

**BRUNCH**

**AT**

**RUBY'S**



Brunch at Ruby's

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As the daughter of a serviceman, I am formerly from all over the place; however I have lived in the grandest city in the south, Atlanta, since early 2003. I'm a northwestern girl at heart but I think I've finally got this southern thing down... the tea is sweet and the fish come with grits!

I'm a lover of technology, a fan of Brunch and am seriously addicted to coffee. I am hardly ever serious and ridiculously sarcastic. I devour books (and Skittles...and coffee) and blog my reviews and thoughts on writing at <http://TheSweetEscape.net>.

I have been writing for most of my life but began seriously pursuing a writing career in 2009. I began writing my debut novel, Brunch at Ruby's in 2011. Four years later, my dream of becoming a published author is finally coming true!



## DEDICATION

For my Mother, Angela with whom I share my "wacky" sense of humor, my love of books and beautiful writing.

For my Father, Marvin, from his "favorite" daughter. \*wink\* You always tell me how proud you are of me. Your love and never ending support has propelled me toward this dream. Thank you.

In loving memory of Uncle Edwin "T" and Delois Kennedy, whose long and loving marriage was an inspiration for this novel.



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**Acknowledgements**

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## PROLOGUE

Debra

I'm packing up my office to leave for the day when he saunters in, unexpected but not unwelcome. My heart skips a beat and my belly quivers like I'm a teenager in love and not an adult in a forbidden relationship.

"Is that your equipment inventory? How are we looking?"

I gesture to the stack of papers folded in his hand. He bypasses me, dropping the form into the IN basket on my desk. His scent is a mix of cologne and manly sweat and fresh cut grass from working on the football field most of the day.

"All there," he says with a confident nod. "All good. We're ready."

I smile at him, my arms full of folders and a heavy bag hanging from my shoulder. School begins in a few weeks and as Principal at Morningside Middle School, I still have hours of work before my day is complete.

David Loren, my Athletics Director, moves across the office slowly, taking his time.

"So, I was just leaving," I hint. "Was there anything you needed?"

"Just...one thing."

Swift and smooth, like an eagle dipping to pluck its prey from the river, he moves in and drops his lips to mine. My heartbeat quickens with panic... then I relax. It's the end of the day. The building is empty, the halls are quiet. I drop the armful of folders onto the nearest chair and let my bag slide from my shoulder. It lands at our feet with a thud.

I lean into him. Into the kiss. Into the moment.

A noise sounds above the quiet moans between us, ripping my lips from his. We leap apart, each taking a few steps back. At the faint sound of a door closing, we rush into the hallway in time to catch a fleeting figure dart past the window and down a darkened hall.

"Hey. HEY!" David takes off, bellowing into the shadows. Whoever it is, they move quickly enough to get away from a former football player. Too soon, he's back in my office, leaning heavily on one leg more than the other, wrinkles of pain across his forehead.

"Could you see who it was?"

He shakes his head. "Moved too fast. I'm pretty sure it was a kid. It was dark." He drops into a chair. I can't breathe, suddenly. My knees buckle. I collapse into the chair next to him.

"Don't panic, Debra. Maybe they didn't see anything."

My glare is pointed and severe. “Maybe they didn’t see your tongue halfway down my throat? Are you serious?”

David pouts, shrugging a bulky shoulder. “Okay, but it’s our word against theirs. Who’s going to believe a kid that says they saw me and you kissing in your office? Sounds made up to me.”

“You mean no one would believe the young PE Teacher would be interested in the old married Principal?”

He sighs. “That’s not how I meant it, Debra.”

“You know what, never mind. It doesn’t even matter. The rumor is enough to make my life hell. I told you we needed to end this!”

“Don’t over think it. That’s how people make mistakes—”

“Mistakes?” I cough out a sarcastic chuckle. “I think this is way bigger than a mistake right now. Do me a favor, David. Shut up. You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

I drop my face into my hands as my world swirls around me. The hallways of a middle school are lined with gasoline. Gossip spreads like wildfire around this place, especially during the first few weeks of the new school year. The thought of my fate being in someone else’s hands or someone having something to hold over me makes my stomach roll.

“This is a nightmare. I’m going to have to tell Willard. And maybe Bernice...”

“The Superintendent? Over a kiss that somebody says they saw? You don’t have to tell anybody anything. You didn’t tell them about it before—”

“No one else knew before!”

“No one else knows now! Stop and think, Debra! All we have to do is deny it. Maybe we just lay low and—”

“No.” I hop up from the chair, grabbing the handles of my bag and tossing it over my shoulder. “I can get another job and so can you, but I can’t risk my marriage anymore.”

I shake my head, my resolve stronger every moment. “Willard cannot find out about this when whoever...” I point toward the window. “Whoever that was decides to play their hand.”

David stands and limps toward the door. The knee injury that destroyed his dreams of being drafted to a pro football team is flaring up. “At least wait before you tell anybody but him. Let’s see how things play out before you get us both fired.”

# PART ONE

# One

Debra

Love fades.

Wait...that's not right. Passion fades. Love changes. It shifts, it breathes, it adapts. Passion burns bright and hot but over time, grows dim. Bit by bit, so slowly that you don't even notice until you look for that spark and it's gone.

Passion is the kind of thing you have to keep feeding, because if you don't and it dies, there's no guarantee of bringing it back. When the passion is gone but you're desperate to feel it, you might do anything to find it again.

I mean... anything.

On Saturday mornings I pay the bills. It's more out of habit than necessity but rain or shine, I'm at the kitchen table sorting through envelopes and writing checks for the bills we don't like to pay online.

This table is older than I am. A rectangular slab of wood, nine feet by twelve feet, worn soft by Wednesday night dinner and Sunday afternoon dessert and so many years of homework and books and bags piled on top of it. It belonged to my parents, who bought it brand new when they bought their house in 1970. When my husband, Willard, and I moved my aging parents to a smaller home, we took the kitchen table that I've been staring at my whole life.

Twelve hours ago, this table was witness to a dramatic change in my life. Willard's life too, and by extension our daughter Kendra, though she doesn't know it yet. I should feel relieved, like a load has been lifted from my shoulders, but I can't help but recognize a sense of dread and foreboding. I'm bracing for impact.

My coffee, once hot with curls of steam rising from the lip of my favorite mug is lukewarm as I pick it up and slurp down a mouthful. I grimace at the bitter taste. I can't get used to this stuff without sugar, but I'm trying to cut my sugar intake. That's something I'm known for. Debra, the Health Nut. I'm also Debra, Suzy Homemaker and Debra, The One with the Answers. I find that last one particularly ironic. I'm drowning in questions and I have no answers for any of them.

"Ma, can you pick me up from band practice?"

Kendra is twelve going on thirty. Tall like her father and thin like me with big doe eyes, long lashes and skin the color of caramel. Kendra is a beautiful child. Smart, social, sweet and loving. Also spoiled. We've been fighting all summer about how short her shorts are and how midriff baring her shirts are. I like letting her buy her own clothes, but not to let her waltz around town with

all of her skin showing. Today, she's dressed like she knows I'm watching. Her shorts fall at mid-thigh and her tank top covers her belly. That's all I ask.

Her expression betrays impatience with my delay in responding to her haughty request. One hand rests on her hip; the other clutches the handle of a rectangular black case. Homecoming is fast approaching and the band is rehearsing a whole new routine, the Band Director tells me. She's having the kids come in before school even starts to get a leg up on the material.

Kendra is in the seventh grade at Morningside Middle School. I'm the Principal— something that should have stopped me in my tracks, but...well, you know that song by Cher, If I Could Turn Back Time? That could be my theme song, right now.

“Why can't you get home the same way you're getting there?”

“Because it's going to be hot when I get out of practice. Please mom?”

Her thin arms flail around her. Desperate and dramatic, she is nearly faint at the thought of having to walk an entire six blocks in the Georgia heat.

“I don't think I can. I have plans with Aunt Max and Aunt Renee today and I don't want to be rushed.”

“But Ma, it's supposed to get over ninety today!”

“Kendra, I said no!”

I don't mean to snap, but it's like she can't remember what the word 'no' means anymore. “We live six blocks from school. You won't melt.”

She sucks her teeth, heaves a tortured, teenage sigh and slowly exits the kitchen, dragging her feet across the tile floor. I feel guilty now for snapping at her. It's not her fault that I didn't sleep.

Because my husband isn't talking to me.

Because last night I confessed to having an affair.

I jumped in front of the proverbial train and spilled everything, not out of a need to save my marriage, to be honest with my husband of fourteen years, to repair what was broken between us. Not even out of a sense of loyalty and full disclosure. I told my husband about my affair because I got caught with another man, and some shit was about to hit the fan.

“Well...” I sigh. She halts her slow, morose exit from the kitchen. I'm such a sucker. “Call me when practice is over. If I'm on my way, I'll come get you.”

Her disposition brightens considerably. The brat. “Thanks Ma!”

She bounds out of the side door that leads through the garage, leaving the door open in her wake. She and a friend meet up at the end of the driveway and they take off in the direction of Morningside.

Morning sun streams into the space where Willard's Lexus is usually parked. He's been gone since early this morning. That isn't unusual, but most Saturdays he would at least hang around for breakfast before going into the office.

I stack the bills together, stuff them into my purse, take one last gulp of coffee and head out of the same door Kendra went through, pulling it closed behind me. I slip into the Benz that Willard bought for me two years ago. I'd

been driving a ten year old E-class and was happy with it. He knew I had been eyeing the S550 though and when I was promoted to Principal at Morningside, he got me the car. It was the biggest surprise of my life. Even Kendra was in on it.

Our home looks happy from the outside– a professionally manicured lawn, a trellis on either side of the porch covered in roses and dots of brightly colored flowers in the flower beds. We hung a vintage wooden swing off of the beams and in the summer, we like to sit outside and drink sweet tea, watch the fireflies buzz through sunset and call to the neighbors as they take their evening walks.

One would think the Macklin family lived a life of easy, suburban bliss.

One could not be more wrong.

## Two

Renee

“It’s your turn, Daddy.”

“I thought it was your turn. I was waitin’ on you.”

Bony fingers pluck a card and slowly transfer it to the stack in the center of the table. After he plays, Daddy fans his cards out and brings his elbows in, hunching forward. As if his failing memory isn’t enough, his eyesight is going downhill, too. He looks so much older than his sixty seven years.

We play cards every day. Every single day. He might forget my name, what street we live on, his own birthday or that he doesn’t work at the Ford plant anymore, but he never forgets to rifle through the top right hand drawer in my mother’s mahogany China hutch, pull out the bundle of cards banded together and take his seat at the table across from me. We play until Jessie, his caregiver arrives. I let him think he whips my butt.

The cards we play with are thin and tattered, so old you can barely see the photos of the Jazz greats printed on the back of them—Duke Ellington, Dizzy Gillespie, Eartha Kitt. Daddy refuses to play with the new set I bought him. He and my mother played cards together with his set.

Memory is a funny thing. It has belongings, smells and sights and sounds and things. The cards belong to a time that he barely remembers anymore. Maybe that’s why his grasp on them is so tight.

He squints as he peruses his hand, his brows pushed closer together by the creases between his eyes.

“Daddy.” He grunts. “Where are your glasses? You’re going to give yourself a headache, all that squinting and staring.”

“Don’t know,” he mumbles, shuffling his cards around. The last time he lost his glasses, I found them in the microwave. There’s no telling where they are now.

I lay down my next card. “Jessie is going to have your hide if you don’t find them before she gets here.”

“Jessie comin’ today?”

“Yes sir. I’m going to see Maxine and Debra today. You remember them, Daddy? My friends that used to live down the street from us?”

“Course I remember,” he says, grunting again. “Why’s Jessie coming? I told you I don’t need no babysitter. Old enough to babysit you.”

“Good, because she’s not a babysitter. She’ll make you some lunch, maybe take you for a walk—”

“Babysitter,” he interrupts, slapping a card onto the table.

In his more lucid moments, my father is aware that there are long periods of time that he can't remember, flashes of memory pulsing in and out. He's insistent that he's fine. It's just a few spells, old age, it'll blow over. He protests having Jessie here and they bicker like siblings, but without Jessie, it doesn't work.

Debra and Maxine, my oldest and dearest friends, love Atlanta. The city, the people, the sweet gentility, the slow pace and southern tradition. Born and raised here, I couldn't wait to get out of this place. I took my Business degree from Georgia State as far north as New York and as far west as Los Angeles, looking for anything to keep me away from Atlanta.

I ended up in Philly, where I got hired on at SimCore, a pharmaceutical manufacturer. That's where I met Marcus— six foot two, lean and muscular, dark brown eyes, velvety skin the hue of a coconut husk. Quiet when necessary. A beast when I needed him to be. I had a good job, a nice apartment, a man I was falling hard for.

My mother taught elementary school when I was young. When I was in high school, she quit that job and opened a small bookstore in downtown Decatur. Gladwell Books was the perfect second life for her, a cute little shop that made just enough money to keep it afloat and Mama's hands busy. After her death, Daddy kept it open as an honor to her memory. I really think he couldn't let it go.

Between the bookstore and taking care of the house and his card club (a bunch of old men sitting around talking about old women), he seemed busy. Like always, he said he was fine, he didn't need my help, don't bother him.

One of our neighbors had taken it upon herself to watch over Daddy and the house, water my mother's roses, check the mail—basically be a busybody, but she was my lifeline. One evening, I'd just come home from work, was changing out of my business suit to meet Marcus for dinner when I heard my cell phone ringing. I thought it was Marcus, egging me on to hurry, since I was already late. I let it go to voice mail.

In the shower, something niggled at me. I felt like I needed to check my messages. I wrapped a towel around myself and found my phone plugged into the charger on the kitchen counter.

Four missed calls read the display on my Blackberry. I dialed into voice mail and was greeted with urgent messages from the neighbor. I knew it was about Daddy.

Around dusk, she'd said, he was marching down the street in his Ford uniform—dark blue slacks, light blue shirt with the Ford emblem over the right front pocket. He wore socks but no shoes and he was shouting for Lorraine. Lorraine, my mother, had been dead for four years.

I flew home and checked him into a hospital. At first glance, the doctors thought it could be stress. Repressed grief, maybe. Daddy thought everybody was crazy. He said he was fine, worrying about him was a waste of time and he didn't need anyone watching over him. He didn't want to stay at the hospital and he didn't appreciate nurses poking and prodding him.

“Go on back to Philly,” he’d said when I brought him home. “I don’t need you here. Get on back to your life.”

I went back to Philly, back to my job, my apartment, my handsome boyfriend. I was looking forward to introducing him to Daddy and we were talking about moving in together.

A few months later, I called for our regular Wednesday night chat. He didn’t recognize my voice. He was distant and slow to answer questions and confused about my reminder to set the garbage out for pickup. The garbage has been picked up every Thursday morning next to the driveway for as long as I’ve been alive.

I called the neighbor for a report. Daddy was not fine. He didn’t know where he was half the time and where he was going the other half. Worst of all, Gladwell Books, the biggest Lorraine Gladwell keepsake possible, was on the verge of collapse. Daddy hadn’t opened the store in weeks.

I flew home and took him back to Dr. Crawford. I’ve been here ever since.

A knock at the kitchen door interrupts a spirited session of bickering about who is losing. Jessie is wearing her usual uniform of khaki slacks and a faded short sleeved polo with the Atlanta Rehabilitation Services logo over the left breast. Wisps of gray hair peek out from under a short curly wig that has been brushed and fluffed to a brilliant shine and impressive height. She carries a black leather bag with her, which holds games, music and anything she feels she might need for the day.

The first year with Daddy, I tried to make it on my own but I realized, quickly, that if I didn’t get some help, I might kill him. Accidentally or otherwise. His illness and general obstinate nature make him grumpy and argumentative. Because his decline has been so markedly slow, he’s aware that he’s sick, that his condition is incurable, his symptoms uncontrollable. That doesn’t make accepting his Alzheimer’s diagnosis any easier. It is a violent internal struggle that presents itself in a habit of throwing things. Or disappearing.

The first four nurses, my father chased away. The last one I fired myself. Jessie has been with us for the last two years. She is an old school nurse who doesn’t take much of anything from anyone, including Bernard Gladwell. She’s all business from the minute she walks in the door until she leaves for the day. Daddy is on a schedule and she keeps him active. They play games, go for walks and she takes him to his appointments when I can’t. He grumbles and argues and calls her his babysitter, but she has a way of being bossy and direct in a motherly away. She’s a lot like Mama, actually. I suspect that this is why they get along.

I tip my head at Jessie. Daddy doesn’t acknowledge her, but he never does. She drops her bag onto the couch and, propping her hands on ample

hips, takes in the scene like we aren't always in this spot, doing this very thing every morning.

"Well, who's winning?" I nod my head across the table to Daddy, who is squinting at the cards he's holding close to his face. "How's he winning and he can't even see?"

She taps him on the shoulder and he nearly jumps out of his skin. "Mistah Gladwell! Where your glasses at, old man?"

Daddy shakes his head, grunts a little, plucks a card from the stack and plays it. She heads for the flight of steps that lead to the second floor. "They're probably on his nightstand. You know how he gets those headaches without them."

A few minutes later, silver wire framed glasses appear at Daddy's elbow as she passes the table on the way into the kitchen. He glances at them, picks them up and puts them on.

"I'm headed out in a few minutes," I tell her. "So it'll be just the two of you for lunch."

"How romantic." Sounds of cabinets opening and closing and items being taken out of the refrigerator waft from the kitchen. "Bernard! You want a hot ham and cheese sandwich? You got some potatoes about to go bad in here. I can fry them up like potato chips."

"I don't care," he mumbles.

I swallow back a little guilt, watching them fall into their daily routine.

My Corolla sedan shares garage space with a slowly rusting Ford Mustang, kept under an enormous tarp. The '66 raven black hardtop, restored from the ground up by his own two hands, was Daddy's pride and joy. He named it Lorraine and when he would talk about Lorraine, we were never sure if he meant the car or his wife. Sometimes when Daddy disappears, I find the indigo blue plastic unceremoniously dumped on the cement floor and him in the driver's seat, his fingers roving the five gauge instrument panel, gripping the gear shift, caressing the leather seats. I wish we could take her for a spin, but she hasn't run in years.

I was sure I was going to be excommunicated when I parked my Toyota in a Ford man's garage. Daddy didn't even refer to it by name. "That foreign junk you drive," he called it.

I slide into my foreign junk and back out of the garage, watching the wide mouth close before pulling into the street. I reach for the radio dial and flip through the FM stations. It has been a long and stressful month and I need to be around people that understand me. And remember my name.

Debra and her family lived a few houses down the street. Maxine and her mother Inell lived a few blocks away. Max intimidated me, mostly. She was easily the prettiest girl in our third grade class. She had long hair that she religiously washed and pressed every Saturday night. Her skin was the color of light brown sugar and her hazel eyes were shaped like almonds, in sharp contrast to Debra and me with cocoa skin and dark brown eyes. Max always

had lip gloss that smelled like strawberries. Debra and I were only allowed to wear Vaseline on our lips.

Once, while my mother was twisting my hair into braids, I told her that I wanted to get my hair pressed and wear it straight like Maxine. She clicked her tongue and rolled her eyes at me in the mirror. “Don’t try to compete with Maxine. She will always win that game.”

Debra, her high school sweetheart, Willard and I went to Georgia State University. Max decided not to go. “It’s boring,” she said when asked why she wasn’t applying to colleges. She flipped her hair and sashayed away in one of her new designer outfits. She had a job at the uppity, rich people mall and her whole check seemed to be going to her hair and wardrobe. Maxine already had everything she needed: a job, a car, money, and endless attention from men—and I don’t mean the boys we went to school with. I mean grown men.

Maxine did go to school, though. Real Estate school. When she earned her first commission check, she knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life.

A stark white streak zooms past me as I get out of my car at Ruby’s. I don’t even have to look up to know that it’s Maxine in her brilliantly bright white Maserati. She’s a self-made woman, owns her own real estate firm and sells big houses to rich people. Debra is a middle school principal, married to a high profile accountant with a perfect child and a house in the suburbs and a Mercedes Benz.

Then there’s me, in a dusty piece of foreign junk, trying my hardest to keep a neighborhood bookstore afloat and my father from wandering into the street in his underwear.

## THREE

Maxine

I coast into the parking lot at Ruby's slowly, so as not to kick up rocks and mar the paint on my car and honk as I pass Renee. She waves without even looking, pulling at the jacket of that purple Juicy Couture sweat suit she wears all the time. The one she thinks hides those ten pounds she's picked up.

Ruby's Soul Food Café is a neighborhood staple, the perfect spot for after-church gatherings on Sunday and the occasional weekday evening when a plate of hot catfish and hush puppies would hit you just right. Back in the day, it was where we went for sodas after school, for group outings on Friday nights and post-movie, pre-make out point Saturday night dates. We spent so much time there that Ruby, the restaurant's founder, is practically an adopted grandmother. We don't see her much, but when we do, it's an event. It's only fitting that Ruby's is where Debra, Renee and I have met for brunch every month for the last four years.

I brush the wrinkles from my dress as I step out of the car and pick my way through the gravel parking lot cursing Richard, the General Manager of Ruby's, like I do every month when I have to trudge through dust and rocks just for brunch.

Stepping inside Ruby's is like a step into the past. Silver stools still line the front counter; the old style cash register still sits on the counter next to the front door, over which a small bell still tinkles to announce new arrivals. The linoleum floors are dull, the shine buffed out of them after so many years of being mopped twice a day.

Ruby's holds twenty tables indoors, another ten outside, another eight at the front counter, so a busy day is a madhouse. Today the place is packed.

Four men seated at the front counter lean back and give me the once-over, head to toe. I nod to each of them as I pass, leather bag on my arm, designer shades clutched in my palm.

"Gentlemen," I greet them, nodding before spotting Renee and Debra seated on a bench that resembles an old church pew painted yellow to match the sunny décor. I sit next to Renee, who is on the phone and reach across her to tap Debra on the knee. She's staring into space and hasn't even noticed I've arrived. "What's up, Deb?"

Her head pops up and she sucks in a breath as if I'd crept up behind her. "Hey, Max. I didn't see you come in."

"I can see how you missed her," says Renee, ending her call and tucking away her phone. "You've been studying that crack in the floor pretty hard."

Debra half smiles, drawing lines around her mouth. “I guess I have some things on my mind. Ready?”

After so many years of faithful patronage, we always get the same table when we come for brunch—the big booth in the back corner with the high sides. Loyalty has its privileges.

Our waitress is a former student of Debra’s. I half listen to their animated chatter as we are led to our table and take our usual seats. Debra sits on the outside, Renee and I on the inside, as close as we can get without elbowing each other.

We always order the same thing at Ruby’s. Renee gets the shrimp and grits with sausage. Debra is our health nut, so her usual is an egg white omelet with roasted vegetables, chicken apple sausage and, her splurge—fried potatoes. As for me, when it comes to comfort food, I like it fried. Serve it up with lots of whatever I order on the side with a knife and fork. I don’t eat with my hands. My usual is chicken and waffles with butter and so much syrup, my food practically does the backstroke.

Our waitress knows the drill and bounces away to place our orders. A busboy arrives with glasses of water for the other two and a bottle of Perrier water for me. I break the seal and pour myself a glass.

“Renee, how’s Bernard doing?”

She grimaces as if the topic is distasteful while dropping a lemon into her glass. “He’s about the same.”

“The same is good, right? He’s not getting worse?”

“I guess. But even the good days are hard to manage.”

“It’s that bad?” Debra asks, coming out of her stupor.

“I don’t know if it’s that bad. I’m that tired.” She relaxes against the cushion of the booth, playing with the zipper on her jacket. “Half the time he doesn’t know who I am. The other half, he’s yelling at me. If I leave him alone for five minutes, he turns a room upside down. Stuff turned over, drawers emptied, things everywhere.”

“Maybe he’s looking for something,” I suggest.

“Apparently, he doesn’t remember what he’s looking for. Guess that’s why he hasn’t found it.”

“Is Jessie still there?”

“Yeah,” she answers, but with a weary sigh. “She’ll be retiring soon. What if he gets really bad, really fast? What if he forgets how to use the toilet? I don’t think I can change my dad’s diapers.”

Renee holds the wide eyed stare of panic. I reach out to give her a reassuring pat on the shoulder but pull back with a frown at the texture of the cheap crushed velvet jacket. “I thought I told you to throw this purple thing away.”

Renee laughs but I sense tension and frustration melting away. “You’re not the boss of me, Maxine. It’s comfortable and it’s what I want to wear. I’m not you.”

“You sure aren’t,” I mumble. I don’t even care that she heard me. She ignores me anyway. “Debra?” I lightly kick her under the table, bringing her out of another stare into space. “What’s up with you today?”

“I’m fine,” she says, brightening. “Just work, you know. School starts up again in a few weeks and Kendra has so much going on with band and Willard is...” Her arms move back and forth as she rubs her palms over her thighs. “Willard is busy. The business tax deadline is coming up and he’s working long hours.”

“When isn’t Willard working long hours?” Renee asks, a rhetorical question because we all know the answer. Working to provide is one thing. Working yourself to death is another.

“I know; it’s the same every year, but now my work load is heavy. I worry about Kendra being raised by the Internet. Or her friends. You know how grown some of these little rich girls can be.”

Renee and I nod. Our eighth grade class had two girls in a close race between labor and graduation.

Three plates land on our table. My chicken is still sizzling from the fryer. I begin cutting my food into bite sized pieces. “Is that all? You seem real quiet today, Deb. It’s not like you.”

“Things could be better but I’m alright,” Debra mumbles, around a mouthful of omelet. “How are you doing?”

“Well, you remember last month, I was trying to unload that place up in Sugarloaf? Next to some football player, what’s his name?” I stop cutting and try to remember, but my mind is blank. If I go to a football game, it’s not to watch the game, it’s to meet the players and I’ve already had my picks off of the Atlanta Falcons team. “Anyway, I finally sold it to some pro golfer.”

“Tiger?” Renee asks, a spoonful of grits and shrimp halfway to her mouth.

“Wouldn’t I have called you if I was selling a house to Tiger Woods?” Renee shrugs and goes back to her lunch. “So, after I sold that house, he started sending his friends to my office. If it’s not golfers buying homes, it’s football players selling them. Property up is being snapped up like hotcakes at a church breakfast and going for millions.” I spear a piece of chicken and waffle and quickly chew and swallow.

“So Donovan is selling all of them?” Renee asks.

I nod, proud. “My agents have showings scheduled every day this week.” I sigh, smiling into my plate. Men, money and food—my three favorite subjects.

“Sounds like business is good,” says Debra. “You’ve done really well for yourself, Max.”

“And did I tell you girls that I dumped James last week?”

“You know you didn’t.” Renee stifles a laugh. “What was it this time? Was he only worth a billion dollars? Did he only have one Ferrari?”

“You joke, but those things tell a lot about a man.”

“Sure,” Debra interjects. “That he has a lot of money that he likes to waste on things he can’t take with him when he dies.”

“Well, you might as well have fun while you’re here. I swear, Debra. You’re so morose today.” I turn toward Renee so I can share the story with the both of them. “There were a few things. First of all, he’s old. James is in his mid-50’s so night out for us ends with him snoring at ten o’clock. And that wouldn’t even be so bad if it wasn’t for the other stuff. Like his height.”

“His height?” Renee and Debra squeal in unison.

“Wasn’t he going to take you to Italy next summer?” Renee asks, spooning more grits into her mouth. “Maybe you’d better run after Mister Short Man.”

“The man is five foot ten on lifts. I wear heels, tall heels. If I’m looking at your bald spot when we walk to the car, it’s just not going to work. I’m not even that tall—”

“You’re almost six feet tall in heels!” Debra sputters, not even trying to hold in her laughter.

“That’s exactly my point! But... it’s not just that. He was short in other places.” I twist a lock of my hair around my index finger, looking at first Debra, then Renee and back to Debra.

Renee sucks in a sharp breath and sinks back into the worn fabric of the booth. “Nooooo,” she whispers.

“And he was self-conscious about it.”

“He had a little dick complex? Ugh, that’s the worst.” Debra huffs and crosses her arms.

“How would you even know what a little dick looks like?” Renee asks. “You have had one frame of reference since you were fifteen and not to pry, but I’m sure you wouldn’t still be with Willard if that was a problem.”

Debra’s jaw falls open and hangs there, slack. “Whatever,” she finally shoots back, trying not to laugh. “I watch Oprah.”

“I don’t think Oprah has ever done a show about little dick complex, but okay.” Renee turns back to me. “So how do you date someone for three months and never know this important... bit of information?”

“I knew it, I just...” I shrug, picking at the remnants of chicken and waffle on my plate. “I wanted it to work. I thought we were falling in love. I was picking out China and monogramming hand towels.” I wave my hand in the air, reciting, “Mrs. James Rubineaux. Maxine Donovan-Rubineaux.” I lower my hands and come back to Earth. “Doesn’t that sound classy? I was going to hyphenate my name.”

Renee is laughing so hard, tears cascade down her cheeks. Debra’s face is buried in her hands. I’m always good for a funny dating story. They always seem funny to everyone but me.

At least I’m trying to find someone and not sitting alone on the couch in my condo, watching reality show trash, or sitting out on my balcony with a glass of wine watching the sunset alone. The last three men I have dated should have led to proposals: Derek, the Investment Banker (he lasted all of six months before he ‘wasn’t ready for anything serious’), Robert the Real Estate Broker (he felt like he was always in competition with me and he wasn’t a

gracious loser), and now James, who owns several auto dealerships. I don't drive American and he loves Ford. He hated the Maserati. Add his height and other shortcomings to the mix, plus his belief that he— cheap, short, impotent and opinionated, was the catch and I should bend over backward for him and he hit the chopping block faster than anyone in recent history.

Maxine Donovan bends over backwards for no man. Unless it feels really good to do so.

"I tried to make it work, you know? I'm not getting any younger. He's almost sixty. But the first time he 'forgot his credit card,'" I say, with finger quotes, "I told him I could get this kind of treatment from a poor, tall brother with a big dick, so he wasn't giving me anything I couldn't do without."

"You did not!" Debra practically screams.

"Yes, I did. Anyway, I heard he found himself a new one already. I hope she enjoys those four inches he's offering. I should have known from that enormous truck he drives. Overcompensation." I refresh myself with some water and rant on. "He was probably cheating on me with her. Men can't stand to be alone, always overlapping. I hope she's a welfare case and spends all of his money."

"Maxine," Renee chides.

"Well." I pout, tossing my napkin onto my decimated plate. "It would serve him right." I wave at the waitress and make motion for the check. The girl reaches for the folder in the pocket of her apron and I reach for my purse.

"I hate to eat and run but I've got to head to the office for an appointment this afternoon. He's a referral from the owner of that security firm—remember that enormous house I sold, with the gates and everything? His partner just moved to town and Brent wants me to find him a nice place in Buckhead that he probably won't take. I love wasting my Saturday afternoon on a wild goose chase, but Brent sends me lots of referrals."

"What's wrong with Buckhead?" asks Renee.

I shrug, drop my wallet onto the table and pull out my compact. I check my makeup, blend a spot with powder and slather on a layer of lip gloss before putting it away. "Not a damn thing. Brent said something about how his new partner wasn't interested in living in the city. He would probably want something in the suburbs but to humor him and show him around. I hope he's cute. I hate being stuck in a car with an ugly man. I don't want anyone thinking I would settle for that."

"Max!" Renee is laughing this time. So am I.

"And I hate being in my car with someone who obviously has no money. Sometimes they're way too impressed with the car."

"Well now, wait," says Debra, her lecturing finger in the air. "You bought an expensive car because you like how it makes you look. You cannot complain when people notice and are impressed by it."

"I sure as hell can. Whose turn is it to pay?" I open the folder and stare at the total, though it's the same every month.

“You always ask whose turn it is when it’s your turn,” says Debra. I slide a platinum credit card into the slot and hand it to the waitress as she walks by. A few minutes later, she is back. “Was nice seein’ y’all! See you next month!”

“That girl has too much energy,” Debra comments, picking up her purse. “That reminds me that I haven’t heard from Kendra. I don’t know if I’m picking her up from band practice or if she’s catching a ride—” A muffled chime rings from inside the bag. “Speaking of my angel. I’ll see y’all.” She frowns. “Y’all? Listen to me now. Thanks, Max.”

Debra tucks the phone between her shoulder and ear while heading toward the door. I grab my receipt and my purse and Renee and I follow Debra out. My phone rings as soon as we get outside, so I wave to Renee as we head in opposite directions.

A car passes with what looks to be high-school age kids hang out of the passenger window, yelling comments, whistling and cat calling. “Hey! Hey, Ma! Nice ride!”

With a swipe of my thumb on the handle, I slide inside the car and close the door, shutting them out. I pull my Prada shades from my bag and slip them over my eyes, press the start button and grin with the thrill of hearing the engine roar to life.

Debra is right, of course. She’s always right. I bought the Maserati because I love how it looks and how I look in it. I refuse to be ashamed about that.

I have always had an eye for things that set themselves apart. The car is expensive; I can admit that. She’s something not just anyone can get. She’s an investment. As anyone in real estate can tell you, appearance is everything. If you don’t look like you can sell million dollar homes, you won’t.

Look the Part is my mantra and not a hard one to believe in. If I can afford to shop at the organic grocer and have my orchids flown in from Japan and wear the latest in designer fashion, why shouldn’t I?

Why should I pretend to be meek and humble to ease your discomfort with my lifestyle?