

Book Description:

For South Bay High's bold, beautiful Jayd Jackson, drama has reached record-breaking heights as she finds herself on the defensive at home, work, and school. Maybe it's time to take her destiny—and her power—into her own hands... Her relationship with now-ex boyfriend Jeremy behind her, Jayd realizes drama is just a never-ending part of daily life. Even so, she's reached her limit, battling with her new boss, jealousies at school, and tensions at home. To deal with it all, Jayd is ready to give some attention to her legacy as one in a long line of conjure women. But that legacy comes with a line of rivals too—and a couple of them are much too close to home.

First, there's Misty, Jayd's enemy #1 and current girlfriend of Jayd's other ex, KJ. Then there's Jayd's neighbor, Esmeralda, a conjurer from Louisiana whose crystal-clear blue eyes are said to be deadly. When Jayd spots Misty's mom visiting Esmeralda, she knows something's up and it's time for Mama to fill her in. Turns out there's a history between these families, and if Jayd wants to keep the drama under control, she'll have to learn to use her power like never before—and become the woman she was born to be.

Prologue

After this morning's dream about my girl Mickey's man jumping Nigel, I never did get any sleep. Before our friends were awake, Rah made me breakfast and took me home to get dressed before taking me to work. He's such a sweetie. But the cuteness ended when he started to get repeat text messages and calls from his girl Trish, snapping me into the reality of the situation: if I want to be with Rah, I'll have to deal with being the other woman always, because I don't see him changing his ways anytime soon.

Thank goodness my mom's picking me up from work in a few minutes. I've never been so tired in my life, not even when Mama keeps me up all night working in the spirit room. I think it's my job that's wearing me down. I'm starting to feel like the people I see going to work on the bus everyday look miserable. I need to make a change for the better and soon.

"So how was your trip?" I ask as my mom pulls away from the curb and drives toward Inglewood. She decided to pick me up from work so she can get me back to Mama's early. I guess she and Karl have a follow-up to their Vegas date later this evening. Girls in general are a trip when they get a new man. And my mom's no exception to the rule.

"It was wonderful," she says, her green eyes sparkling through her Versace shades. They must be a gift from her new man because I know they're not in her budget. "But the date's not over yet. We're going to The Cheesecake Factory for dinner, so you've got ten minutes to get your stuff when we get back, okay? I'll wait for you downstairs."

Damn, it's like that? It seems second nature for women to put a guy as top priority when he's around. That's exactly why—no matter how much I may love Rah—I've decided not to have a man right now. Who needs the drama?

"I do, and so does every other woman I know, including you, little miss thang," my mom says telepathically. I hate when she does that.

"If you don't like it, then speak what's on your mind, shawty," she says again without moving her lips.

"Okay then, fine," I say, still vexed from having to work under Marty again today at the restaurant. I need to find a new job. "How come every time a new dude pops up I become second in line?" I say, feeling the pain of my words knot in my throat. Whenever I get emotional I want to cry. My mom sees it as a sign of weakness, so I try not to let it happen too often in front of her, and this time is no exception.

"You're never second, Jayd," my mom says. She's speeding down La Brea like it's the Autobahn. "But between working all week and having you on the weekends,

I never have enough time to just be me,” she says, sounding like the self-absorbed Lynn Marie that Mama always talks about. From the time I could remember, which has been basically all of my life, Mama has called my mother selfish and materialistic. I used to defend her, until I got a little older and understood that Mama was telling the truth; otherwise my mom would have raised me herself. I try not to blame her too much. Although it’s times like these that make me rethink my forgiving attitude.

“Oh Jayd, I know you think I’m selfish, and you’re right,” she says, turning onto her street and unlocking the doors before stopping the car. “But honestly, Jayd, you’ve been able to take care of yourself since you were very young. When you get older you’ll appreciate having such an independent mother. No matter how Mama may feel about it, I know you came to me because you knew who I was before we met. I used to talk to you in the womb all the time, and you responded. I know you heard me, so don’t act like this is news,” she says, touching my hand and looking at me. Except for their colors, our eyes are identical.

“I know, Mom, I know,” I say, opening the car door and exiting before she makes me cry. I can actually remember having dreams about talking to my mother from inside her belly. Mama says it’s typical for me and other babies born with cauls to have memories revealed through dreams, even of our past lives. Caught up in my thoughts, I trip on the curb, splashing the murky drain water onto my Nikes and accidentally causing the car door to scrape on the sidewalk.

“Okay then. So don’t be so salty when I want to go out. It’s all for you, baby. And be careful with that door,” she says, forcing a sarcastic smirk from me. My mom’s nothing if not honest about who she is and I definitely admire her for that. With or without a king-man, my mom’s a queen. And I, being her daughter, wear a similar crown and deserve more than what any of these dudes around here are offering me. I know I can do better on my own and that’s just what I intend to do.

Chapter One

Cruise Control

“I’m not here for your entertainment/ You don’t really want to mess with me . . .” —PINK

I don’t mind being back on the bus and hiking the near-mile it takes to get to school every morning. Sometimes I wish Mama would let me attend school closer to home but she thinks I’ll get into too much trouble. The brisk morning air feels refreshing against my cheeks. I can tell my legs have become a little weak from the daily rides with Jeremy. But I doubt I’ll still receive that privilege now that we’re no longer an item. I feel awful about our breakup. I do still have feelings for him, but they’re not as strong as what I feel for Rah. Speaking of which, here’s a text from him now. I’ll have to hit Rah back later. Right now I want to mentally prepare for my day while hiking up this steep-ass hill—no distractions allowed.

As the procession of fancy cars passes me, all heading to South Bay High, I notice Misty walking ahead of me across the street. I guess her mom’s running late this morning and couldn’t give her a ride, since I saw her on each of the three bus rides it takes to get here. But luckily they were all packed as usual, forcing a safe distance between us.

I’m surprised Misty couldn’t catch a ride with someone else from South Central. I guess she wanted to roll solo this morning, too. Still, it’s odd for Misty to ride alone, unlike myself. I actually prefer the solitude I find on the bus; it gives me time to think. Mama says I should use this time to study my lessons, and I do for the most part. But instead of reading or writing them down, I recite what I already know in my head. It’s hard enough to concentrate on these noisy and bumpy rides as it is. Besides, I don’t like to have too much in my hands just in case I got to make a quick move. You never know when the driver will miss a stop or a fight will break out in the back. I’m always on my toes.

When I finally arrive on campus, Chance is waiting for me by my locker with Nellie and Mickey, of course. I must admit, I love having my crew back together. This weekend's chill session was just what we needed to get our groove back. And spending time with Rah is always cool, especially when we're in the studio watching he and Nigel work on their music. His new song still has me blushing, but not blind to the painful facts. Rah has a girl and I'm single. I've had three relationships in four months and it's time for me to chill. I'm letting time take over for now, leaving the controls on cruise while I sit back and enjoy the ride.

"Hey y'all," I say, interrupting what looks like a deep conversation. "What's up?"

"Hey Jayd," Nellie says, putting her lean arm around my shoulders and escorting me to my locker. What's her problem? "How are you feeling, girl?" she says as I open my locker door, retrieving my Spanish and English books for my first two classes. I haven't forgotten them in my locker for the past couple of weeks and I have to admit, I'm proud of my progress.

"I'm feeling fine, Nellie. Are you okay?" I say, putting my hand on her forehead, checking for a fever.

"Girl, stop playing," she says, slapping my hand away from her face and taking a step back toward Chance and Mickey, who are amused at our behavior. They look just as concerned about me as she does.

"Nellie's just making sure you're okay. This is the first day back since you and Jeremy broke up," Mickey says, taking her watermelon Blow Pop out of her mouth long enough to translate Nellie's body language. "Everyone's already talking about it."

"Yeah, it's pretty brutal," Chance says, grabbing Nellie by the waist, like she's his property to claim. Their blossoming relationship should be the talk of the town, not my breakup with Jeremy.

"Is there something I should know about you two?" I say, slamming my locker shut and leading the way out of the busy hall. I do notice people I don't even know looking at me and whispering to their friends. Bad news travels fast,

especially when it's about the most wanted boy in school and his chocolate pick-of-the-month.

"Yeah, you should know that people are cashing in on their bets of how long you and Jeremy would last," Chance says, looking across the quad toward South Central, the black side of the quad, where Misty has joined the crowd. I'm sure she's having a field day with this one. I'm surprised she didn't say anything to me about it on the bus. But, from the looks of it, she had more important things on her mind. I'm still confused as to why KJ didn't give her a ride. Aren't they still dating?

"Yeah, it's pretty pathetic what some people will bet five dollars on," Mickey says. I can't say I'm surprised. Jeremy is the most popular cat at this wack-ass school and his life is of public interest.

"Only five dollars? I'm worth way more than that," I say, making light of the humiliating situation, while giving my friends a good laugh.

"Yes, you are," Chance says, letting go of Nellie long enough to give me a bear hug. "None of these dudes up here are good enough for my girl," he says, making Nellie feel slightly uncomfortable by the looks of it. Here we go. I don't like the idea of my best friends dating, especially not when Chance used to have a crush on me. Even though nothing went down between us, I know how females are when it comes to their men—even if they are my girls. Mickey would have had a beef with me if Nigel and I used to date. And I know it bothers Nellie that Chance used to have it bad for me. But now he's hooked on her, and I hope she concentrates on the future and not the past.

"Yeah girl, you already got your man," Mickey says, referring to Rah. "You just need to woman up and fight for the fool," she says, now loudly smacking her candy-turned-gum as the first bell rings.

"Nobody needs to woman up, Foxy Brown," I say, teasing my girl, who's still wearing the attitude of her Halloween costume's character. I'm glad we took pictures of that night at the Masquerade Ball—we all looked good. Noticing me

eyeing my key chain before securing it into one of the many pockets on my Jansport, Nellie takes hers out and clasps it to her backpack.

“Hey, let’s all wear our pictures on our bags, the ones of us in our Halloween costumes,” she says, taking Chance’s key chain off his belt and hooking it onto his backpack.

“What are we, in junior high?” Mickey says. Before she can protest any further, Nellie takes Mickey’s out of her purse and locks it to her backpack as well.

“No. But we can still show love, right Jayd?” she says, waiting for me to follow suit. I take the picture off of my cluttered key chain and move it to my backpack, next to the “No More Drama” satchel Mama gave me for the first day of school. I tied it there after the drama between Misty and Trecee unfolded and haven’t even considered moving it.

“Are you happy?” I say, sassing Nellie as we continue to walk to class. “Now we officially look like the clique I never wanted to be a part of.”

“There’s a big difference between our crew and those other cliques,” Nellie says, putting one arm around me and the other around Mickey’s shoulders, forcing Chance to release her waist again. Lucky for Nellie, Chance looks amused by our impromptu soul train.

“What’s that?” Mickey says, dryly. She’s not into belonging with any one set of folks, or any one dude for that matter. I know she and her man have been together since junior high, but I doubt that she’s ever been exclusive. And, according to the dream I had Saturday night, her unfaithful shit’s about to hit the fan.

“We’re real friends—ride or die.” As Nellie says something that sounds more like Mickey’s mantra, I see KJ and his crew looking my way. He has a big smile on his face. I know he must be talking about Jeremy and me breaking up. I wonder if Jeremy’s getting this kind of heat on the white side of Drama High.

“Yeah, whatever,” Mickey says. “Let’s just try to stay on the right side of our friendship from now on.” I couldn’t agree more; we’ve already had enough drama for the year and we’re only in the second month of school. But I seriously doubt it will happen. If I know one thing about our crew, it’s that we have haters. And where there are haters there’s always drama. “And I haven’t forgot about you being our slave, either,” Mickey says to Nellie, referring to Nellie’s punishment for choosing Tania over us.

“I think she’s learned her lesson, don’t you?” I respond. As much as I would love to humiliate Nellie for what she did, no one’s perfect, and I would hope my true friends would show me some mercy when the world’s against me.

“No, especially not with her making us all wear these damned pictures on our backpacks,” Mickey says, flicking the frame with her curved silver and violet nails. Nellie looks scared and I don’t blame her. Knowing Mickey, Nellie’s punishment will be cruel.

“There’s the final bell,” Chance says, pulling Nellie off to first period as I head to my Spanish class, saving my girl from her sentencing, for now.

“All right, I’ll see y’all at lunch. I have to talk to my English teacher at break,” I say. Mrs. Malone’s helping me go over my last paper. She thinks I didn’t try hard enough and wants me to revise it for an A. I wish all of my teachers were cool like her. Most of them would just let my little black ass fail.

“Damn, Jayd. School isn’t all about work,” Nellie says, as Chance leads her away.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you loved this wicked-ass place,” Mickey says, following the new couple away from the quad.

“Bye y’all. And don’t make any more bets on my relationships,” I yell after them. I know they didn’t, but I’m sure the thought crossed their minds.

“Hey Jayd. What’s up with my girl?” Nigel says, swooping me up into a huge hug and walking me out of my classroom as I head in. He loves catching me off guard. Nigel must’ve had a meeting with his coach, Mr. Donald, who also doubles

as my Spanish teacher. Thank God I'm not trying to take the AP exam in this subject, because I'd fail because of his inadequate teaching, for sure.

"Nothing much. Aren't you going to be late for class?" I say, as he puts my feet back on the ground.

"I'm an athlete, baby," he says, showing off his hall pass from Mr. Donald. "We're always excused."

"Whatever, Nigel." I push the heavy door out of his hands and pass him. As I enter the classroom, I notice a new girl is sitting in my seat. She looks a little shaken, so I'm not going to sweat her today. I'll just have to be here a little early tomorrow morning to stake my claim.

"Have you talked to my boy this morning?" Nigel says, escorting me to an empty desk as the rest of the class makes their way into the chilly room. First period's always the coolest. I don't know if it's because of the morning frost, or the air conditioning they use to keep us awake, but I'm always glad to get out of this room.

"No, but he texted me a little while ago. I've just been too preoccupied to hit him back," I say, only telling half the truth. Ever since Rah's girl started texting him while we were together yesterday, I've been rethinking just how attached I want to get to him right now. I'm just glad he's not at my school everyday. If he were up in my face all of the time, he would be too irresistible for me to even think twice about getting back with him. Being tucked away at South Bay High does have its advantages.

"Well, you know he doesn't like to be kept waiting," Nigel says, grinning and showing off his bright smile. Mickey doesn't have a chance against falling hard for Nigel. I just have to help all of us not get hurt by the heat their forbidden love is stirring up. If Mickey's man finds out that she likes Nigel, there'll be hell to pay.

"Yeah, I remember well. And you will both remember that I don't play games," I say, taking my seat as Mr. Donald writes today's agenda on the board.

“Yeah, whatever, Jayd. You’re a trip. Just hit him back,” Nigel says, finally leaving the room, and me to my thoughts. I can’t handle Rah and my first day broken up with Jeremy at the same time. I’m not looking forward to third period. I know Tania’s got to be glowing over the news of us breaking up. I just hope she doesn’t say anything to set me off, because the last thing I need is more heat in my fire this morning.

Second period was a breeze because we watched *The Color Purple* in class, comparing it to the novel, which we already read over the summer as a prerequisite for this course. I love Mrs. Malone’s book list. She makes the best selections and also the most diverse. Our summer reading list included works from Sandra Cisneros, Zora Neale Hurston, and Julie Dash. I don’t know if any of those authors will be on the AP exam for sure, but I enjoyed reading them anyway.

“Can I just rewrite my paper on Alice Walker’s literary voice rather than Virginia Woolf’s?” I ask, whining about my last assignment. I hated reading *A Room of One’s Own*. Not because Woolf’s writing sucks, but because I don’t relate to her style. It just doesn’t speak to me. And that’s exactly what I tried to express in my paper.

“I like your critique of Ms. Woolf’s voice,” Mrs. Malone says after class, propping herself up onto the desk in front of mine, displaying her cream and turquoise moccasins. She looks like she just stepped out of a New Mexico tourist brochure. “You just need a more solid argument,” she says, handing me a paper heavily marked in red. Damn, that means hella work on my end.

“It doesn’t look like you liked much about it,” I say, flipping each of the five pages, revealing more red ink as I continue to flip. It looks like she bled all over it.

“Jayd, all of these notes aren’t bad. Don’t always expect the worst,” she says, leaning over and turning to the third page. “Take for example this page. I wrote a paragraph explaining how this is where your actual thesis begins, instead of on page one, which is where it belongs. This is your rough draft, Jayd. Turn in the final one to me by Friday,” she says, closing the paper and placing it on the desk in front of me.

“I’ve seen you do much better. But you’ve seemed a little distracted lately. Everything okay at home?”

“Yes, everything’s fine,” I say, looking at her wall clock, ready to roll. There are only five more minutes left in break and I really could use a Snickers right now. Mrs. Malone’s always looking to have an after-school-special type of conversation with me. She’s cool, but I’d never tell her all of my business. Mama would hang me where I stand if I ever told any of my teachers about my home life. I learned that lesson very early on when I was in elementary school: whether it’s dirty or clean, we never air our laundry in public.

“Is everything okay with Jeremy?” she says, like we’re a couple of old girlfriends having tea. Ah, hell nah, let me nip this one in the bud right now before she pulls out a box of tissues.

“Jeremy’s no longer my concern,” I say, rising from my seat, wounded report in hand. “I’ll have the paper back to you by Friday and thank you again for giving me a chance to rewrite it.” I say, marching toward the door. Damn, there’s the first bell. Now I’m going to have to go to third period without my chocolate fix. I really hope everything’s cool with both Jeremy and Tania. Any more irritation and I’m liable to bite someone’s head off.

“Jayd, if you ever need to talk, I’m here. I know breaking up seems like the end of the world, but it’s only high school,” she says, whimsically dismissing my feelings as a schoolgirl crush. Even with Rah winning the battle for my heart, I still feel for Jeremy.

“Thank you, Mrs. Malone,” I say, as I walk toward third period. Right now I just feel like my feelings are out of control, like they’re marching to their own beat and I’m a passenger along for the ride.

“The key is to be in alignment with your feelings in order to control the situation,” my mom says, sounding more like Mama than herself, as she invades my thoughts.

“Not at school,” I say aloud to my mom as she coquettishly grins in my head. She’s having too much fun with her born-again powers. But I know she’s right. I have to get my mojo back, and fast.

When I walk into Mrs. Peterson’s class, Tania and Jeremy aren’t there yet. At least they won’t be able to catch me off guard. Now I have a moment to prepare myself.

“Hey Jayd,” Jeremy says, walking into our class right as the bell rings and taking the seat next to me, as usual. I guess some things haven’t changed.

“Hey,” I say, unable to muster up a different greeting. I’m still so upset with him for not claiming his and Tania’s baby, because he’s afraid of his dad disowning him, but I also feel guilty, because it was an easy way for me to be free to explore something new with Rah. But Jeremy doesn’t have to know all that.

“Good morning, class,” Mrs. Peterson says, barely looking up from her desk. “Your assignment’s on the board. Your quiz will be during the last fifteen minutes of the period. If you must talk, make it quiet, please.” Before returning to her newspaper, Mrs. Peterson looks up at the opening door, ready to attack whoever’s walking into her arena late. “Thank you for joining us this morning,” she says, hella salty to a tardy Tania.

“Well, it’s the least I can do, considering it’s my last morning at South Bay,” Tania says, sliding an envelope across the teacher’s desk, as giddy as ever. She turns around to wink at Jeremy, then gives me a sly look before walking to the back of the classroom where her followers are seated. She collects money from some classmates while Mrs. Peterson signs her release papers. I know this trick didn’t place a bet on me and Jeremy.

“Jeremy,” she says, leaning across my desk, directly in striking distance. If I were a crocodile, she’d be underwater by now. “It’s been real,” she says, blowing him a kiss as she cuts her eyes at me. “So sorry the two of you didn’t work out,” she says, showing off her fifty dollar bill and blingedout engagement ring before walking back to the teacher’s desk. The broad’s lucky she’s pregnant. Otherwise, whipping her ass might be worth the automatic suspension from school.

“What a bitch,” Jeremy says under his breath, but loud enough to make the students around us giggle. Well, at least Jeremy and I are in agreement about something. Too bad I can’t agree with Jeremy accepting that his father will only allow his sons to bring home white babies. Lucky for Tania, her parents hooked her up with a fiancé in New York who also happens to be rich. What a life.

“Yeah, I think our breakup is worth a whole lot more. At least a c-note,” I say, breaking the iceberg that’s between us. I would love it if we could still be friends. I genuinely like the cat, and love vibing with him, whether we can kiss or not.

“I agree. At least a hundred. I wish they’d let me in on the bet. I could have made a killing,” he says, taking his books out of his backpack and turning to our assignment. With Tania’s grand exit over, it’s back to work in Government class.

“I hear you. What would you have wagered?” I ask, copying the notes from the board into my notebook. I miss the easy exchanges with Jeremy. We seemed to lose our spark amid all of the relationship baggage. It’s nice to be on the path to friendship again, even if it’s slightly awkward. Like Mama says, time heals all wounds or makes you forget what you were fighting about in the first place.

“A million dollars,” he says, looking as serious as a heart attack and surprising me, much like Nigel did earlier. “I would’ve bet that much that we’d stay together, if the situation and timing were different.” I now realize Jeremy feels as bad as I do about us breaking up. The difference between us is that he has no one to catch his rebound. My phone vibrates with another message from Rah, making me blush. Damn, this sucks. Now I really feel uncomfortable.

“Quiet please,” Mrs. Peterson says, ending the heat for now. I hope Jeremy and I can really be friends, even if he does find out about me and Rah. But, for now, I just pray that we can all chill for a minute before crashing head on into each other.