

Book Description:

It's almost Valentine's Day at South Bay High, but romance is the last thing on Jayd Jackson's mind...

If Cupid had his way, love would be in the air at South Bay High. But even though Valentine's Day is around the corner, no one's having an easy time of it—especially not Jayd Jackson, who lost her mojo after her friend Tre's shooting. Worn out by Tre's death—and sick of the same old drama with Rah—Jayd's suddenly ruining her clients' hair and feeling alienated from her friends. And to make things worse, she's got to watch her back because her nemesis, Misty, is plotting her ruin.

Good thing Jayd has her magical Mama on her side. Because to protect herself and bring her crew back together, Jayd will need more than her inner strength. She'll need the help of her gifted ancestors...

Prologue

"Jayd, can you hear me?" Mama says, but I can't see where her voice is coming from. I know I'm dreaming, but it feels too real to be a dream. "Jayd, snap out of it before you get hurt!" Why is she yelling at me? All I'm doing is walking around the living room, and I could walk around this entire house with my eyes closed and not trip over a thing. But wait, this isn't our living room. It looks like it, but I can tell from the furniture I'm back in my great-grandmother's time again and this must be her house.

"Jon Paul, no! Give her back to me," Maman screams at her husband, who's holding their daughter tight. The baby screams loudly as Maman's cries become even more powerful. She begins to shriek like an opera singer and my great-grandfather can't take anymore. He slaps Maman hard with the back of his hand and she falls to the floor, hitting the Christmas tree on the way down.

"Lynn Mae," Maman cries, holding her bloody face with one hand and reaching her free hand up toward her daughter, who is still in her father's arms.

“Jayd, wake up, now!” Mama shouts, but this time she’s not in my dream with me. Where is her voice coming from?

“What is she doing here?” Jon Paul asks my greatgrandmother, looking dead at me. Oh hell, no. I don’t want to be in this dream. Maybe I should wake up, but I can’t. I wish I had more control over when I wake up from or fall into my dreams.

“You do, Jayd, and now is the time to exercise that power. Wake your ass up!” Mama’s talking to me in my head, but not like my mom does. It’s as if I’m dreaming, but in reality I’m awake. What the hell? Before I can get a grip on what’s really going on, Jon Paul charges at me with his daughter in tow like he’s going to slap me, too.

“Jon Paul, Sarah has nothing to do with this. Leave her alone,” Maman says, now on her feet, her green eyes glowing like I’ve never seen before. Unlike in my last dream with Maman, this time her eyes look like emerald fireballs. He’s in for it now. And who the hell is Sarah?

“She’s always here. You know all about her whoreish ways, don’t you, young lady?” How did he hear my thought? I back away from my great-grandfather, frightened of his temper. As I stumble over a chair, I land in it and catch my reflection in a clean pot on the kitchen stove. The face staring back at me belongs to a girl about my age, but she’s not me. I’m bugging for real. This is too much for me to handle.

“Jon Paul, haven’t you heard of picking on someone your own size?” Maman’s voice begins to get higher in pitch and her eyes even brighter as she focuses all of her attention on him. His head begins to pulsate, just like it did in the vision that Mama and I shared on Christmas Eve, and he can’t take it anymore. He begins to charge toward the kitchen door, but Maman’s not letting him go anywhere with her daughter.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Maman says, putting her arms out for her daughter, whose eyes are also glowing. “Sarah, come here. And bring Lynn Mae with you. He can’t hurt you now.” I stay put because I don’t realize that she’s

talking to me. But when she focuses her glowing gaze in my direction, I jump up from the table, walk toward my now mentally paralyzed great-grandfather, and take my grandmother out of his hands. When I reach my great-grandmother, she pushes us behind her and focuses all of her energy on crippling her husband. Maman's powers are completely off the chain. And I thought Mama was gangster with her shit.

"Jayd, drink this," Mama says, still talking to me from outside of my dream. I look down at the baby in my arms and she smiles back at me, making me think of what my ex's daughter Rahima must be doing now, wherever she is. But this is Mama, not Rahima, and I'm about to freak out completely if I don't wake up soon.

"Why is Jayd standing in the middle of the living room floor so late at night?" I can hear my uncle Bryan ask, but I can't see him either. What's really going on?

"She's sleepwalking. Help me keep her safe, but don't touch her," Mama says. Sleepwalking? Damn it. I haven't done this in years and it's never good when I do. "Jayd, focus on my voice, not on whatever's going on in your dream, and snap out of it, please." The urgency in Mama's voice scares me, but I still can't find my way out.

"Okay girls, it's time to make our move," Maman says, not letting go of her visual hold on Jon Paul for a second. "As you can see, he kicked in the front door, so we're going to have to make our way out the back. Stay behind me. And Sarah, whatever you do, don't let go of Lynn Mae." We follow my great-grandmother back into the kitchen and walk around her husband, who is now crippled on the floor and holding his head, which looks like it's going to burst. "Walk right by him. Don't look at him. Just keep moving and everything will be okay."

"Jayd, stop walking," Mama says, but I can't. I have to follow Maman and get baby Mama out of harm's way, no matter what my grandmother says.

"Jayd, it's not real. Stop walking, now. Bryan, follow us." I follow Maman out of the back door, hand her baby to her, and she looks me in the eye, releasing me from my dream state.

Upon waking, I fall back into Bryan's arms, completely lifeless. He holds me upright as Mama brings me to.

"Here, Jayd. Swallow this," Mama says, forcing some thick concoction down my throat. I resist at first because the smell is putrid. Whatever's in this cup reminds me of when Mama used to make me drink orange juice mixed with castor oil when I would get constipated as a child. I still don't drink orange juice to this day because of that experience.

"Y'all are too much for a nigga sometimes, you know that?" Bryan says, holding on to me tightly as Mama continues force-feeding me. I hate it when this happens.

"Watch your mouth," Mama says to Bryan. I look up at the both of them and realize we are standing on the back porch. It's dark and cold outside. Mama's dog looks at us from her post on the bottom step and seemingly shakes her head at the sight. All Lexi does is sleep and scratch herself, so I'm not really worried about disturbing her.

"Jayd, are you okay, baby?" Mama asks. Sometimes it's too much for me, too. If I could just leave my powers at the curb right now, I'd do it in a heartbeat. I'm getting sick of this shit.

"I'm fine," I say, coughing up some of the thickness she's made me swallow. I'm shivering in my thin nightgown and sweat pants and my feet are bare, causing the cold to run straight through my body. "Can I go back to bed now?" If Bryan's just getting in from his radio show, it must be close to two in the morning and it's a school day for me, no matter what kind of dream I just had.

"Not until you tell me what that was all about, Jayd. Whenever you sleepwalk, it's serious, girl, and you know it."

"Mama, I start a new semester tomorrow and I have to drive my mom's stick shift all the way to Redondo Beach for the first time. I need sleep. Please, can we talk tomorrow?" Mama looks into my eyes and feels my pain.

“Fine, but don’t forget any of it. I need details.” I’m sure she’s already got the summary in her mind. I wish I could forget, but this dream was too freaky. I’ve never dreamt of being someone else before. I hope that was the last time it happens. I have enough to deal with as it is. I just want to get through this day with as little trouble as possible. With new classes, Mickey and Nellie tripping, and Nigel still out because of his wounded shoulder, there’s going to be enough drama to deal with this morning as it is.

Chapter One

Walk on By

“That’s all that I have left so let me hide/ The tears and the sadness you gave me when you said goodbye.” —DIONNE WARWICK

After this morning’s sleepwalking episode, I could barely get myself out of the bed, let alone dressed and ready to go. Luckily, I don’t have to get up as early as I did before my mom let me take her car, but six is still early in my book.

Speaking of books, I forgot my backpack as I was rushing out the door this morning, which means my day’s not going to be easy at all, especially since we’re being issued new books and have to take them home to cover.

I’m not excited about my new class schedule because not much has really changed. That’s one of the major problems with being on the Advanced Placement track: the monotony is grueling and there’s also the added curse of having to deal with Mrs. Bennett’s evil ass. With any luck, I won’t run into her or Misty today. That would make the day tolerable.

“Damn it,” I say aloud while attempting to shift the car into first gear on the steep hill near campus. There aren’t many hills between Compton and Inglewood, so I never got to practice balancing the clutch in various situations.

Where's Rah when I need him? He hasn't talked to me since his ex Sandy took off in his grandfather's car with Rahima. I know he's pissed, but it really wasn't my fault. How was I supposed to know she would make a copy of his car keys and jack Rah the first chance she got?

"Because the bitch is crazy," my mom says, feeling my frustration.

"Mom, you can't call her a bitch. She's young enough to be your daughter," I think in response while still trying to work my way up the hill without rolling back too far. The cars behind me are honking at my slow progression, but I don't care. I'd rather they be mad at me than hit anyone. All I need is to have an accident. My mom would never let me live that down. More than likely I would also find myself back on the bus, and I'm not having that.

"You worry too much, Jayd. And no, Sandy isn't old enough to be a child of mine. That girl's eighteen and a mother, therefore she's fair game—and a bitch is a bitch, as I'm sure you already know." My mom's got a valid point. If there's an official bitch club, Sandy's got to be the president.

"Can you help me drive this thing or what?" I say aloud. If the traffic weren't so slow trying to get into the parking lot, I wouldn't have this problem. I've experienced more stop-and-go traffic in the ten minutes I've been waiting in line here than my mother does on the 405 freeway during rush hour.

"You have to learn how to navigate the road ahead in all situations, Jayd. Besides, it's good for you to know how to drive a stick. It's an irreplaceable skill to have. The first thing you need to do is calm down, little one, and put the car in neutral." I follow my mom's instructions and the car starts to slide backwards. "Put your foot on the brake, Jayd. Damn, girl, you always have to use your common sense."

"Mom, I had a very rough night. Please cut me some slack," I say, near tears. I notice the new girl, Shawn, walking past me and looking at me like I'm crazy. I guess she heard that, and probably thinks I'm talking to myself. I don't care what she thinks of me. As long as she keeps walking without saying shit, it's all good.

“Okay, I’m sorry. Now, ease off of the brake and apply an equal amount of pressure on the clutch before shifting into first gear. Then press slightly on the gas. If you do it right, the car should go up the hill smoothly.” At first the car lurches forward, but then I ease up on the clutch and simultaneously press on the gas pedal. It works smoothly, just like my mother said it would.

“Thank you, Mom,” I think back.

“That’s what I’m here for. Now, what about this rough night you had?” I pull up in line and feel like an old pro at driving a stick the way I’m handling the hill. I’m almost in a good mood for the first time in days and don’t want to mess it up thinking about my dream.

“Mom, I really don’t want to go into that right now.” I’m next in line to get through the gate and really want to get on with my day. It’s bad enough Rah still hasn’t returned any of my calls or text messages since he picked up his Acura from my mother’s house yesterday. I want to know if he’s heard from Sandy. I know he feels like he’s the only one missing his daughter, but she left me too and I need to know if he’s heard from her crazy-ass mama.

“Okay, fine. But I will remind you this weekend when I see you. Have a good day, baby, and let me know how your day went later on.”

“Alright, Mom. You too,” I think back. I have to watch it, talking aloud to her when I’m in public. I already have a reputation as a voodoo girl, which is the truth. The last thing I need is the school thinking I’m a schizoid, too.

“Hey, Jayd, new wheels again?” Jeremy asks from his car to mine, catching me off guard. Somehow he’s made his way beside me, putting his car in the perfect position to ease his way behind mine and be next in line to get through the gate.

I guess being the most popular guy on campus has its advantages even before the school day officially begins.

“Yeah, my mom had sympathy on me and let me roll her car until I get some more wheels of my own.” I haven’t heard from my daddy since I left the dilapidated vehicle he bought me for Christmas in his driveway Saturday night,

and don't expect to hear from him anytime soon. I know he's pissed and his ego's shattered. It'll take awhile for him to come around and call me this time.

"Sweet. So when are you taking me out, for a change?" I'm still irritated with Jeremy for the way he didn't react when I told him about Nigel and Tre getting shot last week, but what can I expect? His reality is surfing all day and living the life of luxury, while mine is making potions with my grandmother and dodging the occasional bullet. We exist in two different worlds.

"One day," I say as I pull into the lot to find a spot. Jeremy's right behind me, ready to get on with this school day as well. I don't know how I'm going to stay focused. But as Mama says, the day will pass whether I participate in it or not. So, we'll just have to wait and see how it goes, because right now I feel like time is passing me right on by and that's not good.

My first two classes haven't changed, and they went by without incident. But there was one mistake with my schedule. They registered me in a non-AP speech and debate elective when I should've been registered in the AP journalism class. They usually do this when there's a class cancellation, but I'd rather make my own adjustments than have them made for me. I requested a meeting time to talk to my counselor, Mr. Adelizi, about the change, but as busy as it was in the main office this morning, I doubt I'll get to see him today.

While I was in the main office this morning, I ran into Ms. Toni, the ASB teacher, and gave her a quick hug before she had to run off to a meeting. She's been so busy lately we haven't had time to catch up on all that's happened. I know she's still a little pissed at me for participating in Mickey's downfall, and consequently losing my part as Lady Macbeth, but there's still love there for me and I can feel it. She also mentioned she wanted to talk to me about Nigel's shooting.

I'm sure Ms. Toni still has questions regarding Laura's accusation about me choking her up with my special spray, and how I got my part back on opening night of the play. It is true: I did make a potion to get my crown back, but Laura can never prove it. Telling Ms. Toni about my powers isn't an option, but letting her in on my lineage may be okay. Mama wouldn't be happy to know that someone in the administration knows all about our work, but who we are is no secret. I have to tell Ms. Toni something when she asks, even if it isn't

the whole truth.

“Can I walk the lady to class?” Rather than look for someone new to hang with at break, I’ve decided to chill in the library until further notice. I guess Jeremy figured this out and came looking for me, which is nice, but still not enough to make me forget about his non-reaction to my friends’ drama.

“Okay, since we’re both going to the same place anyway,” I say. He takes my books from my hands and tucks them under his right arm. We walk in silence away from the media center where the library is housed and toward our government class. Jeremy looks down at me, waiting for me to say something, but if I speak first the words won’t be so nice.

“What’s up with you this morning? Did I do something wrong?” I look up at Jeremy and realize just how clueless he really is. Who knew boys could be so naïve?

“It’s not so much what you did as what you didn’t say.”

Jeremy shakes his thick brown curls and gives an exasperated sigh. I know I’m a bit much for him sometimes, but no one said friendship was easy.

“Okay, what was it this time?” The bell rings and students start to leisurely rise from their seats and join us in our trek to class. Third period is my least favorite, and will remain that way until Mrs. Peterson is gone permanently. I thought she was retiring at the end of last semester, but it seems the old crow’s going to wait out the rest of the school year. Lucky us.

“Look, the last thing I want to do is argue with you, Jeremy. We’re just different people and I accept that. There’s no need to go into it any further.” I look around at a few students staring at us as we walk on by. They’re probably wondering if we’re back together. That’s how rumors start.

“What the hell are you talking about? What could I have possibly done between now and the last time we talked two days ago?” He stops in front of our classroom, looks down at me, and puts my books behind his back as if he’s going to hold them hostage until I give him the information he wants.

Of all the days to forget my book bag. Well, at least I only have to carry them to the car and not from one bus stop to another. That would suck. Papa Legba, my father Orisha, does have some mercy on me.

“Can we get into this some other time? We have to get inside before the tardy bell rings. You know Mrs. Peterson would love to mark us both for being late while we’re standing right in front of her door.” I think she heard me because she looks up from her newspaper and scowls at me before taking a sip of her coffee. I wonder if her drink is as bitter as she is.

“Jayd, I hate it when you do this. How can you give me the cold shoulder without telling me what I did to deserve it? That’s not fair.”

“Fair? Who said anything about life being fair? One of my best friends was shot a few days ago while another one died, not to mention that I’ve lost both of my homegirls over some bull. And another one of my friends got his daughter and car jacked at the same time by his crazy-ass baby mama, who he was trying to help. Fair my ass,” I say, walking past Jeremy and into the classroom, leaving him standing in the doorway under the ringing bell. I know that was a lot of information to drop in his lap and he didn’t deserve all that, but he kept pressing me and I haven’t had much sleep lately. I was liable to snap any minute and Jeremy just happened to be the one there at the time to vent on.

I feel slightly relieved letting it out, but not completely satisfied. Now I feel bad, especially with the look on Jeremy’s face from where he’s still standing with his mouth open. He can keep the damned books for all I care. I’m not feeling this day anyway and we still have three more classes to get through after this one. Hopefully, second-semester business will take up the majority of the day and I can skate through the remainder without having to pay it too much attention. I take my seat and start flipping through the new textbook.

“Miss Jackson, did you hear me?” Mrs. Peterson asks as I turn around to face her. All eyes are on me as our teacher waits for my response.

“Yes, Mrs. Peterson. I’m sorry,” I lie, because I didn’t hear a damned thing she said before she snapped me out of my thoughts a second ago. Jeremy looks at me and I can see the worry in his eyes. I guess now he’s coming to understand

how serious it is when a friend gets shot. I didn't even tell him it was Rah's baby-mama drama that I was speaking of before because he wouldn't understand that either.

"Well then, why aren't you moving? Come get your pass and go on to the counselor's office." Damn, I didn't hear any of that, but I'm glad to get out of here for the rest of the period. All we've been doing is looking through our new textbook and class syllabus. Talk about monotonous. My counselor must have time now to help me get the class I want.

"Jayd, I'm sorry for not saying I'm sorry about what's going on with your friends earlier." Jeremy's blue eyes look mournful as he gently caresses my hand with his fingers. I know he's sorry, but I don't know if that's enough. I need someone to feel me right about now and I just don't think he can.

"I appreciate that," I say, gathering my books and papers before getting up from my desk. "I'll holla later." My phone vibrates in my purse and I look down at it, hoping and praying that it's Rah, but it isn't. It's my calendar, reminding me to call and schedule a doctor's appointment. Mama must've had Bryan program it after I went back to sleep this morning, because I know she didn't do it. She's not funny. What do I need to go to the doctor for?

"I don't know, but it must be serious if Mama's telling you to go. You know if she can't figure out what's wrong with you she'll find someone who can. You'd better listen to her, Jayd," my mom says, committing a mental drive-by of her own before I can comment back. As if I need another thing to think about this morning.

When I reach the main office, there's a long line in front of most of the counselors' offices, including Mr. Adelizi's. Rather than join the procession of anxious students who either forgot to request changes in their schedule before the deadline or students—like me—who did, but still got screwed up in one way or another, I look at the available class list posted outside of his open door.

“Miss Jackson, come on in and have a seat. The rest of the students don’t have a pass,” Mr. Adelizi says. The pensive student seated across from him looks up from his schedule to give me a once-over and then back down like he’s about to cry. He reminds me of a disgruntled postal worker, so I’d better make this visit quick just in case he decides to go off. I sit in the other chair across from Mr. Adelizi’s desk in the cramped office, and explain my situation.

“Mr. Adelizi, I don’t know what happened, but somehow my fourth period journalism class got bumped for speech and debate, and it’s not even on the Advanced Placement track. There must be some mistake.”

“Well, good morning to you, too,” he says, trying to make me smile, but I’m not in the mood this morning. “So serious so early?”

“This is serious business. I can’t afford to get off track.” Mr. Adelizi looks at me over his thin-framed glasses and sees I’m in no mood for small talk.

“Miss Jackson, your schedule won’t work if you choose to take the journalism class, which was moved to fifth period.” He’s right. I’d have to give up drama and that’s never going to happen.

“Well, can’t I have a study period or something instead?” I really don’t like the idea of being in a speech class open to all tracks. It leaves the door open for too many unknown variables, like having Misty and KJ as classmates, and that just won’t work.

“Sorry, Jayd, but study periods are for seniors only. The only classes available that will fit into your Advanced Placement schedule are speech and debate, or home economics: it’s your choice.”

“Fine, speech and debate it is,” I say, signing my schedule before getting up to leave.

“Debate class starts tomorrow, so you’ll have a free fourth period for today.” A free period means we have to check in at the library and spend our time studying, which is just fine with me. Normally, I wouldn’t mind being in a debate class, but being outside of the AP track is always tricky, because the

environment is less controlled than it would normally be. But I have to enroll in another elective, and home economics ain't it. I get enough of that subject living with Mama.

"You know, Jayd, you can talk to me about other things. I'm not just an academic counselor," Mr. Adelizi says. I look down at the schedule printout and notice there's no teacher listed for the debate class. Damn, another unknown variable. I can't stand it when that happens. "We heard about the shooting and I know all about your friend Mickey being transferred to the continuation school. You must be having a tough time adjusting to all of this change."

"The only constant in the world is change," I say, borrowing lyrics from India.Arie, leaving Mr. Adelizi to ponder how a little black girl could be so insightful when I know the thought is far from original. If I know anything to be true, it's that statement and, like all the members of our tribe, we keep moving through the change, no matter how painful the move may be.

Driving back to Compton from my high school in Redondo Beach is a pretty straight shot. You never know how many unnecessary stops there are on a bus route until you take an alternate path. I'm also looking for the roads less travelled when it comes to me learning this clutch. Mazda never lied when they made zoom-zoom their motto: this little Protégé's got spunk. The last thing I want to do is accidentally hit someone while trying to balance the gas and the clutch like I did this morning before my mom intervened.

There are several ways to get from school to home without taking the freeway, and all of them involve getting caught up in mall traffic. There are two major malls between here and Compton and some people are still taking advantage of the after-Christmas sales. If I had some money, I'd be right in there with them. I haven't braided any heads since the shooting, and don't anticipate hustling this weekend either. Mama says I can't touch anyone else's head until I get mine straight. I'm pretty sure her and Netta will hook a sistah up tomorrow, whether I'm ready or not.

When I get home, I know the first thing Mama's going to ask me is if I made the appointment with our family physician, Dr. Whitmore, yet. I have insurance through my mom's job with Kaiser, but Mama doesn't trust them with shit like

my sleepwalking. I don't blame her, because the last time something like this happened to me and my mom took me to my pediatrician, they tried to give me antipsychotic drugs, as well as send me to a shrink. When Mama found out she wanted to crucify my mom, and I was right there with Mama.

Walking up the driveway and up the porch, I look over my shoulder to make sure the alarm lights come on, indicating my mom's ride is somewhat safe parked in front of the house. I doubt anyone will jack it because we protect our own on our block, even if Gunlock Avenue is notorious for being the spot to take jacked cars to get money for the parts. So a sistah still has to be cautious.

As soon as I walk through the front door, Mama walks into the living room from the kitchen. She looks ready to harass me about my sleepwalking incident this morning.

"Hi, baby. You didn't forget any of the details from your dream last night, did you?" she asks, wiping her wet hands with a kitchen towel before giving me a hug.

"No, ma'am," I say, returning the hug. It feels good, embracing my grandmother, whose vanilla scent is comforting.

"Good. And did you call Dr. Whitmore to make an appointment? I had Bryan put a reminder in that fancy phone of yours."

"Mama, I just got home," I say, putting my pile of schoolbooks down on the dining room table before taking off my shoes. It's been a long day and I'm in no mood to get drilled.

"Don't you sass me, young lady. Tomorrow afternoon we're at Netta's, but you tell him that Wednesday works for me. And now that you're driving your mama's car, it should be good for you, too. Now, get on that little pink phone of yours and make the call." Damn, Mama can be harsh sometimes. You'd think she was the one sleepwalking instead of me.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, near tears. Mama looks up from her spirit book, also on the dining room table, and sees the emotion written all over my face. She pats my hand with hers, letting me know she’s here for me.

“Look, Jayd, I know it’s hard right now, but it won’t always be this way. We need to immediately get to the bottom of why you’re sleepwalking, and Dr. Whitmore will be able to help me see what I can’t right now. And more importantly, he’ll be able to help you get some solid sleep. The sooner we take care of this, the better.” I couldn’t agree more with her final statement. The last thing I want to do is have another episode like the one I had this morning.

“I know, Mama. I know.” I take my phone out of my purse and put it on top of my stack of books. I look around the living room and notice my backpack isn’t where I left it by the dining room table. Mama follows my eyes as I search the room.

“Your backpack’s in my room, Jayd,” she says, reading my mind. “You have to be careful, girl. You know these fools around here will snatch it and anything else up without a second thought.” Mama’s right. I have to be more careful and pay attention to what I’m doing. Maybe a visit with her doctor is just what I need to get myself together after all. Between his work and Netta’s head cleansing tomorrow, I should be straight by the weekend.

After Monday’s eventful day, I opted to hide out all day yesterday, and with it being a usual short Tuesday because of the weekly staff meetings, it went by pretty quickly. Mama, Netta, and I also had a quiet afternoon at the shop. But even with Netta’s rogacion de cabeza and Mama there to assist with the head cleansing, I still didn’t sleep well last night. It seems like as soon as I close my eyes, it’s time to get up. There’s no dreaming, no hard sleep, nothing. Just lying down and getting up. That’s what usually leads to more sleepwalking episodes and no one wants to tune in for that show, least of all me.

There was still no teacher for the debate class scheduled to start yesterday, so I had another free period in the library. According to Mr. Adelizi, today we will definitely start speech and debate.

I haven’t seen Mr. Adewale this week and I miss his presence.

I've become accustomed to seeing our AP substitute teacher on a regular basis. I hope they find some work for him to do soon.

Walking down the main hall gives me the same familiar feeling I had when I walked down these same halls during the weeks before Christmas break. It's only the third day of the new semester and ASB has already moved on to the next holiday. Valentine's Day is over a month away and they've already got fliers up advertising the annual dance and secret valentine telegrams. Who knew a holiday supposedly about love could provide so many different fundraising ideas?

As with all holidays, the true meaning is hidden behind the commercial bull. The original Valentine's Day is based off of bloodshed, just like Thanksgiving. It seems that no matter the celebration, there has to be a sacrifice of some sort, and usually the person with her ass on the line has no idea she's about to be butchered.

"Ah, look who it is, baby. The bitch who death follows," Misty says. I don't know why, but her words give me the chills, and not like when a cold breeze blows across my face. I feel like she just invited someone—or something—into our space, and whatever it is doesn't feel good.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Misty's eyes look cold and empty as she thinks of a response to my question. I never thought I'd see the day Misty reminds me of Esmeralda, but today she does. Our evil next-door neighbor has been incognito ever since Misty and her mom became Esmeralda's godchildren in the religion. Mama says that some twisted voodoo priests use their godchildren like vampires, and this newfound family they've concocted is a prime example of that type of sick relationship.

"It means that wherever you go, someone gets hurt. If I didn't know better, I'd say someone cursed you." Misty, KJ, and his crew laugh at her joke, but it's anything but funny to me. Those sound like fighting words, but I'm too tired to front her physically, so my words will have to serve as fists today.

“So, KJ, I see you have a thing for voodoo girls.” He looks at me like he wants to eat me up, but he knows better than to try to get with me again. That’ll never happen.

“Not anymore,” he says, playing off his obvious attraction to me while adding to their morning comedy routine.

“Oh, Misty did tell you she’s in the same religion as I am, didn’t she? Or did you forget to mention that little fact?” I say, wiping the smiles right off all their faces. The last thing KJ or his hella Christian parents want is to be associated with any hoodoo mess, as they call it. But all priests know that hoodoo is simply the work. Voodoo, Santeria, Ifa, or whatever branch of the religion we choose to refer to ourselves as, is a whole other world KJ and his folks want no part of.

“Don’t pay her any mind, KJ. She’s a very troubled girl,” Misty says, rolling her neck and hips at me. Misty’s eyes aren’t the only thing that’s different about her. She’s also lost a lot of weight over the break. When I saw her at Tre’s house after the shooting, I could tell she was shedding the pounds, but now she looks like she’s been starving herself.

“Whatever, Misty. You and I know the truth, and whenever you’re ready to come with it, bring it on,” I say to Misty’s back as they exit the main hall, heading in the same direction I’m going. KJ looks back at me and I nod my head to confirm my words. If Misty’s going to call me out on my shit—which I’m not ashamed of—then I’m calling her on hers. One of the rules of our religion is to not out other practitioners, but Misty’s far from being a true devotee of the Orisha, our West African Gods. And because she’s a fake, I think it’s my duty to out her wannabe ass for the trick she really is, in as many ways as I possibly can.

I take my class schedule out of my purse to check the room number for my new fourth-period class. It’s in the language arts hall at the opposite end of the building from my English class. At least it’s not far from my third period government class. Jeremy conveniently ditched third period today, starting out his second semester the right way, as far as he’s concerned. Lucky for him the absences start over again at the beginning of each semester, which means he’s working with a clean slate now.

“Lost?” I hear a familiar voice ask. As if my prayers were answered, Mr. Adewale comes walking down the main hall looking as fine as ever. Damn, why does he have to be my teacher and too old for me to date?

“Hey, Mr. A. Fancy meeting you here.” Mr. Adewale looks down and smiles at me, falling into step with my quick stride. As we walk down the long corridor, we notice the crowd of students waiting at the other end of the hall. Among the masses are KJ, Misty, and their crew. Please tell me they’re not in class with me.

“Not really. Seems they had another opening for this semester and I’ll still be subbing for Mrs. Peterson when she needs me, as well as the other teachers, just like I did last semester.”

“So what do you do when you’re not teaching here?” I ask, all up in his business this morning. We never have a lot of time to talk so I have to get in the important questions whenever I get the chance.

“I study. I still have to pass my exams at the University of West Los Angeles in the spring, before they award me my master’s degree in conjunction with my bachelor’s.”

“Wow, that must take a lot of time out of your day.” I feel him though. “Between my schoolwork and my work at home, I always have my head in a book.”

“Is there a better place for your head to be?” Yeah, resting on a pillow in a deep sleep that keeps me still, but he doesn’t need to know all that. Ending our brief conversation, Mr. Adewale stops in front of my fourth-period classroom and unlocks the door. Yes! He’s my teacher after all. There is a God.

“Oh hell, no, she’s not in our class,” Misty says, following Mr. A and me into the cold, dark classroom. If I recall correctly, this room wasn’t used last semester. It smells stale in here and has a strange feeling, like it’s vacant, but not really. If I didn’t know any better I’d say there were ghosts up in here, but I think that’s my sleep deprivation talking.

“Now, this should be interesting,” Jeremy says, talking over KJ and Misty’s heads while looking down at me from behind.

I look up at Mr. Adewale, who shakes his head before turning on the lights.

“Please take your seats,” Mr. A says over the loud crowd.

Most of the students from my government class are in here, as well as other displaced AP students. But there are a few new faces as well. One dude in particular catches my eye because he seems to be staring at me. I quickly swoop up the seat closest to Mr. Adewale’s dusty desk, and Jeremy’s right next to me, as usual. Misty, KJ, and the rest of their crew, including Shae and Tony—her mute man, who never speaks unless spoken to—take the seats in the back, and everyone else files in and gets comfortable in our new space.

“Excuse me, I’m supposed to have you sign this,” the cute Latino dude who was checking me out says to Mr. A. He glances at me and gives me a shy smile, making me blush from the inside out. Damn, he’s fine. I wonder if he’s met Maggie and the rest of El Barrio, the Latino clique. If not, I think introductions are in order and I’ll be glad to make the connection.

“Sure,” Mr. A says, taking the yellow enrollment slip from our new classmate and signing it. “Okay, class, today we’re going to get our seat assignments in order and pass out the textbooks. Tomorrow I will hand out the syllabi for the semester and I expect everyone to familiarize themselves with the various sections of the textbook by tomorrow.”

“Damn, dude, chill. It’s the first day,” Del says, causing KJ and followers to chuckle. Now they should know better than to mess with the same brotha that served as the referee for the game between them and my boys. Jeremy shakes his head, crosses his arms over his desk and puts his head down for a quick nap. He has no tolerance for drama of any kind.

“It’s not the first day, it’s the third and I’m not your dude nor do I chill.” Mr. Adewale slams his teacher’s edition onto his desk, causing a cloud of dust to rise up and silencing the chattering class. Jeremy doesn’t budge. “No disrespect of any kind will be tolerated.” Mr. A walks over to Jeremy and taps him on the shoulder, waking him up.

“Sorry, man, my bad,” Jeremy says, sitting up straight in his chair. I wish I could fall out that easily.

“Jeremy, would you please pass out the textbooks that are in the back corner of the room. KJ, you can help.” Wow, Mr. A is serious about his shit this morning. “Rule number one of debate and speech is to respect your opponent, just like in any other sport. You may not like them or agree with what they’re saying, but they still deserve to be heard. Rule number two is to remember rule number one.”

Feeling someone’s eyes on me, I turn around and look behind me, scanning the other faces in the room. I catch Misty staring at me. She’s been going back and forth with Shae the whole time we’ve been in here. Just then, Nellie and Laura walk into the room, completing my nightmare of a class situation. I feel like I’ve died and gone straight to hell, and I don’t even believe in the place. Mama says life, like hell, is what you make of it, and this is as close as I could get to it on Earth.

“Like I said, this should be interesting,” Jeremy says, placing a book on my desk before continuing with the rest of the row. He’s no prophet, but Jeremy hit this one on the head. Mama’s definitely got to tell me how to deal with this situation, because keeping a cool head this semester will be next to impossible.