



*A Follow-up Short Story
to the
Bestselling Novel,
A Heart Not Easily Broken*

Ebony & Brian Mini Memoir

*Family for
the Holidays*

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After Ebony reveals her interracial relationship and engagement to her family, her parent's hop on a plane and fly across country to meet Brian, the man who has won their daughter's heart.

Confident in their commitment, Brian is sure he'll win her parents over, but a series of events forces them both to realize their path to happily ever after is filled with more than just saying, *'I do'*.

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The Meeting- December 23rd

Brian

“Brian, my mom just sent me a text. Their flight just landed.” Ebony typed a response on her phone, then cursed. “I hate autocorrect. I typed ‘whoo hoo’ and it posted ‘whoop’. That’s what I get for typing too fast.”

I rested my hands on her shoulders and massaged. “Ebony, calm down, you’re tense. Everything is going to be okay.”

“You don’t understand, Brian. I haven’t seen my parents in nearly a year. And after all that’s happened...”

I reached over, pulled my fiancée into my arms, and kissed her forehead. “What’s making you nervous, having them here or them meeting me face-to-face?”

She looked up at me with her gorgeous brown eyes, her eyebrows furrowing. “Both?”

I chuckled. “I’m supposed to be the one who’s nervous.”

“And you’re not?” Ebony stared at me in disbelief.

“No, I’m not.”

‘Delta Flight 4224 has arrived and is now unloading.’

Ebony squealed with excitement at the announcement then covered her mouth.

I smiled. Seeing my fiancée this happy after the events of the past month was more than I could ever ask for. After the turmoil our relationship had gone through, it was a blessing to still be together.

And now I was about to meet her parents for the first time.

I pushed aside the thought of how long it took Ebony to tell them about us. It turned out her fear of their disappointment because I was white had been unfounded. It took them by surprise, but after what I’d done in retaliation of what happened to their daughter, her parents made it clear that race didn’t matter.

Ebony squeezed my arm. “There they are!” She ran to her mother, embracing while rocking back and forth. Beside them, her father stood; his smile wide as he took in the sight, waiting patiently for his turn.

I took my time walking toward the group, giving them a private moment to reconnect.

Ebony’s mother took a step back and held her daughter at arm’s length, appraising her as if making sure she was actually all right. I couldn’t blame her. The events of the past few months and

Ebony's decision to keep it secret were one of the reasons why they made the trip to California for Christmas. They needed to see for themselves that she was indeed okay.

"So, where is this young man?" her father bellowed, looking around the crowded area.

Ebony turned, looking for me. "There he is! Brian, come meet my parents!"

I paused only to avoid a young man dragging a large suitcase, then made my way across the tile floor. "Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, it's nice to finally meet you in person." I held out my hand to Ebony's father. He took a second to look me up and down then accepted the handshake.

"I know it's crazy to do this because you've talked on the phone, but I can't help it. Baby, these are my parents, Clarence and Anita. Mom, Dad, this is my fiancé, Brian Young."

Ebony's parents were nothing like I imagined. Mrs. Campbell was the same height as her daughter, but a little thicker. Her eyes were sharp as she appraised me in a cautious fashion.

Her father, on the other hand, was a large man and could not be missed. His salt and pepper hair and beard gave him the look of a genteel grandfather, but the booming voice and intimidating height said otherwise.

"So, you're the young man who's stolen my daughter's heart." His eyes bore into mine, and his grip was tight. Though he smiled, the meaning was clear. *'I may be grateful for what you've done for my daughter, but you hurt her and I will kill you.'* It was obvious Ebony was daddy's little girl.

My insides turned to jelly. Message received, loud and clear.

"Yes, sir." I smiled, keeping my fear hidden. I ignored the pain in my hand from his two-hand grip and turned to her mother. Looking at the women side-by-side was like looking into a mirror of the past and future. "Mrs. Campbell, I have no doubt Ebony will be as beautiful as you are as we grow old together."

An unreadable expression passed over her face. "Oh, why thank you."

Inside, I kicked myself. So much for assuming my charm and wit in person would have the same results as it did over the phone. I had to remember, regardless of our racial differences, I was still a man who could hurt their daughter. Though she wore my ring, they knew nothing about me.

Moments ago I was cool and calm, but between Mr. Campbell's handshake and Mrs. Campbell's appraising stare, I was thrown off my game.

Ebony seemed oblivious.

"How about we get your suitcases from the baggage claim? Brian's mom has put together a great dinner. I hope you're hungry."

"Free food? Now you're talking," Mr. Campbell said, his attention turning back to his daughter. He walked toward the luggage claim. I followed, leaving Ebony and her mother to reconnect.

“Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, these are my parents, Laura and Winfried,” I said, after my mother let us into the house.

“Please, call me Anita, and this is Clarence,” Ebony’s mother said. She accepted my mother’s hug, while Mr. Campbell shook hands with my father.

“Please have a seat and make yourselves comfortable,” my mother said, slipping into hostess mode. If there was one thing she loved, it was entertaining. While everyone, including Ebony, moved to the living room, I brought in the luggage. Fine by me. I was trying my best to avoid sticking my foot in my mouth again. The ride from the airport to my parents’ home couldn’t have gone fast enough. While her parents were cordial, I couldn’t help but feel as if I were the chauffeur. The conversation flowed around me, full of laughter and questions as the family caught up on what was going on back in North Carolina.

“Brian, baby, are you okay?” Ebony joined me in the foyer, concern etched into those lovely features.

I cleared my throat and walked toward the front door. “Yeah, I’m good. Just getting the rest of the luggage.”

“You’re lying.” She poked my shoulder and followed me outside to the trunk of her car. “My father made you nervous, didn’t he?”

“No.” I popped the trunk and grabbed what had to be her mother’s bag. It weighed a ton.

Beside me, Ebony burst into laughter. “It’s okay to admit it. He’s a bit intimidating in person.”

Intimidating wasn’t the half of it. Mr. Campbell was not a little man. Though we stood at the same height and he had about twenty pounds on me, his booming voice is what did the trick. Though I’d talked to him for a brief period of time on the phone, it was something quite different to be face-to-face with the father of the woman I loved. For once, I could understand exactly why Ebony had been hesitant about telling them about our relationship.

I shrugged. “Maybe just a little.”

Ebony forced me to put the bag I’d pulled out of the trunk on the ground.

Her arms went around my neck. “Do you love me?”

“You know I do.” I leaned down for a kiss, taking my time to savor the connection with my fiancée. The woman I’d willingly sacrifice my life for. The woman I was ready to kill for.

“Then don’t worry about a thing. They’re staying with your parents, and from what I’ve seen, I doubt they will kill each other. It’s like you told me, everything is going to be all right.”

I let out a half-laugh. She used my words against me.

“You’re right. They’ll be here and you’ll be with me.” I kissed her again. “I can’t wait to get you home tonight.”

The sexy smile I loved appeared. “Me, neither.”

I pulled away to grab the suitcase off the ground while Ebony leaned in to grab the smaller carry-on pieces.

We entered the foyer and dropped off the bags at the base of the steps. I had no idea which room my mother wanted them in.

“Oh, there you two are!” My mom walked over, hugged and kissed Ebony. “We thought you got lost outside.”

“No, just getting the bags. Which room do you want them in?” I asked.

“You can put them in your sisters’ old room.”

“Okay.” I grabbed a bag and started up the stairs.

“Oh, by the way, we’ve all been talking, and Ebony, it seems so unfair for your parents to fly across the country for Christmas to see you, only for you to live thirty minutes away. We’ve decided it would be best if both of you stayed here for the week. We’ve got plenty of room in this house. Ebony, you can sleep in one of the spare rooms. Brian, you can have your old room.”

My eyes went wide. “What?” I looked over at Ebony whose eyes were lit up.

“Mrs. Young, are you sure?”

My mother reached over for Ebony’s hand. “How many times do I have to tell you its okay to call me Mom?” They both laughed. “Yes, it would be perfect. Not to mention it would save gas and time for us to all get together. Besides, Brian, it will give you a chance to know your future in-laws.” My mother pinched my cheek. “Don’t take too long; dinner will be served in fifteen minutes.” She left to join everyone else in the living room.

“Brian, this is going to be so much fun!” She grabbed the carry-on bag and started up the steps.

I stood at the bottom in shock. Why did I have a feeling this wasn’t going to be as fun as Ebony thought?

Christmas Eve- December 24th, Part 1

Ebony

My mother-in-law to be led us into the kitchen. “Ebony, Anita, we’re going to have so much fun!”

My mom and I laughed at Mrs. Young’s enthusiasm. We’d spent the day going from store to store, picking up last minute gifts and ingredients for her Christmas breakfast and Christmas dinner dishes.

The Young family’s customs were nothing like my family’s. I watched my mother all day as she stopped herself on several occasions from suggesting where the other woman should place a decorative item or exactly what meals should be on the menu. I had to say...she was a trooper.

This was the first time my mother would not be hosting Christmas dinner at our family home. Every year, no matter where we were, our family dropped everything to be together. Especially since Trevon and I graduated high school and went to college. I’d moved to California while my brother, Trevon, attended college in Atlanta, Georgia. Upon graduation, he made the city his home. My older sister, Lashana, and her husband and daughter were the only ones living near mom and dad.

I snuck a peek at my mom as she accepted the aged recipe from Laura’s family cook book. She scanned the ingredients and plastered on a smile. It wasn’t a dish she was familiar with. When it came to something new, my mother had to be prodded to accept change. I could tell she longed for the dishes she customarily made back home.

I felt a momentary pain of guilt. Once again, my decisions affected those I loved. If I had opened up about what was going on in my life, things would be a lot different now. I would have been home, and Brian would be with me, meeting my entire family. Instead, he had obligations to attend to that kept us in town.

But when I thought about it, things were working out the way they should. Soon, Brian and I would be starting our own family traditions as a married couple. Between my family across county, and his large family in town, deciding where we spent the holiday would be interesting.

Having my parents meet my future in-laws now instead of on our wedding day would make the decisions we made much easier.

“Oh crap, where are my manners?” Laura said. I looked up to see her watching my mother. “We were out all day, so I didn’t ask if there was something you’d like to make for dinner. I’m so sorry.”

My mom smiled. “Oh, it’s not a problem. Everyone does things differently.”

“Yes it is. It’s probably too late to plan a meal. Would you like to make something for dessert?”

My mother’s eyes brightened. “Are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

“Of course not.” Laura smiled. She walked over to the refrigerator where a mini notepad and pen were stuck on with a magnet. “Write down what you need. Whatever we don’t have, I’ll send Brian to the store to get.”

“Okay, wow, I’m not sure what to make!” My mom put her hands on her hips, deep in thought.

“How about your famous Banana Pudding? I haven’t had it in ages,” I suggested.

“Perfect!” both women said in unison.

My mother jotted down the ingredients from memory.

“Laura, what time is Bridget going to be here?” I asked.

“Bridget?” My mom looked up from her notes.

“She’s one of Brian’s sisters. You’ll love her, she’s a riot.”

“That’s right, I remember you telling me about her. Laura, how many children do you have?” my mom asked.

“Five. Four girls and one boy. Brian is the baby.” Laura selected a pot out of the cabinet, then put her hands on her hips as if reviewing the inventory. “I hear you have twins. How fun was that?” She glanced over her shoulder.

My mother laughed. “Honestly? Not as much fun as you would think during the first few months. Sleep was a commodity not easy to come by. Let’s not talk about potty training and learning how to walk.” She looked at me and shook her head.

“What?”

“Wait until you have your own kids.”

Laura laughed. “Do twins run in your family?”

“Yes, they do,” mom confirmed.

“And that’s why I’m not in a rush to start a family.”

Both women looked at me as if I’d used profanity. Neither woman lacked in the grandkids department. Laura had six and my mother had one. My twin brother and I weren’t in a hurry to add to the Campbell family tree.

“Does Brian feel the same way?” my mom asked.

“Um...yes, we’ve had this conversation.” A feeling of unease hit the pit of my stomach. A quick glance at my mother and seeing the expression on her face didn’t help. “We are both starting out in our careers and want to get stabilized first. I have a few more months until I graduate college, and he’s still making a name for himself at the record label. We’ve got three years until we turn thirty. We’ve got time.”

Both women looked at each other and smirked.

“Baby, I was twenty-one when I gave birth to your sister, and twenty-three by the time you and Trevon came along. I couldn’t imagine doing it when I was older than that.” My mother shook her head. “You have no idea how much energy it took to keep you two out of trouble.”

Laura laughed. “Tell me about it. I started young, too. It seemed like they just kept popping out. Give birth to one, look at Winfred, then I was pregnant again.”

I laughed along with them and ignored the momentary flash back to when there was a chance I carried Brian’s baby. Even then I was sure the Young men were potent. A twinge in my gut made me nauseous.

I pushed the reminder of the decisions of my past aside. There were some things Brian and I chose to keep private.

“When the time comes, I’ll be sure to do a conference call and let you both know at the same time.”

“Let them know what?”

We turned to see Bridget breeze into the kitchen, her arms loaded with groceries, her pixie cut hair tousled.

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” I warned. One thing I’d learned about Bridget, she was in no rush to be attached to any man, much less have a baby.

She took a moment to study me, looked at the older women, then back at me. “You know...you’re right.” She went to her mother, gave her a hug. “You owe me, Mom. This is the last Christmas Eve where I go shopping. If it weren’t for the fact that Caroline just had her baby...” She rolled her eyes. “Anyway, I’m being rude. Hi, I’m Bridget.” She extended a hand to my mother.

“This is my mother, Anita,” I said, praying her appearance would speed up the change in subject.

“It’s nice to meet you.” Bridget walked over to the kitchen table and grabbed a bright red apple from the fruit bowl, rinsed it off, took a bite, then chewed. “Where’s Dad?”

“Your father, Clarence, and Brian are in your father’s man cave. When it comes to cooking, Winfred stays away from the kitchen, but if it has to do with grilling, that is his territory,” she advised my mom, who nodded in understanding.

“No surprise there.” Bridget took another bite and chewed. “Well, it’s obvious I’m here in time for cooking. What have I missed? Have we started planning the wedding yet?”

“No, but there’s no time like the present.” My mother’s eyes lit up. I knew exactly where this was about to go. “Ebony, I’ve talked to our pastor back home and he said he’s more than willing to perform the ceremony. All we have to do is notify him of the date and the church will be reserved.”

Laura looked up from the cookbook she’d pulled out. “I thought the wedding was going to be here in L.A. The church we attend is beautiful. There’s plenty of seating and all of my daughters have gotten married there. Well, except for Bridget.”

My future sister-in-law rolled her eyes and continued eating.

All eyes centered on me.

I bit my lip. “Well... with everything that’s been going on, we haven’t set an exact date yet, much less decided where to hold it.”

“Well, that’s a no-brainer. North Carolina is your home. You grew up there and have family and friends who haven’t seen you in years. What’s there to think about?” My mother stated.

“Brian has a lot of family here, too. If you have it in North Carolina, a lot of people won’t be able to attend. Andrea and Lisa have small kids, and Caroline just had the baby...”

Both women started going back and forth, listing the pluses and negatives of each location as if I were no longer in the room.

I was scared to utter a word for fear it would turn into World War III.

“Holy crap, I didn’t mean to start an argument,” Bridget murmured out of the side of her mouth when she joined me at the kitchen island.

Both of us watched our mothers, shocked at how fast the ambiance in the room changed from happy to nearly volatile.

“Have you guys decided what you want to do?” she asked.

I shook my head. “Not yet.”

It was apparent that whatever we decided, neither of our families would be happy.

Christmas Eve- Part 2

Brian

My father jumped out of his recliner as his favorite football team scored. “Go, go, go....yes! See, Brian, I told you! Pay up!”

Beside me, my future father-in-law shook his head. “That was just luck.” He dug into his wallet and pulled out the money to pay his debt.

“No, that was an athlete who knows how to play the game,” Dad said, laughing as he collected his winnings.

I dug into my pocket and gave my dad a dollar before glancing at Clarence. He appeared calm, even though his team was losing. The good-natured bets going back and forth between us was an easy way to study the temperament of my future father-in-law. After last night’s handshake, I was still on edge.

He sipped his beer and studied my father’s movie posters on the wall during the commercial break. “Nice man cave you’ve got here, Winfred. I’ve tried to get Anita to let me have one inside the house.” He shook his head. “You’d think after thirty years of paying the mortgage I would have earned a room. Instead, I got pushed out to the garage.”

Both men laughed.

“What we won’t do for the women we love, eh?” My dad supplied.

Clarence raised his bottle. “Here, here.”

Both men looked at me. I held my bottle up in agreement then gulped.

A soft knock on the door drew everyone’s attention. Ebony peeked into the room. “Excuse me, Brian, your mom would like you to run to the store before they close.” She held up a sheet of paper.

I tried to hide my relief. “Sure.”

If I was lucky, Ebony would be able to sneak away with me. After my mother’s invitation to spend the week at the house with everyone else, Ebony and I had gone to our respective homes and grabbed enough clothes for the week. Our original plan had been to spend the rest of the holiday at our new home.

Three weeks had passed since we signed the lease. Ebony came by periodically to help unpack and set things up. A few of her personal items had made their way over. Her official move-in date was a few days after Christmas. Regardless, my attempt to convince her to spend at least one night at our new home and come back in the morning hadn’t worked. She insisted on not disappointing our parents. In the end, not only had I slept alone, I slept in my childhood bed.

My mother insisted we sleep in separate rooms because we weren’t married. She knew we had sex, but my parents were old fashioned. *‘Unwed? No sex in my beds!’* was her motto.

Imagining my fiancée sleeping down the hall in addition to the intimidation of being in the same room with her father made a good night's sleep hard to come by.

I joined Ebony in the hallway. "How are things in the kitchen?"

She walked over, slipped her arms around my waist, and laid her head against my chest. "Up until twenty minutes ago, fine."

I caught the change in her voice; she was no longer as excited as she'd been at breakfast.

In need of physical connection as much as she apparently did, I held her tight. "What happened? Is everything okay?"

Before she could reply, I heard the door to the man-cave open behind me.

"Hey, Brian, do you mind if I ride with you? I could use a bit of fresh air."

Clarence's booming voice forced me to jump away from Ebony as if we were teenagers caught red handed. My back was turned to him so he couldn't see my initial cringe as I squeezed my eyes shut. "Sure. I'll be ready to leave in five minutes."

"Let me grab my shoes." Clarence walked by me, stopped at Ebony, who'd stepped away from me, and kissed her cheek before heading for the stairs.

Ebony watched as he disappeared, then turned to me. "I saw that look. Things aren't going well in there either?"

I shrugged. "They're getting along fine. Men are easy. Beer, sports, everything is all good."

She cocked her head to the side, studying me. "What about you?"

"I'm hanging in there." It was my turn to study her. "How about you? You guys seem to be getting along great. We can hear the laughter over the T.V."

Ebony ran a hand over her head. "Woman can be touchy, especially when the subject of weddings and babies comes up." She shuttered.

I was about to ask for details when I heard her father's heavy footfalls on the stairs. I kissed her quick. "We'll talk tonight after everyone goes to bed, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan. Be safe." She kissed me again and headed for the kitchen.

"Ready to go?" Clarence said.

"Yes, sir."

We were in my truck, merging into the main street traffic when Clarence spoke.

"Brian, I have to be honest. When my daughter told us she'd been dating a white man and that you were engaged, I had my reservations. Even after she told us about what you've done for her, I still was wary. Things were different when my wife and I got married, but times have changed. We raised our children to be open-minded, loving, and honest individuals. As a father, it's hard to imagine your little girls growing up and being involved with a man. You worry about how well they'll be treated and if the guy really loves them..." His voice drifted off as if in remembering

something. “Then one day they say, ‘Pop, I’m getting married.’” You learn to handle it and move on, but it’s never easy.

“Ebony has always been strong minded, hard-headed, and determined to have what she wants. Ever since she was a little girl.” He chuckled. “I can’t tell you how many times she almost gave her mother a heart attack by bringing injured animals home and hiding them in the garage.”

I smiled, trying to picture Ebony doing those things. Then I felt Clarence staring at me. My smile dropped.

“You’ll have to forgive me if I’ve come off as rude. With everything my daughter has told us over the last few weeks, it was quite a shocker. What happened to her...what you did...the engagement...that was a lot of information to process at one time.”

“And the fact that I’m white.” I glanced over in time to see him crack a small smile and nod.

“And there’s that. Can’t lie and say we weren’t shocked.”

I braced myself for what he was about to say next.

“But since meeting you and your family, I can understand why she loves you. You’re a good man and come from a good family.”

My mouth fell open. I risked a glance as I drove to make sure I hadn’t heard incorrectly.

Clarence watched me, an enormous smile on his face.

“Thank you, sir,” I stammered.

His thunderous laugh reverberated in the car. “You were scared, huh? I must say, you did better than my other son-in-law. Poor boy nearly pissed his pants the first time he met me, and he’s black.”

I found myself laughing. “Well, I didn’t have problems with my bodily functions, but my hand still aches.”

“Sorry about that. I hope it’s not one you play with.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. I’ve done a lot worse. When I first met Ebony, I did yard maintenance for a living. There were numerous times when I had cuts and bruises on my hands and had to go to the club to play that night. Professionals learn to do what you must for the show to go on.”

He nodded. “True. Which is what I want to talk to you about.”

Something about his words set me on edge. “What’s on your mind, sir?”

“You can call me Clarence, or Dad, whichever one you’re comfortable with.” He watched me nod. “My daughter comes from a family of hard workers. You’ve seen it for yourself. She’s worked hard to get where she is in her career.”

“Yes, sir. I support her with anything she wants to do. That’s one of the reasons why I fell in love with her.” I watched him nod with my peripheral vision.

“So I’ve heard. I understand you have a pretty good work ethic, too. You’re a musician and own your own business. How do you balance the two?”

“I’ve got family; my cousins are running the business for now. I join in when I have time. But working for the record company pays well, too.”

“How long do you plan on staying there?”

“Excuse me?” I gave him my full attention when we reached a red light.

“Musicians tend to move from job to job. It’s not like working for a corporation that pays for your health insurance and gives you a 401K. There’s no retirement fund. What happens when Ebony gets pregnant and you guys need a bigger place? What about when you have a second or third kid? Life won’t get easier. I know my daughter is going to get the job at the zoo she wants, but how long will she be able to work once she’s pregnant? What if she takes off from work and decides she’d rather stay home with the kids. Will you be able to handle the expense with the job you have now?”

Clarence looked at me full on. Nothing about his facial expression or body language said he disliked my choice of careers. He was asking real-world questions based on the reality of the commitment Ebony and I were going to make.

“To be honest...” I gripped the steering wheel. “I don’t know. I’ve thought about some of it, but right now, children are not high on our list.”

“Do you guys have a five-year plan? Ten year? Anything?”

I shook my head. The plans Ebony and I made were about our jobs and getting married. Now that I thought about it, even that was unfinished. We had yet to set a definite date.

“We’re moving in together this weekend.” My eyebrows furrowed. “I guess with everything that’s happened, we’ve skipped ahead a few steps.”

“I’m glad you’re willing to admit it,” Clarence said. “There’s one thing I want you to remember.” He paused, waiting for me to look in his direction. “Nothing is set in stone. Plans can be broken, updated, and reevaluated at any time. Trust me. I’ve been married to Ebony’s mother for over thirty years. Sometimes I knew where we were going in life. Other times, I was flying by the seat of my pants. I didn’t always share the ups and downs with Anita because the stress would have made her worry too much. There were times when I carried the burden alone. As men, that’s what we do to take care of our families. Remember that. But don’t just take my word for it, ask your father. I’m sure he’s got some stories he’ll be able to tell,” he chuckled, “especially when raising five kids. And four daughters?” He whistled. “Two was enough for me.”

I smiled then got lost in thought.

Clarence had given me a lot to think about. While Ebony said she was supportive of my career, how long would it last? We avoided the baby roulette game once, but what if it happened again? We’d welcome our baby, no doubt about it. But what about everything it would take to care for my family?

Insurance. Housing. Daycare. Stay-at-home mom? Could my current career handle all of that on one income?

Yes, Ebony and I were definitely going to talk tonight.

Christmas Eve: December 24th, Part 3

Ebony

“Ebony, baby, wake up.”

I awakened in the dark room to find Brian looming over the bed, his blond hair illuminated by the light streaming through the bedroom window. “What time is it?” I rubbed my eyes. After a day spent shopping and preparing for tomorrow’s activities with my mother and Mrs. Young, I was exhausted.

“Nearly midnight. You were supposed to meet me outside ten minutes ago.”

The mattress lowered on one side of the bed as Brian sat down. I reached out and rested a hand on his thigh. I wanted him to crawl in-between the sheets with me and talk in bed. But I knew my man. Talking would lead to cuddling which would lead to kissing and end in sex. I had no problem with all three activities, but his mother’s rules about un-married couples sleeping together in her house were finite. I was not about to break them.

“Are you sure we can’t talk here? It’s warm and I’m comfortable.” I put on my best smile, but it was no use; he couldn’t see it in the dark.

“Don’t tempt me.” He ran his fingers along my hand. “Let’s go, I promise you’ll be comfortable. Be sure to grab a jacket.” He stood and offered his hand.

I still wore my clothes from earlier in the day in preparation for our late night rendezvous. I shoved off the sheets, got out of bed, and slipped on my tennis shoes.

Our fingers linked, I followed Brian into the hall, tiptoeing past the guest room where my parents slept, and his parents’ master bedroom. The lights in both rooms were off, but a faint blue glow ran underneath his parents’ door.

“They sleep with the television on,” he whispered.

We crept slowly down the steps.

“Follow my lead, step where I step,” he instructed.

I nodded and did as I was told; only missing one spot. The creak of that step sounded like a gunshot in a quiet room. We froze; no doors opened. I suppressed a giggle while Brian stifled a laugh.

We made our way through the dark house and out of the sliding-glass door in the kitchen. Instead of stopping at the patio table and chairs on the back porch, Brian retrieved a flashlight from the railing and led me across the backyard.

I looked at the newly built gazebo. “We’re not going there?”

“No. We need privacy. If they wake up and look outside, they’ll see us. We’re headed for the treehouse.” Brian handed me the flashlight and lowered the rope steps. He reached for the light, stuck it between his teeth, and climbed.

I inclined my head and watched. When he reached the top, he looked down. “Come on.”

“I must be crazy,” I murmured, testing the rope to be sure it would support my weight. “If I fall on my ass I’m kicking yours,” I said, loud enough for him to hear.

When I reached the top, I crawled through a small door into a room that was big enough for us to sit facing each other. The flashlight sat on its flat base, the light reflecting off the ceiling and bouncing off the wooden walls. I wiped my hands on my jeans and looked around. Pictures, drawings, and posters lined the walls while a box filled with a variety of toys sat in the corner.

“My father and I built this when I was eight. Now my niece and nephews play here when they come to visit.” He chuckled. “You know, my sisters used to sneak out of the house late at night to make out with their boyfriends when our parents were asleep.”

I laughed. “I assume you did, too.”

His lopsided grin I loved so much appeared. “Of course.”

I shook my head, trying to ignore the green-eyed monster of jealousy. It wasn’t often that I thought about the women from his past.

“Don’t worry, I never got past second base with anyone up here,” his eyes turned mischievous. “I’d love to do it with you, though.”

I covered my mouth and laughed. “But your mother’s rule—”

“Only applies *inside* the house. We’re outside.” He wagged his eyebrows, then reached into a box beside him. “And, I’ve come prepared.” He pulled out candles and a lighter. A large blanket, a small bottle of wine, and plastic cups followed.

Brian always had a way of bending rules to meet his needs. My heart warmed. “When did you have time to do this?”

“When no one was looking.”

We maneuvered around the small space and lay the blanket down. I held the candles while he lit them; he held the cups as I poured the wine.

“This is perfect,” I said after sipping the chilled liquid. “I thought today would never end. Don’t get me wrong, I enjoyed it, but I’ve missed being with you.”

“I missed you, too,” he said, settling against the opposite wall. “So, what went on with you guys?”

I sighed. “In a nutshell? I was told we don’t need to drag our feet with starting a family. Oh, and deciding where to have our wedding is going to be a pain in our backsides.”

Brian lifted his head from the wall. “What?”

I nodded, sipped again. “You heard me. Apparently waiting a few years to have kids is going to make us ancient by the time they get to be teenagers.”

Brian laughed. “Which one of our mothers said that?”

“Both.”

He cringed. “Yikes. And the wedding?”

“Remember when I told you the last time my mother assumed I was getting married she started planning the event?”

“Yes.”

“She informed me she’s already talked to the pastor back home and has the church reserved. All she needs is the date.”

His eyebrows went up. “Okay...”

“Oh, that’s not the half of it. Your mom insisted the church your sisters were married in is the perfect location, especially since your family is so big.”

He whistled. “What did you say?”

“Nothing other than we haven’t decided on a date yet.”

Brian shook his head.

“How was the ride with my dad?”

Brian’s brow rose as he looked down at his near empty cup. “Enlightening and informative.”

It was my turn to look confused. “How so?”

“Do you want the long or short version?”

“Short, that’s all I think I can handle.” I emptied my cup and reached for the bottle.

“He admitted he had reservations about me being white, but said since meeting me and my family, he’s happy if you’re happy.”

“Hey, that’s great news!” Then I realized Brian wasn’t exactly smiling. “Did I miss something?”

His eyes turned intense when what he was about to say was important. “Can I ask you a question? I need you to be honest.”

“Always.” I gave him my undivided attention.

“Your father made some good points about what it takes for a man to support his family. It’s funny, even he mentioned kids.”

I nearly choked on my wine. “You’re kidding.”

He shook his head. “Nope, I got family advice, too, the practical side that is. He made me think about something I haven’t considered before. With both of us determined to see our careers grow, what happens if get you get pregnant before we’ve reached them?”

Instinctively, my hand went to my belly. His eyes followed.

“Would you want to go right back to work, or would you prefer to stay home?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. After talking to my sister, I know daycare can be expensive, and I don’t like the idea of someone else raising my child during the day.”

“Neither do I. But what if we needed the money?”

That was a sobering thought. “What are you saying, Brian?”

He took a deep breath. "I'm saying...maybe I should cut back on the music and focus on building my business. It was a way to supplement my income while I focused on my career. It worked when it was just me, but now..." he looked down at his cup. "The business has grown over the last few months. If I focus on it, with my cousins help, I can make it into more. We'll need that type of stability in the future. I can make a decent living off my contract with the studio and playing gigs. The major money is in touring, but I'm not about to go down that path again. The last time was..." he looked away. "I'm not leaving you like that again, especially if we have a child."

"Brian, are you saying you're going to give up everything you've worked for because of something my father said?"

He scooted around, as if suddenly uncomfortable with the thought. "I want to provide a good life for you, for us. You're about to be my wife and—"

"And I want you to be happy about it." I set my cup down and moved closer to where he sat. His eyes were cast down. I lifted his head until our eyes connected. "Can you honestly say you'd be happy if you put your dream aside?"

I gazed into the cerulean eyes I loved and saw him at war with himself, trying to make himself say something I knew he wouldn't believe.

"No," he admitted.

"Then don't walk away from what makes you happy. That's like asking me to quite school and give up on becoming a veterinarian because I was pregnant. Not about to happen. I'm this close," I held up two fingers in demonstration, "this close to earning the degree it took eight years to get. Walking away now would be throwing away eight years of my life. The same for you. You've got talent like I've never seen before, and you are good at what you do. There's nothing worse in life than giving up something you love. You'd be miserable, and for what? I'm not pregnant. We have time. I don't want you regretting our relationship because my father is making you doubt your career. I'm happy with you and your career...now and in the future. What happens next is our decision. Where we work...where we get married...when we start our family." I swallowed hard, forcing the lump I felt in the back of my throat to go away. If I wasn't careful, tears would follow.

"Your right." He pulled my hand that rested on his cheek to his lips, and kissed my ring finger. Then he chuckled. "And to think, a month ago, we were worried your parents wouldn't support our relationship. Now we've got support, but it's the real life issues that are stressing us out."

"Tell me about it." I settled into his embrace as he pulled me next to him. "What are we going to do about the wedding? Tomorrow is Christmas Day and your entire family will be here. They're going to expect us to announce a date."

Brian kissed my forehead. "You're right. You know, we could always do like my cousin and run off to Vegas. We could sneak away for the weekend, then Skype everyone with the good news."

I laughed. “Don’t tempt me. I say we don’t worry about what our mothers want. It’s us getting married. Why don’t we find someplace neutral?”

Brian nodded. “I like the way you think. Got someplace in mind?”

“The perfect place. I’ll need to make a call in the morning. What time is it anyway?”

Brian dug his phone out of his pocket. “Damn, it’s way past midnight.”

“Christmas morning?”

He nodded.

“You do realize this is our first Christmas together.” I let a seductive smile play across my lips and saw his eyes light up in response.

His focus went to my mouth as the deviousness I loved came out to play. “Indeed. What are you thinking?”

I scooted away from him and settled down on the blanket. It wasn’t a bed, but it could work.

“I’m thinking we celebrate early. We may not be in our house, but I’m sure I can knock out the memory of Betty Sue or Sara-what’s-her-name who wouldn’t let you get past second base.” I beckoned him over with the crock of my finger.

Brian laughed, put his cup down, and moved the lit candles out of the way. He settled in the space of my open legs, resting his elbows on either side of my head. “You know, I think your right.”

Our lips fused together as my hands dug deep into the blond waves of his hair. The feel of my son-to-be-husband’s body pressed against mine would never get old. I pushed all thought and worry about family aside and focused on what was important...the here and now. The love that we shared. The future we were building.

Now all I had to do was keep from moaning too loud. The neighbors had dogs. No need to wake up the entire neighborhood.

Brian’s mouth left mine and traveled the expanse of my throat. In-between kisses he said, “I love you.”

I sighed. “I love you, too.”

Christmas Day- December 25th

Brian

“Merry Christmas, Brian!” my sisters sang as I entered the kitchen.

The room was filled with the aromas of Christmas dinner and sound of my sisters singing Christmas carols off key.

Andrea and Lisa assisted my mother as she finished making dinner. Caroline sat at the kitchen table, bottle feeding her newborn son. Bridget danced around everyone doing absolutely nothing, as usual, except use the wooden spoon as a microphone. In the middle of it all was my fiancée and her mother. Mrs. Campbell sat at the kitchen table nursing a cup of coffee, bewildered and amused. Ebony seemed to enjoy every minute of it.

I walked among the group and kissed them each on the cheek. To my surprise, Ebony’s mother allowed me to give her one as well. After her standoffish greeting at the airport, we had yet to have a one-on-one conversation.

Maybe her husband’s talk with me the day before won her over. Either way, I would take whatever she wanted to give.

“It smells good in here,” I said. As tempting as it was to sneak a taste of the dishes lining the kitchen island, I knew better.

“Thank you,” my mother responded.

“Do you guys mind if I borrow Ebony for a moment?”

“No,” my sisters sang.

Ebony followed me out of the kitchen and into the dining room. My mother’s fine china, used only for special occasions, sat on the table along with other decorative items used for family gatherings.

The minute we were out of sight of my nose family, I pulled her in my arms and kissed her. “Want to sneak back outside tonight?”

Her arms went around my neck as she laughed. “I don’t know. I had a hard time sleeping last night. It was a combination of wanting more and guilt.”

I chuckled. “Hey, you’re the one who started it. I’d rather think the wanting is what kept you up. Did you make the call?”

She nodded. “Yes, and everything has been worked out. Now we just have to make the announcement.” She inhaled deeply. “I’m not sure how they’re going to take it.”

“Neither am I, but it’s our decision.” I pulled back to so our eyes met. “You and me?”

She smiled. “Me and you.”

With dinner time nearing, everyone was either in the living room, kitchen, or my father's man cave watching television. I snuck out on the back porch for a few minutes of silence. The last few days of being with my family was inspiring. My mind was in creative mode, toying with rhythms and notes to recreate the melody in my head.

Brian, can I talk to you for a minute?"

I turned to find Mrs. Campbell standing behind me

"Sure. It's a bit chilly out here. Do you want to go inside?"

"No, here is fine."

I waked over to the patio set and pulled out a chair for her.

"Thank you." She sat down, tugging the edges of the shawl she wore around her shoulders a little tighter. "I can't believe how much warmer it is here than it is back home. It's still chilly, but at least you can walk outside without turning into a Popsicle. Weather like this will make you want to stay in California."

"Yes, ma'am, it will. Are you enjoying your visit?"

Her attention turned to me. "Yes, I am. It's been more than I expected."

Not sure how to take the comment, I remained silent.

"Let me rephrase that," she inclined her head. "*You're* more than I expected."

I thought back to conversations held with Ebony when we started dating. She told me her mother made a habit of pointing men who were 'talk, dark, and handsome' in her direction, playing matchmaker from afar. If anyone was thrown off by her decision to be with me, it was her mother.

"Brian, do you really love my daughter?"

I looked her in the eye. "Yes, ma'am, I do."

"Then forgive me for asking this question, but I must. Ebony mentioned you were in a relationship with a black woman before. So I get it, this isn't new for you, but it is for Ebony. She says she's ready to tackle anything life throws at you, and I believe her. But I can't help but wonder...what happened to the last woman?"

Momentarily caught off guard, I kept my mouth shut. My first instinct was to tell her it was none of her business. What happened with my previous girlfriend had nothing to do with my relationship with Ebony.

I sat back in my chair. "You think I'm trying to replace my ex with another black woman?"

Mrs. Campbell tilted her head as if studying my body language. "Are you?"

I sat forward in my chair, rested my elbows on the table, and linked my fingers. I kept my eyes trained on hers. "My feelings for Ebony have nothing to do with any woman from my past. The night we met, I wasn't looking for any one. She caught my attention as a beautiful woman I wanted to know. Skin color, race...none of that stuff mattered. I fell in love with the woman she is. Period.

“Mrs. Campbell, I don’t take relationships lightly, nor do I play with anyone’s emotions. If you’re worried I’ll get tired of her and leave...believe me that will never happen. I’m in love with your daughter. I don’t know what else to say. And to be honest, my job is to make sure Ebony is satisfied with what we have. Outside opinions don’t matter. Not yours, your husband’s, and not my parents. I hope you can understand where I’m coming from. I mean no disrespect.”

Both of Mrs. Campbell’s eyebrows rose as she sat back in her seat, her lips pursed. A part of me wanted to apologize, but I hadn’t said anything to offend her. If anything, her question had offended me.

After years of watching my brother-in-law’s deal with my mother, I learned one thing; as the husband, there were times your foot had to be put down in order to gain the respect of your wife’s mother. Since I wasn’t the one Mrs. Campbell selected for her daughter, I had to make her see me for who I really am: the man who loves her daughter and the father of her future grandkids.

“I know my daughter, Brian; it takes a lot to win her heart, especially if she’s got her mind set on reaching a goal. She would have moved back home a long time ago if it weren’t for the job opportunities in front of her. Can you promise me that you will continue to make her happy and support her, not just financially, but emotionally?”

“Until the day I die.”

She nodded slowly. “Then there’s only one thing I can say,” she rose from her seat, walked over to where I sat, and opened her arms wide. “Welcome to the family. And you can call me Mom.”

“I am stuffed!” Ebony pushed back from the table, both hands on her belly.

I looked over at her plate; there was food left. “Are you going to eat that?” I pointed to the stuffing and cranberry sauce.

“Have at it.” She pushed her plate over and I devoured the remains. There was nothing like my mother’s homemade stuffing.

“Where on earth do you put all of that food? If I ate like you do, my hips would spread.”

I swallowed, then followed it up with the soda sitting in front of me. It was the only thing that had not received a re-fill since dinner was served. “I burn it off. And don’t worry, if it goes to your hips, I’ll help you get rid of the calories.” I winked; she laughed.

“It seems like everyone is nearly done. Are you ready?” she asked.

I held up a finger and ate the last of the dressing.

As I chewed, my gaze went around the table. Nearly everyone was here. My parents, her parents, my sisters and their husbands, and my grandparents, which was a blessing. All six of the grandkids were seated at the table in the kitchen.

I wiped my mouth on a napkin, then picked up my glass and tapped the side with my fork. “Excuse me everyone, can I have your attention?” I stood as everyone quieted down.

Ebony stood, too.

“First of all, I’d like to say thank you to the wonderful hands that prepared this evening’s meal,” I rubbed my belly as everyone murmured their appreciation. “And to anyone who is unable to finish their plates, I have containers with my name on them in the kitchen. No doggie bags will be allowed to leave the premises.” Laughter erupted; I waited for it to die down.

When it did, I reached for Ebony’s hand and kissed it. “This year, we have had the pleasure of having new guests join us. Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, and my beautiful fiancée, Ebony.”

“Thank you for having us,” Mrs. Campbell said.

My parents raised their cups and saluted them.

“I appreciate you guys welcoming my soon-to-be in-laws into our family. I know every Christmas won’t be celebrated this way, but this was a great start to our future. I can’t tell you how much Ebony and I appreciate your continued support. With that said, we have an announcement.”

I turned to Ebony, but didn’t miss the anticipation on the faces of every woman in the room.

“For the past three days, Brian and I have received advice about love and marriage, even kids,” Ebony laughed; I chuckled. “Between our parents, that’s over sixty years of experience. We love you for it.”

Around us, my sisters and their spouses’ clapped in agreement.

“And with that said, we’ve decided on a date for the wedding. April 5th!”

More clapping and cheering.

“And...,” she gripped my hand for reassurance as the din called down, “we’ve decided on a location. Mom,” she looked at my mother, “and Mom,” she addressed her mother, holding her gaze. “We talked about the locations you suggested, but have decided to do this our way. Our wedding will be held at the Phillips Family Inn. They have several beautiful rooms that will be perfect for the ceremony and reception. There’s also a spacious garden that will be perfect for pictures. We chose this location because it is significant to us. We built memories there and want to add one more; our wedding day. We hope you guys understand and respect our decision.”

There was a moment of silence as our mothers looked at each other across the table.

“If this is what you want, Ebony, then I’m happy. I’ll buy our tickets for the flight out as soon as we get home,” her mother said.

“I agree. Whatever you need, let me know. I’m sure Anita and I can coordinate over the phone or Skype, or whatever! Isn’t that what technology is for?” my mom added.

Both of our mothers got up from the table to hug us.

“Dad’s, I could use some help footing the bill,” I said and received hearty laughs from both men.

My niece, Hannah, tugged on my arm. “Hey, Uncle Brian, can you play us a song?”

“That would be great!” Ebony said. “I’d love for my parents to hear you play.”

“Well, it is tradition for us to sit down after dinner and sing a few Christmas carols. Let me get my guitar.”

Before long, everyone was squeezed into the living room. The children were on the floor, while the adults sat in every available seat, including chairs brought out of the dining room.

I took my customary place in front of the fire place while Ebony sat with her parents. I played a few carols we loved to sing, laughing at the off key notes sang by my sisters, some of it done intentionally. All the while, the notes that had been playing around in my head since before dinner came to mind.

“I’ve got one last song to play. It’s my Christmas gift to all of you.” I announced. “It’s a bit different and there are no lyrics, because honestly, I just made this up. It was inspired by my crazy, loving, and sometimes annoying family. I wouldn’t trade you guys for a thing. And this is also for you, my new family.” Across the room, Ebony and her parents smiled.

I closed my eyes and let the notes flow from me to the strings, humming the melody as I remembered Christmases past and revisited the conversations had with my future family.

Most of all, I thought of the love I had for Ebony and the un-known future lying ahead of us.

When the song ended, the room was silent. I opened my eyes to see my mother wiping tears while my father smiled, full of pride. Ebony’s mother had a hand over her mouth, while beside her, her husband nodded in appreciation.

Ebony walked towards me. “Brian, that has to be the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard you play. Thank you.” She threw her arms around my neck and kissed me.

Around us, our family clapped.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” Ebony whispered.

“Merry Christmas, to you, too.”

The End

####

Thank you for taking this journey with Ebony and Brian, I hope you enjoyed this brief peek back into their lives as much as I did writing it! If you’ve read [A Heart Not Easily Broken](#), be sure to read the next stories in The Butterfly Memoirs Series:

[Jaded \(Book 2\)](#)

[Lonely Heart \(Book 3\)](#)

[Nobody’s Business \(Book 4\)](#)

[Alone \(Book 5\)](#)

Shattered (Book 6; coming 2017)

Stay safe, Happy Reading, and Happy New Year!!!!