

CHAPTER 1

Sweat popped off me and my heart danced as I scratched out beats until my fingers burned. I hunched my back so I was closer to my mixing board and bopped my head to the beat, waiting for my cue to start my solo as my brother, Derrick Richardson, worked the crowd, spitting unrehearsed rhymes off the top of his head.

The audience was on fire, and so were we.

When I started my solo, my body took over, and I started vibing with the music. I no longer felt the pain in my fingers, and my face was so close to the vinyl that I could almost kiss it as I focused on making that record sing a new song. It was like I was outside myself, watching as I did these crazy combinations that had the crowd on their feet yelling my stage name, Jazzy J, and grooving to my beats. Their energy was unlike anything I had ever known in all my sixteen years, and I lived for it.

Derrick took center stage again, and I harmonized with him before belting out a few lines from an R&B tune that would put Mary J. Blige to shame. The crowd was in awe. Most people knew I could DJ, but they had no clue that I was a fierce singer, and I could rap too. I had been saving my singing for the perfect moment, and that time was now—during the biggest performance of our lives. When Derrick was done, I scratched one last beat then came from behind my Technics 1200 turntable and grabbed his hand. We took a bow as the crowd whistled and shouted so loud my ears hurt.

We were the final act for the All-District Rap Invitational, which had gathered the top acts from Queens, New York, to compete for a spot in All-City. There, the winner from each of the city's boroughs—Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, Staten Island and the Bronx—would battle for a deal with Impact Records, a company that was known for producing hits. Derrick and I were rumored to win All-District, and as far as I was concerned, All-District and All-City were just formalities. That record contract already had my name on it.

Derrick leaned over, sweat streaming down his chocolate-brown face, and gave me a high-five. “Good job, Jasmine,” he yelled, sounding a little hoarse.

“Thanks.” I grinned at him as I whipped a towel from around my neck and handed it to him. “I knew you’d forget to bring one.”

He smiled his thanks as he wiped his face and threw the towel into the crowd. The girls went crazy as they fought to get it, and I couldn't help but laugh as Derrick blushed. He didn't like the spotlight at all, although he was an incredible rapper.

I watched as the other participants took the stage, and I tried to keep from laughing when I spotted the group that had come on before us. They had forgotten half their routine and had walked off the stage in disgrace after the crowd started booing them. I was surprised they had the nerve to show their face again. I know if it were me...nah, that would never be me. My routine was always tight.

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The MC finally made his way to the stage again, and he told a few corny jokes while the judges tabulated our scores. I figured they were just doing it for show, because there was no doubt in my mind that Derrick and I had won.

When the third-place winner was announced, I smiled at my brother. They had been good as had a few of the twenty acts, and even though I knew we were the best, I was still anxious about actually hearing our name called. When a solo performer was named the second-place winner, I didn't know whether to be happy or nervous. I crossed the fingers of my right hand behind my back and bounced in place, probably looking like I had to pee, as I silently encouraged the MC to call our name, and Derrick squeezed my other hand to calm me down.

"We want to thank all our acts for performing tonight," the MC said, "and now without further ado, the winner of the first annual All-District Rap Invitational is Jazzy J and Kid D."

The roar of the crowd was so loud that I could hardly hear who had won. It wasn't until Derrick lifted me up and spun me around that I realized it was us.

"We did it," he shouted.

"We did it?" I repeated, making sure I hadn't heard him wrong.

He nodded as he put me down, smiling so hard I thought his face was gonna split in two. We walked over to the announcer and accepted our trophy and a check for a thousand dollars, then we waved to the crowd who continued to cheer for us.

I spotted my friends Kyle Adams and Loretta Dennis in the front row, and they looked just as excited as I felt. I pointed to the trophy and grinned. Besides my brother, my friends knew just how much I wanted to win this contest. It had always been my dream to land a record deal, and now I was one step closer.

Life just couldn't get any better.

"Nice show," a man said as I pushed through the crowd to head off stage to meet my friends. It seemed like everybody and their momma had decided to come on stage to congratulate us, and it took me a good twenty minutes to make my way to Kyle and Loretta.

"Thanks," I said, showing off my perfect white teeth once again. I looked at the trophy to make sure it was still there and that I wasn't dreaming, then I glanced back at the guy as I pushed a lock of my curly hair out of my face. It was so hot in the Springfield Auditorium in Queens that my sandy-colored hair had become so frizzy it had worked its way out of the ponytail. The man was big and dark, and he kind of reminded me of Big Rick from that old show *Flavor of Love*, except he had a huge purple wide-brim hat that matched his purple shirt, which he wore with a white three-piece suit and tie. The fumes from his cigar mixed with the funk of the auditorium had me about to choke. I sniffed politely, but it didn't help.

When he blew another puff of smoke my way, I got annoyed.

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“Don’t you see the no-smoking signs in here?” I said, pointing to one above his head. “If you want to kill yourself, fine, but I’m too young to die.”

He grinned at me and blew smoke in my direction, which really annoyed me. I rolled my eyes and smacked my lips before turning to walk off.

“Do you play at parties and clubs?” he asked.

“Sure,” I said, turning to look at him again. I caught a glimpse of Loretta over the guy’s shoulder, and she was saying something, but she was too far away for me to hear her. I shrugged and looked at the guy again. “My brother and I have performed all over Queens.”

He nodded and stuck his cigar in his mouth again before he flicked a business card from his wallet. “Why don’t you give my assistant a call? I might have some work for you.”

“Have your assistant call me,” I said.

He gave this deep laugh, and his whole frame shook. “You’re a spunky little thing. I like that,” he said and grinned. “Call my assistant,” he insisted.

“Okay,” I said, taking the card. I got numbers all the time from people who said they wanted me to play at their party, but most of them never ended up following through. “Nice meeting you,” I said, not bothering to look at him as I headed over to my friends.

“We won,” I said, giving both Kyle and Loretta a hug.

“Congratulations,” Kyle said, giving me a pound and slinging his arm around my shoulder. “That show was hot.”

I turned to Loretta, but she was looking past me. I turned to see what she was staring at, but no one was there. “Hey,” I said, tapping her on the shoulder. “You’re not gon’ congratulate me?”

“Do you know who that was?” she asked, continuing to look past me.

“Who?” I asked.

Loretta finally focused on me and smiled like she had just seen her future baby daddy. “That was Dexter Chamberlain,” she said, smoothing her hair in place.

“Who’s that?” I asked, wrinkling my nose. The name sounded familiar, but I couldn’t remember where I had heard it.

“That dude from DC Records,” Kyle said and shrugged.

DC Records had been around for years, and the company had a huge stable of chart-topping gangsta rappers.

“You mean DC Chamberlain?” I asked as my eyes got wide. “His first name is Dexter?”

Loretta nodded. “What did he want?”

“He told me he might have some work for me.”

“He probably wants to sign you,” Loretta said, getting excited. “I think I heard somewhere he wants to move away from gangsta rap.” She jumped up and down and

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pulled on my shoulder. “You’d be perfect. When you get a deal, can I be on the cover of your first CD?”

Loretta was desperate to break into the modeling game, but somehow none of her gigs ever came through.

“Sure,” I said and laughed as Derrick walked up.

I filled him in on my encounter with DC Chamberlain, and he looked almost as unimpressed as Kyle.

“Do you really think he’s interested in signing us?” I asked, trying not to show my excitement.

Kyle frowned. “If he is, you’d better run in the other direction. I know you’ve heard about that man’s reputation.”

Derrick nodded.

I looked at Loretta, and I could see she was already picturing herself in my first video too. “What do you care about his reputation as long as you get your name out there?” She shrugged and glanced away before pouting her lips, smoothing her weave and looking over her shoulder, posing for a *Daily News* photographer who came to take our picture.

I thought about what Loretta said, and I realized she was right. Obviously DC knew I had skills or he wouldn’t have asked me to call him. If I had his support, there was no way I could lose All-City.

CHAPTER 2

By the time Derrick and I made it back to Hollis, it was almost two o'clock in the morning, and we had already missed our midnight curfew. Derrick had wanted to head home as soon as the competition was over, but I had convinced him that we needed to go out and celebrate. I knew we would be late, but I figured my daddy would be so excited we'd won that he'd talk to Momma so she wouldn't be upset. Since I knew we were going to be in trouble, I hadn't bothered to call, and I wouldn't give Derrick his phone so he could call.

After we dropped Loretta and Kyle off, Derrick and I drove in silence, except for the radio, which I had booming until Derrick made me turn it off.

"Man, I didn't think Loretta was ever gon' stop talking about her picture being in the paper," I said when the quiet finally started getting to me. "I hope that girl lands a deal soon. She's about to drive me crazy talking about modeling."

"That's all she talks about," Derrick agreed, looking out the window.

"Yeah, that's true. It's cool that we're gonna be in the paper though, huh?" I said, tapping my fingers against the steering wheel.

"You think they're still up?" Derrick asked, ignoring me as we got off the Cross Island Parkway at the Hempstead Turnpike exit. We had headed to a local diner for something to eat before dropping off Kyle and Loretta who both lived in Rosedale.

"Who knows?" I said, shrugging. I took my eyes off the road and briefly glanced at him. "So what we're a little late. We're not going to let them ruin this night for us, okay?"

Derrick tried to look as though he wasn't worried, but I knew he was, so I changed the subject.

"Man, where did you come up with those lyrics? That's not what we rehearsed."

Derrick shrugged and grinned sheepishly. He was really shy except when he was around people he was close to and when he got onstage. Then he became a different person. "You know how it is when the music takes over," he said.

I did know. I loved the way working the crowd made me feel.

"That note you hit was crazy." He looked at me and raised an eyebrow, still amazed at my vocal talent.

"Yeah, you know I've got skills." I grinned.

We listened to the radio for a couple of blocks, and I felt him starting to worry again.

"When are you gonna get that clunker of yours fixed? I'm tired of chauffeuring you around," I joked.

Truthfully, although Derrick was two years older than me, we were as close as twins, although we looked totally different. We were like a Reese's candy cup. His skin was the color of milk chocolate, and mine was like peanut butter. We did everything together, and I liked hanging with him. We were both graduating from high school the

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next week, and we would be freshmen at Morgan State in the fall—he was going to major in biology, and I was thinking about music, but I hadn't made up my mind.

I had skipped ninth grade, so Derrick and I were both graduating from Queens Academy that Thursday. We were coaledictorians, so we each had to give a speech. Derrick had been working on his for weeks, but I hadn't even started mine.

Derrick laughed. Thanks to the local performances at parties we had been doing for the last two years, we had created a buzz for ourselves in Queens, and with the money we made, we both had been able to buy used cars. I had gotten my Honda Civic a few months ago for my sixteenth birthday. Derrick had gotten an old Honda Prelude. It stayed in the shop more than it did on the road, but he loved his car as much as I did mine.

"What are you gonna buy with the prize money?" I asked.

Derrick pushed back his baseball cap and rubbed his hand over his close-cropped hair as he thought. "I don't know," he finally said. "I still can't believe we won." He looked down at the trophy, which he held between his legs, probably to make sure it was still there. "What about you?"

"Maybe that leather coat I saw at that store on Jamaica Ave.," I said.

"Yeah, it was nice," Derrick said and stroked his chin. "But maybe you should wait. Summer is about to start."

We had seen the black full-length coat when we had gone to look for turntable equipment a few weeks ago, and I hadn't been able to get it out of my head.

"Yeah, you're right. Maybe I'll just save my half of the money and treat myself to the coat when we land our deal."

"You really think we're going to win All-City?"

I took my eyes off the road for a second to look at him. "I know we are," I said. "I mean, some of those acts were good, but they weren't as good as us. We'll just practice every chance we get between now and August. Don't forget they still don't know I can rap."

He nodded thoughtfully. We turned onto our block and saw the living room light was on, as it usually was when we went out. Derrick glanced at me.

"They're probably asleep," I said. I tried to sound convincing, but I don't think I pulled it off since he looked at me real skeptical.

We walked in the door, and Momma looked like she had been in the same spot since we left earlier that evening.

"Do you know what time it is?" she asked, getting up to meet us at the front door. We didn't get a chance to answer. "I've called you half a dozen times."

"But Momma—" I said.

"Do I look like I need you to say anything right now? Do you know how worried I've been?" She looked from Derrick to me, and I didn't know whether we should answer. "Do you hear me talking to you?" she asked through clenched teeth.

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“But Momma, we won,” I said, grabbing the trophy from Derrick and holding it up for her to see. “We get to compete in All-City, and when we win, we’ll get a record deal. We’re gonna be famous.”

Momma ignored me and turned to Derrick. “I know Jasmine put you up to this. You know better than to be out this late without calling me. What has gotten into you?”

Derrick looked at the floor in silence, and I immediately jumped to his defense. “Momma, it was my fault. I wanted to go out to celebrate. My cell phone battery was dead, and I had Derrick’s phone in my purse, which is why we didn’t get your messages.”

She looked at me like she didn’t believe a word I was saying.

“For real, Momma. Look, I promise it won’t happen again—”

“I know it won’t,” Momma said. “The two of you are grounded for the summer.”

“What?” I screamed. I couldn’t believe she was being so unfair. It’s not like we missed curfew that often. “But Momma, didn’t you hear me? We’re going to All-City. We have to practice, and we have all those parties lined up. Please, we’ll do anything you ask, but you can’t put us on punishment now.”

Momma walked toward the back of the house, indicating we weren’t going to talk about it anymore. I glanced at Derrick, and he just stood there. I ran to catch up with her. “Momma, you can’t do this,” I yelled, trying to keep from crying.

All our screaming woke Daddy who stood in the door of their bedroom, rubbing his eyes. “What’s going on?” he asked sleepily.

“You need to talk to your daughter,” Momma said, turning to look at me.

Whenever I did anything wrong, she didn’t claim me.

I ran over to him. “Daddy, we won,” I said, showing him the trophy.

His eyes lit up. “Congratulations,” he said. He picked me up and spun me around, placing a kiss on my cheek. Momma frowned. “Oh come on, baby,” he said, looking at her. “That’s great news.”

“Daddy, I didn’t tell you the best part of all: We get to go to All-City, and when we win there, we get a record deal,” I screamed. I jumped around as the reality of my words set in.

Momma and Daddy never attended any of our performances. I think they reminded Daddy too much of his past and all he had given up. He had just been about to sign a record deal when Momma told him she was pregnant with Derrick. They both had had to drop out of school and get jobs to take care of Derrick and then me when I came along two years later. Although they never said they regretted not finishing college, I always wondered if they did. They were always riding Derrick and me about the importance of getting our education, making sure to mention that my cousins were doing well in college, and all the talk was starting to get on my nerves.

Derrick and I had gotten to the point where we stopped talking to them about our performances because my parents, especially my mother, always managed to work education into the conversation.

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I had totally tuned Daddy out, and when I refocused on the conversation, Derrick had come into the hall, and Momma was once again going on about the importance of education.

“You’re starting college in a couple of months, and since you’ll be on punishment for the rest of the summer, you can just tell whoever that you won’t be performing in that competition, so there won’t be a record deal.”

“Momma,” Derrick and I both shouted. I knew he probably was more upset for me than himself.

Although Derrick liked music, it was really my dream to pursue it professionally.

I turned to Daddy. “Daddy, please don’t let her do this,” I whined.

Momma ignored me. “As long as you’re living in my house, you’re going to abide by my rules,” she said.

“Daddy,” I wailed again.

“Don’t bring your father into this,” Momma said, giving Daddy that look that parents exchange. “I’ve made my decision, and that’s final.” She turned to go into her room, which meant the conversation was over.

I looked at Daddy, silently pleading with him to talk to her. “I’m sorry, baby,” he said. He had learned from experience not to get into our arguments.

“This isn’t fair,” I whined.

Momma spun around. “I’ve had just about enough of you, young lady.” She looked like she had a lot more to say, but I didn’t want to hear it.

“No, I’m the one who’s had enough,” I yelled.

My outburst shocked everyone into silence. I couldn’t believe I had actually let the words out. I mean, I had thought them plenty of times, but I liked my life too much to say them out loud.

“You’re always trying to run my life. I’m sick of it. You’re not going to ruin this chance for us. I’ll move out if I have to,” I said and flew to the safety of my room.

I was relieved when I woke up around nine the next morning to find Momma and Daddy had already left for work. My daddy, Thomas Richardson, drove the Q4 bus route in Cambria Heights, and my momma, Patricia, worked at the post office in Laurelton. They both seemed to like their jobs just fine—until my uncle Henry came around. Uncle Henry is a year younger than daddy, and he owned some big-time law firm in Manhattan. He and Daddy don’t talk much because Daddy said Uncle Henry only knew two things to talk about—the past and his kids.

Daddy said he and Uncle Henry were supposed to be as big as some of the old-school rappers—Uncle Henry was going to be the rapper, Daddy was the DJ, and some guy named Chubby was going to be the producer. They used to hang out with a lot of famous people before they were stars and everything since they all grew up in the same neighborhood. We lived in the house Daddy and Uncle Henry grew up in, another thing Uncle Henry never let Daddy forget.

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Apparently, Uncle Henry was still mad that Daddy messed up their future. I always wonder why Uncle Henry just didn't go through with his plans. Once I asked Daddy, but he told me to stay out of grown folks' business, so I never brought it up again, but I wondered just the same. Derrick said he thought Uncle Henry dropped it because he wasn't as passionate as Daddy, sort of like me and Derrick. Music was okay for Derrick, but for me it's like breathing.

I headed to the kitchen, grabbed a bowl of cereal and flopped down in a chair. I thought about turning on the TV, but I wasn't in the mood, so I flipped through the copy of the *Daily News* that Daddy had left on the table. Our picture had made it in the paper. I knew Loretta was gonna be mad because she and Kyle had been cut out. If I looked real close, I could see her shoulder.

I shook my head as Derrick walked in.

"Hey," he said. "What are you looking at?"

I showed him the picture, and he started laughing. "Dang, that girl just can't get a break," he said.

Loretta was always trying to get her big break as a model, but nothing ever seemed to work out for her. I thought it had something to do with her body. Although she was only sixteen, she had the big butt and full hips of a grown woman. She was almost too shapely for modeling. She had gotten scammed out of so much money it was crazy, but that didn't stop her from pursuing her dream, which I understood.

Derrick grabbed a bowl and poured some cereal. "Do you think Momma's going to keep us on lockdown for the rest of the summer?"

I shrugged, and we ate in silence for a while until I couldn't take it anymore. I turned on the television, and we watched a few videos. When one of DC Records' artists came on, I remembered the card I had gotten from Dexter Chamberlain the night before, and tried to remember where I had put it.

"It's in your car," Derrick said without looking at me.

"How do you know what I'm thinking?" I asked.

He didn't bother to respond to my question. "Am I wrong?"

"No," I said with an attitude. He drove me crazy when he knew what I was thinking, sometimes before I even knew. I headed out to his car and searched until I spotted the business card on the floor of the passenger seat. I had given it to Derrick the night before because I was known to lose stuff.

"Should I call him?" I asked nervously when I returned to the kitchen. Derrick exhaled in disgust. "I guess that was a stupid question," I said, picking up my phone.

I chewed on a nail as I waited for someone to pick up on the other end. I was just about to hang up when I heard a bored-sounding voice say, "Thank you for calling DC Records. How may I help you?"

I took a deep breath. I had never called a record company before, so I didn't know what to expect. "Hi. My name is Jasmine Richardson. Mr. Chamberlain asked me to call him today."

The woman on the other end brightened. “Oh, hi. I’m Jessica, DC’s assistant. I’ve been expecting your call.”

“You have?” I asked nervously.

“Yes. Are you familiar with Teen Scene?”

“No. What’s that?” I asked. Derrick looked at me, silently asking me what she had said, but I held up a finger to let him know I’d tell him in a minute.

“It’s something DC decided to start a few months ago. He wants to turn a local club into a hangout for teens where they can dance and have fun in a drug- and alcohol-free environment. We’re going to do a test run in Queens before we expand. The parties are going to be held every weekend starting in two weeks until the end of the summer.”

“Oh, that’s pretty cool,” I said, wondering what this had to do with me. I looked at Derrick and shrugged before waving my hand to try and get Jessica to get to the point.

“Our deejay canceled on us last week...” At that, I sat up straight.

“Really?” I said.

“DC wants to hire you to play the parties.”

“Okay,” I quickly said.

Jessica laughed. “You don’t know any of the details yet.”

“Oh.” I tried to calm down when I realized just how immature and unprofessional I sounded. I didn’t want to talk myself out of a job.

“I have a contract I use,” I said, hoping this made me sound more businesslike.

“That’s fine,” Jessica said. “I’ll send you a copy of our contract, and you can send yours back with it. The parties will last from eight until midnight, and they’ll be held at Twilight on Linden Boulevard in St. Albans.”

“That’s not too far from me,” I said, recalling the club. It had been around a long time, but lately it seemed there was always something going on there. I had heard ads for karaoke and comedy nights. Whenever Derrick and I drove past on weekends, there was always a huge crowd waiting to get in.

Derrick was staring at me again, and I smiled at him.

“You’ll be performing Friday and Saturday nights, and you’ll need to be there no later than seven each evening, and you’ll be paid a thousand dollars a week.”

“A thousand dollars a week?” I said slowly, and Derrick raised his eyebrow.

“Is that okay?” Jessica asked.

I sighed, pretending I had to think it over. “I guess so,” I said. I tried not to let my excitement show in my voice, although I was tapping Derrick on the arm. I had never made that much for working an event, and I couldn’t believe I’d be making it every week. It looked like I wouldn’t have to wait until I landed my record deal to get my leather coat. “Are we supposed to split that?” I asked in my most professional voice.

“We?” Jessica asked, sounding confused.

“Yeah, me and my brother, Derrick. We’re a team,” I said.

Jessica hesitated. “DC didn’t mention anything about your brother. I’ll have to call him.”

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I looked at Derrick who was shaking his head. “Could you hold on for a minute?” I asked. I put the phone on mute. “What?”

“Take the job,” he said.

“But I can’t do it without you,” I whispered.

“Jasmine, this is your dream, not mine,” he said. “Take the job.”

I didn’t know what to do. I was use to Derrick being with me when I performed. “Will you come with me?” I asked in a small voice, suddenly scared of the thought of being without him.

He nodded, and I felt a relief I couldn’t describe. “Thank you,” I said. I unmuted the phone. “Jessica, don’t worry about calling DC. I’ll do the club by myself.”

“Great,” she said, sounding relieved. “This is a really great opportunity for you. A lot of rap’s pioneers got their start at the club, and DC has asked a lot of celebrities to drop by, so you should get some really good exposure.”

I smiled as I envisioned myself hanging out with some of the people I watched in videos.

“Hello,” Jessica said.

I shook myself and refocused on the conversation. “Yes, I’m here,” I said.

“I’ll messenger our in-house contract to you today,” she said. “Sign it and get it back to us as soon as you can.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I said and hung up. I looked at Derrick who was smiling.

“Congratulations,” he said, giving me a hug.

“Oh man, wait until I tell Loretta and Kyle,” I said, picking up the phone. “Daddy is gonna be excited too.” I looked at Derrick, and his expression made me put down the phone. “What?” I asked.

Before he could respond, the back door opened, and in walked Momma.

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