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THAT GIRL  
*Lay Lay*

# TALENT SHOWDOWN

BY JEVON BOLDEN

ILLUSTRATED BY DEANDRA HODGE

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## ◆◆◆ CHAPTER 1 ◆◆◆

**THE BEGINNING OF A NEW** week at Woodlawn Middle School was like any other middle school week—unless you're a viral social media sensation like me. It was Tuesday, and I had just gotten into the building after an exciting Labor Day weekend in the studio recording a new collab with a high-profile producer and rapper. We even recorded some behind-the-scenes video that I got to show on my social media channels.

As I walked down the hallway to my locker, I

noticed that almost every kid I passed was staring and smiling at me like I was a blue unicorn or something. Kids must have seen the videos I posted this weekend. One kid even tried to sneak and snap a picture, but I was ready—I struck a cute pose and kept walking. I'm always ready for a cameo.

I mean, like, for real. What is my life? Sometimes I can't believe how much things have changed since my dad posted that video of me freestyle rapping in our car. One day, I was just Alaya High, a regular girl, going to school and hanging out with my friends. Now everybody with a smartphone and YouTube knows me as That Girl Lay Lay. I'm literally famous!

After the freestyling video blew up, I was invited to perform everywhere, and I now record albums in the same studios as some of my favorite artists. Still, I'm just the same girl who loves to go to school and hang out with her friends. Being semi-famous won't change that.

It seems like everything happened overnight, but it was a lot of hard work, practice, and believing in myself. With school and everything, it's not easy

juggling it all. It's a task, but what else would I do? This is the life I was made for, and I love it. I truly believe everyone has the potential to be anything they want to be.

I mean, what?! Your everyday girl here, Lay Lay, just living her best life and manifesting her dreams—and doing it all with my girls at my side. There's Giana, who's been my BFF forever; amazing gymnast Akila; sweet-as-cotton-candy Riley; and, last but certainly not least, organic beauty guru Harper.

I love my girls. We are fun, smart, talented, and so supercute in our own unique ways. We have one another's backs, too. So much has happened for me in such a short time that if I didn't have my friends—well, I'd still be bomb, don't get it twisted—but it wouldn't be as much fun or nearly as manageable. They hold me down. I couldn't wait to see them at school that day!

And like clockwork, as soon as I rounded the corner to my locker, there they were.

Harper was the first to spot me. “Oh my gosh, Lay Lay!” Her long, silky black hair was pulled into

a tight ponytail at the top of her head. Her dewy skin looked perfectly flushed in all the right places, like she'd just stepped out of a steam room.

Akila whipped around, her long, dark braids flying as she grabbed my hands and started jumping up and down. Soon Giana and Riley were in the mix, too. We all squealed and melded into a jumping, screaming, hugging girl cloud.

“Did y’all see the videos?” I asked when we settled down. “What’d y’all think?”

“Oh, Lay Lay! It was everything.” Riley looked at me starry-eyed. She hugged her notebook close to her shirt, which read *NAMASTE*. Then she swept a lock of her curly ginger-red hair from her eye and tucked it behind her ear.

“You are so big-time, girl,” Giana added. “You were spitting fire like crazy. I don’t think the big boys could keep up.” Giana was all about the details—she was a little nerdy but still had her own cool vibe. Her wavy, dark brown hair, hip glasses, crop top, and big baggy jeans let you know she was never to be taken lightly. Giana has been my bestie since elementary school.

“You were so focused and just . . . I don’t know—on?” Akila felt around for her words. “It was like you were a whole other person.” She loves to see people in their zone, you know? Athletes, performers, and especially fashion designers and magazine editors—she has a whole thing about reading their memoirs and watching documentaries about their lives, which I think is what makes her one of the smartest, most creative people I know. She works so hard to be great at everything. From gymnastics to schoolwork to her flawless braids, in her own quiet way, Akila Ojo was goals.

“It was so amazing, y’all!” I said. “I was a little nervous, but the producer and the other artists made me feel really comfortable. Everybody was so nice and professional.” I was getting giddy all over again thinking about it.

“So what’s coming up next?” Giana asked.

“Hey, did you guys hear?” Harper interrupted. “They’re shutting down Hayes Theater.”

“What?” Riley said. “No way!”

“Yeah, so you know my mom is on the board,”

Harper continued. “I overheard her talking about a real estate developer with a plan to build up historic Woodlawn and make it ‘more modern.’ He wants to tear down Hayes Theater and make room for a new living-shopping-eating lifestyle community. The theater just doesn’t fit his vibe, so it will be torn down.”

“How did I not know about this?” I was shocked for real. “My cousin Tasha works part-time in the theater’s outreach department—and I’m there with her practically every day after school.”

“I guess they’ve been talking about changes to historic Woodlawn behind the scenes for a while now. The city pressured the theater board members into a meeting with the developer this past Saturday morning. So Tasha may not have heard yet.”

Akila’s face fell. “This is really terrible,” she said. “They can’t just do that, can they? I liked going down to help with costumes whenever they had a show.”

I knew how much Akila loved the Hayes. Of her many goals, being a fashion designer or costume designer someday was number one.



“Yeah, and I liked helping out with concessions,” Riley said.

“We all liked that, too,” I agreed. My mouth watered just thinking about my girl Riley Smiley’s vegan treats. They are the bomb.

“I think they can and will,” Harper said sadly. “They don’t know or care about the history behind the theater.”

We had all volunteered at the historic Hayes Theater before. My cousin Tasha and Harper’s mom were always recruiting us. It was our chance to be involved in our community while doing the things we each loved. Harper probably helped out there the most. She used her beauty skills to do hair and makeup for almost every show. Akila loved to shadow the costume director, and she was the costume props assistant on the last musical at the Hayes. My bestie Giana had helped with sound and lights for the last few performances, too. And of course Riley donated her amazing organic desserts, baked with love at her family’s farm. Whenever I could be there, I assisted the stage manager and helped Tasha with outreach.

Hayes Theater had been part of Woodlawn life for almost one hundred years. To hear that they were closing it down was the worst news to start the week. Though I was feeling kind of tired after my big weekend, my heart started pumping with the injustice of it all.

“We can’t let this happen. We have to do something.”

“I agree,” Harper said, her dark eyes flashing. I could tell she was feeling fired up. “If the five of us put our heads together, we’ll come up with an idea.”

“Maybe Tasha can help, Lay Lay,” Riley said. From the tone of her voice, I knew she was getting heated, too. “We need to find out if there’s any way to convince the real estate developer that Hayes Theater is a valuable part of our community, and that it can’t be torn down.”

“I can talk to her today,” I agreed. “Harper, what about your mom? Does she know anything more?” I was hoping we could get a few things working at one time.

“Oh, you guys know how she is. She’s always stressing, but I’ll see what she says.”

Just then, the bell rang.

“Okay, we’ll talk more in third period,” I said.

We went our separate ways—well, everyone except Harper and me. We were both on our way to Ms. Ortega’s language arts class.

As we walked, my mind was racing. There had to be something we could do. Hayes Theater was one of those places where people with different talents and backgrounds could all come together and do really amazing things. What would Woodlawn be without it?