THE *Wedding Present*

From *I Do* to *Happily Ever After*

Charles Michael Baril

CHAPTER 1

Young Love

CHRISTMAS DAY never looked or felt more beautiful to me. The thermometer read a brisk twenty-four degrees and snow was covering the streets and blanketing the landscape. Franklin, Tennessee, like most other U.S. cities, was filled with the magic that Santa Claus and the birth of our Savior Jesus Christ brings to the world. The Downtown historic square, decorated with wreaths, holly berries, garland, pinecones, and lights was now calm after days of frantic activity. The shoppers had gone home with their presents, and the shopkeepers had finally closed their doors last night.

The breathtaking snowfall was a welcomed rarity for middle Tennessee this Christmas. However, it could have been catastrophic for me and my future bride.

You see, my college sweetheart Brittany Case and

myself were about to be married at the Main Street Church of Christ. I had just turned 24 and she was 20.

I had been looking for a wife for five long, arduous years. I had only one semester left at Lipscomb University, a Christian college in the heart of a lovely part of Nashville. It was surrounded by large homes and fantastic old trees that had been there a hundred years. I was getting a Music Business degree but going for a minor in husbandry. I realized that my choices for a Christian wife would be much slimmer once I got into the "real" world. Brittany was a beautiful, intelligent young woman who was much more mature than her young age. Her striking long brown hair and tall, curvaceous frame got my attention immediately, but it was her charm and sweetness that won my heart.

We met through our mutual friend Sarah. I got to know Brittany just as a friend. She was dating David Jeffries, a starter for our college basketball team. She often shared her relationship problems with me. After a few months went by, her relationship ended with David. I think it was because his arrogance clashed with Brittany's humility. Her loss only seemed to draw us closer, and be my gain.

One morning as I was lying in bed, it was like God's Spirit telling me, "Wake up, you fool. Brittany is the girl you have been praying and hoping for all these years." I then realized she had become my best friend. She was

extremely loyal, and I could trust her with anything. She was growing more and more attractive to me, and not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. I sat up and thought to myself, "I need to make a commitment to this girl before someone else does."

Five days later in the cafeteria line, I announced, "Brittany, I don't know if my eyes are getting better, or you are just getting prettier." She blushed. That was just the kind of girl she was, modest, with a sweet childlike innocence about her. She had a couple of short-term relationships in high school, but nothing serious. She was too focused on doing well in school.

Brittany grew up in Nashville, so she wasn't as keen to big city life like I was growing up in Chicago. I considered myself street smart, where Brittany was more book-smart. She was fascinated with the stories I would tell about the people I met and places I had been. Like most men, I had spent most of my life trying to impress women. Brittany seemed as charmed by me as I was of her.

We had been together over six months and my love and friendship with Brittany had grown very strong, so I decided to test the waters and throw the marriage card on the table after one of our movie dates. Cautiously I said, "I can't imagine my future without you in it."

She responded, "Me neither."

So I dove right in and exclaimed, "Then why don't you be my wife?"

"Are you serious, Brett? Nothing would make me happier than to spend the rest of my life with you!"

"Yes!" as I pumped my fist in the air like Tiger Woods winning the Masters. With enthusiasm and relief, I took Brittany by the waist and kissed her passionately. I grabbed her hand before we ran off to our favorite spot on campus. I think deep down we knew this was a commitment we truly wanted to make.

We always loved sitting by the fountain near the Student Center looking at dropped pennies glistening at the bottom and guessing what each person might have wished for. I reached in my pocket and found a new shiny quarter, kissed it, and threw it over my shoulder.

"What did you wish for, Brett?" Brittany inquired.

"I'm just paying God forward because last week my penny wish came true tonight."

The moon was full and bright that March evening, but Brittany's beautiful brown eyes and big smile shone brighter as she sat staring at me on the ledge of the fountain. I couldn't imagine a more special moment.

I reached in my jacket pocket for the black velvet box. I popped it open displaying the one carat princess-cut diamond and got down on one knee. Brittany gasped.

"Brittany Ellen Case, you are the woman I have grown to love and adore. I need you in my life now and forever. You bring me so much joy. Would you be my wife?"

With tears in her eyes she said "Yes, of course." Then

she paused, "But there is someone else you have to ask?"

"Who?"

"My father, silly. You always have to ask a girl's daddy."

Suddenly my joy turned to dread at the thought of asking Mr. Case for his daughter's hand in marriage. He wasn't just your typical future father-in-law. He had been a Major in the Army during the Vietnam War. He was hard-working, strict and a real man's man. He loved his family, his country, and his guns.

"Well I guess it's a small price to pay to have you, but the sooner the better."

"Brett, I want the most beautiful wedding we can have without having to spend a lot of money. I don't want this to cost a fortune for my parents, because you know how tight my dad is with money. But I know we can make it really special."

"It will be special and beautiful," I promised. "Where should we go for our honeymoon?"

"You know, Brett, this may sound strange, but I've always dreamed of staying at the Peabody Hotel in Memphis."

"Memphis? Now that's a honeymoon hot spot," I chuckled. "Well at least we won't have far to drive."

We chose Saturday, December 25th, as our wedding day. We couldn't think of a more special time to be married. The next day after church, Brittany told her parents

that we had some great news that we needed to talk with them about. We agreed to go to their house that afternoon.

As we made our way down the long winding driveway of Brittany's parent's fifteen acre farm in Franklin, her two chestnut brown quarter horses seemed to greet us standing next to the rail fence. The tulips were in full bloom and looked glorious. Brittany was so giddy and joyful. Her diamond engagement ring sparkled brilliantly as she clasped her hand in mine.

Brittany had wonderful parents that adored her. She loved them so much, but practically worshipped her father. She was a real daddy's girl. I just hoped she would grow to have the same kind of confidence in my character as she did his.

She bounced up the stairs onto her enormous front porch with not a care in the world and rang the doorbell. I, on the other hand, followed slowly behind while my heart raced faster with each step. This had to be the most important discussion I'd had in my life and I didn't want to blow it by acting like the nervous wreck I felt.

"Hi mom," said Brittany.

"Hi honey, come on in. Brett, it's good to see you," said Mrs. Case. Brittany looked just like her mother, only twenty years younger. They both had dark hair and eyes with Italian features and big, bright smiles.

"You, too, Mrs. Case. Thanks for letting us stop by

on such short notice."

I was grateful Mrs. Case seemed very fond of me. Hopefully, she would be in support of our union. But I wasn't so sure about Brittany's father.

"Sweetheart, how are you?" Mr. Case asked as he came into the room.

"Hi daddy," said Brittany as she gave her father a hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Brett, I hear you have something to talk to me about?"

"Yes, sir, I do."

"Well, why don't you come on back to my office?"

As I traveled down the long dark hallway, it felt as if a lump the size of grapefruit had formed in my throat. I tried taking deep breaths, but I just couldn't get enough air.

Upon entering the room, all I could see were bookshelves lined with hundreds of books. In the corner stood a gun case with more rifles than I had seen in my entire life. A miniature American flag and a Tennessee flag were proudly displayed on his desk.

"Have a seat, Brett."

"Thank you."

As I slid into the leather wing chair, I couldn't help but notice the four Army medals of honor in an acrylic display case behind Mr. Case's head. Staring down at me from the wall was a ten point buck with dark glassy

eyes. I thought to myself, another poor victim of this man.

"So what is it that you want to talk to me about, Brett?"

"Well, sir," I said as I began to cough, "excuse me."

"Would you like a glass of water?"

"No, I'm fine,. Thank you. As you know, Brittany and I have been dating for a few months now and I have really grown to love your daughter."

Mr. Case just sat there listening with his hands clasped and his head slightly bowed, looking directly into my eyes.

"I can't imagine a nicer girl than Brittany. She makes me very happy and I hope I make her happy, as well. What I'm trying to say, and forgive me because I'm a little nervous, is I would like to marry your daughter if you would give me the honor."

Still with no outward sign of emotion from Mr. Case, it seemed as if I waited five minutes in complete silence. Then finally, a response.

"You know, Brett, marriage is a big decision and Brittany is my only daughter. I couldn't let her go to just anybody. Marriage is for life. We don't believe in divorce in this family. Nor does God."

"Yes, sir, I agree."

"Brittany's mother and I have been married for almost twenty-five years. Marriage is like a good business

relationship. It's a lot of hard work. You have your good years and your bad years. But all in all, you work it out because that's just what you do. Do you know what I'm saying?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"First of all, when do plan on getting married?"

"On Christmas Day, sir."

"Christmas Day? That seems like an odd time."

"It's our favorite holiday and we just think it would be the perfect day to get married."

"Where do you plan to live? I hope you aren't planning on moving back to Chicago."

"No, sir, we're going to live here. Nashville is my home now."

"And something else . . . Brittany still has two more years of college. I expect her to graduate."

"I want that for her, too. Her dream of being an interior designer is important and I have encouraged that dream."

"What about you? How are you going to support her? Won't you still be in school?"

"Yes, sir, but I plan on getting a job. Once I graduate, I hope to work for a major record label doing promotions."

"You know money causes some of the biggest problems in marriage. Do you have any debt?"

"My parents are paying for my college so I don't

have any school loans. I paid for my vehicle with the money I made working the last two summers. But I do have some credit cards."

"Credit cards are the worst kind of loans. How much do you owe?"

"Um . . . I think about $12,000. I just put Brittany's ring on one of them, but I got it on sale."

"It doesn't matter if it's on sale if your credit card interest rate is over twenty percent. Listen to me, Brett, I believe in paying cash for everything except maybe your house. Even then you should pay it off as soon as possible. I've worked really hard to get the things I have and the Lord has blessed me. When I was discharged from the Army, I went into construction and started building houses. Today I have people building houses *for me.* I don't want Brittany to have to worry about money so I expect you to be a good provider for her and not get into a lot of debt."

"I will take good care of her, Mr. Case. I promise."

"How long have your parents been married?"

"Twenty-eight years."

"That's good. Are they Christians?"

"Yes, sir. My mom is the reason I'm in Nashville. She wanted me to go to a Christian college."

Mr. Case sat up in his chair with his elbows resting on the desk. He leaned toward me with even more determination.

"Brett, I think Brittany is too young to be married. I'm not convinced you are the best choice. You have no real job and she's still in school. What if she ends up getting pregnant? Will she finish school then? Probably not. But knowing my daughter the way I do, she has already made up her mind to marry you. With that said, if you ever hurt her or cheat on her, you will have to answer to me. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir, loud and clear," I said, as I was about to have a heart attack.

"Obviously I have no choice but to give you my blessing," he said. "Brittany would never forgive me if I didn't."

"I won't let you down, sir."

"I'll hold you to that."

With a big sigh of relief, we shook hands. All I can say is this was going to be my last proposal because I never wanted to go through that kind of interrogation again. It was a good thing Brittany was worth it.

With just nine months to plan the wedding, our lives became a whirlwind–the flowers, the food, the church, the gown, the rings, the cake, the photographer, the invitations, and everything else a wedding entails. We had a lot of help from her mom and girlfriends who were more than willing to assist with the big day. Whenever

they asked my opinion, I quickly learned it was better to say, "I love it!" It kept the peace and it really didn't matter to me because I just wanted to be with Brittany.

CHAPTER 2

Binding Together

BEFORE I KNEW IT, I woke up and it was Christmas Day, but more importantly, our wedding day. I looked out the window and saw the snow glistening on the sidewalk. It looked to be a half a foot. I was a bit concerned that our guests might have trouble getting to the church building. Middle Tennessee was not like Chicago in the winter. The whole place might shut down if there was even a hint of ice on the roads.

My best man, Tom Johnson, had stayed the night with me because he had come in from his new home in Atlanta the day before. He had just graduated from Lipscomb last May with a degree in finance and was now working for SunTrust Bank.

"Tom, have you looked outside?"

"No, what is it?" As he pulled back the curtain, Tom

said, "I haven't seen this much snow in Nashville in years!"

"Neither have I," I said as I turned on the television.

"Temperatures are expected to reach only thirty degrees today so this snow will stick around for a while. If you don't have to get out today, we advise staying in if you can because the roads are treacherous," informed the Channel 5 weatherman. "It's a perfect day to stay indoors and enjoy the Christmas holiday with your family."

"That's just great," I said sarcastically. "On the most important day of my life there's going to be nobody to witness it."

"These weather people like to exaggerate things, Brett. Let's just get ready and go meet your parents at the hotel. We'll see for ourselves. The roads probably aren't that bad."

"I hope you're right."

"Trust me, when women buy a new dress, they'll risk their lives to show it off."

"And I thought they were coming for me," said Brett.

"No, the single women are coming to check out all of us single guys. Sorry to burst your bubble, Brett," Tom said with a big grin.

After a quick bite to eat and a shower, we slowly headed out for the Opryland Hotel to meet my family so we could all drive together to the ceremony.

The side roads were very slick. When we approached the first stop sign, we couldn't stop and just slid into the main road. Thank the Lord no cars were coming. We must have been the only two idiots on the road. As we approached I-65, we saw a snowplow and decided to follow along behind it. There were dozens of cars that had been abandoned on the side of the road.

"This isn't looking too good," Tom said.

"So much for your positive thinking."

As we carefully made the corner to the I-40 exit, I just started praying to myself. "Please Lord, let us make it to the hotel safely. Please melt this snow so the people will come to my wedding."

Then I thought why in the world did we even think about having a wedding in the middle of winter? I couldn't remember if it was my idea or Brittany's.

I approached the cloverleaf exit to turn onto Briley Parkway and could feel my back tires losing traction, the car sliding sideways.

"Oh no!" I said as my Toyota 4-Runner was heading toward the guard rail.

"Turn into the slide, Brett!" Tom warned. It always confused me as to whether I was to turn into or away from the slide. Just then, the vehicle straightened out and we merged onto Briley. Thankfully, no cars were behind me.

"Whew! That was close," said Tom. "Try not to kill

me before the ceremony. After all, I am the best man."

"What about me? No groom, no wedding."

"That's very true," said Tom.

Heading down Briley Parkway, I was grateful they had cleared the road. "Thank you, Jesus," I thought to myself. It was probably the most dangerous and curvy road in all of Nashville.

"Have you talked to Brittany?" asked Tom.

"Not today."

I promised Brittany I wouldn't call her today because she said it was bad luck. I told her I thought it was only bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding, but it wasn't worth the risk in her mind.

As we made our way into the gigantic Opryland complex, we managed to find a close parking space. My heart was relieved we had made it there in one piece. I opened my wallet to pull out the money to pay for parking and a tattered picture of Laura Johnson, my ex-girlfriend, fell to the floorboard. I reached for it quickly.

"Brett, is that a picture of Laura?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I guess I forgot to get rid of it," I said as I pushed it under my seat.

"Why would you even be carrying around a picture of your former fiancée anyway?" Tom questioned.

"I've just been really busy and forgot it was in there. We gotta go or we're going to be late."

Tom and I walked through the magnificent Cas-

cades area of the hotel, which is filled with exotic plants and waterfalls, to my parents' room. My dad opened the door. "Son, it's your big day. How are you holding up?"

"How am I holding up? Dad, have you looked outside at the snow? We almost wrecked trying to get here!"

"I'm glad you're okay. This is nothing compared to the blizzards we get in Chicago."

"But this is Tennessee and people freak out over a couple of inches."

"Don't worry, son, everything is going to be fine."

"I hope so. You remember Tom, don't you Dad?"

"Why of course. I couldn't forget the Bulls game that year you came up for Thanksgiving. How are you, Tom?" Dad said as he gave Tom a big hug. I came from a long line of huggers. My family was openly affectionate even in public.

"How are you doing, Mr. Taylor? I can never forget seeing Michael Jordan in person. He put up sixty points that night."

"You must be a fan to remember that."

My mom greeted Tom with a big hug and kiss on the cheek.

"Good to see you again, Mrs. Taylor," said Tom.

"Great to see you again, Tom. Thanks for being here for Brett's big day."

My dad was all of 6' 1" and a real man's man like Mr. Case. As a kid he looked much taller but now that

I was 6' 2" we were pretty much eye to eye. Dad always said I got my good looks from him. The only change in the way he looked from when I was growing up was his dark brown hair was now half gray, and his waist was a few inches thicker.

"How do you feel, son?"

"Well, I'm excited. I'm scared. I'm happy. I'm falling apart. So I'm glad I have Tom to keep me together."

"Everything is going to turn out perfectly. I've got your tuxes. Brett, are you and Tom going to get dressed here or wait until we get to the church?"

"I guess we can get changed now," I replied. Tom agreed.

Jeremy, my younger brother, was on the end of the bed playing video games.

"Hey Jer, how are you?" I said as I grabbed his shoulders and gave them a shake.

"Whose bright idea was it to have this wedding on Christmas? I only got two presents this year thanks to you!"

"That's not true, Jeremy," said Mom. "Santa told me he left more under the Christmas tree at home for you."

Jeremy just rolled his eyes. I guess it was tough being thirteen. As we made our way out of the hotel, the sun was beaming down from the clear blue sky.

"See, son, this snow is going to melt away in no time."

I was glad my father was remaining optimistic because I was a hair away from a panic attack. I kept wondering how Brittany was handling all of this. Luckily, we had no problems getting to the church.

We arrived at 201 Main Street in Franklin at 11:35 a.m. for the 1:00 p.m. ceremony. There was no sign of Brittany or her bridesmaids. I hoped she wasn't stuck in the snow somewhere. Then I saw her mother with the florist who was putting the finishing touches on the stairway to the front door. The florist was placing swags of evergreens, mixed with holly berries, and poinsettias tied with elegant red velvet ribbon on the doors. Then she began wrapping the stair rail in white tulle. It was a sight to see Brittany's mother all dolled up in her fancy dress sweeping snow off the concrete steps.

"There's Brett," Brittany's mother called when she saw me.

"Good morning, Mrs. Case. Everything looks beautiful. Can you believe this snow?"

"No, I guess that's what we get for planning a December wedding."

"Yes, and who's idea was this exactly?" my Mom asked Mrs. Case.

"It was our crazy kids, I think," said Mrs. Taylor. My family and Tom all greeted Mrs. Case with a hug.

"Jeremy, why don't you sweep these steps so Mrs. Case doesn't slip out here?" my Dad said.

As the rest of us made our way into the church building, all the men went to a private room to get ready and stay away from the women. "Is Brittany here?" I asked Mr. Case.

"Yes, all the girls are in the back room getting ready."

"Would you do one thing for me, sir?"

"Sure, what is it, Brett?"

"Would you go tell Brittany that I love her?"

With a genuine smile, he said, "I'd be happy to."

My anxiety continued to build but I was grateful to see the guests start coming in. Some ladies had hats and some didn't. They all looked smashing. I guess Tom was right. No snowstorm was going to keep them away. Even the men cleaned up pretty good.

I couldn't believe I was about to be married. Mr. Case came back with a hand-written note on one of our wedding napkins. It read, "The best is yet to come. Love eternally, Brittany."

That's all I needed to hear. I was ready to make this commitment. It was five minutes until 1:00 p.m. and the wedding planner asked all the men in the wedding party to line up because it was *that* time.

The church was majestically adorned with lit candles and dozens of red and white roses. I had my very best friends, Tom and Mike, Brittany's brother, Ben, and my younger brother, Jeremy with me. I smiled at our

minister, Dr. Bill Lambert, as we made our way up the steps to the pulpit. He squeezed my hand in a reassuring kind of way. He had been very encouraging to both of us during our pre-marital counseling sessions with him.

I looked curiously at our many guests, seeing faces that I had not seen in years and faces that I had never seen before. I wondered if there were a few wedding crashers in the group. It was great to see everyone smiling. There were probably over two hundred people. You would have never known there had been seven inches of snow that morning, or that they all gave up their Christmas for our wedding.

As I glanced through the audience one last time, I felt like someone punched me in the gut. On the very back row on the groom's side sat a familiar face. To my amazement, it was Laura—my ex-fiancée. What was she doing here? I knew we certainly didn't send her an invitation.

Laura and I had a serious relationship a couple years ago and we had planned to marry. I decided to break off the relationship because I just wasn't ready to get married. I wasn't sure she was the girl I wanted to be with the rest of my life. Laura was heartbroken. I never meant to hurt her. I just didn't want to make a mistake I might regret the rest of my life. Once I met Brittany, I realized why things never felt right with Laura. Things

always seemed like a struggle with Laura but with Brittany there was an ease that I couldn't explain.

I wondered if she was here to cause trouble. Just then the music began and the girls started to line up at the back of the church. My knees started to shake. The day we had waited so anxiously for was here. I could understand how some people might get cold feet at this point because it was a make it or break it moment. I had to put Laura out of my mind and focus on Brittany—the woman I *really* wanted to be with for the rest of my life.

The ushers seated our parents, grandmothers, and Mrs. Case. The sun was glistening in through the glass doors from the back of the church. The four beautiful bridesmaids adorned in red satin dresses slowly glided down the aisle. They carried red rose bouquets with red satin ribbon. Two bridesmaids were Brittany's cousins, Julia and Peggy. The other two girls were her college roommate, Jenna, and her best friend and maid of honor, Brooke. As they gracefully made their way up the steps, they gave me this cute smile and Brittany's cousin, Julia, even gave me a wink.

My little five-year old cousin, Bailey, was the flower girl, and Brittany's six-year old cousin, Jacob, was the ring bearer. They looked so sweet together and everyone was amused by their cuteness. Their moms were fearfully hoping they wouldn't mess up and drop the

rings along with the rose petals.

The theme song from the movie *Somewhere in Time* began playing. It was my favorite instrumental Rachmaninoff piece and its beauty equaled my love for Brittany.

As the last rose petal was dropped by Bailey, I gazed toward the back of the church. The white glow from the sunshine over Brittany's veil appeared almost angelic. My knees began to shake even more. Brittany looked more beautiful than the loveliest flower. She was pure and striking. The veil made her stunning face a mystery. Her gorgeous bouquet of white roses paled beside her beauty.

As she took her father's arm, they smiled and proceeded up the aisle. The day was bittersweet for Mr. Case. I think he felt like the dad in the movie *Father of the Bride*. He was losing his precious little girl to me—a guy he only hoped and prayed would take care of his daughter.

The closer Brittany came to me, the faster my heart raced. When Brittany's father apprehensively gave me her trembling hand, my fear turned to absolute assuredness as my knees stopped shaking. This was the right decision and she was the right girl.

Dr. Lambert, the minister of the Main Street Church where Brittany grew up, was a tall and gentle man with a sweet Southern drawl. Brittany loved his humility and his ability to always admit his own weaknesses and need

for God's grace and mercy.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here on this glorious Christmas day. Not only is it the day we celebrate the birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ, but we are here to join the lives of Brett Matthew Taylor and Brittany Ellen Case in holy matrimony. Thank you all for being here today to witness their union."

Brittany looked at me and smiled. If she was nervous, it didn't show.

"I must now pause and ask if there is anyone here today who has any reason this couple should not be joined together?" asked Dr. Lambert. "That person should speak now or forever hold their peace."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Dr. Lambert never told us during the wedding rehearsal he was going to ask that question. Who does that anymore? I felt like I was set up.

I was glad my back was facing the crowd. I couldn't help but feel Laura's eyes peering into the back of my head. My worst nightmare was that she was about to jump up and wave her hand in the air and yell, "I do. I'm in love with Brett and he still loves me."

But thankfully there was silence.

"Then let us proceed. Marriage was first designed by God for our benefit and pleasure…" The next few minutes seemed like a blur to me. The whole day had been filled with emotion. It was the first chance I even

had to catch my breath. Now everything became surreal and I couldn't grasp it.

"Brittany and Brett have prepared their own vows that they would like to share." We didn't want to have the typical, impersonal wedding vows in our ceremony. We wanted our wedding to be meaningful and heartfelt. To my delight, Brittany openly shared her love and commitment to me as I did to her.

After we repeated our vows, Dr. Lambert threw me for a momentary loop when he asked, "Brett, do you love Brittany enough that you would die for her like Christ died for us?" I had never thought about that one before. At the risk of humiliating my future wife, I confidently answered, "Yes!" and promised myself to think that question over at a later date.

Since we were not unlike every other Cinderella-fed, fairy-taled couple, we did not have a clue as to what would lie ahead and the true meaning of the vows we just so confidently declared.

As we carefully slid the beautiful gold bands on each other's left hands, we only felt love and hope. Little did we know the tests and challenges our love would soon endure.

Before Dr. Lambert said the traditional phase, "You may kiss your bride," he presented us with a wedding present. It was a box—flat and rectangular about the size of a tie box—wrapped in red glossy paper with a

gold bow. He told us that this was a very special present that had been given to him when he was married thirty years ago. He said this gift was instrumental in his relationship with his wife, Helen. It helped them build a life of love, understanding, and unity.

We thanked Dr. Lambert for the unexpected present and were curious as to its contents. Brittany put it beneath her bouquet to open later.

"By the power invested in me by God and the great state of Tennessee, I pronounce you husband and wife. Brett, you may kiss your bride." I did just that and later wondered if I kissed a bit too long since our wedding pictures showed Dr. Lambert's eyes closed in a bashful sort of way.

We paraded down the aisle and I was beaming. Dozens of flash bulbs went off. We waved with excitement to our friends and family feeling like movie stars on the rose petal-covered carpet.

As we reached the back of the church, Brittany exclaimed, "We did it!"

"We sure did, Mrs. Taylor," as I planted another kiss on her lips.

Just then I saw Laura with tears streaming down her face exit the building. I felt sorry for Laura because I did still care about her but was glad Brittany didn't see her. Ironically, Brittany was experiencing the happiest day of a woman's life while, Laura seemed so unhappy..

After spending a few special hours greeting our guests, posing for pictures, cutting the cake and tossing the bouquet, we were off on our honeymoon.

Since we chose the *Honeymoon Capital of the World* for our dream destination– Memphis, Tennessee—we jumped in our shaving cream and toilet paper-covered SUV and headed west. The three-hour drive seemed like a mere fifteen minutes as Brittany and I just floated down I-40. By now all the snow had been removed from the freeway. It was as if our vehicle was Cinderella's enchanted carriage, Brittany seemed to me to be the beautiful Cinderella and I felt like Prince Charming who finally found his princess after years of searching.

"Were you happy with the way everything went?" I asked.

"It was just magical, Brett."

"It really was. I couldn't have planned it better myself. You did an amazing job."

"I can't believe all these months of planning were over in less than three hours."

I couldn't get out of my mind Laura's unexpected appearance at the wedding. The day could have ended in total disaster for us. I wonder if that will be the last I ever hear from Laura.

"I was afraid we might not be able to pull it off with the snow?" I asked.

"I know. Me, too. But I think it made everything

more beautiful. Don't you?"

"I guess you could say that. Tom and I nearly slid off the road trying to pick up my folks this morning."

"You did?" Brittany asked, surprised.

"Yeah, but thank God, we didn't have an accident. I wouldn't have wanted to leave you standing at the altar."

"That would have been pretty embarrassing."

"You're right."

"Oh, I meant to bring Mr. Lambert's wedding present," Brittany said with disappointment. "I was so surprised to receive it during the ceremony. I wonder what it is?"

"I have no idea. Whatever it is, it's pretty small."

"Sometimes, the smallest gifts are the most meaningful," Brittany said.

"*True.* Could you believe Mrs. Pruett, my high school English teacher, was there? I didn't know she even liked me," Brittany said with surprise.

"I wonder what our honeymoon suite is going to look like?" I asked.

"I don't care as long as we're finally alone."

I was glad to hear Brittany say that because I had been anticipating this night for a long time. We stayed at Brittany's dream hotel—the famous Peabody. The hotel had a grand history to it. It had hosted American presidents and all kinds of world leaders and celebrities. It was featured in one of our favorite John Grisham

movies, *The Firm*, starring Tom Cruise.

I opted for valet parking to impress Brittany. The lobby was spectacular with rich, elegant furnishings, crystal chandeliers and the feeling that there was a lot of history here. You could almost sense the ghosts of past guests.

Our timing was impeccable because the famous Peabody ducks were getting ready to make their grand entrance. People were lining up along the red carpet leading from the elevator to the impressive fountain. The ducks marched off the elevator, waddled down the red carpet and jumped into the fountain one by one. After a few minutes of swimming and photos, their caretaker blew his trumpet. They all jumped out of the fountain and back on the elevator. They went just like little soldiers. Brittany just loved the ducks, like she did all animals. I admired her tender heart.

It was like the whole world had stopped spinning just for us. The excitement and overwhelming love we felt was so thick you could cut it with a knife. It was evident we had the *just married* glow. We had to pinch ourselves and remind each other that we were finally married and that at the stroke of midnight this would not all vanish into pixie dust.

The intimacy and passion we experienced was so pure and sincere. We were grateful that we both had waited to consummate our relationship until that night.

Until then our lives were merely a day-to-day existence rather than being so wonderfully alive, happy and thankful for each special moment.

The next morning we went to Denney's for breakfast. Brittany had pancakes. She was a vegetarian. Unfortunately, I didn't share her commitment to vegan living at the time and I had scrambled eggs and sausage. I was still relishing the Rendezvous ribs I had tasted the night before.

Besides spending a lot of time locked away in our honeymoon suite, we visited Graceland. It was quirky, fun, and very 1970's. It is a must-see for anyone going anywhere near Memphis. Elvis' home was a miniature Southern plantation. It was left basically the way it was at the time of his premature death in 1977. I was impressed by all the countless gold and platinum albums in his museum. Brittany laughed as we entered the Jungle Room. The wild furniture and green shag carpet wasn't her style. I kind of liked it. But our tastes were opposite when it came to decorating. She was elegant and tasteful. I liked anything fun and whimsical. That was just the beginning of a long list of differences we would soon uncover.

It was surreal to see Elvis' gravesite along with his mother's and father's which were on the grounds of Graceland. My mother always told me that the day he died was a day she will never forget. She considered

Elvis the greatest entertainer of all time and admired his love for people along with his compassion and generosity.

We spent the next few days enjoying all that Memphis had to offer—trolley rides, the wonderful Blues music on Beale Street, bowling at Jillian's, the Gibson Guitar factory tour, a Memphis Grizzlies game at the FedEx Forum, the Memphis Rock and Soul Museum and Sun Studio where Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, and Johnny Cash recorded. I also took Brittany to the Brooks Memphis Museum of Art because she loved art and architecture. Her favorite family vacation of all time wasn't Disney World but touring the beautiful homes of Charleston, South Carolina.

On our last day, we were a bit sad that it all had to come to an end. It was romantic and magical. We were a world away from problems, bills, housework, homework and reality.

Our drive back home to Franklin was a lot of fun. We relived the wedding ceremony and also talked about how much it meant to us to have so many of our friends and family show up for our special day. Brittany stated, "It's amazing how long you wait and plan for your wedding day and it goes by in the blink of an eye, almost like a dream."

We arrived home to our four-room, eight hundred square foot apartment in Franklin that I had just moved

into. I carried Brittany across the threshold and tossed her on the bed, kissing her madly. I was excited that she finally was mine to keep and I no longer had to drive her back to her parent's home. It was New Year's Eve and I could not remember ever being happier or looking forward to a new year more than now.