

CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND



SPEAK

This summer, Kobe Means will find his voice

CHAPTER 1

GOING TO SUMMER SCHOOL SEEMED like a good idea until I realized it wasn't.

The problem is I realized it a little too late.

Before things get too crazy, let me explain.

It all started around the second week of March when my dad, Bryant Means, woke me up early, insisting we needed to discuss my plans for the summer since the governor of Alabama had announced all the schools in the state were going to be closed for the rest of the school year thanks to the coronavirus, or Rona as Black folks called it.

“Junior,” he'd said, calling me by the nickname I hated since technically I wasn't a junior because his first name is my middle name. My mom, Gabrielle, said it was Daddy's way of calling me his mini-me, which was something else I despised. I was nothing like him.

“Kobe Bryant Means,” Daddy had rumbled in his deep baritone, calling me by my full government name when I hadn't responded to him fast enough.

“Sir,” I had croaked, peeking at him from under my blanket. Judge me if you want, but technically, it was my spring break, and all I wanted to do was sleep late and catch up on my reading.

“Your freshman year is more than halfway over. You'll be in college in a few years. We need to make sure you're on the radar of college coaches so you'll get recruited. We need to come up with a game plan for the summer. Folks are talking about not allowing large gatherings, which means you won't be able to do a sports camp.” I could hear the disappointment in his voice. “When I was your age, I'd already completed I don't know how many camps, and I was on the radar of The University of Alabama and LSU,” he said

Just between us, sometimes I think my dad peaked in high school or college.

Even though he's a wide receiver for the Birmingham Knights, he spends a lot of time reliving his glory days at Grover High School and The University of Alabama.

Let him tell it, he was born to play football. He keeps this baby picture of himself on the wall in his man cave of him clutching a football when he was a few months old. It seems like sports is all he talks about, and as his only child—or more specifically his only son—he just knew I was going to play sports too. I think secretly he hoped I'd follow in his footsteps and play football at The

University of Alabama before going pro, but as I got older and found more joy in reading a book than running a ball, he'd decided any sport would do.

It's crazy to me that I'm fifteen, and he still hasn't realized yet that sports are not my thing. Seriously, if I never see another piece of sports equipment again, I'd be fine. Even if I did like sports, the problem is they aren't my gift, and the scar on my forehead from when I'd run into a fence trying to catch a ball proves it. I've seen clips people have posted on social media of whatever team I'm on playing—or rather whatever team my dad is coaching since he's the one being tagged—and I've just happened to be on the field. If you saw the posts, you'd agree—after you stopped laughing—it's really, really bad. If I'm not tripping over my feet or my face isn't connecting with a ball, I'm just standing there looking bored out of my mind, probably thinking about books.

According to my dad, I'm just not trying hard enough. Clearly, he's in denial.

The thing is most of my coaches know I can't play. They put me in games because my daddy is *the* Bryant Means. Plus, he always signs up to be a volunteer coach for whatever team I'm a part of. Now that I'm older, I get it. I know it looks good for a peewee team to say they have *the* Bryant Means as a coach. As a tradeoff, coaches put me in for a few minutes for most games.

Daddy has been insisting since I played with my first youth football league when I was five that I just need to find my sports thing and that I definitely need more practice. When I was seven, one day I overheard him tell Momma there was no way I could have the name Bryant Means and not have sports skills.

Since I started high school, all Daddy has talked about is me getting recruited, and I don't get it. Now, I'm not even going to pretend I'm in the running for class valedictorian—I'm a solid B student—but I know I'm getting into somebody's college, and if I don't get a scholarship, my parents can afford to pay. I don't need to be recruited.

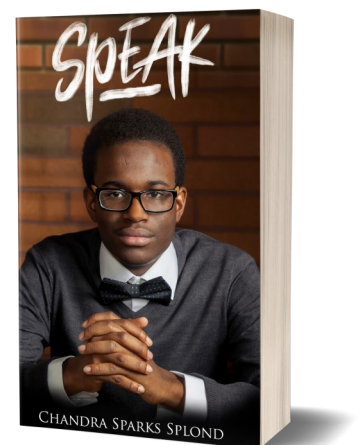
“Junior, do you hear me talking to you?” Dad had yelled that March morning, snatching the covers from over my head and pulling me out of my thoughts. I really wanted to tell him to stop riding me, but it wouldn't change anything.

I wiped the sleep out of my eyes, grabbed my glasses and looked at the clock, knowing I had to be seeing things because it was barely six in the morning.

“Yeah” I'd mumbled, willing to say anything to get him to stop talking so I could go back to sleep.

“Yeah?” he said in that voice that told me I needed to rethink what I'd just said and who I was talking to real quick.

“Yes, sir,” I croaked. I yawned and turned away from him so I could roll my eyes, then I swung my feet to the floor and turned to stare at him.



Daddy was dressed in his usual spring workout gear of shorts and a Birmingham Knights t-shirt. He worked out every day and before and after church on Sundays since that was the only day he didn't go train with the Knights.

If he wasn't running five miles, he was working out in our home gym. By the looks of things, before I started researching summer plans, I was going to be working out with him. Did I mention that even though it was March, that Saturday morning felt like it was one of the coldest days of the year?

Somehow, I huffed and puffed my way through a mile before I had to sit on a curb to catch my breath in our Cotswolds neighborhood. I felt like I was going to throw up, and for the thousandth time, I vowed before my sixteenth birthday, I was going to speak up for myself and find some way to make my dad understand my life wasn't his to live, that I had hopes and dreams of my own that I wanted to pursue, even if I was still trying to figure out what they were.

Fast forward to today—the first day of summer classes—and the reason why I'm sitting in this English class trying to pretend I'm bored rather than low-key excited since that's how the handful of students who had made their way into the class looked.

I hadn't been in a physical classroom in months, so it was good to be around kids my age. Plus, I loved English. I'd been hoping for an advanced placement class, but it wasn't being offered since they were basically doing a test run to see how or if they'd set up classes in the fall. I was taking whatever class I could to avoid spending all day every day at home with my parents or should I say working out with my dad who was determined to stay in shape for the Knights' season in the fall, assuming they had one.

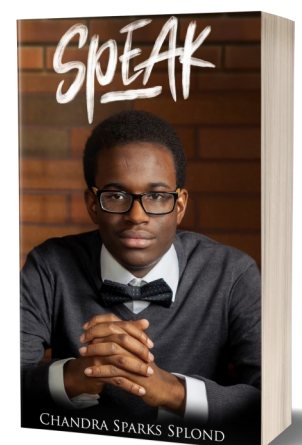
Now that I was sitting in class though, I was rethinking my decision. Sure, summer school was better than being at home, but it was still summer school, and seeing everyone in mandatory masks and sitting six feet apart to avoid spreading the coronavirus was just...weird. The stigma, whether it was true or not, was that most of the kids in summer school weren't smart.

Someone lurking over me snatched me out of my thoughts.

"Yo, Kobe, I didn't know you went here," Dennis Kendricks, a kid I had known since elementary school, said as he slid into the seat across from me. My eyes widened at the huge slit he had cut in his mask, I guess to help him breathe. I tried not to cringe. Dennis had never been the brightest kid.

We attended different high schools, but the way summer school was set up, it's this centralized deal, so kids from all over Birmingham met at one location, which happened to be my dad's alma mater, Grover High. I attended Tate Academy, so it was really the first time I had ever been inside Grover, but there was something about the school I liked.

"Yeah, man," I said, giving Dennis a nod when he tried to give me a



pound. I glanced around the room and realized it was starting to fill up. I had arrived early and opted for a seat toward the middle of the class rather than sitting in the front like I'd normally do. Everyone who had come in after me had taken seats behind me, so I was still in the front, which I thought was kind of funny.

“Wow. You failed a class,” Dennis asked, talking loud as he somehow managed to stuff his big body into the seat.

I gave him a tight smile, not sure what to say.

“This is your first time here, right?” he asked, glancing toward the door at some of the students who were walking in. He threw back his head, acknowledging a few of them, and his mask slipped under his nose. He didn't even try to fix it, and I tried not to visibly cringe as I prayed he didn't sneeze.

“Yeah,” I said. “How'd you know?”

He looked at me from my new white Air Force Ones to my pressed jeans and long-sleeved white shirt, gray sweater and black bowtie, and raised his brows. I gulped. Even though it was pushing almost eighty degrees already, I'd wanted to make a good impression on my first day. Plus, classrooms were always cold, so having on layers would probably come in handy. I glanced around the room and really paid attention for the first time to how the other kids were dressed. Most of the guys were in Nike shorts or joggers along with t-shirts and Nike slides. At Tate, we were required to wear jackets and ties every day, so I thought I'd dressed down, but obviously not enough. I suddenly felt very overdressed and made a mental note to tone things down for the rest of the summer.

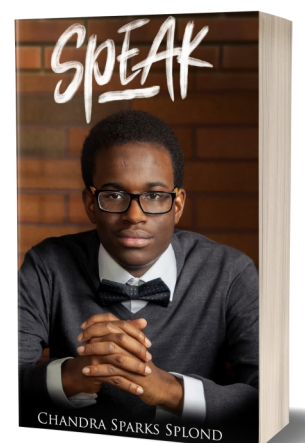
“Is this your first time?” I asked.

“Nah, man,” he said. “I've been coming to summer school every year since like fifth grade.”

I squinted at him. I was pretty sure Dennis was a rising junior—or at least that's what he was supposed to be. I knew him mainly because we'd played football for the same team when we were younger, although we were on different squads because he was a year older. He had always been a big kid, but he was huge now. He had to outweigh me by a good sixty or seventy pounds, and even though we were sitting, I had to look up to make eye contact with him. He grabbed a gallon jug of water I hadn't noticed next to his feet and chugged it.

“You come to summer school every year to get ahead?” I asked. Deep down, I already knew the truth, but I couldn't help the hope in my voice.

He barked out a laugh. “Nah, man. I always end up flunking something. This year, it was English,” he said like it was no big deal. “Coach told me if I didn't take this class, I couldn't play next year. You know that's not gonna happen.”



“Right,” I said scooting back when I realized he was spitting through the slit in his mask while he talked. I adjusted my mask and tried not to shiver as I thought of all the corona he was spreading.

“I could be at home sleeping late if I didn’t have to be here. Man, the teacher better not ask me to do no work. I’m not even here for all that,” he said.

I bit my lip, trying to keep myself from asking him why he was in summer school if he didn’t plan on doing any work, especially if he knew that was the only way he could play sports. Luckily, the teacher walked in, which kept me from asking.

“Good morning, scholars. Welcome to English literature,” the teacher said. He turned to write on the board, and in this flowy handwriting, he spelled out *Mr. Merriweather*.

“Hey, teacher. What does that say?” someone asked.

I glanced around, and a few other kids were looking at the board confused, like Mr. Merriweather had written a calculus problem instead of cursive.

“I don’t read swirls,” someone announced, and a couple of kids laughed, although I wasn’t sure if it was because the girl had called cursive writing swirls or if it was because they didn’t know how to read what was written either.

“My name is Mr. Merriweather,” the teacher said in this deep voice as he trailed his finger under what he’d written on the board. “I’ll be your teacher for this summer session.”

I sat up straighter, kind of intrigued. I can’t explain it, but the thought of Mr. Merriweather teaching the class had me excited. I had never had a Black male teacher before, so that was kind of cool.

“Before we begin, I’d like for each of you to stand and introduce yourself.”

“Man, I hate when teachers do that,” Dennis muttered as he slid lower in his seat.

Mr. Merriweather looked at Dennis. “Did you say something, young man?”

Dennis sat up straighter. “I was saying I can’t understand you with that.” He pointed at Mr. Merriweather’s mask.

“Can everyone else understand me?” Mr. Merriweather asked, looking like he really wanted to know.

A few kids nodded.

“Maybe you should cut a hole in it like I did,” Dennis said, proudly pointing at his massacred mask.

Several kids cracked up, and Dennis looked around, confused.

I waited for Mr. Merriweather to embarrass him like I knew some of my teachers from Tate Academy would do, but instead, he pulled a disposable mask in a clear sealed package from his backpack and handed it to Dennis before he explained to the class why wearing masks and not cut-



ting them was an important way to stop the spread of the coronavirus. I thought the way he handled the entire situation was cool, and apparently, Dennis did too because he put on the mask without complaining, and he actually looked like he was paying attention when Mr. Merriweather reminded us we were going to introduce ourselves.

I was expecting Mr. Merriweather to start at the front of the room, which is what most teachers do, but there were only a handful of students, including me, sitting there. Instead, he started at the back corner, which kind of surprised me and apparently a few of the other kids too.

I had just started to introduce myself when the classroom door flew open, and this girl rushed in, her cheeks flaming.

“I’m so sorry I’m late,” she said, looking around the room until her gaze landed on Mr. Merriweather who was propped on top of a desk near the window. “I overslept.”

“You could sleep over with me anytime,” a boy behind me said.

I didn’t like his way of saying it, but I agreed with his unspoken sentiment. This girl was fine. She looked about five four, a few inches shorter than my five-eight height, and her yellow sundress was fitting her just right, but not in a skanky way, and it coordinated with her yellow-and-green mask. I stood there staring for a few seconds, watching as she plopped down in a desk near the front of the room where there were still several empty seats.

“Kobe,” Mr. Merriweather said, snatching me back to reality, “please continue.”

I frowned, wondering how he knew my name, then I remembered I had said it before my introduction had been interrupted.

“My name is Kobe Means,” I said, purposely not using my middle name.

“He means Kobe Bryant Means,” Dennis said from his seat across from me.

A couple of kids burst out laughing.

“Your parents really named you Kobe Bryant?” someone said, and more kids cracked up as they made the connection that I had the same name as the late basketball legend.

I glared at Dennis, annoyed. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut, and this conversation wouldn’t be happening right now. If that wasn’t bad enough, he’d pulled his mask down to do it. Thankfully, only his nose was uncovered.

“So, do you like sports?” Mr. Merriweather asked, trying to get the class back on track.

“Of course he does. His dad is Bryant Means,” Dennis volunteered.

“The Mean Machine who plays for the Birmingham Knights is your daddy?” someone yelled from behind me.

“Can I get his autograph?” a guy near the back of the room asked.

“Can I get his number?” this girl who looked at least twenty glanced from behind her compact mirror long enough to ask.



I sighed in frustration. This whole morning was not going the way I had pictured it in my head. My parents gave me the name because Kobe Bryant was my mom's favorite basketball player. I could have gone deeper into the story about my dad regretting not giving me his name within a month of them naming me, but what was the point?

"Yes, my dad is Bryant Means," I said, figuring I needed to go ahead and admit it since he would probably be picking me up, "but I don't like sports."

It was the first time I had said the words aloud, and even though I was getting weird stares, it felt good to admit sports weren't my thing.

"So, what do you like to do?" Mr. Merriweather asked.

I shrugged. "Other than reading, I don't know. I'm still trying to figure it out," I said.

"There's nothing wrong with that," Mr. Merriweather said, nodding at me. "I was still trying to figure it out when I was your age too. You'll find your way."

I don't know why his words made me feel good. Other than my mom, Mr. Merriweather was the first person who didn't seem to think it was a big deal I wasn't into sports.

I slid back into my seat, glad my time in the spotlight was finally over. I zoned out as Dennis introduced himself, making a mental note to stay away from him. He hadn't been my favorite person when we were younger, and now I remembered why: He talked entirely too much.

I perked up again when Mr. Merriweather pointed at the girl with the yellow sundress who removed her mask as he stood.

"My name is Sophia Grace Kelly," she said. Something about her voice had my heart speeding up. "I'm sixteenth, and I'm a rising sophomore here at Grover. I have a little brother named Robert whom I love." She gave this cute shrug. "That's about it."

I nodded. She hadn't said much, but there was something about Sophia that I liked. The fact that she hadn't mentioned being in love with some dude like a few of the girls in class had made me wonder if she was talking to someone.

"Hey, what's up with all these crazy names? Ain't Grace Kelly somebody famous?" someone yelled.

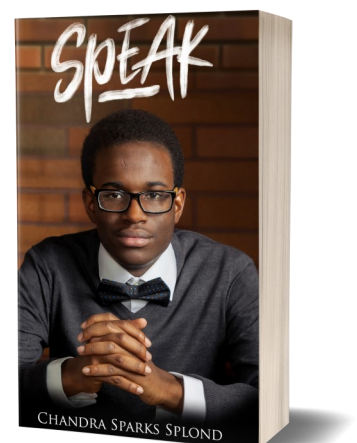
"Don't you mean *isn't*?" Mr. Merriweather asked.

"No, I meant *ain't*," the kid said, and the room exploded with laughter. Even Mr. Merriweather had to laugh.

Sophia smiled so wide, she showed off her dimples. Her eyes seemed to sparkle, even from a distance.

"Yeah, Grace Kelly was in that movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*," a girl sitting next to Sophia said. I vaguely remembered her saying her name was Brianna. "We had to watch it in class last year. It was actually pretty good."

"You're referring to Audrey Hepburn," Mr. Merriweather said, "but



you're right, *Breakfast at Tiffany's* is a great movie."

"You've seen it?" Brianna asked, leaning back and looking at him in surprise.

"I have," Mr. Merriweather said like it was no big deal.

"That's cool," Sophia said. "I liked *Breakfast at Tiffany's* too." She turned to look at Brianna. "Grace Kelly was an actress and a princess, kind of like that Black princess Meghan Markle."

"Alright," Brianna said, nodding in approval.

"So, you were named after a princess?" some burly dude asked.

I was pretty sure he could care less. He was just trying to put himself on Sophia's radar. I couldn't blame him.

"Not really," Sophia said. "My mom just liked the name." She shrugged like she was apologizing.

"I like it too," the burly guy said.

Sophia gave him a thin smile before taking her seat.

"Wait," someone yelled, and Sophia looked toward the back of the room. "Didn't you say your little brother's name is Robert?"

She nodded, and I saw something flicker across her face before she blinked it away.

"So, your brother's name is Robert Kelly, as in R. Kelly?" he said, and a few of the kids laughed before turning to her expectantly.

"His last name isn't Kelly," she said softly, her face focused on her desk.

"Lucky for him. That would be real jacked up," someone yelled. "I mean I like R. Kelly's music, but we stopped claiming him and playing him at cookouts after everybody watched *Surviving R. Kelly*."

"Speak for yourself," the girl who looked twenty-two said. "Y'all know all those women were lying. They just got mad because they couldn't sing, and he didn't make them famous."

Sophia shook her head, and Mr. Merriweather raised his hands, silently telling the class to settle down.

"Man, forget R. Kelly. It's bad enough your brother's name is Robert. Who names a little kid that grown man name?" a guy muttered then slumped in his seat.

"It's better than your name," a girl said, then rolled her eyes. I racked my brain trying to remember what his name was but couldn't.

"That's enough," Mr. Merriweather said. "We are not going to tear each other down in this classroom." His tone let us know he wasn't playing. He glanced around the room, making eye contact with every one of us. Even Dennis who had dozed off sat up straighter.

"Now that we've gotten the introductions out of the way," Mr. Merriweather said, "let's talk about the class and what I expect from you all over



the next four weeks.”

I tapped the spacebar on my MacBook to awaken it so I could take notes, then glanced around the room to where other kids were pulling out notebooks and Chromebooks. I made eye contact with Sophia who was the only other one in class who wasn’t using a school-issued laptop. She had forgotten to put her mask back on and gave me a cute smile, and a jolt went through my stomach knowing it was just for me.

“So, it seems quite a few of you don’t know cursive, so in addition to everything else we’ll be learning, I’ll be teaching you that,” Mr. Merriweather said.

“What we gotta learn that for?” Dennis asked, slouching again. “I didn’t come here for all of that.”

Mr. Merriweather just stared at him.

“I’m just saying. Don’t you already have enough stuff to teach us. I’m just looking out for you, Mr. M. It’s the summer. You’re stuck here with us all day. I know you want to have some fun too.”

“Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Mr. Kendricks, but I think I’ll be able to make it work.” He turned to look at the rest of the class. “Now, as I was saying, in addition to cursive for those of you who need it, we’ll also be incorporating speech into our curriculum.”

“You mean like talking?” someone asked. Mr. Merriweather nodded. “We already know how to do that.”

“Clearly you don’t do it well,” someone yelled.

For a moment, I thought it was Sophia, but she was focused on her computer screen, and based on the little I knew about her, she wouldn’t say something so rude.

Mr. Merriweather went on like the person hadn’t spoken. “We’ll also be doing a lot of reading, and there might be a field trip or two.”

“So, we’re not going to be stuck in the classroom every day?” Brianna asked.

“Not if I can help it,” Mr. Merriweather said. “I’m hoping by the time this class is over, it will change you, and you’ll think about life in ways you haven’t before.”

I can’t explain it, but his words intrigued me.

Maybe summer school wouldn’t be so bad after all.

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CHANDRA SPARKS SPLOND

SPEAK

This summer, Kobe Means will find his voice

ABOUT THE BOOK

Fifteen-year-old Kobe Means has zero desire to follow in the footsteps of his famous father. Now, thanks to the pandemic, they've been stuck at home together for months, and Kobe has had enough. It seems the only way he'll get any peace is to find a way to speak up for himself. What starts out as a simple idea to get away from his dad and show some independence turns into his life changing in ways he could never imagine. This summer, Kobe will find his voice.

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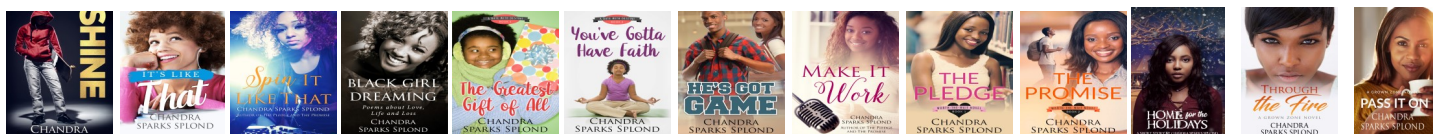
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