

# CHAPTER ONE

Pop! Pop! fourteen-year-old Chelsea Spain screamed, exploding through the front door like a gust of wind.

“Hey! Hey!” Pop responded, emerging from the kitchen. “What’s hap’nin’, little girl? The end o’ the world here? All those doomsayers turn out to be right after all? The sky fallin’ down? *What?*”

Pop was wearing an apron and a puffy white hat. He was cooking the family dinner, as he often did. Mom, Monica Spain, was too busy teaching fourth grade to cook, and that was okay with her family. When she did cook, her dinners came in plastic dishes out of a cardboard box, fresh from the freezer and microwave.

“We’re gonna have a play at school!” Chelsea cried. “They said it’s an original play, and it’s just for freshmen to be in. But everybody can come and see it. This really great lady wrote it, Jeannie Duvall. Mr. Wingate, the drama teacher, is picking kids for the parts, and I’m trying out for the main role. I already talked to Mr. Wingate, and he likes me.”

Chelsea stopped chattering to take a breath. “He said I got a lot of enthusiasm, and I got a real good chance. He said I was a ‘live wire.’ ”

“Hey, that’s great, little girl. You sure are a live wire there,” Pop agreed, giving his daughter a bear hug. “Oh boy! Your brother did such a good job when he was in that play from *A Tale of Two Cities*. Now you’re gonna be the family star. Way to go, little girl.”

“It was so much fun seeing Jaris up on the stage when he was a junior,” Chelsea recalled, her voice bubbling. “I thought, ‘Oh, I could never do that.’ But now I’m

sure I can. The play is titled *Courage*, and it's about Harriet Tubman when she was just a young girl like us."

Both Chelsea and her brother, Jaris, were students at Harriet Tubman High School. "I'd get to play Harriet herself, Pop—I mean, if I get the part. And I honestly think I'd be better than anybody else in the whole freshman class."

"Absolutely," Pop replied. "Hey, a little over-the-top confidence isn't a bad idea at a time like this."

"You wouldn't believe," Chelsea grumbled, shaking her head. "That snarky little Kanika Brewster is trying out too. Like that mean old thing could play a wonderful, compassionate lady like Harriet!" Chelsea grimaced. "I mean, when she read for Mr. Wingate, we all had to cover our mouths to keep from laughing. She acted like Harriet was some little snob instead of a poor slave girl."

Mom came through the front door, and Chelsea swung her head around to look at her. Mom was dragging her heavy briefcase

full of homework to be corrected. She dumped it on the floor and plopped down in one of the overstuffed chairs, kicking off her shoes.

“Mom! Mom!” Chelsea exclaimed. “I’m gonna get to play Harriet Tubman in a play at school—well, maybe anyway. We already had first readings, and I could tell Mr. Wingate likes me best. Some of the others were really awful. I was just telling Pop, this phony Kanika Brewster was the worst of all. We had to laugh.”

Mom frowned. “Well, sweetie, it’s rude to laugh at another person’s efforts,” she remarked.

“No, Monie,” Pop declared. “I’ve seen this kid, this Kanika. She’s this prissy little twit who thinks her family and her are better than everybody else. I don’t blame the little girl and her friends for laughing. I remember when we had this parents’ night a coupla weeks ago. Everybody is bringin’ these nice homemade cookies. Well, in comes Kanika’s snotty mom with these

gourmet tarts from some highfalutin store. And you know she did that just to make everybody else feel crummy. Everybody grabbin' for the tarts, and the poor chocolate chip and raisin cookies the other moms baked got lost in the crumbs."

Chelsea was laughing hysterically.

"Next time we got one of these parents' nights," Pop announced, "I'm gonna spring something on her. I'm gonna make her tarts look chintzy. I ain't figured it out yet—maybe tiny little cream puffs or somethin' like that." Pop wore a devilish grin.

"Lorenzo," Mom groaned, "sometimes I think I have three children, Jaris, Chelsea, and you."

"Anyways," Chelsea went on, "Athena Edson is trying out too. But she wouldn't make a good Harriet 'cause she's just *too* pretty."

"*You* are very pretty too," Mom responded.

"Thanks, Mom," Chelsea said, "but I don't look like Athena. I mean, she's gorgeous, but

I'm just, you know, okay. Harriet Tubman was a really plain girl, and I could kinda play down the good stuff about me. People would believe me as Harriet, but Athena could come out in rags and still be beautiful."

"Athena Edson," Pop noted. "She looks like one of those dolls, the Barbie doll type. To tell the truth, the kid makes me sick. She looks like a twenty-year-old woman in a kid's body."

"And the other girls trying out, I don't even know them," Chelsea continued. "But one of them had this little squeaky voice, and nobody could hear what she was saying. I feel really good about my chances. Old Maurice Moore told me I was the best. He said if I win the part, he'll give me a kiss. I told him I'd smack him if he did that, and he just laughed. He likes to tease girls."

"Stay away from the little creep," Pop commanded.

"He's okay, Pop," Chelsea said. "He's kinda like the dog that's always yapping, but he never bites."

“I seen him looking at you, little girl,” Pop commented. “When you’re wearing your clothes too tight, y’know what I’m sayin’? Like you’re pretending to be a sausage or something that got stuffed in the casing. I don’t like how he looks at you.”

Next to come through the door was Jaris Spain, home from Tubman High. Chelsea told him all about the play and how she thought she had a good shot at playing the lead. “Lemme give you a good tip, chili pepper,” Jaris advised. “When they make the final decision, this Jeannie Duvall is gonna make you or break you. Mr. Wingate is sweet on this lady. So when you do the reading, you look right at her and do it for her. I did that when I was trying out for Sydney Carton in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I ignored Wingate and everybody else, and I just played to her.”

“Okay! Thanks, Jaris,” Chelsea said. “I just met the lady once. She’s pretty. I could see that Mr. Wingate liked her.”

“Any good parts in the play for boys?” Pop asked.

“Well, there’s this boy Harriet helped to escape,” Chelsea answered. “Then this horrible slave master got so mad he threw a lead weight at the boy. It hit poor Harriet in the head, and it made a dent in her head. She had bad headaches after that. The play sorta makes it look like Harriet and the boy were sweet on each other and stuff. But that’s what Ms. Duvall does to make the story better, makes it sort of a love story.”

Chelsea giggled. “Heston Crawford is trying out for the boy. So is Maurice. Another one trying out is a friend of Sharon’s—Keone Lowe. He was pretty good.”

“Keone Lowe,” Jaris noted. “Isn’t he the boy who saw Zendon kill that guy over on Grant?”

“Yeah,” Chelsea said, “isn’t that awful to see a murder happen? Keone was too scared to talk about it. Then the cops arrested Zendon on suspicion, and Keone came forward and told his story. I hope



I never see the stuff Sharon sees over on Grant. I think I'd have nightmares forever and ever."

"Keone a freshman at Tubman?" Pop asked, with a nod of his head.

"Yeah. He's real quiet," Chelsea answered. "He's Sharon's boyfriend, but I don't have any classes with him. You know how it is, Pop. The kids that come from the apartments on Grant, they don't mix with kids like Athena and Keisha and me. They hang with each other."

"Well, that's not entirely a bad thing," Mom commented. "Most of the people over on Grant, I wouldn't want you being close to anyway. Sharon is all right, but it's a tough, gang-infested neighborhood. Those people don't have the same values we do. I'm sure some of them are nice, and they can't help they live in the projects. But the kids have to be absorbing all that bad stuff that goes on there."

"Yeah," Pop said, rolling his eyes comically. "Don' wanna be hangin' with the