

RISE SCHOOL OF MUSIC AND DANCE

Written by

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RISE: THE ACADEMY

Episode 101: "Legacy Ain't Free"

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COLD OPEN

FADE IN:

INT. RISE ACADEMY - KING ILLY'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Rain streaks down office windows in Oakland Ca. The smell of aged leather and cognac hangs heavy on his breath. A half-empty bottle of Hennessy sits next to a glass resting on his office table.

KING ILLY (42), sharp-featured Black American man with Trinidadian roots, stares at a massive flat-screen. Grainy footage plays: a young Black man, early twenties, headphones draped around his neck, hunched over a composition notebook. His pen moves like lightning.

The young man looks up—ZEEK MORRISON. Even in the blurry footage, his eyes burn with something raw and hungry.

ZEEK
(on screen, rapping)
They say the pen is mightier than
the sword

But what happens when the sword signs the record deal?

King's jaw tightens. He reaches for the remote, rewinds. The same ten seconds play again.

KING ILLY
(whispered)
Zeek...

The footage glitches. Static devours the frame before stabilizing. King's reflection merges with Zeek's face on the screen.

KING ILLY (CONT'D)
I'm trying, Z. I don't know if I
know how.

Thunder crashes. King drains his glass in one gulp.

CUT TO:

INT. RISE ACADEMY - MAIN REHEARSAL HALL - CONTINUOUS

Three floors below, the heart of RISE pulses with life. Exposed brick walls hold the weight of dreams. Mirrors reflect bodies in motion. The air tastes of sweat and ambition.

NOVA SAINT-JAMES (17), moves like royalty—every gesture calculated, every step a statement. She leads a group of dancers through a routine that's part poetry, part rebellion.

NOVA

Five, six, seven, eight—

She stops mid-count. Something's off. The other dancers freeze, looking to their queen.

NOVA

Tyler, you're dragging the whole formation.

TYLER MOSS (17), lanky with mischievous eyes, shrugs with a grin that could charm his way out of detention.

TYLER

Maybe y'all just moving too fast.

NOVA

(ice cold)

Maybe you just moving too slow.

In the corner, JUDAS JAMES (18) sits cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, fingers dancing over piano keys that aren't there. When music plays, he sees colors—right now, the rehearsal glows amber and gold in his mind.

JUDAS

(without opening eyes)

The harmony's in B-flat. Y'all arguing in C-sharp.

Nova and Tyler exchange glances. The kid's weird, but he's never wrong.

The massive rehearsal hall door swings open. Students part like the Red Sea as a figure enters—King Illy, three-piece suit slightly wrinkled, carrying the weight of ghosts.

KING ILLY
 (to the room)
 Pack it up. Tomorrow we start
 fresh.

Students gather their things. King's eyes find a framed photo on the wall—Zeek Morrison, forever young, forever smiling. A small placard reads: "IN MEMORY OF OUR INSPIRATION."

Nova approaches, towel draped around her neck.

NOVA
 Mr. Illy? The showcase is in three
 weeks. We need more time to—

KING ILLY
 (cutting her off)
 Tomorrow. We start fresh.

He walks away, leaving Nova standing there, frustrated and confused.

King stops at Zeek's photo. His reflection stares back from the glass.

KING ILLY
 (whispered)
 I'm trying, Z. I don't know if I
 know how.

FADE TO BLACK.

TITLE CARD: RISE

ACT ONE

EXT. EAST OAKLAND RESIDENTIAL STREET - DAWN

The sun fights through morning fog. Chain-link fences guard small houses with barred windows. The air smells like coffee and car exhaust.

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Cramped but clean. The walls hold family photos and unpaid bills in equal measure. The coffee maker gurgles like an old man clearing his throat.

ZHANE CARTER (35) moves through her morning routine with practiced efficiency. Beautiful in a weathered way, she's the kind of woman who makes three jobs look effortless. Her nursing scrubs hang over a chair.

She peers into the refrigerator—mostly empty. Closes it with a sigh.

ZHANE
(calling out)
Zay! You better be up!

No response. She walks down a narrow hallway, past a bathroom where the faucet drips steadily.

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - ZAY'LEE'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

ZAY'LEE CARTER (17) sits on the edge of his bed, notebook in his lap, pen moving like he's channeling electricity. The room is small but alive—posters of Kendrick, Cole, and King Illy cover the walls. A beat-up microphone sits on a milk crate.

Zay stops writing, reads the line back to himself.

ZAY'LEE
(under his breath)
They promise you the world but sell
you the cage...

ZHANE
(from doorway)
That's beautiful, baby.

Zay looks up, startled. Zhane leans against the doorframe, studying her son with proud eyes.

ZAY'LEE
Just working on something.

ZHANE
You been "working on something"
since you were twelve. When you
gon' work on getting out of here?

ZAY'LEE
(defensive)
I'm trying, Ma.

ZHANE
I know you are. But trying don't
pay bills.

She tosses him a crumpled flyer. He unfolds it—an ad for
warehouse work. \$15 an hour.

ZHANE
My friend Keisha works there. She
said she could put in a word.

ZAY'LEE
(looking at the flyer)
Ma, you know this ain't what I
want.

ZHANE
Want and need are two different
things, Zay.

She checks her phone—7:15 AM.

ZHANE
I gotta go. First shift at the
hospital, then the store, then
night cleaning. There's leftover
spaghetti in the fridge.

She kisses his forehead, but he catches her hand.

ZAY'LEE
Ma, you alright? You look tired.

ZHANE
(forcing a smile)
Just the grind, baby. You know how
it is.

She leaves. Zay stares at the warehouse flyer, then at his
notebook. The choice weighs heavy in his hands.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - AUDITION ROOM - DAY

Floor-to-ceiling windows flood the space with natural light. Three judges sit behind a polished table—King Illy in the center, flanked by MISS CHEN (50s, former Broadway dancer) and MARCUS WEBB (30s, music producer with kind eyes).

Nova stands center stage, chin raised, ready for war. She's changed into a simple black dress that somehow makes her look even more powerful.

KING ILLY

Whenever you're ready, Miss Saint-James.

Nova nods to the pianist in the corner. The first chord strikes, and she transforms.

NOVA

(singing)

I was born in the shadow of a dream
deferred

Every promise broken, every hope that's blurred

But I'ma rise above the noise, above the pain

'Cause my voice is thunder, and I'm bringing the rain

Her voice fills every corner of the room. Raw power wrapped in velvet. King leans forward, captivated.

NOVA

(singing)

They told me I was too much, too
loud, too real

But I'd rather burn bright than never feel

This fire in my chest, this song in my soul

I'm not here to play a part, I'm here to be whole

The last note hangs in the air like a prayer. Silence. Then—

KING ILLY

(quietly)

That was... where did you learn
that song?

NOVA

I wrote it. Last night.

Miss Chen and Marcus exchange glances. King's eyes narrow slightly.

KING ILLY
You wrote that. Last night.

NOVA
Yes, sir. Problem with that?

KING ILLY
(standing)
No problem at all. Welcome to RISE,
Miss Saint-James.

Nova's composure cracks for just a moment—pure joy breaking through.

NOVA
Thank you, Mr. Illy. You won't
regret this.

KING ILLY
(something unreadable in
his eyes)
I hope not.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Nova exits the audition room, barely containing her excitement. She pulls out her phone, speed-dials.

NOVA
(into phone)
Daddy? I'm in... Yes, I'm sure...
No, I did it myself... I know, I
know, the family's investment in
the school... Daddy, I earned this.

She hangs up, frustrated. Her moment of triumph already complicated.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - SMALLER AUDITION ROOM - DAY

Judas sits at a piano, fingers hovering over keys. The room is smaller, more intimate. King, Miss Chen, and Marcus watch from folding chairs.

JUDAS
This is called "Synesthesia." It's
about... seeing music.

He begins to play. The melody is haunting, complex—colors bloom behind his closed eyelids. Deep purples and electric blues.

JUDAS
(singing, voice soft but
piercing)
I see the sound in shades of blue

Every note a different hue

What you hear as melody

Lives in color inside of me

King's phone buzzes. He glances at it, distracted.

JUDAS
(continuing)
The world is noise until you learn
to see

The symphony in everything that breathes

I paint with sound, I sing with light

Turn darkness into something bright

Judas opens his eyes, the song complete. King is typing on his phone.

JUDAS
(quietly)
Mr. Illy?

KING ILLY
(looking up)
That was... adequate. We'll be in
touch.

Judas's face falls. Miss Chen shoots King a disapproving look.

MISS CHEN
Actually, that was extraordinary.
You're in, young man.

JUDAS
(confused)
I'm in?

MARCUS
You're in. Don't let anyone tell
you different.

Judas gathers his things, glancing back at King, who's already forgotten he exists.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - DANCE STUDIO - DAY

Tyler bounces into the mirrored room like he owns it. Music bumps from the speakers—something with a heavy bass that makes the floor vibrate.

He starts moving, and it's like watching lightning strike. His body becomes liquid, then solid, then something in between. Every pop, every lock, every glide is effortless.

The judges watch from the corner. Tyler catches King's eye in the mirror and winks.

TYLER
(still dancing)
Y'all can stop pretending to be
impressed anytime now.

MARCUS
(grinning)
Kid's got confidence.

TYLER
(spinning into a freeze)
Kid's got skills. Confidence is
just the package.

He finishes with a move that seems to defy physics. The silence stretches.

KING ILLY
You're talented.

TYLER
I know.

KING ILLY
You're also undisciplined.

TYLER
I know that too.

KING ILLY
(standing)
Discipline is what separates the
gifted from the great.

TYLER
(shrugging)
And arrogance is what separates the
great from the remembered.

The room goes quiet. King studies Tyler like he's solving a puzzle.

KING ILLY
You're in. Don't make me regret it.

TYLER
(grinning)
Wouldn't dream of it.

EXT. EAST OAKLAND STREET CORNER - DAY

Zay walks with purpose, notebook tucked under his arm. The warehouse flyer crumples in his other hand. Street vendors sell fruit and bootleg CDs. The air smells like barbecue and car exhaust.

He stops at a corner where a small crowd has gathered. In the center, a young man about his age spits bars over a beat playing from a portable speaker.

LOCAL RAPPER
My mama worked two jobs just to
keep the lights on

But I'm about to turn them off, put the whole city on
They don't understand the struggle, they don't see the pain
But I'ma make them feel it every time they hear my name
The crowd cheers. Zay's fingers itch for his pen.

CROWD MEMBER
Yo! Fresh face, you got something?

Eyes turn to Zay. He shakes his head, but the crowd's energy is infectious.

ANOTHER VOICE
Come on, man! Don't be scared!

Zay looks at his notebook, then at the expectant faces. He steps forward.

ZAY'LEE
(to the beat)
They promise you the world but sell
you the cage

Tell you to dream but keep you minimum wage

I grew up where hope dies before it's born

But I'ma plant seeds in concrete, watch them grow in the
storm

The crowd erupts. Zay's voice cuts through the noise like a
blade.

ZAY'LEE
See, I don't rap for the fame or
the chain

I rap for my mama who's working through pain

I rap for the kids who think they're too late

I rap 'cause my voice is the one thing they can't take

The beat stops. The crowd goes wild. Zay steps back, heart
pounding.

CROWD MEMBER
(pulling out phone)
Yo, that was fire! What's your
name?

ZAY'LEE
(backing away)
I'm just... I'm nobody.

He pushes through the crowd, leaving them wanting more.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - KING ILLY'S OFFICE - DAY

King sits behind his desk, scrolling through social media on
his tablet. His assistant, JENNIFER (20s, efficient), enters
with coffee.

JENNIFER
Your 3 o'clock is here, and the
board meeting got moved to
Thursday.

KING ILLY
(still scrolling)
Fine. And Jenny? Hold my calls for
the next hour.

JENNIFER
Sure thing.

She leaves. King's tablet screen shows a video titled
"UNKNOWN RAPPER DESTROYS CIPHER IN OAKLAND." The thumbnail
shows Zay mid-rap, face intense, crowd mesmerized.

King hits play. Zay's voice fills the office.

ZAY'LEE
(from video)
They promise you the world but sell
you the cage

Tell you to dream but keep you minimum wage

King's coffee cup hovers halfway to his lips. Something about
the rhythm, the cadence, the raw honesty—it's familiar.

KING ILLY
(to himself)
Find him.

He picks up his phone, dials.

KING ILLY
(into phone)
Marcus? I need you to find
someone...

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - KITCHEN - EVENING

Zay sits at the small table, homework spread out in front of
him. Math equations blur together. His mind keeps drifting to
the cipher, to the feeling of the crowd hanging on his every
word.

His phone buzzes. Unknown number.

ZAY'LEE
Hello?

VOICE (V.O.)
(filtered)
Is this Zay'Lee Carter?

ZAY'LEE
Who's asking?

VOICE (V.O.)
My name is Marcus Webb. I work for
RISE Academy. We'd like to invite
you to audition.

Zay nearly drops the phone.

ZAY'LEE
RISE Academy? How did you—

MARCUS (V.O.)
We saw your performance today. Very
impressive.

ZAY'LEE
I don't understand. What's RISE
Academy?

MARCUS (V.O.)
It's a performing arts school.
Founded by King Illy. We develop
young talent, provide full
scholarships, and—

ZAY'LEE
(interrupting)
King Illy? THE King Illy?

MARCUS (V.O.)
The one and only. Are you
interested?

Zay looks around the cramped apartment, at the stack of bills
on the counter, at the warehouse flyer still crumpled on the
table.

ZAY'LEE
Yeah. Yeah, I'm interested.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Great. Tomorrow, 10 AM. I'll text
you the address.

The line goes dead. Zay stares at the phone, then at his
notebook, then at the King Illy poster on the wall.

ZAY'LEE
(whispered)
Ma's gonna flip.

ACT TWO

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - ZHANE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Zhane sits on the edge of her bed, still in her nursing scrubs from the hospital. She opens a manila envelope marked "CONFIDENTIAL" and pulls out medical documents.

The letterhead reads "OAKLAND GENERAL HOSPITAL - ONCOLOGY DEPARTMENT."

She scans the pages, her face growing pale. Words jump out: "Stage 2," "Treatment options," "Prognosis."

A knock at the door. She quickly shoves the papers back in the envelope.

ZAY'LEE (O.S.)
Ma? You okay in there?

ZHANE
(voice strained)
I'm fine, baby. Just tired.

ZAY'LEE (O.S.)
I got something to tell you.

She takes a deep breath, composes herself.

ZHANE
Come in.

Zay enters, practically bouncing with excitement.

ZAY'LEE
Ma, you're not gonna believe this.
I got invited to audition for RISE
Academy.

ZHANE
(confused)
RISE what?

ZAY'LEE
It's a performing arts school. They
give full scholarships. And get
this—it's King Illy's school.

ZHANE
(recognition dawning)
The rapper? The one on your wall?

ZAY'LEE
Yeah! Ma, this could be it. This
could be my way out.

Zhane forces a smile, but her eyes drift to the hidden envelope.

ZHANE
That's... that's wonderful, baby.

ZAY'LEE
(noticing her tone)
You don't sound excited.

ZHANE
I am. I'm just... tired. It's been
a long day.

ZAY'LEE
(sitting beside her)
Ma, what's wrong? And don't say
nothing, 'cause I know you.

She looks at him—her son, her world, her reason for fighting.

ZHANE
Nothing's wrong. I'm just proud of
you, that's all.

She pulls him into a hug, holding him tight.

ZHANE
(whispered)
So proud.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - MAIN ENTRANCE - DAY

Zay stands outside the glass doors, notebook clutched in his hands. The building is imposing—all clean lines and possibility. Through the windows, he can see students moving with purpose.

He takes a deep breath and enters.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

The lobby is stunning. High ceilings, exposed brick, and everywhere—photos of successful alumni. A reception desk sits in the center, staffed by a young woman with kind eyes.

RECEPTIONIST

You must be Zay'Lee. Mr. Webb is waiting for you.

She points toward a hallway lined with rehearsal rooms. Through the glass walls, Zay can see students singing, dancing, creating.

ZAY'LEE

(under his breath)

Damn.

He walks down the hallway, mesmerized. In one room, Nova rehearses alone, her voice carrying through the walls. In another, Tyler teaches a group of younger students a complex routine.

Zay stops outside a room where Judas sits at a piano, eyes closed, lost in his music.

VOICE (O.S.)

Impressive, isn't it?

Zay turns. Marcus Webb approaches, warm smile on his face.

MARCUS

I'm Marcus. We spoke on the phone.

ZAY'LEE

(shaking hands)

Zay'Lee. This place is incredible.

MARCUS

Wait until you see the audition room. Come on.

They walk deeper into the building. Marcus points out different areas—the recording studio, the dance rehearsal hall, the student lounge.

MARCUS

King built this place to nurture real talent. Not manufactured pop stars, but artists with something to say.

ZAY'LEE

Why me? I mean, there's gotta be thousands of kids who want this.

MARCUS

(stopping)

Because you remind him of someone.

ZAY'LEE

Who?

MARCUS

(hesitating)

Someone who could have been great.
If he'd had the chance.

They reach the audition room. Through the glass, Zay can see King Illy sitting alone, reading something intently.

MARCUS

You ready?

Zay nods, but his hands are shaking slightly.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - AUDITION ROOM - CONTINUOUS

King looks up as they enter. In person, he's smaller than Zay expected, but his presence fills the room.

KING ILLY

Zay'Lee Carter. The mystery rapper
from East Oakland.

ZAY'LEE

(nervous)

Yes, sir.

KING ILLY

Relax. This isn't a job interview.
It's a conversation.

Zay takes a seat across from King. The silence stretches.

KING ILLY

Tell me about your process. How do
you write?

ZAY'LEE

I don't really have a process. I
just... listen to what's around me
and try to put it into words.

KING ILLY

What do you hear?

ZAY'LEE

(thinking)

Struggle. Hope. My mama's footsteps
at 5 AM when she's getting ready
for work. The way the city sounds
different at night.

(MORE)

ZAY'LEE (CONT'D)

The way people talk when they think
nobody's listening.

King nods, intrigued.

KING ILLY

Let me hear something. Something
personal.

Zay opens his notebook, flips through pages.

ZAY'LEE

This one's called "Invisible
Chains."

He clears his throat, begins to rap a cappella.

ZAY'LEE

They say we're free but I see the
design

Prison bars made of poverty lines

They lock us up with hope and fear

Tell us we're equal but keep us down here

King's eyes widen. The cadence, the rhythm—it's eerily
familiar.

ZAY'LEE

I grew up thinking I was born to
lose

But I refuse to sing somebody else's blues

My voice is my weapon, my pen is my sword

I won't be silenced, I won't be ignored

The room is dead silent. King stares at Zay like he's seeing
a ghost.

KING ILLY

(quietly)

Where did you learn to rap like
that?

ZAY'LEE

I don't know. It just... comes from
somewhere.

KING ILLY
(standing)
Welcome to RISE, Zay'Lee.

ZAY'LEE
(shocked)
Just like that?

KING ILLY
Just like that. Classes start
Monday.

Zay's face breaks into a grin. He stands to shake King's hand.

ZAY'LEE
Thank you, Mr. Illy. You won't
regret this.

KING ILLY
(something dark in his
eyes)
I hope not.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Zay exits the audition room, walking on air. He pulls out his phone to call his mother, but bumps into someone.

NOVA
Watch where you're— (recognizing
him) Oh. You're the new kid.

ZAY'LEE
Zay'Lee. And you're...

NOVA
Nova. I run the vocal program here.

ZAY'LEE
(confused)
I thought King Illy ran the school.

NOVA
(with a smirk)
King Illy owns the building. I run
the talent.

There's something magnetic about her confidence. Zay finds himself staring.

ZAY'LEE

So what's your story? You grow up singing?

NOVA

I grew up knowing I was meant for more than where I started. What about you?

ZAY'LEE

I grew up knowing I had to fight for everything I wanted.

NOVA

(studying him)

And what do you want?

ZAY'LEE

To be heard. To matter. To make my mama proud.

NOVA

(softening slightly)

That's honest. I like honest.

She starts to walk away, then turns back.

NOVA

Word of advice? Don't let them change your voice. The industry's good at making carbon copies.

ZAY'LEE

You speaking from experience?

NOVA

I'm speaking from observation.

She disappears down the hallway, leaving Zay intrigued and slightly confused.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - JUDAS'S PRACTICE ROOM - DAY

Judas sits at the piano, but he's not playing. He's writing in a notebook, humming melodies under his breath.

The door opens. Zay peeks in.

ZAY'LEE

Sorry, didn't know anyone was in here.

JUDAS
(not looking up)
It's cool. I'm just working on something.

ZAY'LEE
Mind if I ask what?

JUDAS
(finally looking up)
A hook. For someone who'll probably never credit me.

ZAY'LEE
That's dark.

JUDAS
That's the music business.

Zay enters, closes the door behind him.

ZAY'LEE
I'm Zay'Lee. Just got accepted.

JUDAS
Judas. Been here six months.

ZAY'LEE
Six months? How's it been?

JUDAS
(returning to his notebook)
Eye-opening.

ZAY'LEE
In a good way?

JUDAS
In a realistic way.

Judas plays a few chords on the piano. The melody is beautiful, haunting.

ZAY'LEE
That's beautiful. What's it called?

JUDAS
"Invisible." Seems appropriate.

ZAY'LEE
You don't sound happy to be here.

JUDAS
(stopping playing)
I'm happy to be developing my
craft. I'm less happy about being
treated like... like a ghost.

ZAY'LEE
What do you mean?

JUDAS
You'll see. The talented ones who
don't fit the image? We become the
support system for the ones who do.

The door opens. Tyler bounces in, all energy and motion.

TYLER
Y'all look like somebody died.
What's the vibe?

ZAY'LEE
Just getting to know each other.

TYLER
(to Zay)
You the new kid? The rapper?

ZAY'LEE
Word travels fast.

TYLER
Honey, in a school this small,
everything travels fast. I'm Tyler.

ZAY'LEE
Zay'Lee.

TYLER
(to Judas)
You still sulking about the
showcase assignments?

JUDAS
I'm not sulking. I'm observing.

TYLER
Same difference. Look, new kid—

ZAY'LEE
Zay'Lee.

TYLER

Zay'Lee. Here's the deal. This place is amazing, but it's also politics. You want to survive? Learn the game.

ZAY'LEE

What game?

TYLER

The one where talent matters, but image matters more.

Nova appears in the doorway.

NOVA

Y'all having a meeting without me?

TYLER

Just giving the new kid the orientation they don't give in orientation.

NOVA

(to Zay)

Don't listen to him. Tyler's just bitter because he got put in the second showcase group.

TYLER

I got put in the second showcase group because I don't kiss ass.

NOVA

You got put in the second showcase group because you missed three rehearsals.

ZAY'LEE

(interrupting)

What's the showcase?

JUDAS

End of semester performance. Industry people come. It's basically a cattle call.

NOVA

It's an opportunity to be seen by the right people.

TYLER

It's a popularity contest with a backing track.

ZAY'LEE
Which one am I in?

NOVA
You just got here. You're not in
either.

ZAY'LEE
So what do I do?

JUDAS
You learn. You watch. You figure
out who you want to be.

TYLER
And you decide if you want to be
yourself or who they want you to
be.

The room falls silent. These four young people, all talented,
all hungry, all carrying different wounds and dreams.

ZAY'LEE
(finally)
Can I ask y'all something?

NOVA
Shoot.

ZAY'LEE
Why does it feel like there's
something nobody's telling me?

The others exchange glances.

JUDAS
Because there is.

TYLER
But it's not our story to tell.

NOVA
You'll figure it out. You seem
smart.

ZAY'LEE
Figure what out?

NOVA
(heading for the door)
Why King Illy really built this
place.

She leaves. Tyler and Judas follow. Zay stands alone in the practice room, more confused than ever.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - ARCHIVE ROOM - DAY

King walks down a hallway most students never see. He stops at a door marked "AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY" and uses a key card.

The room is part shrine, part storage facility. Boxes of records, master tapes, and photographs line the walls. In the center, a glass case holds a single composition notebook.

King approaches the case. The notebook is open to a page covered in handwriting—lyrics, corrections, doodles in the margins.

KING ILLY
(reading)
"They promise you the world but
sell you the cage..."

He freezes. Those words... he's heard them before. Recently.

King pulls out his phone, finds the video of Zay's street performance. He plays it.

ZAY'LEE
(from phone)
They promise you the world but sell
you the cage

Tell you to dream but keep you minimum wage

King looks at the notebook, then at the phone, then back at the notebook.

KING ILLY
(whispered)
That's impossible.

He reads further into the notebook. More lyrics, more familiar phrases. Then he finds it—a page titled "Invisible Chains."

The lyrics are identical to what Zay rapped in his audition.

King's hands shake as he closes the notebook case.

KING ILLY
(to himself)
What the hell is going on?

ACT THREE

INT. RISE ACADEMY - STUDENT LOUNGE - DAY

The lounge buzzes with activity. Students sprawl on couches, practice routines, and work on laptops. The walls are covered with inspirational quotes and photos of successful alumni.

Zay sits alone at a table, working on lyrics. Nova approaches with a cup of coffee.

NOVA
Mind if I sit?

ZAY'LEE
(looking up)
It's a free country.

NOVA
(sitting)
Barely.

They sit in comfortable silence for a moment.

NOVA
What are you working on?

ZAY'LEE
Something new. Trying to capture
this feeling I have.

NOVA
What feeling?

ZAY'LEE
Like I'm exactly where I'm supposed
to be and completely out of place
at the same time.

NOVA
(understanding)
I know that feeling.

ZAY'LEE
Really? You seem like you belong
here.

NOVA
I've been performing since I was
five. I know how to seem like I
belong anywhere.

ZAY'LEE

But do you actually belong here?

NOVA

(hesitating)

I don't know. My family... they have connections to this place. Sometimes I wonder if I earned my spot or if it was bought for me.

ZAY'LEE

What kind of connections?

NOVA

The kind that come with expectations.

Before Zay can ask more, King Illy enters the lounge. Students straighten up, conversations quiet.

KING ILLY

(to the room)

Can I have everyone's attention?

The room falls silent. King's presence commands respect, but there's something off about his energy today.

KING ILLY

I want to talk about legacy. About what it means to carry the torch for those who came before us.

He begins to pace, his words carrying weight.

KING ILLY

RISE Academy exists because of a young man named Zeek Morrison. He was a writer, a dreamer, a poet. He had a gift for seeing the truth in things and putting that truth into words.

Students listen intently. This is the first time many have heard King speak about the school's origins.

KING ILLY

Zeek died too young. He died before the world got to hear his voice. This school is my attempt to make sure that doesn't happen again.

He stops pacing, his eyes finding Zay in the crowd.

KING ILLY

But legacy isn't just about
honoring the past. It's about
making sure the future learns from
our mistakes.

His gaze lingers on Zay for a moment too long. Several
students notice.

KING ILLY

The industry will try to change
you. It will try to package your
pain, commercialize your truth, and
sell your authenticity back to you
at a discount. Don't let it.

STUDENT

How do we know when we're being
changed?

KING ILLY

(dark smile)

You don't. That's the point. The
best traps are the ones you don't
see coming.

An uncomfortable silence settles over the room. King's words
feel more like a warning than inspiration.

KING ILLY

That's all. Back to work.

He leaves. Students slowly return to their conversations, but
the energy has shifted.

NOVA

(to Zay, quietly)

That was weird, right?

ZAY'LEE

(watching King disappear)

Yeah. That was weird.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

King walks quickly toward his office, phone pressed to his
ear.

KING ILLY

(into phone)

I need you to pull everything we
have on Zeek Morrison.

(MORE)

KING ILLY (CONT'D)
Publishing rights, unpublished
material, everything... I don't
care if it's been twenty years.
Find it.

He hangs up, troubled.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - VOCAL BOOTH - DAY

Nova stands behind the glass, headphones on, lost in song.
Her voice soars through a melody that seems to come from
somewhere deep and personal.

NOVA
(singing)
I see the cracks beneath the gold

Stories that were never told

They dress me up in their design

But this voice will always be mine

In the control room, Zay watches through the glass,
mesmerized. Judas sits at the mixing board, adjusting levels.

JUDAS
She's incredible, right?

ZAY'LEE
(not taking his eyes off
Nova)
Yeah. She is.

JUDAS
That melody she's singing? I wrote
it two years ago.

ZAY'LEE
(turning to him)
What?

JUDAS
I submitted it as part of my
application. Never heard it again
until today.

ZAY'LEE
Did you tell her?

JUDAS
What's the point? She probably
doesn't even know.
(MORE)

JUDAS (CONT'D)

They just gave it to her as an
"original composition exercise."

Nova finishes the song, exits the booth.

NOVA

How did that sound?

JUDAS

(bitter)

Familiar.

NOVA

(confused)

What?

ZAY'LEE

It sounded beautiful. What's the
song called?

NOVA

"Beneath the Gold." I've been
working on it for weeks.

Judas stands abruptly, gathers his things.

JUDAS

I need some air.

He leaves. Nova and Zay exchange glances.

NOVA

What's his problem?

ZAY'LEE

I think... I think there's a lot
going on here that we don't
understand.

NOVA

Like what?

ZAY'LEE

Like how you ended up with his
melody. Like why King looked at me
like he'd seen a ghost during that
speech. Like why everyone keeps
talking about things they can't
explain.

Nova sits down, the weight of realization settling on her.

NOVA

You think they're using us?

ZAY'LEE

I think they're using somebody.
Question is who, and for what.

EXT. RISE ACADEMY - ROOFTOP - SUNSET

The Oakland skyline stretches out below. Tyler sits on the edge of the roof, legs dangling over the side. Judas approaches.

JUDAS

You're gonna give me a heart attack
sitting like that.

TYLER

(not turning around)
Only way to fly is to get
comfortable with falling.

JUDAS

That's either very wise or very
stupid.

TYLER

Little bit of both.

Judas sits beside him, more carefully.

JUDAS

Can I ask you something?

TYLER

Shoot.

JUDAS

Do you ever feel like we're just...
content for them? Like we're here
to make other people look good?

TYLER

(finally looking at him)
Every day.

JUDAS

Then why do you stay?

TYLER

Because where else am I gonna go?
At least here, I get to dance. Even
if it's in someone else's shadow.

JUDAS

That's depressing.

TYLER
That's survival.

They sit in silence, watching the sun set over Oakland.

TYLER
What about you? Why do you stay?

JUDAS
Because I'm hoping that one day,
someone will hear my music and know
it's mine.

TYLER
And if that day never comes?

JUDAS
(pause)
Then at least I'll know I never
stopped making it.

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Zhane sits at the table, medical papers spread in front of her. A cup of tea grows cold in her hands. She's still in her scrubs—this time from her evening cleaning job.

Her phone rings. She glances at the caller ID: "OAKLAND GENERAL ONCOLOGY."

She lets it go to voicemail.

The front door opens. Zay enters, energized and excited.

ZAY'LEE
Ma! You home!

ZHANE
(quickly gathering papers)
Hey, baby. How was your first day?

ZAY'LEE
It was... complicated. But good. I think.

He notices her hastily shoving papers into an envelope.

ZAY'LEE
What's all that?

ZHANE
Just bills. Always bills.

ZAY'LEE

Ma, you sure you okay? You've been acting strange lately.

ZHANE

(forcing brightness)

I'm fine, Zay. Just proud of you. Tell me about school.

Zay studies her face, unconvinced, but decides not to push.

ZAY'LEE

The other students are cool. There's this girl, Nova, she's incredible. And this kid Judas, he's like a musical genius.

ZHANE

And the teachers?

ZAY'LEE

King Illy gave this speech today about not letting the industry change us. But the weird thing is, it felt like he was talking directly to me.

ZHANE

Maybe he sees something special in you.

ZAY'LEE

Or maybe he sees something that reminds him of someone else.

ZHANE

What do you mean?

ZAY'LEE

I don't know. Just a feeling. Like there's history there I don't understand.

Zhane's phone buzzes with a text. She glances at it, her face tightening.

ZHANE

Zay, I need to ask you something, and I need you to be honest with me.

ZAY'LEE

Okay.

ZHANE

If something happened to me, would you be okay? Would you be able to take care of yourself?

ZAY'LEE

(alarmed)

Ma, what kind of question is that? Nothing's gonna happen to you.

ZHANE

I know, baby. I'm just... I worry sometimes.

ZAY'LEE

(sitting beside her)

Ma, you're scaring me. What's going on?

ZHANE

(looking into his eyes)

I love you, Zay'Lee. More than my own life. You know that, right?

ZAY'LEE

Of course I know that. Ma, you're really freaking me out.

ZHANE

(forcing a smile)

I'm sorry. It's just been a long day. I'm proud of you, that's all.

She kisses his forehead and heads toward her bedroom.

ZHANE

Get some sleep. Tomorrow's a new day.

She disappears down the hallway. Zay sits alone in the kitchen, more worried than ever.

ACT FOUR

INT. RISE ACADEMY - ARCHIVE ROOM - NIGHT

King sits alone among the boxes and memories. Zeek's notebook lies open on a table beside a laptop. On the screen: Zay's audition video, paused mid-rap.

King reads from the notebook, then hits play on the video. The words match perfectly.

KING ILLY
(to himself)
This is impossible. Dead men don't
write new verses.

He flips through more pages of the notebook. The handwriting changes slightly throughout—sometimes rushed, sometimes careful, but always distinctly Zeek's.

On the last written page, King finds something that makes his blood run cold. A verse titled "The Ghost in the Machine," dated just three months ago.

KING ILLY
(reading)
"I speak through voices that ain't
even born yet

My words find a way when my body's gone to rest

They think they buried me but planted me instead

Now I grow in the minds of kids who share my thread"

King's hands shake. He checks the date again. Zeek died twenty years ago.

His phone rings. Marcus.

KING ILLY
(answering)
What?

MARCUS (V.O.)
(filtered)
We need to talk. About the boy.

KING ILLY
What about him?

MARCUS (V.O.)
I've been doing some research.
Zay'Lee Carter. His mother is Zhane
Carter, maiden name Williams.

KING ILLY
So?

MARCUS (V.O.)
Zhane Williams dated Zeek Morrison.
Right before he died.

The phone slips from King's hand, clattering to the floor.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - STUDENT LOUNGE - LATE NIGHT

Zay sits alone, working by lamplight. The building is mostly empty, but he couldn't sleep. He's surrounded by notebooks, trying to work through a new song.

He hears footsteps in the hallway. Then voices—King and Marcus, talking in hushed tones.

KING ILLY (O.S.)
(muffled)
Are you sure about this?

MARCUS (O.S.)
(muffled)
DNA would confirm it, but the
timeline fits. Zeek died in October
2004. Zay was born in July 2005.

Zay freezes. They're talking about him.

KING ILLY (O.S.)
(muffled)
That doesn't explain the lyrics.
Dead men don't write songs.

MARCUS (O.S.)
(muffled)
Maybe they do. Through their
children.

Zay quietly moves closer to the door, straining to hear.

KING ILLY (O.S.)
(muffled)
I can't let this get out. If people
find out Zeek had a son...

MARCUS (O.S.)
 (muffled)
 Find out what? That you've been
 profiting off a dead man's work for
 twenty years? That this whole
 school is built on guilt money?

KING ILLY (O.S.)
 (muffled, angry)
 That school gives kids
 opportunities they never would have
 had!

MARCUS (O.S.)
 (muffled)
 Including his son, who doesn't even
 know who his father was.

The voices fade as they move away. Zay stands frozen in the doorway, his world suddenly tilted off its axis.

ZAY'LEE
 (whispered)
 Zeek Morrison... is my father?

INT. RISE ACADEMY - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Zay walks in a daze, their conversation echoing in his head. He finds himself in front of the wall of photos he passed on his first day.

He stops at Zeek's memorial photo. For the first time, he really looks at it. The eyes, the shape of the face, the way Zeek holds his head when he's thinking.

It's like looking into a mirror.

ZAY'LEE
 (touching the photo)
 Dad?

A sound behind him. He turns to see Nova approaching.

NOVA
 Zay? What are you doing here so
 late?

ZAY'LEE
 (still staring at the
 photo)
 Nova, do you know anything about
 Zeek Morrison?

NOVA

Just what everyone knows. He was
King's writing partner. Died young.
Why?

ZAY'LEE

(turning to her)

What if I told you I think he might
be my father?

NOVA

(shocked)

What? How is that possible?

ZAY'LEE

I don't know. But I just overheard
King and Marcus talking, and...

He tells her everything he heard. Nova listens, her
expression growing more concerned.

NOVA

Zay, if this is true, it changes
everything.

ZAY'LEE

How?

NOVA

Don't you see? You're not here
because of your talent. You're here
because of who your father was.

ZAY'LEE

But that doesn't make sense. King
didn't know who I was when he
accepted me.

NOVA

(thinking)

Or maybe he did. Maybe that's
exactly why he brought you here.

ZAY'LEE

For what?

NOVA

I don't know. But I think we need
to find out.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - BASEMENT ARCHIVES - NIGHT

Nova leads Zay down a staircase he's never seen before. She produces a key card.

ZAY'LEE

How do you have access to this?

NOVA

My family's investment in the school comes with certain... privileges.

They enter the archive room. Boxes and files stretch into the shadows.

NOVA

If there's proof about your father, it'll be here.

They search through boxes labeled with dates. Nova finds one marked "2004-2005" and pulls it out.

NOVA

Here. The year Zeek died.

Inside: contracts, recording sessions, and personal documents. Nova pulls out a folder marked "PERSONAL EFFECTS."

In the folder: photos of Zeek with various people, including several with a young woman who looks exactly like an older version of Zhane.

ZAY'LEE

(pointing to a photo)

That's my mother.

NOVA

Are you sure?

ZAY'LEE

I'm sure.

Nova continues searching and finds a letter, handwritten.

NOVA

(reading)

"Zhane, I know this is hard, but I need you to know that if anything happens to me, I want you to take care of yourself and the baby. I've written some songs for him-or her. They're in my notebook.

(MORE)

NOVA (CONT'D)

Make sure they know their father loved them before he even met them."

ZAY'LEE

(voice breaking)

The baby. That's me.

NOVA

There's more. "I've left instructions with my lawyer. There's money set aside, and rights to my catalog. King doesn't know about you or the baby. Keep it that way. He'll try to use you like he used me."

They stare at each other, the weight of discovery settling between them.

ZAY'LEE

My whole life, my mom told me my father was just some guy who left. She never told me...

NOVA

She was protecting you.

ZAY'LEE

From what?

NOVA

From this. From King. From becoming another one of his projects.

ZAY'LEE

But I'm already here. I'm already one of his projects.

NOVA

Then we need to figure out what his real plan is.

Footsteps echo from upstairs. They quickly gather the documents and photos.

NOVA

We need to go. Now.

They slip out of the archives, carrying the truth that will change everything.

ACT FIVE

INT. CARTER APARTMENT - ZAY'LEE'S ROOM - LATE NIGHT

Zay sits on his bed, staring at the photo of Zeek and his mother. His notebooks are spread around him, but he can't write. Too many thoughts, too many emotions.

His phone buzzes. Text from Nova: "Are you okay?"

He starts to text back, then deletes it. He's not okay. He's not sure he'll ever be okay again.

He picks up one of his notebooks and reads his own lyrics. Now he understands why they felt so familiar, why they seemed to come from somewhere else.

ZAY'LEE
(to the photo)
Were you trying to tell me
something? Through my own voice?

A knock at his bedroom door. Zhane peeks in.

ZHANE
Baby? You okay? I heard you come in
late.

ZAY'LEE
(not looking at her)
Ma, can I ask you something?

ZHANE
Of course.

ZAY'LEE
Did you ever know someone named
Zeek Morrison?

Zhane freezes in the doorway. The color drains from her face.

ZHANE
Where did you hear that name?

ZAY'LEE
(turning to face her)
From RISE Academy. He's the guy the
school is named after.

ZHANE
(sitting heavily on the
bed)
Zay...

ZAY'LEE
Ma, I found a photo. Of you and
him. Together.

Zhane's hands shake as she covers her face.

ZHANE
How did you find—

ZAY'LEE
Is he my father?

The silence stretches between them, heavy with twenty years
of secrets.

ZHANE
(finally)
Yes.

ZAY'LEE
(voice breaking)
Why didn't you tell me?

ZHANE
Because I was trying to protect
you.

ZAY'LEE
Protect me from what?

ZHANE
From them. From King Illy and the
industry and people who would use
you because of who your father was.

ZAY'LEE
But Ma, I'm already there. I'm
already at King's school.

ZHANE
(looking up, panicked)
What?

ZAY'LEE
King Illy is the one who invited me
to RISE. He's been watching me, Ma.
He knows who I am.

ZHANE

(standing)

We're leaving. Tonight. Pack your things.

ZAY'LEE

Ma, no. I can't leave. Not now.

ZHANE

Zay, you don't understand. Your father died because of that world. Because of King Illy.

ZAY'LEE

What do you mean?

ZHANE

(breaking down)

Zeek wrote all of King's hits. Every single one. But King was the face, the performer. Zeek was just the ghost behind the music.

ZAY'LEE

So?

ZHANE

So when Zeek wanted credit, when he wanted to step out of the shadows, King couldn't let that happen. Too much money, too much reputation on the line.

ZAY'LEE

Are you saying King killed my father?

ZHANE

I'm saying your father died broke and forgotten while King became a millionaire off his words. And the night before Zeek died, he told me he was going to expose everything.

ZAY'LEE

Ma...

ZHANE

(grabbing his hands)

Baby, I've been hiding this from you your whole life because I knew one day they'd come for you. And now they have.

ZAY'LEE

What if I don't want to hide
anymore?

ZHANE

What if you end up like your
father?

ZAY'LEE

What if I don't?

They stare at each other—mother and son, protector and
protected, past and future.

ZAY'LEE

Ma, I have his gift. His voice.
Maybe I'm supposed to finish what
he started.

ZHANE

(crying)
I can't lose you too.

ZAY'LEE

You won't. But I can't run from
this. Not anymore.

INT. RISE ACADEMY - KING ILLY'S OFFICE - SAME TIME

King sits at his desk, Zeek's notebook open in front of him.
He's been drinking—the bourbon bottle is half empty.

Marcus enters without knocking.

MARCUS

We need to talk about the boy.

KING ILLY

(not looking up)
He's Zeek's son.

MARCUS

You know?

KING ILLY

I figured it out. The question is,
what do we do about it?

MARCUS

We tell him the truth.

KING ILLY

(laughing bitterly)

The truth? Which truth? That I built my career on his father's work? That this whole school exists because I feel guilty? That I've been lying to myself for twenty years?

MARCUS

How about we start with the truth that his father was a genius who deserved better.

KING ILLY

(slamming the notebook shut)

His father was naive. He thought talent was enough. He thought the industry cared about art over profit.

MARCUS

And you taught him different?

KING ILLY

I tried to protect him. Just like I'm trying to protect his son.

MARCUS

By controlling him? By making sure he never learns who he really is?

KING ILLY

By making sure he doesn't make the same mistakes.

MARCUS

(sitting down)

King, listen to yourself. You're about to do to Zay exactly what you did to Zeek.

KING ILLY

What's that supposed to mean?

MARCUS

You're going to try to keep him in the shadows while you take the credit. You're going to package his pain and sell it as your redemption story.

King looks up, something dangerous in his eyes.

KING ILLY

Get out.

MARCUS

King—

KING ILLY

(standing)

Get out of my office. Now.

Marcus leaves. King returns to the notebook, flipping to the last entry—the one dated three months ago.

KING ILLY

(reading aloud)

"The sins of the father ain't the son's to bear, but the son might choose to carry them anyway."

He looks up at the window, where Oakland glitters in the distance.

KING ILLY

(whispered)

I'm sorry, Z. I'm so damn sorry.

EXT. RISE ACADEMY - ROOFTOP - DAWN

Zay stands at the edge of the roof, looking out over the city as the sun rises. The photo of his parents is in his hand.

Nova appears behind him.

NOVA

Figured I'd find you here.

ZAY'LEE

(not turning around)

Couldn't sleep.

NOVA

What are you going to do?

ZAY'LEE

I don't know. My whole life just got turned upside down.

NOVA

Maybe it got turned right side up.

ZAY'LEE

(turning to her)

What do you mean?

NOVA

Maybe now you know who you really are. Maybe now you can decide who you want to be.

ZAY'LEE

And who's that?

NOVA

That's up to you. You can be your father's son—talented but used. Or you can be Zay'Lee Carter—talented and free.

ZAY'LEE

What if those are the same thing?

NOVA

Then you make them different.

Zay pulls out his notebook, reads his latest entry.

ZAY'LEE

(reading)

"They promise you the world but sell you the cage. Tell you to dream but keep you minimum wage. But what if the dreamer wakes up? What if the cage was never locked? What if the voice they tried to silence gets louder instead of soft?"

NOVA

That's beautiful.

ZAY'LEE

That's my father's rhythm, but my words.

NOVA

Then it's your song.

ZAY'LEE

(looking out over Oakland)

Nova, what if King's right? What if the industry will just chew me up and spit me out like it did my father?

NOVA

Then you make sure you're harder to chew.

They stand together in comfortable silence as the city wakes up below them.

ZAY'LEE

You know what the crazy part is?

NOVA

What?

ZAY'LEE

I still want this. Even knowing what I know, I still want to make music. I still want my voice to matter.

NOVA

That's not crazy. That's courage.

ZAY'LEE

(voice-over, as the camera pulls back)

My name is Zay'Lee Carter. My father was Zeek Morrison, and he died before I could meet him. But I carry his voice, his rhythm, his truth. And I'm about to find out what that's worth.

NOVA

(voice-over)

What if the dream they sell you... is how they buy your soul?

ZAY'LEE

(voice-over)

Then you make sure the dream is yours to begin with.

The camera continues pulling back, showing Zay and Nova as small figures against the vast Oakland skyline. The city sprawls beneath them—full of dreams and broken promises, hope and hustle, voices waiting to be heard.

ZAY'LEE

(voice-over)

This is my story. My father's legacy. My choice.

The music swells—a blend of Zeek's melody and Zay's lyrics, past and present becoming one voice.

ZAY'LEE
(voice-over)
And I choose to rise.

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF EPISODE

NEXT EPISODE
PREVIEW:

Quick cuts of:

- Zay confronting King Illy
- Nova discovering her family's deeper connection to RISE
- Judas finding his stolen compositions in King's private collection
- Zhane's cancer diagnosis being revealed
- A mysterious figure watching the academy from across the street

NARRATOR (V.O.)
Next time on RISE...

ZAY'LEE
(to King)
You killed my father. Now you're
trying to kill me.

KING ILLY
(to unseen person)
The boy knows too much. We need to
contain this.

NOVA
(to Zay)
My family didn't just invest in
RISE. They own it.

FADE OUT.

