

Book Description:

Just as South Bay High's Jayd Jackson is feeling good that her two main social circles have finally come together, drama takes over once more, and the usual suspects are involved...

These days, family and relationship drama is the name of the game in Jayd's life—from her fighting uncles on the home front to her friend Mickey's possible pregnancy—aka her “maybe baby”—to a vengeful plan being plotted by Misty, Jayd's nemesis, over a highly personal problem. In fact, Jayd may have to do some plotting of her own to keep her crew safe from Misty's drama. Meanwhile, Rah is trying to get closer to Jayd, but she won't be his rebound girl. Everything comes to a head when Jayd's ex, Jeremy, asks to play basketball with Rah and the others and is told that a white boy can't ball. Jeremy proves them wrong, but will that be enough for them to let him on the team for an important game? Or will ego and stereotyping win? It's almost more than Jayd can take—until her Mama reminds her of her powerful lineage. Now it's time for Jayd to catch up on her spirit work, and confront some powerful emotions of her own...

Prologue

“Haven't you heard of no white after Labor Day, Jayd?” Mrs. Bennett, my most hated teacher, says, commenting on my bright attire. Apparently, it's okay for folks to wear all black on any given day. But put on white from head to toe, and you stick out like a sore thumb.

“Other people’s opinions of you don’t matter, Jayd. It’s what you think of yourself and your heritage that counts,” Mama says, creeping into my dream as usual. Do all grandmothers have this ability, or is it just mine?

“She’s right, Jayd,” my mom says. I guess my dream world has become community property. “I know it’s difficult sticking out in a crowd, especially at school, but it’s worth it. Trust me.” And I know she knows what she’s talking about. My mom gave up on her spirit lessons in high school. So why are they all up in my head this morning?

“Look at that witch,” Reid says, no longer in character as Macbeth but joined by the rest of the drama class in his taunting. “My mom told me about people like you.”

“Yeah, my great grandmother remembered hearing stories about slaves with strange powers,” Mrs. Bennett says. What is she doing in drama class? She and Mrs. Sinclair don’t get along at all. “They had to be put in their place to protect the others on the plantation,” she says, raising her pointer above her head, which she yields like a weapon in class on a regular basis, ready to strike.

“Fight back, Jayd, like I taught you to,” Mama whispers into my ear as I stand my ground in the center of the room. Everyone has surrounded me, ready to watch the whipping I’m supposed to receive. “None of our ancestors took shit laying down, Jayd. We come from a long line of warriors. Girl, get up and fight!”

“You have no right to judge me,” I say, taking a step back from Mrs. Bennett. None of my friends are here to help me. Only my enemies have come to watch. “And you damn sure have no right to hit me,” I say. Mrs. Bennett looks at me, her cold blue eyes shimmering like our wicked neighbor Esmeralda’s did when she gave me my headache from hell, which starts again as I stare back at her. What the hell?

I feel like Alice in Wonderland. Watching me stumble and fall to my knees in the center of the circle, the entire class laughs hysterically at my demise. At any minute I’m going to vomit from the dizziness in my head. The laughing is getting louder and more dramatic. The scene switches and Reid is now in character. But instead of being Lady Macbeth, I’m one of the witches. Alia’s still laughing along

with the rest of the onlookers as Mrs. Bennett readies herself to take a cheap shot at me while I'm already down.

"Jayd, don't you hear that alarm, girl? Get up," Mama yells from her bed, instinctively saving me from my psychic beat-down.

"Sorry, Mama. I'm off my game a little this morning," I say, shaking my head free of the leftover pounding from my dream. I haven't seen Esmeralda since I gave Misty her grisgris ingredients last week and I leave out of the back door now always, just in case she's feeling bold. After getting a taste of her powers, I'll never give Esmeralda the chance to catch me off-guard again.

"As soon as you realize it's a game you can master, you won't ever be off it again," Mama says, giving me insight into my own visions, as usual. How does she do that?

"She's Mama," my mom says, contributing her two cents. "You haven't even seen ten percent of what she can really do. Why do you think I stay out of her way?"

"If your mom's in your head, please tell her to call me. It's time for her to get a reading about this new man of hers," Mama says, rolling over in her bed and returning to sleep. When did I become a psychic mailwoman?

"Mama says to call her," I say out loud, knowing they both heard me.

"Damn, see what I mean Jayd? She probably already did the reading and wants to see what I have to say. Ain't no hiding from Mama." And don't I know it. I'll have to talk to her about my dream later. Now it's time to get to school and face the music. Things have been really tense since everyone found out about me trying to help Misty, especially when I came to school wearing all white last week. But, I'm not going to be deterred from living my life. And with my crew back together as tight as glue, I know I'll be just fine.

Chapter One

Above The Rim

“The world is mine when I wake up/ I don’t need nobody telling me the time.”
—ERYKAH BADU

From my dream this morning, I thought my day was going to be much more eventful than it was. It was chill though, just going to my classes and getting my assignments for the week. Mrs. Malone still hasn’t returned my paper to me. I’m anxious to see what I got on the rewrite. It was a difficult assignment and I wasn’t into it at all. I hope there will be fewer red marks across the pages when I get it back this time.

I did notice people staring at me, but it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was going to be. And me looking extra flyy today gives them a different impression than the one they had of me last week, even though I look flyy in my whites too.

“Jayd, wait up,” Nellie says, joining me as I head toward the gymnasium. While I have dance class, she, Mickey, and the rest of the South Central kids have P.E. during sixth period. I usually don’t see any of them walk in because I’m always late for dress-up. Hiking up the hill from drama class is no joke and takes up the majority of the six minutes we have to get from one class to the other, no matter how far apart the classes are. Luckily, we have ten minutes to dress, which gives me plenty of time to get ready and be on time for roll call.

“Why aren’t you in the gym already?” I say, speed walking up the steep hill. Students are rushing in every direction before the final bell for sixth period rings. “Don’t you have to run laps if you aren’t there for roll?” Regular P.E. is more stringent than our elective courses on the AP track, and I always hear about the tougher rules from both her and Mickey. They think I’ve got it easier because I seemingly have more options, but, like the saying goes, you can’t judge a book by its cover.

“Yeah, but we have a sub today,” she says and instantly I know it’s Mr. Adewale, the fine-ass sub who’s been working here for the past couple of weeks. Damn, I wish I had her class today. “And check it out. Nigel, Chance, and Jeremy are playing a game of basketball against KJ and his boys. You’ve got to come watch.”

“What the hell are they doing that for?” I say, obviously more out of the loop than I realized. I missed kicking it with them at lunch because I was rehearsing in drama class, and nothing seemed unusual at break.

“Because they’re boys,” Nellie says, pulling me in the direction of the main gymnasium instead of to the back area where the dance studio, Olympic-sized pool, and weight rooms are housed. I have a good view of the football field from my class, but the outside basketball courts are on the other side of the building, which is where all sparring matches are held, unless it’s raining, like it’s supposed to do this afternoon.

“Yeah, but don’t they have football practice now?” Chance and Jeremy are seniors and elected not to have classes the last period of the day, especially since they aren’t athletes. They’d usually be at the beach right about now. It’s mid-November and getting cooler, making surfing uncomfortable I suppose. But still, a game against KJ is tantamount to suicide and I can’t imagine the fun in that.

“Yeah, but Mr. Donald had a meeting, so the team just has to run drills and lift weights today. But, they all got into it in fourth period today, arguing about some stupid shit,” Nellie says, shaking her head at the painful memory. “KJ challenged Nigel to a game of one-on-one and Nigel accepted, but it quickly turned into three-on-three when Del and C Money wanted in on the action. Chance had Nigel’s back, making Jeremy an honorary team player, of course.”

“Of course,” I say. I can’t believe two of my exes and Rah’s best friend are all about to engage in a basketball game. And I wonder what they were arguing about in the first place. “How did this all start again?”

As I step into the gymnasium, the bell rings loudly above our heads. I see Jeremy, Chance, and Nigel on the opposite side of the courts, practicing their free throws. I know Nigel’s jump shot, but I’ve never seen Jeremy or Chance ball.

“I can’t remember exactly, but I know it had something to do with money,” she says. I hope it isn’t about KJ placing bets on me and Jeremy’s break-up. Before I can continue my questioning, Mr. Adewale comes out of the boy’s locker room in a blue and gray Adidas warm-up suit. Damn, he looks good, and he’s much taller than I remember.

“Hey y’all,” Mickey says, entering the gymnasium, tardy as usual. “Have they started yet?”

“Not yet,” Nellie says, following my eyes across the court.

“Jayd, what are you looking at?”

“My future baby-daddy,” I say, amusing my girls. I try to make eye contact with Mr. Adewale, but he’s got eyes for his clipboard and whistle only.

“I know you’re not talking about that nappy-headed teacher, are you?” Nellie’s not into natural hair at all. Whenever I wear my hair in Afro-puffs, she clowns me for a week straight. “Jayd, please tell me you don’t like dreads.”

“What can I say? I prefer a natural black man, especially after dealing with KJ’s pretty behind,” I say, watching KJ and his boys strut into the gymnasium. Nigel and his team stop and stare down their opponents. KJ and his team face them on the court, ready to ball. They know they’ve got this game in the bag. I actually feel sorry for my boys. I hope their egos are strong enough to survive the ass-whipping they’re about to receive.

“Come on, let’s get a seat,” Mickey says. As we walk up the bleachers, the rest of my dance class, my dance teacher, and the other sixth-period activity classes file into the open space. I know they’re not here to witness the impromptu ball game.

“Jayd, I see you made it to class after all,” Ms. Carter says. She’s hella cool and basically lets us make up our own routines. I always dance solo so that I can dance to my own music, unlike the rest of the white girls in the class who practice their ballet steps all period. I use the class to get a good workout to my reggae and hip-hop CDs.

“Yes, Ms. Carter,” I say as my girls take a seat in the bleachers. I hope Ms. Carter doesn’t make me sit with our class.

“Good. I was just about to hand in my roll sheet and didn’t want you to get marked absent. The gym teachers have a meeting right now and I’m leaving you to the sub over there. Make sure he knows you’re here,” she says, leaving me to chill with my girls and flirt with Mr. Adewale. This day’s looking up minute by minute.

“I have to go check in real quick,” I say, tossing my backpack down by my girls’ feet and jogging back down the bleachers toward Mr. Adewale.

“But Jayd, you’re going to miss the game. They’re only playing until the end of the period.” Nellie’s too into this game for me. I get enough of watching brothas ball from my uncles at home. They have a basketball hoop attached to the top of the garage and ball whenever the mood hits them.

“I’ll be right back. Besides, we all know who’s going to win.” Mickey and Nellie both look at me like I’m the biggest traitor alive. I guess since their boyfriends are playing, it’s personal for them. And I have to admit, I would love to see Jeremy whip KJ’s ass. But I know different. I just hope Jeremy doesn’t get humiliated too bad.

“Hello, Miss Jackson,” our substitute says as I approach the crowd where my class is standing. My fellow classmates are too busy salivating over him to notice me walk up late. Wait until he’s here every day. Ms. Toni’s right, I refuse to be one of these girls. But I do like his style. Maybe for now he can be the big brother I never had. “Glad you could make it this afternoon,” he says, giving me a sly smile as he erases the absent mark from my name.

“Sorry I’m late. I was in here the whole time,” I say, but I know he’s just giving me a hard time.

“It’s okay. Have a seat with the rest of the class and we’ll begin shortly.”

“Oh, but Mr. Adewale,” I say, looking across the gym at my girls who are completely engrossed in the game while I’m missing crucial moments. “I was hoping I could sit on the other side and watch the basketball game, if it’s okay with you.” Lord knows I would much rather get to know him better, but I’ve got to support my boys.

“But your class is over here, Jayd. And your teacher does have a lesson plan for me to follow, which means I’ll need all of the students present. But look on the bright side, you don’t have to get dressed today,” he says, smiling as he continues to call off names from the roll sheet. How do I get him to cut me some slack? It’s not that serious, I know.

“Mr. Adewale,” I say in my sweetest voice. “Can I please be excused, just this one time? It’s a very important game and I’ve already missed the first five minutes.” But Mr. Adewale isn’t budging. Now what?

“Use your eyes, girl. Those pretty brown things are for more than seeing with,” my mom says, creeping into my thoughts. But this time I’m glad. “Just try it. Keep staring at him and think of the outcome you want, like Mama taught you. And whatever you do, don’t let go of your gaze.”

“Jayd,” Mickey shouts from across the packed room. There are a couple of smaller games going on, but most of the students are kicking it in the bleachers, waiting for the period to end. “Get your ass over here girl. We need you.” Following my mother’s advice, I lock onto Mr. Adewale and I can’t help but fixate on his flawless butterscotch skin. Looking unmoved at first, Mr. Adewale continues his duties, seemingly unaffected by my plea. But my eyes are wearing him down and he can’t resist my request.

“Fine Jayd. But make sure you practice your drills at home. There will be a quiz tomorrow and you will have to incorporate the drills into your own routine.”

“Thank you so much,” I say, ready to dart off toward my girls. “And can I call you Mr. A?”

“Not if you expect me to answer,” he says, smiling at me as I walk backwards toward my destination.

“Damn, what took you so long? You almost missed the whole thing,” Mickey says, munching on her Funions as Nellie preps herself in the mirror.

“Don’t you think you’re exaggerating a bit? And Nellie, why are you worried about your makeup right now? We’re in the gym.”

“So what? The Homecoming Princess always represents the court and I must look fly at all times,” she says, closing the small compact and returning it to her purse as Mickey rolls her eyes, trying to ignore our girl. “Besides, Chance will be devastated after KJ finishes with him and I want to put a smile on his face.”

“Nellie, sometimes you really make my butt itch, you know that? Homecoming is over,” Mickey says, smacking on the tangy chips. They do smell good.

“You should talk, bringing those stank-ass things in here. You know there’s no eating in the gym,” Nellie says, pointing to the multiple signs posted throughout the room. “I can’t believe you’re still hungry after that lunch you ate anyway.”

“Shut up Nellie and watch the game,” Mickey says, a little more serious than necessary. I wonder what’s got her panties in a bunch.

“Everything okay Mickey?” I ask, grabbing a Funion out of the near-empty bag. Nellie’s right: our girl can eat. “You seem tense today.”

“Yes Jayd, I’m fine. I want to watch the rest of the game in peace, if y’all don’t mind.” No, something’s definitely wrong with her. She’s being bitchy, even for Mickey.

“Ouch,” Nellie says, responding to KJ dunking on Nigel’s head. Damn, I know that hurt.

“And that’s what we like to call ‘above the rim,’” Dell says, talking shit to Chance as he guards him. “You see all that air KJ left for y’all?”

“Less talking, more ballin’,” Jeremy says, stealing the rebound from C Money and taking the ball back up the court.

“Oh, so the white boy thinks he can ball,” KJ says, but even he can’t front: he’s impressed with Jeremy’s skills. “You’re not going to beat me on my own court.” Talking shit is KJ’s second-best sport. It seems to go hand in hand with being a good basketball player.

“We’ll see about that,” Nigel says, catching Jeremy’s pass before shooting for three. “Did you hear the sound of that? That’s what we refer to as a swoosh,” Nigel says, laughing all the way back up the court.

“Yeah, well this is what we refer to as a tiebreaker,” KJ says, dribbling into Jeremy, through Chance, and around Nigel for a perfect layup.

“Foul,” Chance says and he’s right. But the rules are different in street ball and that’s new territory for both him and Jeremy.

“Dude, you can’t step on someone’s feet and still take it to the hoop,” Jeremy says, stepping into KJ’s face as the warning bell rings. Most of the students have already started to head out of the gym, waiting for the final bell to ring. My dance class is still in awe of Mr. A, who’s on his way back to the boy’s locker room. And me and my crew are staying posted, waiting to see if this game will end in bloodshed.

“Dude,” KJ says, mocking Jeremy. “There’s no referee here, if you haven’t noticed.” KJ and Jeremy are the same height and probably about the same weight. If they fight, it’s going to be an even brawl and I ain’t missing a beat, even if I do miss my bus.

“Yeah, dude. And that’s game,” Del says, rubbing salt into their wounds. “Take it like a man.”

“I would if you played like one,” Nigel says, throwing his own shit in the mix. “Y’all play worse than the Lakers when Shaq and Kobe were competing for best bitch of the league.”

“Who you calling a bitch?” KJ says, stepping out of Jeremy’s face and into Nigel’s. Even if Nigel stands a few inches shorter, KJ doesn’t want to mess with him. Nigel

was recruited to sack players for South Bay and he'd be glad to do it right here on the basketball court, if need be.

"Is everything alright over here?" Mr. Adewale says, catching us all off-guard. Me and my girls are mesmerized by the scene, waiting to see who will throw the first blow. And Chance, Nigel, and Jeremy all look ready for a fight.

"Yeah man, everything's cool," Nigel says, being the first to back down. "This game isn't over."

"Anytime, any place baby. You call it and I'll be there," KJ says as he and his team retreat toward the locker room. "It's going to be my court no matter where we play."

"We'll see about that," Nigel says, passing the ball to Mr. Adewale as he comes to give Mickey a kiss before heading back to the weight room. I hope he works off some of that frustration before he hurts someone.

"Jayd, you want a ride? From the looks of it, it's about to storm," Mickey says, suddenly in a generous mood. There must be some magic in Nigel's lips because my girl's mood has completely changed.

"Yeah, thanks. Chance, are you okay?" I say, noticing the black scuffmarks across his new kicks and I know how sensitive dudes can be about their shoes.

"Yeah, I'm cool. Jeremy, you should've kicked his ass when you had the chance, man."

"That's not the way to handle it, trust me," Mr. Adewale says, dribbling the ball and shooting some practice hoops. I see he's got game, too. "But, you should have a ref around next time, just in case."

"You're right, man. Next time," Jeremy says, responding to Mr. Adewale but looking at me. I think we should hit the road before I get into some trouble of my own.

"I have to get going," I say, signaling my girls to get up.

“Good game. I’m impressed with both of you.”

“Why thank you, Lady J,” Jeremy says as Chance takes Nellie by the hand, escorting her down the bleachers. “You ladies want to grab something to eat?”

“Oh, I can’t. I’ve got a ton of work to do.” I wish I could hang out more after school like other students do, but Mama would have my ass in a sling if I didn’t stick to my regular schedule. “But how about tomorrow? It’s an early day.”

“Tomorrow it is,” Jeremy says, helping me down too. I forgot how much of a gentleman he can be.

“And thanks for being our cheerleaders,” Chance says, kissing Nellie’s hand as Mickey leads the way out of the gym. I think she’s had enough of us and our white boys for one day.

By the time we get to the parking lot, it’s raining heavily and most of the cars are gone.

“Mickey, do you have my sweater in the car?” Nellie asks, getting in the back since I’ll be dropped off first.

“No, I left it at home. I’ll get it to you tomorrow,” Mickey says, starting the car as Keisha Cole and Missy Elliot blare out of her speakers, making the trunk shake.

“No, Mickey. I need it now. I have my outfit picked out for tomorrow and it includes my red Bebe sweater. You’ll have to take me to your house to get it.”

“Ah, hell no. I’ve got to get home,” I say, emphatic about not going to the other side of Compton today. I’m not in the mood for seeing Mickey’s family, her man included. “Besides, that’s out of her way to go all the way to her house and then back to mine.”

“Not if she takes the 105. And besides, you were supposed to give me back that sweater weeks ago. I’m not getting out of this car until I have it in my hand.” Nellie can be more demanding than Mickey sometimes. It’s a wonder they’re friends at all.

“Fine. I’ll give you your damned sweater,” Mickey says, barely catching the on-ramp to the 105 East from the 110. I don’t feel good about this detour at all. I knew I should’ve taken the bus home, even if it meant getting a little wet. It’s better than dealing with Mickey’s side of town any day.