed once. She took a breath.

“I don’t know,” she said. “But I’m going anyway.”

Jada leaned her head back against the wall.

“You wrote anything new?”



Kendra reached into her backpack and pulled out her notebook. The cover was bent, and some pages were loose, but the words were there.

She handed it over.

Jada opened it carefully, flipping through the pages slowly, like each one might tear. “You wrote all this since summer?” she asked.

Kendra nodded. “Some of it’s from before, too. Before the first audition. Even before the gallery.”

Jada didn’t say anything right away. She stopped on one page near the middle. Her eyes scanned the words, then she looked up.

“This one. The one about walking home in the dark but still humming? This one feels like now.”

Kendra smiled, just a little.

Her phone buzzed in her hoodie pocket. She didn’t rush to check it. But when it buzzed again, something in her chest pulled her hand to the screen. She unlocked it without thinking, thumb swiping up.



One unread email.

She clicked it open. Her eyes moved across the screen slowly.

Then faster.

Her breath stopped.

Subject line: “Rising is moving to Broadway. You remain our lead.”

The words didn’t change, no matter how often she read them. They were there. Not a maybe. Not a callback. Not a question.

It was a yes.

A big, loud, clear yes.

She gasped. Her hand went to her mouth. The phone almost dropped from her other hand. Jada looked over, confused at first, then grabbed Kendra’s wrist.

“What?” she asked. “What happened? You good?”



Kendra turned the screen around. Jada leaned in and read.

“Oh my God,” Jada whispered. Then louder: “OH MY GOD.”

They stood up simultaneously in the small bedroom, with the folded towels still on the floor and the notebook between them.

Kendra felt like the room tilted. Just a little. Like the floor wasn’t entirely flat anymore. Her feet stayed on it, though. She took one long breath. Then another.

And she smiled.

A real one. Big. Quiet. Full.

Jada hugged her hard. “You’re the lead. On Broadway.”

“I’m still me,” Kendra whispered.

“But now you’re you... on Broadway.”



The next morning came early, but sleep had never really settled in. Kendra tossed in bed, eyes half closed, the email playing repeatedly. When her alarm buzzed, she was already sitting up. She dressed silently, grabbed a banana from the counter, and scribbled a quick note for Marvin: “Be good. Back soon.”—and slipped out the door.

When she stepped into the subway, the train platform was half full. Morning workers, students, and people move like they always do. Her feet found the yellow line. The tunnel wind blew softly across her face. Her fingers traced the edge of her lyric notebook in her bag.

The train pulled in.

She stepped on.

As the doors shut behind her, Jada appeared like she always did—sliding through the last second, breath quick from the stairs.

“You didn’t dream it,” she said without sitting. “I checked the website this morning. Your name’s there.”



Kendra sat down and rested her hands on her knees.
“Feels weird,” she said.

“Feels right,” Jada answered.

They rode without talking for a bit. Just the hum of the train. The jerk of tracks. The soft rhythm of the ride.

That night, rehearsal started at a new building—different doors, bigger mirrors, tighter schedules. The Broadway room didn’t wait for anyone. Everyone moved fast. The stage manager wore black and didn’t smile. The director clapped sharply. The piano player kept time like it was a clock ticking.

Kendra stepped inside and held her bag close.

“LaShonda’s not here,” someone whispered. “New show, new city.”

Kendra didn’t ask questions. She just nodded.

Mr. Powell spotted her near the mirrors. “You’re here early. Good.”



She didn't explain why. She was just... there.

Rehearsal began. They ran the first number once, then again. Cues had to be tighter now. Every beat exact. No room to breathe. Kendra's shoes squeaked against the floor as she hit her marks. Her arms moved fast, chest open, voice rising. The room didn't clap when she nailed it. But no one stopped her either. That meant something.

The break came. Everyone sat, stretched, or checked phones.

Kendra found a corner and pulled out her notebook—a clean page.

She wrote fast.

“Don't shrink. Don't hide. Don't guess.”

She folded the page and tucked it into her pocket.

Mr. Powell called five minutes.

She stood.



The next part was more challenging—three songs back-to-back, new blocking, full mic.

Her body moved like it remembered before her brain did. Her voice cracked once. But she didn't stop.

The mirror caught her face in the final hold. Her cheeks were red. Her eyes were wide. Sweat on her neck.

She didn't look away.

When rehearsal ended, the cast clapped politely. A few people nodded at her. A costume tech gave her a thumbs-up.

"Nice run," someone said.

Outside, the city lights were starting to glow. Jada waited near the exit.

"Yo," she said. "You ready for opening night?"

Kendra adjusted the strap of her bag. "Ask me after tomorrow."



“I will.”

They walked to the train without talking. Their silence was different now—not heavy, just full.

When she got home, the apartment was warm. Marvin was already in bed, one sock hanging off his foot. The TV was still on low, and a cartoon played with no sound.

On the fridge was a sticky note.

It said, “Broadway girl. I saved you the other Pop-Tart. You’re welcome.”

She laughed and peeled it off.

Her mother was asleep on the couch. Kendra didn’t wake her. She picked up the blanket that had slipped halfway to the floor and tucked it gently around her mother’s shoulders. Shashawna’s shoes were still on, her badge hanging loosely from her collar. Her fingers were curled in, like she’d been holding something and let go.



Kendra sat for a minute beside the couch, quiet and still. Then she reached for the half-empty mug on the table, the one her mother always used for tea, and carried it slowly to the sink. She washed it carefully, even though it didn't need it, and dried it with the clean towel they kept by the stove.

Then she grabbed her notebook and walked to her room.

She left the half-open door just enough to hear if Marvin called. Her room was still messy—costume bag leaning against the chair, old lyric sheets tucked under her pillow. She kicked off her shoes and stood at the window. The Bronx air was cooler now. The night moved differently. Slower. Softer.

She pulled her curtain back and looked out over the buildings. The block was quiet. A few people walked home. A light blinked from a car across the street. Somewhere, a dog barked once and went silent.

Kendra reached for her notebook again. She flipped to the back, where there were pages still blank. She wrote down one sentence:



“Still me.”

The next morning was the day. Not a rehearsal. Not a preview.

Opening night.

Broadway.

She woke before the sun again, but this time, her eyes opened easily. Her heart didn't race, not yet. She sat on the edge of her bed and listened to the quiet. Then she stood and got dressed. She packed slowly, folding her hoodie and checking her shoes twice.

Marvin was still asleep when she left. She didn't leave a note this time. She knew he'd know.

The train was less crowded that morning. There were just a few people: a woman with a bag full of fruit and a man in work boots nodding off near the door.

Kendra sat by the window. Her face rested against the cool glass as the train rolled south. Murals rushed by—color on brick—names, shapes, and stories.

Each one reminded her where she came from.



She pulled her phone from her pocket and opened the email again. Her name was there. Right under the show title. “Lead Role: Kendra Rivers.”

She didn’t smile.

Not yet.

At 42nd Street, she stepped off the train.

When she came up the stairs, she paused. The city was already awake. People moved fast. Taxis honked. A group of kids rushed past, laughing. But all of that faded when she turned and looked up.

There it was.

The theater.

Broadway.

The name of the show was up in bright lights above the marquee. And under that, in smaller gold letters: “Starring Kendra Rivers.”

She stood still.



The lights blinked. The wind pulled at her jacket. But she didn't move.

She didn't need a mirror. She didn't need a camera. She didn't even need to take a picture.

Because her feet remembered something else.

Victoria Theatre's backstage hallway. The creaky pipes that knocked when the heat turned on. The cracked tile is near the dressing rooms. The echo when you sang alone in the gallery, late at night. That place had its kind of light. It didn't shine the same but warmed her the same way.

And then before that, her block. Her hallway. The second stair creaked. Mr. Santiago's store. The mural on the corner. The night folding Marvin's clothes, warming rice, whispering lines to herself with the window cracked open.

All of that walked with her now.

She stepped forward.



Inside the theater, people moved like they had a plan. The crew in black clothes rolled props. Stage managers checked lists. A woman with a headset passed Kendra a water bottle. “You’re in Dressing Room Three. Left hallway.”

Kendra nodded. “Thanks.”

She passed through the narrow hallways, her sneakers brushing the floor. She reached her door. Her name was taped on a white square, just a black marker: “Kendra Rivers.”

She stood in front of it for a second. Then she opened it.

The room was small but clean. There was a mirror with bulbs lit around the frame, a low table with tissues, cotton pads, and a brush, and a little stool.

She sat.

She stared into the mirror and took a breath.

She didn’t say anything out loud. But in her head, the voice was unmistakable.



“You belong.”

She got into costume: a silk dress, a light scarf, and shoes with a short heel that clicked on the floor when she walked.

A knock at the door. “Ten minutes.”

She nodded. “Ready.”

She walked backstage.

Other actors were there too. Stretching. Whispering lines. Some pacing.

LaShonda was in the wings.

Kendra didn’t expect her.

LaShonda didn’t have a script. Didn’t have a mic.

She was sitting in one of the empty seats, off to the side.

Not with a glare.

Not with a smirk.



Just watching.

Her arms folded. Her chin rested on her hand.

Kendra didn't speak. She didn't wave. But she saw it in LaShonda's face.

Something new.

Respect.

Someone said, "Five minutes."

Kendra moved behind the curtain. She walked past the lights and the stage ropes. She stopped just before the velvet edge and placed her hand on the wall.

She whispered, "Now they know my name. But I've always known it."

And she waited. Not with fear.

With fire.



CHAPTER 10: THE CONTRACT AND THE CURTAIN

The next two weeks blurred.

Every night, the seats at the Victoria Theatre filled before the lights dimmed. Rows of faces waited, all eyes facing the stage. Each night, the buzz in the lobby started earlier, louder—people showing up before sunset, laughing, pointing at the posters, snapping pictures of the sign outside. Some fans even waited at the back entrance hoping for a wave or autograph. Most just wanted to say, “We saw her. We saw Kendra Rivers.”

Inside the walls, the energy never dropped.

The cast packed tight in the dressing rooms, changing fast, fixing hair, adjusting mics. Every space backstage felt smaller now—warm with sweat, full of sound. Between scenes, people leaned against walls to breathe, to sip water, to stretch their legs before running back out. The velvet curtains didn’t feel like



fabric anymore. They felt like part of the work. They soaked up voices, movement, breath.

Kendra didn't stand still much.

She moved with purpose. Quick changes, vocal warm-ups, steps to mark before her solo. Her shoes sat beside the monitor every night, soles worn from each show. Her silk scarf stayed tucked in her bag, folded just the way she needed it to feel right before the lights hit.

"Five minutes," the stage manager called each time, his headset crackling.

Kendra always nodded. "I'm here."

Her dressing room mirror held a small note Marvin had made: "Breathe, Broadway." She looked at it once before going onstage and again when she came off.

And she felt everything.

Every time the music started, her chest lifted. Every time she hit her mark, her feet felt planted like never before. Every lyric rolled off her tongue with the



weight of the Bronx, the voice of her mother, the corners she'd walked, the halls of M.S. 110, the sound of Marvin's laugh from the kitchen.

But she also felt the other part.

The tired part.

Her voice cracked more easily now if she didn't warm up right. Her back ached after long nights. Her fingers cramped when she scribbled new lyrics at 1 a.m., trying to keep creating while also performing. She kept moving, but inside she started to feel the pressure build.

She didn't tell anyone.

Not even Jada.

When the show ended each night and the crowd clapped and stood and shouted her name, she bowed low and smiled. Then she went home and soaked her feet in the tub while Marvin told her who posted what online. "Girl, your clip's at a million views now," he



said one night, showing her his phone. She smiled and nodded but didn't even click the link.

At school, kids looked at her different. Some smiled with wide eyes. Some stared, not knowing what to say. Even the teachers gave her nods, or asked, "How's the show going?" But Kendra still did her homework. Still ate lunch outside with Jada. Still studied for math tests. Fame didn't cancel seventh grade.

Then the news broke.

Twelve weeks. That's how long *Rising Up* sold out the Victoria Theatre.

And in just the first two weeks alone, ticket sales crossed \$170,000. Posters were gone by the first weekend. T-shirts flew off tables. And Kendra Rivers? Her name was everywhere.

Word reached Uptown. Producers from Broadway had come quietly to watch—sitting in the back row, no fanfare, just watching. And by the second week, they handed Paul, the theatre producer, a business card. "This girl," they said. "She's what we've been looking for."



One Thursday, in the middle of the second week, Kendra walked into the theatre early. The house was quiet. No one else had arrived yet. The chairs were empty, rows waiting in stillness. The lights on the stage were off, but a strip of glow ran along the floor.

She stood there by herself.

She could smell the leftover scent of makeup, the sharpness of hairspray, the soft mix of fabric and wood.

She whispered one word: “Thank you.”

Not to anyone.

Just to the room.

That night, the audience gave the biggest ovation yet. They clapped so long she had to bow twice. Mr. Powell waved his arms backstage trying to rush her off, but the crowd was still shouting. She stepped back finally, breath heavy, hands shaking.

Behind the curtain, LaShonda stood by the prop table.



She didn't say much.

She just passed Kendra a water bottle.

"You owned it," she said, plain and direct.

Kendra nodded. "Thanks."

LaShonda tilted her head. "No. I mean it."

And that was it. Then she walked away.

That same night, Paul—one of the Victoria Theatre producers—was pulled aside by a pair of visiting guests. Broadway producers from Uptown West who had been quietly attending previews handed him a card. "This girl," they said. "She's what we're looking for. We want *Rising Up* on Broadway. And we want her as the lead."

Paul didn't answer right away. He just nodded and watched as the guests disappeared into the Harlem night. He knew this meant something big. But he also knew it meant changes. Contracts. Buyouts. Calls. And pressure.



Back at home, Kendra couldn't stop thinking about the money. She heard whispers of how much was being made. Merch was sold out. People were waiting outside every night. She wondered what her name meant to all of it. Not just to the audience. To the people in charge.

But no one had said anything. No one had offered her more than thanks.

The next morning, Shashawna sat at the table with a piece of paper in her hand. Her face was tired, but focused.

"They want to sign you."

Kendra blinked. "What do you mean?"

"This came in the mail. It's a contract."

Kendra took the paper slowly. Her name was there at the top. "Kendra Rivers – Lead Artist Agreement."

She read the first lines. She didn't understand everything. But she saw words like "future



engagement,” “creative rights,” and “compensation deferred.”

Her eyes stopped there.

“Deferred?”

Shashawna rubbed her eyes. “It means... not yet.”

Kendra sat back.

“They said the show made a lot,” she said, voice small.

Her mom nodded. “It did.”

“Then why...”

Shashawna sighed. “Because they’re hoping we don’t ask.”

Kendra didn’t say anything. She folded the contract and slid it into her notebook.

Later that day, Shashawna made her way back to the theater. She wasn’t just holding Kendra’s contract—she was holding records. Ticket stubs. Merch invoices.



Online data. “She’s not just your lead,” she told Paul flatly. “She is the show.”

She pointed to Clause 17B—about renegotiation if a single artist became the face of the production. “That clause? It applies now. And she deserves what you promised—plus back pay for the weeks she already carried this.”

The conversation was sharp. Shashawna didn’t shout. She didn’t beg. She broke down every number, every loophole, and every delay. By the end of it, Paul sighed and said, “We’ll move to Broadway. And yes, her deal goes with it. Retroactive.”

That night, in her dressing room, Kendra opened a clean envelope. Inside: a new contract with payment terms. Her name, salary, bonus. For the first time, it felt real. She looked at her mom and whispered, “You fought for this.” Shashawna just said, “I fought for you.”

At the theatre, news had already spread. Ticket sales hit \$170,000. Merchandise sold out—T-shirts,



posters, even lyric books with her photo. People were talking about moving the show to another city.

And still, backstage, nothing slowed down.

Someone ran into a chair and ripped a seam. Someone else dropped a mic pack. The stage manager's voice never stopped. "Costume techs to the wings!" "We're ten down!" "Someone grab backup lights!" Every night was a rush of sweat and sounds.

The hallway by the dressing rooms stayed packed. Isaiah sat on the floor, stretching. "You okay?" he asked.

Kendra shrugged. "Yeah."

"Just tired?"

She nodded.

He tossed her a granola bar. "Eat. We need your fire."

She smiled, unwrapped it, and took a bite.



That night, the second act ran long. Someone missed a cue. The band had to hold for six beats while a tech fixed a cord. Kendra stood in the wing, one foot in her dance shoe, the other in a slipper. Her scarf was tangled.

Jada, who had snuck in that night, waved from behind the curtain. “You good?”

Kendra nodded.

But she felt the weight.

Not the crowd.

Not the lights.

The doing.

Night after night after night.

Still, when the curtain lifted, she moved.

Her voice cracked once. She fixed it. Her step slipped. She fixed that too.



And when she hit the last line—“This voice won’t wait for permission”—she looked out and saw her mom, still in scrubs, sitting in row five. Her eyes full of tears. Her lips moving.

She was mouthing every word.

Kendra finished, arms lifted, head high.

The crowd stood again.

This time, she bowed slow.

When she walked backstage, she didn’t run.

She just walked.

Calm. Clear.

She sat in her dressing room chair. Closed her eyes. Let herself breathe.

Mr. Powell knocked once. “You good?”

Kendra opened her eyes. “Yeah.”

He smiled. “Keep showing up.”



She nodded.

Later that night, at home, Marvin was already asleep.
A fresh sticky note was stuck to the fridge.

“Showed Mr. Carter your clip. He cried. Love you,
star.”

Kendra poured herself water, sat at the table, and
opened her notebook.

She didn’t write a new song.

She didn’t even write a lyric.

She just drew a box and inside it wrote one word:

“Here.”

Then she closed the notebook and pushed her chair
back. The hum of the fridge filled the kitchen. The
apartment was quiet except for the soft creak of the
windowpane in the breeze and Marvin’s small breaths
from the other room. She stood, stretched her arms,
and walked down the hall. Her steps were slow. The
floor was cold under her feet. She stopped at Marvin’s



door and peeked in. He was curled up under his blanket, one sock half-off, mouth open just a little. His schoolbook was still open on the bed next to him. Kendra stepped inside, lifted the book gently, closed it, and placed it on his desk. She tucked his sock back on and pulled the blanket up over his shoulder.

Back in the living room, she grabbed her scarf and folded it carefully, laying it over the back of the couch. She glanced at the clock. Past midnight.

She was about to turn off the kitchen light when the apartment door opened.

Shashawna walked in. Her face looked tight, her lips pressed together. She was still in her hospital uniform. The navy pants had a smudge near the knee, and her white shoes looked grayer than usual. Her eyes met Kendra's.

"I'm going," she said, voice low but firm.

Kendra blinked. "Going where?"



Shashawna held up the contract. It had a sticky note on the top corner and a folded edge. “They think this is enough? They think we’ll just take this?”

Kendra walked over. “Mama, it’s okay. I don’t need—”

Shashawna shook her head. “No. You don’t get to say that. Not anymore. You work. You show up. You lead the whole thing. You made that show. They sell out every night because of you.”

Kendra looked down at the floor.

“I’m not asking for millions,” Shashawna said. “But we’re not walking away with thank-yous and fake promises.”

She grabbed her jacket from the hook and shoved the contract into her bag. Then she turned and left without another word.

Kendra stood still.

Outside, the city still moved. Sirens in the distance. Someone yelling from a window. Music spilling from a car driving past.



At the Victoria Theatre the next day, the crew was already buzzing when Shashawna stepped inside. Her coat was buttoned high, her hair pulled back clean. She walked straight through the lobby, past a group of people waiting in line for tickets. She moved through the backstage doors without slowing. Every footstep hit the floor like a drum.

A tech looked up. “Excuse me, ma’am—”

“I know where I’m going,” she said.

She passed rows of costumes, makeup stations, tangled wires on the floor. She passed dancers stretching and singers humming. Some people turned their heads. Some whispered. But no one stopped her.

She reached the producer’s door and knocked once.

Then she opened it.

Inside, the producer sat at his desk, half bent over a clipboard, phone to his ear. He wore a dark blazer and glasses with thin black frames. His tie was undone.



The walls behind him were lined with posters from past productions.

“Paul,” Shashawna said.

He looked up, frowned slightly, and ended his call.

“I’m sorry, who—?”

“Shashawna Rivers,” she said. “Kendra’s mother.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Ah. Yes. She’s been doing great. Truly impressive—”

“We need to talk about the contract,” she cut in.

He glanced at the file on his desk. “It’s been reviewed. Everything’s standard. It’s a great opportunity—”

Shashawna stepped closer. “Clause 17B.”

He blinked.

“That clause says compensation may be renegotiated if the artist’s voice or image becomes the defining identity of the production.”



He opened the folder slowly.

“You’ve sold out two weeks,” she continued. “You printed her face on every poster. Her solo plays in every ad. And she hasn’t seen a dime. That’s not standard. That’s theft.”

His face tightened. “Now, let’s not jump to accusations—”

“She’s thirteen,” Shashawna said. “Thirteen, and she shows up early. She sings until her voice cracks. She comes home with aching feet and finishes her homework before bed. And you hand us a contract that says maybe someday she’ll get a check?”

Paul set the folder down. “Look, it’s a startup show. We take risks. We hope it pays later.”

“She already paid,” Shashawna said. “And now it’s your turn.”

He didn’t answer right away.

The room felt still. Even the hallway noise behind them seemed to pause.



“I’m not leaving until you write up a plan to fix it,” she said.

He rubbed his temples. “These things take time.”

“You have till curtain,” she said. “After that, you’ll hear from a lawyer.”

Paul sighed and nodded slowly. “Alright. I’ll draft something. No promises, but... something fair.”

Shashawna turned and walked out.

Backstage, the cast was gathering for warm-ups. The air buzzed with the usual pre-show rush—people running to fix hair, techs checking mic batteries, lights flashing in test runs.

Kendra stood near the wings, holding her lyric sheet. She saw her mother coming toward her.

“How did it go?” she asked.

Shashawna gave a short nod. Her eyes looked sharp, like she had walked through something and come out stronger.



“It’s getting done,” she said. “They heard me.”

Kendra looked down at the sheet in her hand, then back up. “You sure?”

“I made them look at the paper the way they look at the stage,” Shashawna said. “Now they know the difference.”

The hallway around them was still full of noise—heels tapping, voices rising, costumes rustling. But between them, it went quiet. Kendra stepped forward, and her mom took her hand. They didn’t say anything for a moment.

Shashawna reached into her bag and pulled out a new envelope. It was thicker and cleaner, and the flap sealed tight. She held it out.

Kendra took it slowly. She turned it over, opened the flap and pulled out the contract. Her name was printed in bold letters at the top. There were lines she didn’t understand, numbers that felt too big to believe, and a page at the end for her signature.



Her hands stopped moving. Her eyes were stuck on the words.

“This real?” she said.

Shashawna nodded. “It’s real.”

“I don’t even know what to feel.”

“You don’t need to feel everything right now,” her mother said. “You just need to remember this is yours. It’s been yours since the day you walked through that door and sang with nothing but your name.”

Kendra looked up. Her heart was full, but it didn’t feel heavy. It felt steady.

“This ain’t just a show,” Shashawna said again. “It’s your show.”

Kendra held the contract tight. “I’m with you.”

Her mom didn’t smile. She just said, “You earned it. I just made sure they remembered.”



The stage call came in five minutes. Kendra walked to the mirror near the dressing room. The lights buzzed overhead. She sat down and picked up a tissue, wiping the powder and blush from her cheeks. Her reflection stared back—clear, bare, strong.

She cleaned off her lips, brushed her edges one more time, and adjusted the collar of her costume. It sat just right now. She didn't need to tug at it. She didn't need to check her hair again. She was ready.

The hallway lights flickered as someone ran by with a headset, shouting names.

“Kendra, you're next!”

She stood. The lyric sheet was still on the counter. She picked it up, folded it neatly, and slid it into her pocket. She took one last look in the mirror, then turned off the light above it.

Backstage, the velvet curtain swayed slightly. The crowd was louder tonight. Laughter bubbled from the front rows. A baby cried and was quickly hushed.



Shoes tapped the wooden floor beneath the seats. The theater was full, wall to wall. Again.

She stepped into place behind the curtain. The warm glow of the stage lights seeped through the edges. Her pulse beat in time with the low buzz of the house speakers.

She closed her eyes.

“I’m not singing for them,” she whispered to herself. “I’m singing because it’s what I do. It’s what I am.”

The opening notes played. Her cue came.

The curtain rose.

She stepped forward.

Her voice came out like breath, steady and sure. The first line floated into the air, and she watched heads lift in the crowd. Phones rose, but she didn’t see them. She saw only her space. Her stage.

The solo grew stronger. Her chest pulled tight on the high note, but she held it. Her hand lifted just a little.



Her feet stayed planted. The words wrapped around her, and she let them carry her forward.

Every beat that came after landed clean. Every pause felt earned. The spotlight followed her, not because she chased it—but because she belonged in it.

The number ended. Her voice dropped into silence.

The crowd rose.

She didn't blink.

Somewhere in the back, LaShonda sat still. No glare. No smirk. Just a nod.

Kendra stepped back into the wings.

She didn't rush to the dressing room. She didn't sit. She just stood, her back pressed against the wall, her heart pounding but not shaking.

The noise from the crowd came through in waves: feet on the floors, hands clapping, voices shouting her name.



But she stayed still.

She remembered the cracked floors at home, the rice reheated at midnight, Marvin's sticky notes, her mom's tired shoes, her own hands wiping makeup off mirrors in silence.

She remembered every "no."

Now she had a "yes." Not just from a crowd. But from herself.

She whispered, "Now they know my name. But I've always known it."

And she walked away from the stage, not toward the noise, but into the quiet, where she could finally breathe on her own time.



CHAPTER 11: GIVING IT BACK

Kendra stepped off the train at 149th Street–Grand Concourse and felt the air hit different. It wasn't just the smell of roasted peanuts from the corner cart or the usual sound of a bike's brakes squealing at the light. Something had changed.

The sidewalk buzzed, but when she walked past the mural wall near the laundromat, she stopped. There, painted bright and bold, was her face. Her name sat at the top in gold letters: "KENDRA RIVERS – OUR BROADWAY GIRL." Her eyes looked out from the bricks like they had always been there. She didn't know who painted it. Maybe someone from the block. Maybe someone from the community center. But someone had watched. Someone had seen her.

Kendra reached into her pocket, touching the edge of her lyric sheet. It was worn soft, folded tight. She looked up at her own painted eyes and smiled. She kept walking.



At the corner, a group of little kids shouted her name. Two of them were still in school uniforms. One boy wore shoes two sizes too big. One girl wore a purple crown. They ran up to her.

“You’re Kendra!” the crown girl said.

“You were on the stage,” the boy said, pointing at a phone in his hand. “I saw it. My aunt showed me!”

Kendra knelt down. “You guys watched?”

“Three times,” the boy said. “Your voice goes up like this—” He threw his arms in the air and made a loud noise that didn’t sound like anything, but his grin stretched wide.

Kendra laughed. “You ever want to be on stage?”

The crown girl nodded fast. “I sing in the mirror.”

“That’s where I started too,” Kendra said. She stood up and looked at both of them. “You don’t need a big crowd. Just your voice.”



They ran back toward the stoop where someone was blasting music from a speaker in a shopping cart. The beat bounced off the walls. She kept walking.

At Moe's Sneaker Spot, a flyer hung on the window. Kendra's photo sat in the middle of it. Around her, block letters read: "OUR BROADWAY GIRL – CATCH HER IN RISING UP." Inside the store, a TV near the register played a clip of her solo. Moe himself looked up from behind the counter and waved.

"Look who it is," he said, stepping out with a box in his hand. "They didn't tell me Broadway had Bronx girls like this."

Kendra smiled. "How's business?"

"Can't keep the red Jordans on the shelf," Moe said. "Ever since you wore 'em in that one scene. Everyone's asking. Had to reorder."

She shook her head, still surprised. "That's wild."

"Not wild," he said. "Earned."



He handed her the box. “These are for you. Same style. Clean. No charge.”

She took them slowly. “Moe, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” he said. “Let folks see what pride looks like in sneakers.”

Kendra nodded. “Thank you.”

She stepped out again, walking down toward the old corner where Mr. Santiago’s bodega stood. Music floated through the block now, mixed with grill smoke and voices calling back and forth. On the street, tables had been set up with foil trays. Rice, beans, wings, empanadas, pastelillos. Someone handed her a plate before she even asked. They said her name like it was a welcome.

Block party music blasted louder. A group of girls danced in the middle of the street. A DJ near the hydrant spun tracks while kids waved flags and shirts. Behind the DJ, a poster stretched across the fence.



It was her again. “**RISING UP – A CELEBRATION FOR OUR OWN.**”

The celebration wasn’t just about what had been done. It was also for what was coming next. Earlier that week, word spread fast that the Broadway producers had officially bought out the remaining Victoria Theatre contract. The deal had been made between both teams—Harlem and Broadway, a full transition. Kendra’s show was heading to Times Square. The papers called it “a historic handoff.” The theatre crew called it “bittersweet.” But for Kendra, it meant everything she had worked for was being trusted to grow bigger.

Kendra ate on the curb. Her plate balanced on her knees. She waved at old neighbors, teachers, kids who used to run through sprinklers outside the center. Marvin showed up with two of his friends. He had on a hat tilted sideways and held a juice pouch like a trophy.

“You see that video of you from last week?” he asked.
“The one with the lights when you twirled?”



“Which one?”

“The one that got like ninety thousand likes,” he said, mouth full of chips. “I showed my teacher. She said you sound like freedom.”

Kendra blinked. “She said that?”

Marvin nodded. “She cried.”

They sat in silence for a minute. Then she reached over and messed up his curls. He didn’t fight it.

Later that week, she walked into the community center with a folder under her arm and a bag over her shoulder. The walls were just as she remembered. Posters for GED classes, Zumba nights, reading clubs. Ms. Alvarez came around the corner with a clipboard in her hand.

“You’re back,” she said. “I heard.”

“I’m starting something,” Kendra said. “Right here.”

Ms. Alvarez smiled. “What you need?”



“A room. An hour. Maybe some snacks.”

“Done.”

They set it up fast. A handwritten flyer went on the board: “FREE THEATER CAMP — BE SEEN. BE LOUD. BE YOU. AGES 8–14. TUESDAYS AND THURSDAYS.”

The first day, only six kids came. By the second week, there were twenty. They came with sneakers too big, shirts too tight, notebooks half full. Some were shy. Some loud. Some could already sing. Others just liked to stand in front of mirrors. But they all stayed.

Kendra brought her own notebooks. Her phone. Her voice. She showed them how to walk with purpose. How to speak from their gut. How to hold space with just their breath.

One girl—Naima—never looked up from the floor at first. She spoke in a whisper. Didn’t sing. Didn’t move.

Kendra sat next to her one day.



“You don’t have to talk today,” she said. “But you do have to stay.”

Naima nodded.

The next week, she hummed. The week after that, she sang a whole line.

By the end of the month, she led warm-ups.

In another class, a boy named Terrence had fast hands and couldn’t stop tapping. Desk. Chair. Floor. Tap tap tap.

“Sounds like rhythm to me,” Kendra said. “Let’s build something on it.”

They made a scene around his taps. A beat under a poem. He beamed like someone had unlocked a door just for him.

Parents peeked in after work. They brought food. Some stayed for the whole class. Someone offered a keyboard. Another brought water bottles. The room filled more and more each week.



Kendra never stood on a stage during the camp. She stayed beside the kids, on the floor, in the circle, sometimes in socks, sometimes barefoot. She let them fill the space.

At night, she'd stay late, sweeping the floor, locking up the cabinets, wiping chalk from the board.

One evening, as she was putting away folding chairs, Ms. Alvarez walked in with a small envelope.

"This came for you," she said.

Kendra opened it.

Inside was a photo of the mural on the wall. Below it, someone had written, "Thank you for showing us how to be."

She didn't cry.

She just folded it and put it in her pocket.

That night, back in the apartment, Marvin was already asleep. His mouth was half open. One sock was gone.



She tiptoed to the kitchen. On the fridge was a new sticky note.

It read, “You’re still our Broadway girl.”

Kendra smiled, peeling it off gently and tucking it into the corner of her notebook. She sat at the table, the hum of the fridge soft behind her. The quiet wrapped around her, not heavy, but peaceful. She opened her notebook, not to plan a show or write a scene, but to write down what she wanted the kids to feel when they came to class tomorrow.

Be seen. Be real. Be loud. Be proud.

The next afternoon, the community center buzzed louder than usual. More kids had come. Some dragged younger siblings along. Some showed up in mismatched shoes. One boy had glitter on his face left over from a school art project. Another girl carried her baby cousin on her hip.

Jada stood by the folding chairs, tying bandanas for the kids in the dance group. She looked up and laughed. “We’re gonna need more chairs.”



Isaiah was near the back with a speaker in one hand and a tangled mess of cables in the other. “Why do cords always know how to fight back?” he muttered, then looked at Kendra and smiled. “We’re ready for sound check when you are.”

Marcus had already taken charge of the small keyboard someone donated last week. He tapped out a tune, nodding at one of the kids who was trying to match the rhythm on a small drum.

Kendra walked to the middle of the room and clapped twice. The kids froze. Some giggled. One kept tapping but slowed down.

“Alright, crew,” Kendra said, voice clear. “We’re putting on our first showcase this Friday. That’s in three days.”

The room exploded with cheers and shouts.

“Costumes might not fit, your sneakers might not match, but your voice, your story, that’s what people will come to see,” she continued. “So let’s make it real.”



They practiced all afternoon. Some forgot their lines. One kid fell during a spin. Another knocked over a folding chair. But nobody left. They helped each other up. They started again. Kendra moved between them, correcting a hand position, fixing a head tilt, encouraging them louder.

Outside, the sun dipped low, painting the courtyard in soft gold. A man with a large speaker on wheels pulled up and waved.

It was Rico Blaze.

“Y’all ready for sound?” he called out.

Kids rushed to the windows.

Rico wore a denim jacket, bright sneakers, and sunglasses even though the sun was setting. He pushed buttons on his laptop and sent a beat thumping through the courtyard. It bounced off the bricks. People turned their heads. Some stopped to listen.

Kendra stepped outside.



“You really brought your setup?” she asked.

“Bronx stage doesn’t need curtains,” Rico said. “Just speakers and soul.”

He pointed to the open patch near the benches.

“That’s your stage.”

By the next evening, the word had spread. Parents, neighbors, kids from other schools, and cousins from down the block started showing up. Fold-out chairs lined the space. A string of dollar-store lights hung across the railing, blinking softly.

Kendra stood to the side, holding a clipboard. Jada handed her a water bottle.

“You ready?” Jada asked.

Kendra looked out at the crowd, then back at the kids gathered behind her, dressed in oversized vests, hand-decorated t-shirts, and glittered headbands.

“They are,” she said.

The music started.



The kids marched out one by one. Some forgot to bow. Others waved at the wrong time. One kid dropped a prop. Another shouted his line too early. But when they sang, it was full. When they danced, they gave all they had.

The crowd clapped along, cheering for every single one.

Rico played track after track. Isaiah beatboxed during the scene change. Marcus tapped out a short solo. Jada ran back and forth with safety pins and water cups. Ms. Alvarez held a flashlight high like a spotlight when one of the extension cords cut off.

In the middle of it all, Kendra stood near the back, mouthing the words, her hands tight but steady.

Then, during the last number, the curtain of people parted slightly.

Shashawna stood there, arms crossed, still in her hospital scrubs. Her hair pulled back. A bag under one eye. A tear slipping down one cheek.



But she smiled.

Kendra didn't move. She just looked back at her and nodded once.

The music swelled. The final song ended. The kids stood frozen in their last pose. For a breath, the courtyard went quiet.

Then the crowd stood up. They clapped. They shouted. Some whistled. Others cheered names.

Kendra stepped forward slowly.

The kids turned to her.

"Take your bows," she said.

They did.

Each of them stepped forward, waved, and bowed. Some curtsied. One did a cartwheel.

After the crowd started to break apart, the kids scattered—some toward their parents, others back



into the building. Ms. Alvarez handed out juice boxes. Rico packed up his speaker.

Kendra stood still in the center of it all, the sound still buzzing in her chest.

Shashawna made her way over.

“You did this,” she said.

“They did,” Kendra answered.

Her mom didn’t say anything right away. Then she reached into her bag and pulled out a folded flyer.

It was the one from the center wall. The first one.

She handed it to Kendra. “I kept it.”

Kendra took it with both hands. “It’s just paper.”

“It’s more now,” her mom said.

They stood in silence.

The lights flickered once, then twice.



“You coming home?” Shashawna asked.

“In a bit,” Kendra said. “I’m gonna clean up.”

She stayed back after everyone left. She stacked chairs, folded tablecloths, and swept up glitter and paper bits from the floor.

She looked at the mural across the courtyard.

Her name still bright.

But it didn’t feel like it was just hers anymore.

It felt shared. Held by everyone who showed up, sang loud, danced hard, and stayed present.

She walked toward the door, the night cool against her arms.

The next day was quiet, slower than the others. The camp kids were drawing props in the back room while Marcus played soft keys on the old keyboard. Jada was late, and Rico had gone to pick up more wires for the speaker setup. The center felt softer, less crowded.



Still, something buzzed in the air like a change was about to walk in.

Kendra leaned over the table with two younger kids, helping them cut stars out of gold paper. She smiled at the mess of glue sticks and torn scraps, then glanced toward the hallway when the front door creaked open.

She almost didn't look. But something made her turn.

LaShonda stood at the doorway, quiet, not dressed for stage or school. Just jeans, a plain hoodie, and her hair tied back in a long braid.

She didn't say anything. Didn't move much. Just stood watching.

Kendra's heart beat a little faster, but not out of fear. Not like before.

She stood up slowly and nodded once.

LaShonda nodded back.

That was it. No words. No glare. No challenge.



Kendra looked back at the table, then back toward the door, but LaShonda had already taken a seat near the back wall. She watched the rehearsal from behind the coat rack, arms crossed, but relaxed. A few kids noticed her and whispered. Kendra didn't stop them. Let them see.

They ran through the number again. A soft call-and-response chant Kendra had built from old street rhythms and lunchtime beats. The kids clapped it out with sneakers slapping the floor. Their voices rose in layers. Kendra kept time with her hands.

LaShonda stayed the whole time.

When they took a break, she stood up and walked out without a sound.

But she had been there. And Kendra had seen it.

Later that evening, Kendra sat in her room. The sun dipped behind the buildings, letting in a cool breeze that shook the edge of the curtain. She pulled her desk chair close to the window and lit the small lamp beside her.



On the wall above her desk was a Rising Up playbill, creased at the corner. Below it, a new photo hung—her, surrounded by camp kids. Some made silly faces. One flashed peace signs. A few smiled wide. Jada stood behind them, hands raised in mid-laugh. Isaiah had his arm around Marcus, both holding juice boxes.

And there, off to the side, a little blurry but there, was LaShonda.

Hands in her hoodie pocket. No smile. But no frown either.

Just present.

Kendra looked at the photo for a while before turning back to her notebook. The tiara still rested beside her lamp, its plastic gems catching the yellow light.

She flipped to a clean page. A corner of the last page still carried the word “Here,” boxed in. She touched the edge gently, then began writing.

Her pen scratched quietly. No music. No voices. Just thoughts.



The ideas didn't come all at once. A line. A chorus. A word that didn't quite fit. Then one that did.

She kept writing until her hand cramped. Then she leaned back in the chair and stared at the paper. Some words circled. Others crossed out. But something about it felt right.

Down the hall, she heard Marvin's laugh through the thin wall.

He was probably watching that one clip again—the one where she hit the wrong note and still kept going. He loved that part. Said it showed “real guts.”

She laughed quietly and shook her head.

She closed the notebook and slipped it into her bag.

Later, when she stepped outside to walk, the air smelled like the deli down the block. The sky was deep blue, fading into soft black. A few stars tried to shine through the streetlights.

She passed Moe's Sneaker Spot. The poster with her face still hung in the window. A new one was taped



next to it—a flyer for the camp’s end-of-summer showcase. Big letters read: COMMUNITY TALENT NIGHT.

She smiled.

A group of little kids ran past her, laughing, tagging each other. One of them stopped, looked at her, and pointed.

“That’s her,” he whispered.

Then he ran off.

Kendra kept walking.

The pages in her notebook fluttered gently with the movement of her steps. She didn’t try to hold them still. Let them flap. Let them breathe.

At the corner, she paused. She could see the mural now. The one with the wide arms, the dancer reaching up.

Someone had added stars above the figure’s hands.



Kendra crossed the street and stood beneath it. She didn't say anything. Just looked.

A voice behind her broke the quiet.

"You think they're ready for next week?"

It was Jada, holding two paper bags and wearing her usual smirk.

Kendra turned and shrugged. "I think they're already shining."

Jada handed her one of the bags. "Turkey and cheese. No mustard."

They sat on the curb and ate quietly.

Jada pointed at the notebook in Kendra's lap. "New lyrics?"

"Maybe," Kendra said. "More like notes to myself."

"Same thing," Jada said.



The street buzzed softly around them—cars, music, laughter from open windows. The kind of noise that didn't distract but filled the space.

After a while, Jada stood up. "See you tomorrow?"

"Early," Kendra said. "We got stage tape to lay down."

Jada saluted and walked off down the block.

Kendra stayed behind a few more minutes, then got up and walked toward home. Her steps were slow. Not tired. Just steady.

When she got to the building, she looked up. One light still on. Marvin, probably still watching that clip.

She climbed the stairs, avoiding the squeaky one. At the door, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a key.

The hallway light flickered once, then steadied.

She stepped inside.



The apartment smelled like something sweet. Maybe cookies. Maybe just the last of the summer breeze slipping through the cracked kitchen window.

She placed her bag down and walked toward her room.

She didn't turn on the big light. Just the small lamp.

She opened the notebook one more time.

Not to write.

Just to look.

Then she whispered quietly, "They see me."

She tapped the page once.

"But I've been here."

And tomorrow, she'd be here again.



CHAPTER 12: THE NEXT ACT BEGINS

The first light of morning slid across the kitchen counter like it belonged there. The smell of toast and something sweet filled the air. Kendra stood barefoot near the stove, stirring a pot of oatmeal with one hand while flipping open her notebook with the other. She didn't need music in the background today. The quiet was enough. She hummed low under her breath, more out of habit than anything else, barely even aware she was doing it.

Behind her, the front door creaked open.

Marvin's voice came first. "Kenny! Kenny, look!"

He burst into the kitchen, socks slipping on the floor, arms full of papers. Some fluttered to the ground as he reached her, but he didn't stop to pick them up. He waved a newspaper above his head like a flag. "You're in it again! Front page this time!"



Kendra blinked, pulled the spoon from the pot, and grabbed the paper. The headline was printed in bold letters right above her photo. It read: “Rising Star Leads the Way—From the Bronx to Broadway.”

Her face stared back at her, mouth open mid-song, eyes lit by stage lights. She looked like herself but also not. Bigger. Louder. Seen.

Marvin dropped a pile of envelopes on the table. “And you got mail. Real fan mail. One lady wrote you a poem. It rhymes.”

Kendra smiled as she flipped through the pages. Some were neat with stickers and stars. Others were messy, with crayon hearts and words like “You inspire me” and “You sound like my sister but cooler.”

She picked up one folded note written in purple ink. The letters were large and shaky. “I saw you sing on TV. My mom said girls like us don’t usually get that far. I’m glad you did. Now I know I can too.”

She read it twice, then set it down gently.



“Marv,” she said softly, “how early did you go out for these?”

He shrugged, already sliding onto a chair and ripping into a Pop-Tart. “Paper guy gave it to me when I was getting juice. Said you had fans waiting by the bodega. You’re famous now.”

She didn’t answer. Her eyes stayed on the fan letter.

From behind them, a soft shuffle came down the hallway.

Their mother appeared in the doorway, her hospital scrubs wrinkled, her steps slow. She had a mug of coffee in her hand and dark circles under her eyes. But her smile was there.

Kendra turned. “Ma—”

Before she could finish, the phone rang.

It sat on the edge of the table, screen lighting up.

Kendra grabbed it, wiped her hands on a towel, and answered.



“Hello?”

“Hi, this is Valerie Greene, producer for Westline Productions. We’ve seen your performance in Rising Up, and we’re preparing an all-new original show. A lead role has opened. We think it’s yours.”

Kendra didn’t speak.

She couldn’t. Her voice caught.

The woman’s voice continued. “It’s a major launch. Original score, full cast. You’d be creating the role from scratch. We want someone fresh, someone honest. You.”

Still, silence.

“Kendra?” the voice asked.

Kendra turned toward her mother. Her mouth opened, but no words came.

Her mother didn’t look up from her coffee. Just said calmly, “You already know your answer.”



Kendra finally found her voice. “Yes. Yes. I’d love to.”

She ended the call, hand still holding the phone, not moving.

Marvin looked up. “What happened?”

Kendra looked at him, still in his hoodie and with crumbs on his mouth. “They want me to be the lead in something new. Not a role from someone else. A new one. Mine.”

Marvin dropped the rest of his Pop-Tart. “Wait, you get to name the character and everything?”

“I think so.”

He leaned back in the chair, arms spread wide. “You better give her a cool name. Like Justice or Blaze.”

Kendra laughed, but her stomach flipped. Not from nerves. From the size of it. The hugeness.

She stood and walked to the window, pulling it open. Cold air rushed in, sharp but clean. Below, the street



was just waking up—delivery trucks, bikes, the shout of someone across the block.

She thought about the community center. About the mural. About every note she'd sung on that creaky floor, every kid who had stood behind her in oversized costumes, believing that a folding chair could be a throne or a milk crate could be a stage.

She thought about her notebook, the way it had pages full of half-ideas, lyrics written in margins, and phrases she hadn't said out loud yet.

She thought about her old sneakers and the days she scrubbed them clean, hoping someone would see her, really see her.

Now they had.

She turned back into the room. "I'm going to need more paper."

Her mom raised an eyebrow. "More songs?"

"No," Kendra said. "More dreams."



That afternoon, the three of them walked to the center together. It wasn't fancy. The walls still chipped. The floor still squeaked. But the camp kids were there. Isaiah ran warm-ups. Jada was marking stage spots with blue tape. Marcus carried in snacks from a corner store. The usual, but everything felt brighter.

Kendra stepped into the middle of the space. "All right, y'all! Big news. We're putting on a full show. And guess what? You're all part of it."

The kids shouted, some clapped, others just smiled big. One girl, the quiet one who barely spoke last week, raised her hand. "What's it called?"

Kendra paused. "We'll figure that out together," she said, but in her heart, she already knew.

They spent the next few hours building it from nothing. Beats. Skits. Song hooks. Everyone added something. A stomp rhythm. A clapped line. Kendra wrote fast, stopping only to ask, "What should come next?" And every answer came like it had been waiting.



Later that evening, after cleanup, after the last kid had been picked up, Kendra sat on the front steps of the building with Jada.

“You’re really doing it,” Jada said. “Not just onstage. Here too.”

Kendra rested her chin on her knees. “Feels like I never left.”

“You didn’t,” Jada said. “You just brought the spotlight home.”

Kendra smiled and pulled her notebook from her bag.

“I’m thinking of calling the next one ‘Echoes of the Block.’ Sound too corny?”

Jada grinned. “Sounds like truth.”

As Kendra finally stepped into the Ambassador Theater for rehearsal, her heart raced. The walls were higher, the stage wider, but it was all real. Just before she met the cast, the producer pulled her aside and handed her the official script. On the front, in bold gold letters, it said, “Echoes of the Block: Broadway



Premiere.” Valerie Greene smiled. “It’s still your show, Kendra. You’re our lead. Harlem may have launched it, but Broadway is where it’ll live now.” Kendra stood there, letting it sink in—she wasn’t just part of something new. She was carrying the truth of where she came from into the biggest space yet.

As the sun dipped low behind the rooftops, the street started to quiet. A few people walked by and nodded at Kendra. Some waved. A little boy held his mom’s hand and whispered, “That’s her.” She gave a small smile and lifted her hand in return. The air felt different now—not heavy, but full. Like the street itself was proud.

She stood slowly and closed her notebook, sliding it into her backpack. The steps under her feet were warm from the sun, but the breeze had turned cool. She zipped her jacket and walked toward the subway station, her sneakers soft against the sidewalk.

At the corner, Ms. Alvarez waved from her stoop. “You good, mija?”

Kendra nodded. “I’m getting there.”



She pushed through the turnstile at the Allerton Avenue station and sat near the window on the uptown 2 train. Her backpack rested on her knees, her notebook in her lap. As the train pulled forward, her pen hovered over the page, then touched down. She didn't need a title yet. Just space. Just a place to let the next song rise.

The lights inside the car flickered, but she kept writing. Her other hand rested on her backpack, fingers tapping in rhythm. The train moved fast now. The same walls she used to stare at, the same sounds she once feared, now felt like part of her beat.

Bronx murals flew by. She watched the colors blur—faces, words, stories. Every stop brought her closer. Not just to Times Square, but to something larger. The future didn't feel far anymore.

The car swayed, crowded with noise and motion. Someone played music out loud. It bounced off the walls, clashed with train screeches, and still she wrote. Her page started to fill. Not perfect lines, but real ones. About home. About heat. About not giving up.



A woman nearby looked over and smiled. “You writing something?”

Kendra looked up and nodded. “Always.”

When the train slid into 125th Street, Kendra leaned toward the window. She could just make out the top of the Victoria Theatre sign as they passed above. She placed a hand over her chest for a second, not to be dramatic, just to feel the echo. That space had changed her. But now she was heading toward a new stage.

At Times Square, everything blinked. Lights. Ads. People. Kendra stepped off the train and walked into the crowd. She didn’t rush. She didn’t shrink. She moved steady, holding her bag close.

It took only a few blocks to reach the Broadway house.

It looked simple from the outside. Brick walls. A black-and-gold sign above the doors. But inside, it was different. Big. Quiet. Waiting.



She pushed open the side door with her new key pass. The security guard nodded. He didn't ask who she was.

Inside, the hallway was cool and dim. The air smelled of paint and polish. A tech walked by with a clipboard. Someone called for props. Her footsteps echoed on the floor.

When she stepped into the main house, the lights were low. The red velvet seats stretched far back. The stage ahead was dark, but not empty. It felt like it was holding its breath.

She walked toward the steps and paused. Then slowly, she climbed.

The floor was smooth. The same kind of wood, but newer. Less worn. She crossed to the middle and looked out.

The seats stared back. Not with pressure, but with promise.



She dropped her bag and pulled out her notebook. Her voice was quiet when she said, “Let’s begin.”

She flipped open a page. Her eyes traced the words. Then she sang. Not loud. Just enough to hear herself. Just enough to feel it.

The sound of her voice stayed in the space long after she stopped. It lingered, quiet but sure, like it knew where it belonged. Kendra sat still, her fingers resting on the page. Then, slowly, she stood up. Her knees cracked a little from sitting so long, but she didn’t care. She walked slowly toward the wings, each step soft on the wide boards of the new stage. The space around her didn’t feel too big anymore. It felt like something she could carry with her.

She reached the edge, where the curtain hung down thick and heavy. It was still closed, still waiting. She stepped behind it, into the shadowed stretch that smelled like sawdust and fresh paint. She moved to the wall, leaned in close, and placed her hand flat against it. The wall was cool. Steady.

She let her fingers rest there.



“Now they know my name,” she whispered. “But I’ve always known it.”

She stayed like that for a moment, breathing slow. She didn’t need to be loud now. She didn’t need to prove anything. Not to the crowd. Not to anyone else. Just to herself. The stage had never been about being perfect. It had always been about being real.

A light flickered above her, and she looked up. Someone was checking spots. In the distance, she heard steps—crew coming in, techs rolling carts, stage managers clipping headsets into place. The house was waking up. The room that had been quiet was now filling with movement, with breath.

Kendra stepped back from the wall and turned toward the center. Her bag was still on the stage, her notebook still open where she’d left it. She walked to it slowly, picked it up, and placed it back into her backpack.

The main doors opened with a creak, and more people walked in—costume racks wheeling behind them, scripts in hand, coffee cups half full. Voices rose in



little bursts of planning and laughter. Music started low from the back—warm-up tracks for the band.

Dana, the new stage manager, called out from the aisle, “Places in ten!”

Kendra nodded, then walked up to the mark in the center. The tape was fresh, a pale X on the polished wood. She stood right over it, feet planted strong. She closed her eyes.

Behind her, the curtain began to shift. She could hear the soft rustle as it lifted, the ropes tugged from both sides. The air moved around her.

She opened her eyes.

The lights rose. Not all at once, but in a slow bloom, like morning coming through a window. They warmed her skin. Her breath caught for just a second, not from fear, but from the shape of it all—from the moment settling into place.

The house was still empty of audience. But that didn’t matter. Rehearsal or not, this was real.



She took one breath.

Then another.

And the next act began.

