



# Hip Hop Kidz: Bring It On

## Chapter one

Devane—that's right, no last name—studied the extra large calendar that took up most of the wall space in her bedroom. Make that her half of the bedroom. The other half belonged to her little brother, Tamal. Tamal Edwards. Who, at this very moment, was eating a PB&J with one hand and drawing some anime-style cartoon with the other and not even noticing that he was getting the J all over the paper. Unlike Devane, Tamal would definitely have to use his last name his whole life long. Last name and middle initial.

What Devane knew and Tamal didn't was that if you were gonna be a star of any kind, you had to have a plan. Tamal L. Edwards was only two years younger than Devane. He was already in the fifth grade. But he had no plan whatsoever. He couldn't even plan far enough ahead to get a napkin when he was eating a sandwich.

But Tamal wasn't Devane's problem. Devane had to concentrate on Devane. And according to her giant calendar, Devane had a big day ahead of her. Today—July 20—was circled on her calendar with the red glitter pen she used for make-or-break days. If she triumphed at the Hip Hop Kidz audition, the one in less than two hours, she'd be right on schedule in her three-year plan for world domination.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, today wasn't supposed to be an "audition." But come on, people, that's what it was. Maddy Caulder, the creative director of Hip Hop Kidz, was making the rounds, observing all the basic Hip Hop Kidz classes, looking to pick new dancers for the Hip Hop Kidz Performance Group.

And in that group Devane would be seen. She wouldn't be hiding her stuff in the classroom. She'd be out in front of an audience.

Devane flipped on her CD player, flooding the tiny space with Missy Elliott's "Lose Control." Her girl had served it up with that one, and the music was exactly what Devane needed to get her into the power zone.

"Not Missy," Tamal groaned. "Not Miiissssy."

Devane ignored him. She began to pump her body, imagining herself in the "Lose Control" video. That was the second step in her plan of world domination—her own video. First, she'd become the star of the Hip Hop Kidz Performance Group. Of course she'd get in. There was no one Devane-worthy in her class to get in the way.

Maybe Ky Miggs, this guy who'd been a steamin' b-ball player at her school until he wrecked his wrist. Ky was in one of the other basic classes, and his moves were almost as good as hers. But Devane didn't have to sweat him. Maddy needed guys and girls for the Performance Group.

That meant the let's-not-call-it-an-audition audition was bagged. And that meant she was all that much closer to livin' large. Videos. Choreography jobs. MTV awards. Acting jobs. Oscars. Directing. More Oscars. Producing. And . . . a rainstorm of cash and cars. Not that she was going to go all mad car disease, but she needed enough cars that she'd never have to shove herself into another reekin' city bus. Enough cars so that her mother wouldn't have to spend half her life commuting to her three jobs on the bus, either.

Even Tamal wouldn't have to take the bus ever again in life—unless he got all foolish. Then he could bus it until he shaped himself up.

Silence slammed into the room. Devane was jerked away from her daydreams. She was back in the bedroom—back in real life. The smell of her brother's sandwich filled her nose. The summer air coming in from the window felt like it was sweating, like it was sweating all over her body. Was the air everywhere in Miami as nasty as it was in Overtown? Or did the rich people in Hibiscus Island have bottled O<sub>2</sub> to go with their bottled water?

Devane shook her head and smiled at the thought of bottles of air filling up designer purses and briefcases. Then she put on an extreme frown and turned to her brother. "Tell me you didn't just turn off Missy," she said, trying to sound scary. She didn't want Little B to start thinking he could get away with stunts like killing her music.

He grinned. "I didn't just turn off Missy."

"You'll be takin' the bus for a very long time unless you do some serious booty kissing," she muttered. She grabbed her gym bag and her Kmart MP3 player, which sounded just as good as an iPod and was nearly as fly. She'd get to the dance studio early and score some no-little-brother practice time in one of the rooms that wasn't being used. Not that she needed more practice. She'd been getting ready for this day since 2001, when she became Devane. Just Devane. No last name necessary.

"How bizarre is it that they make camouflage in orange and purple, anyway? Where would they really help you blend in? A convention of clowns?" Sophie Qian asked her older sister.

Sammi laughed. "True. But you don't want to blend in at all at the Hip Hop Kidz audition." She studied the explosion of clothes on Sophie's bed. "So the purple-andorange camouflage pants. Definitely. Straight out of the hip-hop fashion bible."

Sophie pulled on the pants. They had the Sammi seal of approval. That was all Sophie needed to hear. Sammi was chosen Most Fashion Forward at school last year, when she was an eighth grader. Had her picture in the yearbook for it. And for being a cheerleader. And for being on the honor roll. And for being in choir. And for being class VP. It would be easy to hate Sammi . . . if Sammi wasn't impossible to

hate.

Although Sophie did get an attack of the jealousies every once in a while. But that wouldn't happen if she made it into the Performance Group. Then Sophie would have something, too, the way Sammi had cheerleading, and choir, and honor roll, and and and and and and. Her sister added something new to the list of things to be oohed and aahed over by the parents and everybody else what felt like every other day. <p>“Sophie, if you want a ride in my cab, move it,” her father called from the living room. “I need some paying customers today.”

“Three more secs,” Sophie called back. “How 'bout my lucky Trix rabbit shirt to go with?” she asked Sammi. <p>“Very nice,” Sammi agreed.

Sophie tugged on the shirt and checked herself out in the mirror. She looked good, she decided. She still looked thick. But she couldn't expect the pants to camouflage that away. Because if she was honest, she had to admit she was maybe more fat than thick, although it depended on who you asked. There were a couple of high school guys in her neighborhood who looked at her funny. But the guys at Miami Springs Middle School, where Sophie was in the sixth grade? Not so much. They joked around with Sophie, came to her for advice about other girls, asked her for her sister's phone number—but seemed to have no idea she even had legs at all.

“Sophie!” their dad yelled.

“Let me help with that,” Sammi said as Sophie started working her thick black hair into a bunch of knotted twists with the ends sticking out. “Dad's about to go to Defcon 1.” <p>“Thanks. I need to get water to bring.” Sophie headed for the kitchen, Sammi half a step behind her, continuing to do her hair magic.

“All done,” Sammi said, clipping Sophie's last hair twist into place. “You look amazing. You're gonna burn today.” <p>“I'll be sure to tell everyone who dressed me when I'm on the red carpet,” Sophie promised as she grabbed a package of Ding Dongs from her stash behind her mom's neVERRUN-out double row of paper towels in the top cupboard. “Want one?” she asked Sammi.

“No thanks.”

Sophie slid the Dings into one of the giganto pockets of her cargo pants. “I’m ready to go, Dad.” She headed for the front door and led the way down the stairs of their flamingo-pink apartment building.

“You want to borrow the lucky horse from my key chain? Or the fir tree air freshener?” her father asked after they’d gotten in the cab.

Sophie laughed. “I don’t think I’m gonna stink up the place that much, Dad.”

“I didn’t mean it like that. Your sister wore it around her neck for good luck in that talent show,” he protested. 

“When she was five,” Sophie reminded him.

“It’s just that there are a lot of kids in the basic classes, right?” her dad asked. “That means a lot of competition to get into the Performance Group. And, you know, it’s not all about talent. Being a performer takes a certain look.”

A skinnier-than-Sophie look? Is that what he means? Sophie wondered, unwrapping the Ding Dong. She shook her head. He just doesn’t want you to be disappointed, that’s all.

“I’ll take the horse,” she answered. “But isn’t it supposed to be the good luck charm for lotteries? Or am I getting my Chinese folklore mixed up again? I know, I know, I should pay closer attention when you and Mom talk about our heritage.”

“It is for lotteries, but I figure, close enough,” her father said.

“Works for me,” Sophie agreed. “And I’ll take whatever help I can get to be a Hip Hop Kid.”

Emerson Lane smiled when she saw that the driver of the Town Car was Vincent. Vincent liked to talk—and not on the cell, like some of the younger guys. He liked talking to Emerson. The long drive from Hibiscus Island to the Hip Hop Kidz rehearsal space was so boring without him.

“Are you nervous about your audition this afternoon?”

Vincent asked as he opened the car door for her. Vincent talked and he listened and he remembered. Even her parents didn't always manage that combination.

"It's not exactly an audition," Emerson told him.

"Oh, excuse me. I thought when you did your stuff and then people decided if they wanted you in some kind of Performance Group, it was called an audition." He winked at her, his dark brown eyes crinkling at the corners. "But I didn't go to the Miami Country Day School like you. My vocabulary must not be that good," he said, then shut the door with a light click.

"So are you nervous?" Vincent asked again as he got behind the wheel.

"Of course." There was no reason to pretend with Vincent. He'd been driving her around since she was six, and she was thirteen now. Even when she broke her leg right before the Jamison Ballet Intensive audition, she'd admitted to him that she was almost glad that the break got her out of going to that audition. A truth her mother could've never tolerated.

It wasn't that Emerson didn't love ballet. She did. She'd loved it since she played the littlest mouse in the Nutcracker when she was five. But for almost a year, for months and months before she'd broken her leg, she'd kept on getting the impulse to bust out, just let the music fill her and let her body . . . go. Not something that would have been encouraged at the Jamison Intensive. But something that was very encouraged at the Hip Hop Kidz classes she'd ended up taking instead.

"You're gonna rock the house," Vincent told her.

Emerson loved it when Vincent talked street. Not all fiftyplus men could pull it off, but he could. "You've never even seen me dance," Emerson protested.

Vincent met her gaze in the rearview mirror. "Doesn't matter. I've seen the way you look when you come out of your classes. You really love hip-hop, am I right?"

"Mm-hmm. It's looser than ballet. It's like I'm not even

myself when I'm dancing hip-hop."

"I think it's just the opposite. I think that's when you're the full-on Emerson," Vincent answered.

The full-on Emerson. Emerson wasn't even sure if she knew who that person was.

"Good luck," Vincent said as he pulled up in front of the studio. "Not that I think you need it."

"Thanks. And I'll get the door," she added quickly, even though Vincent already knew that. She always asked him to let her open the door herself at Hip Hop Kidz. It was bad enough that she had a driver; she didn't need to rub it in people's faces by having him wait on her.

"I'll be right here," Vincent said.

"Okay, bye!" Emerson grabbed her dance bag and jumped out of the car. She spotted Sophie Qian bopping toward the studio door.

"Em, hey!" Sophie called.

"Hi!" Emerson called back.

"Come on. We're early enough to check out the competition for a couple of minutes." Sophie covered her mouth.

"Oops. I didn't say competition, did I? That wasn't me, was it? Because all that's happening today are some regular, ordinary Hip Hop Kidz basic dance classes, right? But there isn't any reason we can't watch the regular, ordinary class before ours as long as they don't audition, is there?"

Emerson grinned. There wasn't any reason to answer—Sophie would just keep talking. Sophie talked even more than Vincent. And that's what Emerson liked so much about her. Sometimes Emerson felt like she should sit down and write the girl a nice thank-you note for making it so easy to step into the studio or the locker room. Sophie was always friendly to everybody, always said hi and chatted with whoever was around like she'd known them forever. It was pretty much impossible to be shy around her.

And Emerson was shy. It usually just didn't show that much. That's because she'd known everyone at the Miami

Country Day School—and their nannies and parents, too—since she was practically prenatal. Every girl who was in her ballet class went to Country, except one. Every girl at her church went to Country. Emerson’s violin teacher had given lessons to Emerson’s mother. The principal had been her dad’s first-grade teacher.

Hip Hop Kidz was the only place she was faced with anyone new.

Sophie opened the door to the studio and ushered Emerson through. “Looks like a few other people got the same idea,” she said, jerking her chin toward the observation windows of the largest classroom. Four kids from their class were gathered around it, including even ill papi. Who probably had zero to worry about when it came to being selected for the Performance Group.

Ill papi was practically famous. Everybody knew who he was because everyone knew his dad. Everybody.

Well, not people like Emerson’s parents. But everybody who knew even the ABCs of hip-hop knew that ill papi’s father was J-Bang, one of the old skool dudes like Rubber Band and Kool Herc, the ones who practically invented the style of dancing. The buzz was that ill papi was the new skool version of his dad, just as cutting edge, just as much of a rule breaker. Of course, ill papi was in the Performance Group.

“How many girls do you think want to get into the group just so they can hang with ill papi?” Sophie whispered. “I’m guessing thirty-five percent. And he’s a big bonus for another forty,” she said, answering her own question.

Ill papi turned toward a guy from their class and laughed, giving Emerson a good look at his deep brown eyes, his light caramel skin, and the dimple on one side of his mouth. She thought he was about a year older than she was. Probably going into ninth grade. “I’d say you’re right,” Emerson agreed.

Sophie snorted. “People always say to dance your passion.” She headed down to the windows with Emerson right behind her. “Buddha driving a Volkswagen, as my grandmother would say,” Sophie breathed. “Look at that girl go.”

Emerson didn't have to ask which girl. It was completely, totally, absolutely obvious. The African American girl who was doing flares with her legs crossed. The whole class was down on the floor doing flares. Standard flares. And they were hard enough—bracing your weight on your hands and swinging your legs through the air and around your body. But doing the move with your legs crossed was hugely more difficult. Emerson could do a flare with her legs together, but that was as far as she'd gotten.

"I'd say she's had a little too much fun with her Bedazzler. I mean, the T-shirt. But other than that, she's awesome," Sophie commented.

"That's Devane," volunteered Leeza, a girl from Sophie and Emerson's class, not taking her eyes off the window. <p> Devane.

Devane is definitely getting picked for the Performance Group, Emerson thought. How could she not?

How many girls did the group need? More than just Devane? Did Emerson have a shot? Even the full-on Emerson?