

# Brianna, My Brother, and the Blog

## CHAPTER ONE, BY JACK WEYLAND

*Wednesday, June 11*

“And this is Brianna!” my mom said proudly.

I had no idea who Brianna was or why my folks had brought her to the SLC International Airport to welcome me home from my mission.

I figured she might possibly be one of my cousins from Nebraska. The ones we never see. Except for one thing. In our family, we’re all born ugly. Only after a few years do we get better looking. This girl looked as though she’d been born beautiful and then improved after that, so obviously she couldn’t be a cousin.

She was only a couple of inches shorter than me. Her good posture made me wonder if she might be a dancer. All this, with long, straight, reddish-brown hair, thick-forest-like eyebrows and lashes, and either brown or green eyes, I couldn’t tell which.

Some girls have thin lips, but she did not. They were, well, not thin. Actually, since I was technically a missionary for at least a few more hours, I was embarrassed to have even noticed her lips.

However, what surprised me most was that she seemed so excited to see me. “Welcome home, Elder!” she shouted out. I was just going to shake her hand, but she practically threw herself at me, wrapped her arms around my neck, and gave me a big hug. I panicked and looked over to my mom for protection.

“It’s okay, it’s just Brianna,” my mom said. Everyone seemed to know what that meant. Everyone except me.

“Hopefully, she’ll be a part of our family once Robbie gets home,” my dad explained proudly.

“So little Robbie has a girlfriend?” I asked.

“I wrote you all about it, Austin,” my mom said with her familiar, slightly accusatory tone of voice.

On my mission, my mom’s letters came every week. Unfortunately, it took about that long to read them. Each one was eight to ten pages long. Reading them was made more difficult because my

mom has terrible handwriting. So, the truth is, I hadn’t always read every page.

I decided to fake it. “Oh, of course, it’s Brianna, Robbie’s special friend!” When I shook her hand, I was surprised she had such a strong grip.

“Brianna will be with us the rest of the day, but then she’ll come back on Saturday and stay overnight with us,” my mom said, “so she’ll hear your talk in church.”

“We already think of her as part of our family,” my dad said with a big, goofy grin on his face.

“What year in school are you, Brianna?” I asked.

“I’m a sophomore.”

“Good for you. What high school do you go to?”

She gave me a strange look. “Actually, I’m a sophomore at BYU.”

“Really? Well, you seem so young to be in college.”

“I’m twenty.”

“So you’re the same age as little Robbie then, right?”

“‘Little Robbie’ is now six-foot-five,” she said with a grin.

“I wrote you about his growth spurt,” my mom explained.

I wasn’t going to make that mistake again. “Right. I remember,” I lied.

We lived in Layton, Utah, so it didn’t take very long to drive home. When Dad pulled our SUV into the driveway, I spotted a big sign hanging from the front porch that read, “Welcome Home, Elder Austin Winchester!” I got out and looked around at the house, Dad’s manicured front lawn, and Mom’s flower garden. In many ways coming home was like visiting an old friend.

Our neighbor’s big ugly dog, Tornado, barked and bared his teeth at me just like before my mission. He was still chained to their big tree in the front yard. I had always believed he’d kill me if he ever broke free. Robbie had been the only one in

the neighborhood who could play with Tornado.

Mom had a big dinner ready, and after we'd eaten, I went over to the stake center to meet with our stake president. He interviewed me about my mission, gave me some counsel about education and marriage, and then officially released me. When I got home, I told my mom I was going to take a walk.

"Do you mind if I tag along?" Brianna asked.

"No, not at all."

It took us fifteen minutes to go a block because of all the neighbors who stopped us to welcome me home from my mission. In each case I introduced Brianna as the girl who was waiting for Robbie.

Once we got outside our ward boundaries we were able to make better time.

"You didn't read your mom's letters very closely, did you?" Brianna asked.

"No. How did you know?"

"Robbie can't keep up with them either, so, since your mom sends me a copy, too, I fill him in on the most important things. I could do the same for you now."

"Maybe you'd better."

"Okay, here's what I know. Your Aunt Nancy got married while you were gone. Twice, actually. The last time just a few months ago."

"Twice?"

"Apparently a good man is harder to find than any of us imagined. But the husband she's got now is totally acceptable."

"Anything else I should know?"

"Your dad got downsized. He's now working as a sales representative for a software company."

I shook my head. "Oh, no, I messed up. That's something I should have known."

"It's okay. You were busy. I'll help you catch up."

"Thanks. Oh, I'm sorry I didn't know about you and Robbie."

"It's totally okay. It's strange. You don't know me, but I feel like I know you. He's often told me what a good influence you were on him. For that I thank you."

"Little Robbie."

"Not anymore."

"You like him a lot, don't you?" I asked.

"Yes, I do. He's always been very considerate of me."

"Actually, come to think of it, I taught him that," I said.

"How?"

"I remember when he was in sixth grade I gave him a gerbil for his birthday. When I found out he wasn't taking good care of it, I went to him and said, 'Robbie, you always need to be thinking, *What can I do for the gerbil today?* You've got to think about the gerbil, not just once in a while, but every day.'" I paused. "You obviously benefitted from Robbie's gerbil experience."

She flashed me a teasing smile. "Are you saying he thinks of me the same way he thought about his gerbil?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Oh, my gosh! He didn't put newspapers on your floor every day, did he?" I asked.

For such a classy looking girl, she had the most amazing laugh. First of all, it was a full-bodied laugh. Every part of her got in on it. To make her laugh became my new goal in life.

"You're way more fun than Robbie," she said. "He's, well, more sincere than funny."

"He learned that from the gerbil. Your average gerbil has a pathetic sense of humor."

We ended up sitting next to each other on two swings in a park. We watched the sunset together. Or, to be more truthful, she watched the sunset, and I watched her. How had Robbie lucked out to have found her?

Even so, I wasn't going to take advantage of her trust in me. I was going to play the part assigned me. I would be the trusted brother.

"We'd better get back," she said. "Your mom and dad will be wondering what happened to us."

It seemed strange, being alone with a girl, after two years of that being against the rules. But it was also ... good.

"It's been great being with you. I mean, you being a girl, and all."

She laughed for me again. "You are so observant!"

"Yes, I am. Except for the color of your eyes. Would you mind if I examined them to determine their exact color?"

"I could just tell you."

"No, that's okay. I'm kind of a hands-on guy."

"Okay, I've got to admit, that worries me just a little," she teased.

"We're talking about eyes here, okay? C'mon, give me a break."

She shrugged. "Okay, be my guest." She opened her eyes wide and leaned slightly toward me.

We made eye contact. It was awesome except for the fact that I got a little distracted. Also, I was taking much more time than one would normally need to determine the color of someone's eyes. And that did make her nervous.

"Let me just tell you, okay?" she said, moving away from me. "My eyes are hazel."

The truth is I didn't know what color hazel was, but I wasn't going to admit that. "Of course they are." I stood up. "Well, let's start back."

As we walked home, I felt a little guilty for having looked into her eyes for so long. I felt as though I needed to explain myself. "I didn't think I'd be this comfortable with a girl right after my mission, but, with you, I am. I guess it's because you're already like a member of the family."

"I feel comfortable with you, too, Austin."

After we got home, we went inside, talked for a while, and then she told us she needed to get back to BYU. I have to admit, I wasn't that thrilled about her leaving. I walked her out to her car and thanked her for coming to the airport to welcome me home.

"In about a year, I'll be welcoming Robbie home. I can hardly wait."

"Yeah, well, he's a lucky guy. I'll say that for him."

"I'll see you Saturday afternoon, okay?" she said and then got into her car, flashed me that great smile, and drove off.

The next day my dad took me fishing. Not because I'm that much into it but because he is. But it did give us a chance to talk.

He asked about my plans. I shrugged. "I don't know. Work this summer and start school in the fall. That's about it."

He told me about his new job, and he asked me

some questions about my mission. So it was good to be together, even though we didn't catch any fish.

When I woke up Friday morning, I stayed in bed for a little while, just thinking. It seemed strange not to have a companion to worry about, and I even felt a little guilty, like there was something I should be doing.

My mom took care of that, and the day was taken up working for her around the house, weeding our garden, and mowing the lawn. The reason for all this cleaning was that we were having

people over Sunday after church, and she wanted everything in good shape. That much hadn't changed. She had always been a neat freak about our house and yard.

She even asked me to clean the garage, too, but with everything else she had me doing, I didn't have time to get to that. Besides, it wasn't a project that I could do by myself. For every item I picked up I'd have had to ask her what to do with it. And what guy wants that much supervision from his mom? Not me.

Brianna came for dinner Saturday and then stayed the night. I confess, she was even better-looking than I remembered, if that's possible.

Knowing that she was my brother's girlfriend made it a little awkward to be around her, and I still felt guilty for having used some lame excuse to look into her eyes. So at first I backed off and tried to stay out of her way.

That night Brianna was staying in the guest room, directly over my head in my downstairs bedroom. I couldn't get to sleep right away because I could hear her walking around above me, and I kept wondering what she was doing. It wasn't until it was quiet above me that I eventually dozed off.



I got up at seven and went into the kitchen to work on my talk. Brianna was already up, sitting at the kitchen table reading the scriptures, wearing a pair of olive green flannel pajamas and a robe.

“Good morning,” she said.

I was noticing her eyes. They looked green to me. “Uh, good morning. Did you sleep well?”

I asked.

“Yes, and you?”

“Not really.”

“How come?” she asked.

“I’m having a little trouble adjusting. Basically, I want to go back on my mission for another couple of years.”

“What do you miss the most?”

“The people.”

“Yes, of course. I’m sure they’re missing you, too.”

“I feel like there’s nothing in my life that will ever compare to my mission.”

“I can see why you’d feel like that now. Tell me about the people you taught.”

It took nearly an hour. Me talking while we had some cereal and toast. And then it was time to get ready for church.

“I’m still not sure what to talk about,” I said.

“I think you’ve just given me your talk. People love to hear missionaries tell about their experiences, and the people they met.”

“You think so?”

“Definitely. That and your testimony.”

“Okay, maybe I’ll do that. Thanks.”

During my talk, I kept looking down in the audience at Brianna, who nodded approval that I was on the right track.

After sacrament meeting she came up to me and shook my hand. “You did a fantastic job!”

“Thanks.”

As she was telling me in detail what she liked about what I’d said, I noticed that our handshake, which had begun appropriately, was fast becoming questionable because we had quit moving our hands up and down, but we still had hand contact.

When she finally noticed the problem, she let go and pulled away.

Now I really was embarrassed. I’d forgotten I was holding her hand, that’s all. It could happen to anyone. But it needed to be addressed. “I shook your hand too long, didn’t I? Sorry.”

She got a thoughtful look on her face and pretended to be approaching this from a referee’s

point of view. “Actually, there is no rule about the duration of a handshake. Where we went wrong, I believe, is we failed to keep our hands in motion. As I understand the official rules, as long as the hands are moving, it constitutes a legitimate handshake.”

All I’d ever wanted from life was a girl who would be whimsical with me. Like what we were doing right then.

“So, what you’re saying is, if the hands are moving, it’s not a violation, right?” I said.

She nodded. “It makes sense, really. I mean, think about it. There is no such thing as a ‘hand-still,’ right?” she said.

“I suppose that would technically be called holding hands.”

“I believe you’re correct on that.”

She was amazing. She had a way of holding her eyes wide open as she considered something, and there was a bit of a tease in her. I did notice that her eyes now looked brown to me.

I wanted to tell her how much fun I was having, and how gorgeous she was, but, because of Robbie, I didn’t say anything.

On the other hand, I did feel a little guilty that I’d held hands with the girl who was waiting for my brother, even if it was only for like maybe twenty seconds beyond what most people would consider appropriate.

I stayed in the chapel talking to ward members until they all went to Sunday School and then our family went home to get ready for a luncheon we were having for relatives, friends, and neighbors.

My mom asked Brianna and me to set up chairs and banquet tables in the backyard and then to set the table.

“There won’t be as many here as there were for my farewell,” I said.

“Why’s that?”

“Most of the girls from high school who adored me got married while I was gone. Apparently they didn’t adore me two years’ worth.”

“Did you have a girl waiting for you?” Brianna asked.

“Yeah, more or less, I guess. She got married about six months ago.”

“Her loss, right?” she said with one of her dazzling smiles.

“We can always think so. Do you think you’ll wait until Robbie comes home?”

“Oh, I know I will. There’s absolutely no doubt

about that.”

I was surprised at her answer because she said it with such certainty.

“How do you know you’ll wait?”

“Because people all the time are telling me I won’t make it for two years. I don’t like being told I’m not going to achieve my goals. So I’m going to prove them all wrong.”

“Well, if it ever gets hard for you, give me a call, and I’ll come over and tell you what a great guy he is.”

“That’s a good idea. Sometimes lately, I’ve had trouble remembering what he was like.”

“I’ll get hold of some of our family pictures so you’ll know how he was as he was growing up,” I said.

“Great idea.”

“And if there were certain places you guys used to go or special memories you have of him, you and I could go there and relive those memories.”

She considered that for a moment, her eyes wide open. “Hmm. Do you think that would really help?” That’s not necessarily why I had suggested it, but I was glad she would even think about it.

By the time we finished our work, some people had arrived so I spent my time talking with them. Brianna made herself useful by helping my mom.

An hour later Brianna came up to me. “Hey, Austin. I’m going now. It was fun to see you again. Great talk.”

“Thanks, but do you really have to go now?”

She pulled a face. “Yeah, I do. I usually don’t like to study on Sundays, but I’ve got a paper due tomorrow.”

“Well, can I walk you out to your car?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll be at BYU fall semester,” I said. “Is it okay if I call you once in a while?” I asked.

“Please do. Anytime.” She gave me her number, got in her car, gave me a wave, and drove away.

I stood there on the curb, watching her drive down our street, wondering how my big oaf of a brother had gotten so lucky as to find a girl like her.

The next Sunday, in my home ward, our elders quorum president announced a stake softball league and asked how many of us could play. I raised my hand, but when I found out that all the games were on Tuesday nights, I had to cancel. I’d gotten a job working part-time for a trucking company, handling freight at night, and Tuesday was one of my shifts. After priesthood, one of the guys in the quorum said

he wanted to play but didn’t have a baseball glove.

He asked if he could borrow mine.

“Well, actually, I was going to use my brother’s glove, but I guess you can use it.”

Robbie had been a star on his high school baseball team, helping them win the state championship his senior year.

My friend dropped by that afternoon and picked it up.

Because it wasn’t actually my glove, I wrote Robbie a letter asking if it would be okay to use it. I didn’t mention that I was going to loan it out, but it would probably be several weeks before he answered me, and besides, I was sure he’d say yes.

Three weeks later I got a letter from Robbie saying I could use his baseball glove but only if I didn’t use it for softball. He explained that because a softball is so much bigger than a baseball it would wreck the pocket in the glove. He told me he planned to try to play baseball in college when he got back and would need it then. Oh, and he also told me not to loan it to anyone.

By that time, though, the season was almost over, and I decided to let my friend continue to use the glove. I knew how busy Robbie was as a missionary. I didn’t want to distract him from missionary work by writing to let him know I’d actually loaned his glove for softball. *Maybe he’ll be so spiritual when he comes home from his mission, he won’t even care,* I thought. *After all, the gospel is more important than some dumb baseball glove.*

By the first week in August, softball had ended. In priesthood I asked the guy who’d borrowed Robbie’s mitt to bring it next Sunday. He promised he would, but he kept forgetting.

The Sunday before I was to leave for BYU, he told me he had dropped it by the house during the week. “Nobody was home but the garage door was open so I just put it in there.”

Of course I should have gone out to the garage after I got home from church and returned it to Robbie’s room, but I didn’t do that. Who would have ever thought that would be important someday?

I didn’t have any further contact with Brianna until I showed up at BYU for fall semester. A few days after classes started, we saw each other on campus and stopped to talk. I asked if I could walk her to her apartment. She seemed happy for the company. I certainly was. I’d actually forgotten how

much fun it was to be with her.

“Be honest with me, okay? Do you like your roommates?” she asked.

“I’ve never even thought about it. We don’t see each other that much.”

She sighed. “That is what is so great about guys! Guys don’t even try to be close to their roommates. You’re lucky you don’t have to live in an apartment full of girls. It’s like high drama from day one.”

“In what way?”

“On the first day we were all together, one of the girls insisted on a meeting to determine where each of us was going to put our food in the refrigerator. That meeting like dragged on for forty-five minutes. One girl didn’t want to have the upper right part of the shelf because she was afraid her milk would freeze. Two girls insisted on being on the lower shelf in the center. We were almost to an agreement when one girl, who’d been quiet most of the time, got all teary-eyed and said it’s not fair. So we had to start all over again.”

“Are you serious? Guys don’t talk about things like that. Like in the morning, you see a roommate, and you say, ‘How’s it goin’?’ And he says, ‘Can’t complain.’ And then basically you’re done for the entire day as far as roommates go.”

“What’s the Guy Rule for food in the refrigerator?” she asked.

“You can eat or drink anything in there, whether it belongs to you or not, but there’s just one rule: You can’t take it all. So you’ve got to be careful. Like if I’m going to use a roommate’s milk, I can’t use so much that he’ll be out of milk for breakfast. If I need more than what I can safely take from him, I take some from another roommate’s carton.”

She laughed. “That is so reasonable! Can I move in with you?”

“Yeah, sure, no problem. Bring plenty of milk though because I’m never going to actually buy any myself.”

Gosh, I loved her laugh. For someone that beautiful to belt out a laugh because of something I’d said was for me like the highlight of my life.

“What if one of your roommates is going on a date?” she continued. “Does he keep telling you over and over again how excited he is and then ask your advice, like every five minutes, about what he should wear?”

“No, a guy roommate will never even tell us

he’s going on a date. He’ll just leave. He’ll be gone three or four hours and then he’ll come back and go to bed. He doesn’t tell us how it went and we don’t ask. The truth is, we don’t really care.”

She raised both hands high in the air. “Yes! That’s how it should be! Why do each of my roommates think they have to tell me everything? Why do I have to be shown three possible variations of what she might wear and then be asked to decide? Why do I have to be told in detail what the guy said when he asked her out? And after it’s over, when I just want to go to sleep, why do I have to be told everything that happened on her stupid date? I don’t want to know! I just want to be left alone!”

“You know what? You would fit in so well with guys.”

“I know. I totally would. But that’s not the worst. The thing I dread the most is the weekends. Each of my roommates is seeing someone, so they’ll all go on dates, and I’ll be left all alone in the apartment with only my 8 × 10 picture of Robbie. Actually, it’s his high school graduation picture. I keep getting older, but he stays the same.”

She paused as though she weren’t sure she should say what she was thinking. “You want to know something weird? Last week I realized I was starting to think of him as my nephew.”

That seemed like an odd thing to say, but it also made me very happy. “If you get lonely on the weekends, give me a call. I’ll never be doing anything.”

She hesitated and then asked, “Are you serious?”

“Totally.”

“Well, actually, I will be lonely this Friday night.”

“Okay, I’ll come over. What time?”

“I’d say eight-thirty. By then all my roommates will be gone. I don’t want to have to explain you to them.”

“What do you want to do when we’re together?” I asked.

She thought about it for a while and then said, “I think we should take a walk.”

“Yeah, sure, we’ll totally do that. Then we don’t have to explain anything to anybody. Some people don’t have cars so they have to walk all the time. Sometimes they even walk together with a friend. Nobody in the world would confuse taking a walk with being on a date.”

She nodded. “Exactly.” ■