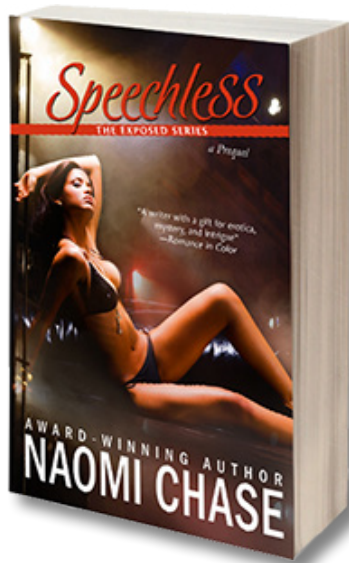


# MAUREEN SMITH



## AN EXCERPT FROM **SPEECHLESS**

### Chapter 4

#### Brandon

*Four years later  
University of Texas  
Austin, Texas*

**B**RANDON EVERETT CHAMBERS looked out over the crowd of new graduates, faculty, friends, and family members who'd gathered for his law school's commencement ceremony. He saw his family members seated in the front row—grandparents, cousins, siblings, and his parents, who were distinguished alumni and major donors to the university.

They all smiled at Brandon, their eyes glowing with pride and joy.

As he stood at the podium delivering his valedictorian address, he was struck by the sheer enormity of this moment. He'd spent the past three years memorizing rules of law, forfeiting sleep to cram for exams, arguing cases in moot court competitions, and being tortured by egomaniacal professors determined to weed out the weak. He'd

survived all that to reach this momentous day.

Graduation Day.

Surveying the large crowd before him, Brandon felt a deep sense of pride and satisfaction wash over him. He was twenty-four years old, headed into the real world armed with a top-tier education and a fierce drive to succeed.

Nothing would keep him from achieving his career goals.

Nothing and no one.

As he concluded his valedictorian speech, the audience erupted into applause and surged to their feet. Brandon smiled at his beaming family members before turning to shake hands with a procession of university dignitaries that included the chancellor, president, dean of the law school, and the keynote speaker.

“Congratulations, Mr. Chambers,” they told him with broad smiles. “You’re going to make one hell of an attorney.”

The accolades and well wishes continued an hour later at Brandon’s graduation party, which was held at Austin’s oldest and most exclusive country club. Brandon’s parents, Bernard and Gwen Chambers, were members of the posh club—a privilege they’d earned by virtue of belonging to one of the most powerful families in Texas. Brandon’s great-grandfather, Everett Chambers, had made history decades ago by becoming the first black chairman of one of the largest bank holding companies in the South, establishing his place among the ruling elite and setting the standard for future generations of Chamberses.

Bernard Chambers served as a state senator whose sights were set on the governor’s mansion, while his wife Gwen was a prominent federal judge. Their family name, combined with their status as a power duo, had secured their membership to the prestigious Austin Country Club.

For Brandon’s graduation party, they’d reserved the club’s main banquet room, which was large enough to accommodate the number of guests they’d invited—pretty much everyone they wanted to impress. The inclusion of Brandon’s friends had been almost an afterthought.

“Yo, this place is off da chain,” exclaimed Deondre Portis, casting an appreciative glance around the ballroom that boasted chandelier ceilings and tall windows overlooking the club’s championship golf course. The room was abuzz with laughter and conversation as guests wandered around socializing and sipping cocktails while waiting for dinner to be served.

“I keep expecting some snooty mofu to roll up and tell me my black ass don’t belong here,” Dre joked.

Brandon grinned wryly at his longtime best friend. “As many years as you’ve been coming to my family functions, has anyone ever tried to kick you out?”

“No, but there’s a first time for everything.”

Brandon chuckled. “No one’s gonna kick your ass out, man. Relax.”

Dre grinned, his teeth flashing white against his dark skin. “Just because *you’re* used to hanging out at country clubs and hobnobbing with the rich and famous doesn’t mean I am. Look around, B. How many of your classmates can say that their graduation party was attended by Jesse Jackson, Colin Powell, Vernon Jordan, and Congressman John

Lewis? And those are just the cats I recognize.”

Brandon merely smiled and sipped his champagne. He wasn't fazed by the presence of political bigwigs at his party because, as Dre rightly noted, he'd grown up surrounded by members of the power elite. It was old news to him.

Upon arriving at the country club that afternoon, he'd been intercepted by his parents. They'd paraded him around the room like a prized show horse, showing him off to their friends and bragging about his accomplishments.

When he'd had enough, Brandon had excused himself, snagged a glass of champagne from a passing server, and retreated to a private corner to get some breathing room.

As he took another sip of champagne, a pair of soft hands covered his eyes. “Are we having fun yet?” teased an amused voice.

Brandon grinned. “If I say no, can you bust me outta here?”

“Hell, yeah. Just say the word and we out dis bitch.”

Brandon laughed, removing his sister's hands from his eyes and turning to shake his head at her. “Now you know good and well we can't go nowhere.”

“I know. Mom and Dad would kill us.” Brooke sighed, twirling a strand of her long black hair around her finger. “It was a nice fantasy though.”

Dre chuckled. “What's wrong? You're not enjoying your brother's graduation party?”

Brooke snorted. “This isn't Brandon's party—it's our parents' party. Brandon's celebration will be at the club later tonight, and I can't wait.”

“For what?” Brandon retorted. “You're not going.”

Brooke frowned. “What do you mean I'm not going? Beau told me I could.”

“He lied.”

“But I wanna go!” Brooke protested. “And I already invited some of my friends. They're driving up from Houston—”

“Then I guess you'd better tell them to turn their little asses around and go back home.”

“That's not fair!” Brooke complained, stamping her foot like a petulant child. “Why can't I go to the party? I'm eighteen—”

“Just barely.” Brandon chuckled, shaking his head at her. “Sorry, baby girl. No haps.”

Brooke looked to Dre for support. “Can you talk some sense into him?”

Dre laughed. “I don't think so, not when his mind's already made up. Besides, you don't wanna be there tonight, Brooke. We gon' have wall-to-wall strippers, and Cornel used his connections to get one of the biggest porn stars from Voyeur Productions. That kind of environment wouldn't be suitable for a well-bred young lady like yourself.”

Brooke scowled, rolling her eyes in angry exasperation.

Though she'd just turned eighteen, she had the body of a grown woman with bodacious curves that made her look more like a video vixen than the sheltered debutante she was. No way in hell was Brandon letting her anywhere near that club tonight. He'd kill the first motherfucker who even *looked* at her the wrong way.

Brooke pouted, glaring at him. “I'm tired of you treating me like a child.”

“Sorry. It's for your own good.”

“That's what you always say.” Suddenly she glanced over his shoulder and smirked. “Don't look now, but here comes Mom with another prospective wife for you. This one looks even more anorexic than the others.”

Brandon groaned as Brooke's eyes gleamed with wicked satisfaction.

"Come on, Dre. Let's go see what Beau, Cornel, and Justin are up to. Have fun, big brother."

Dre threw a sympathetic glance at Brandon before Brooke grabbed his hand and led him away.

"There he is! There's the man of the hour!"

Brandon downed the rest of his champagne and then reluctantly turned to face his approaching mother.

With her smooth maple complexion and elegant beauty, Gwen Chambers was a doppelganger of Diahann Carroll, right down to the cultured tones of her voice. Her dark hair was perfectly coiffed, and she wore a tailored white skirt suit with black-and-white designer pumps. Like Brandon, she had a sunflower pinned to her lapel to represent an old tradition upheld by UT Law graduates—of which she was one.

"Brandon, darling, there's someone I'd like you to meet." Gwen smiled at the young woman she'd brought over for Brandon's inspection. "This is Paisley, the daughter of my esteemed friend and mentor Judge Wilford Prescott."

Paisley smiled at Brandon, her eyes glinting with appreciation. "How do you do?"

"Nice to meet you," Brandon murmured, shaking the fine-boned hand she offered. With her light skin, green eyes, silky mane, and slender figure, Paisley looked just like the actress Stacey Dash—which was the second strike against her. The first had been her ridiculous name.

Neither her name, nor her resemblance to a talentless airhead, were her fault. But still.

"Congratulations, Mr. Valedictorian," Paisley gushed, batting her lashes at Brandon. "I really enjoyed your speech. It was very inspiring."

Brandon inclined his head. "Thank you."

"Brandon was pursued by many prestigious law firms," his mother shamelessly boasted. "He was even offered a clerkship with the U.S. Supreme Court, which, as we all know, is a *highly* competitive position sought by many. But Brandon wants to practice criminal law, so his father and I couldn't be more pleased that he decided to join Chernoff, Dewitt and Strathmore—one of the top law firms in the country."

"Oh, how wonderful." Paisley beamed, dollar signs flashing in her eyes.

Brandon suppressed a weary sigh. He knew Paisley's type all too well. She'd grown up with servants at her beck and call, so she didn't have a clue how to cook or clean, nor did she care to learn. She was Daddy's little girl, a pampered socialite whose idea of a good time was spending someone else's money.

"The two of you should get better acquainted," Gwen suggested, all but shoving Paisley into Brandon's arms.

Brandon was amused, because he knew that the woman he eventually married wouldn't be someone handpicked by his parents. She would be someone who truly loved him for who he was, not where he came from or how much money he had in the bank. She would be his confidante, his ride-or-die chick, his soul mate.

She would be his everything.

Assuming such a woman even existed.

Observing Paisley's predatory smile, Brandon had his doubts.  
But thankfully he didn't have to worry about any of that right now. Marriage was the *last* thing on his mind, and would be for a long time.  
A *verrry* long time.