

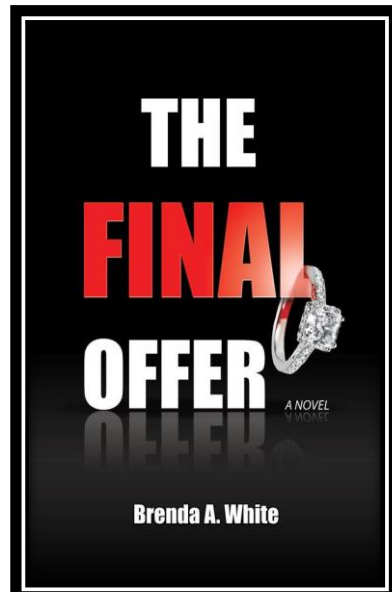
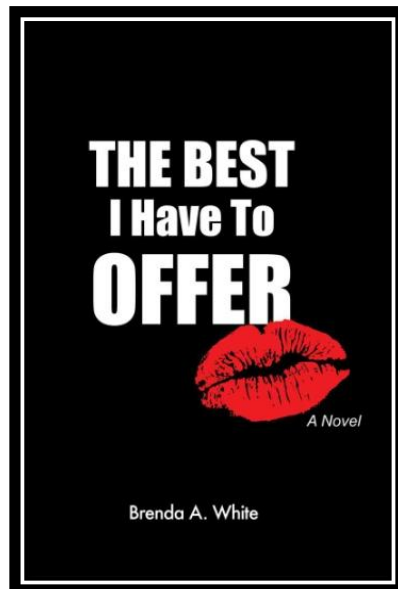
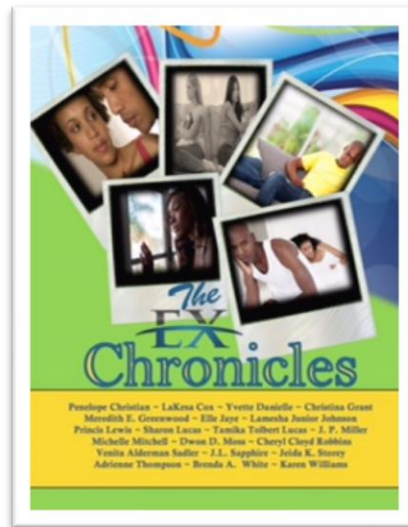
Three Sample Chapters from

AWARD-WINNING

&

NATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Brenda A. White

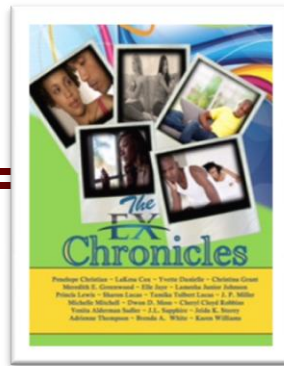


The Ex Chronicles Anthology

AWARD-WINNING

&

NATIONAL BESTSELLER



NOT DADDY'S GIRL

by Brenda A. White



Madison grew up feeling like an outsider smack dab in the middle of a family of five. Although she questioned her identity often, she never imagined the day she'd find out the truth. What secret is her family keeping?

MADISON

Color me dazed and confused because two women approached me at Frenchy's Chicken and said I was their niece.

I was suddenly not hungry, so I closed my box, wrapped my lemon cake and rushed toward my car. My hands trembled so badly I dropped my phone. I fished it out from underneath the seat, and scrolled to my favorites to call my sister, Shay. The phone rang four times and went to voice mail. I slapped the steering wheel. "Shay, call me back, please. I have something to ask you."

I wanted to call my dad since I had just finished talking to him about moving my stuff back home after graduation. I pulled the hoodie over my head and rested against the headrest to calm my nerves. My chest moved up and down.

I had watched my family for years, wondering why I didn't look like any of them. I had always felt different, too. Though it had been awhile, I even questioned my parents on a number of occasions.

"Oh, girl, stop it, you do look like us then continued with what I know now as a bunch of lies. I remember Troy always appeared sad when she responded, but I thought it was because he missed his dad.

I often wondered if I was adopted, but when I discussed it with Shay, she'd remember my mother's pregnancy. She showed me pictures. My dark skin, high cheek bones, thick silky eyebrows, and full lips were totally opposite of her and the rest of the family.

Tears started to glide along my eyelids and my cheeks flushed a wave of heat. I wanted to believe, but I thought were those ladies telling the truth.

My phone vibrated.

"Shay!"

"Hey girl. Why are you yelling?"

"You will not believe what just happened to me." I turned the radio off.

"Yes, I will. What?" Her tone excited. I loved her; she always showed interest in whatever was going on with me.

"I was sitting at Frenchy's eating by myself and these two ladies came up to me." I paused and looked around at the cars lining up in the drive thru. "They came up to me and said that I was their niece."

"Girl, stop it. They are lying to you. How is that?"

“The younger lady was doing all the talking and the other one was just sitting there nodding. She said Momma messed around with her married brother and had me, while she was married to Daddy and that’s why they divorced.”

“Madison, how is that possible? Momma and Daddy divorced when you were almost eighteen.” She paused. “Who would wait eighteen years after an affair to get a divorce?”

She didn’t know it, but she was destroying my theory and desire of finally belonging.

She continued, “If Daddy was mad at Momma about you, Aiden wouldn’t be here, either.”

“What if Aiden is not Daddy’s either?” I twirled my finger around my hair.

“Madison, cut it out. Aiden looks just like Daddy,” her voice elevated.

“I don’t think so. He looks like mom to me. So, we really don’t know who his dad is either.” I mumbled and rested my elbow on the steering wheel.

“Madison! You are out of line?”

“What? No, I’m not! What if Momma is a ho?”

She sighed, “I can’t with you today.”

Our conversation had gone differently than I had planned. I expected support.

“Okay, hear me out. Do you remember when they used to argue all the time? They argued for almost five years about an affair before they finally divorced. I thought it was Daddy’s, because Momma did all the yelling. They argued all the time and it had to be about me, they’ve been telling lies all these years.”

“Madison, that is not true,” she yelled.

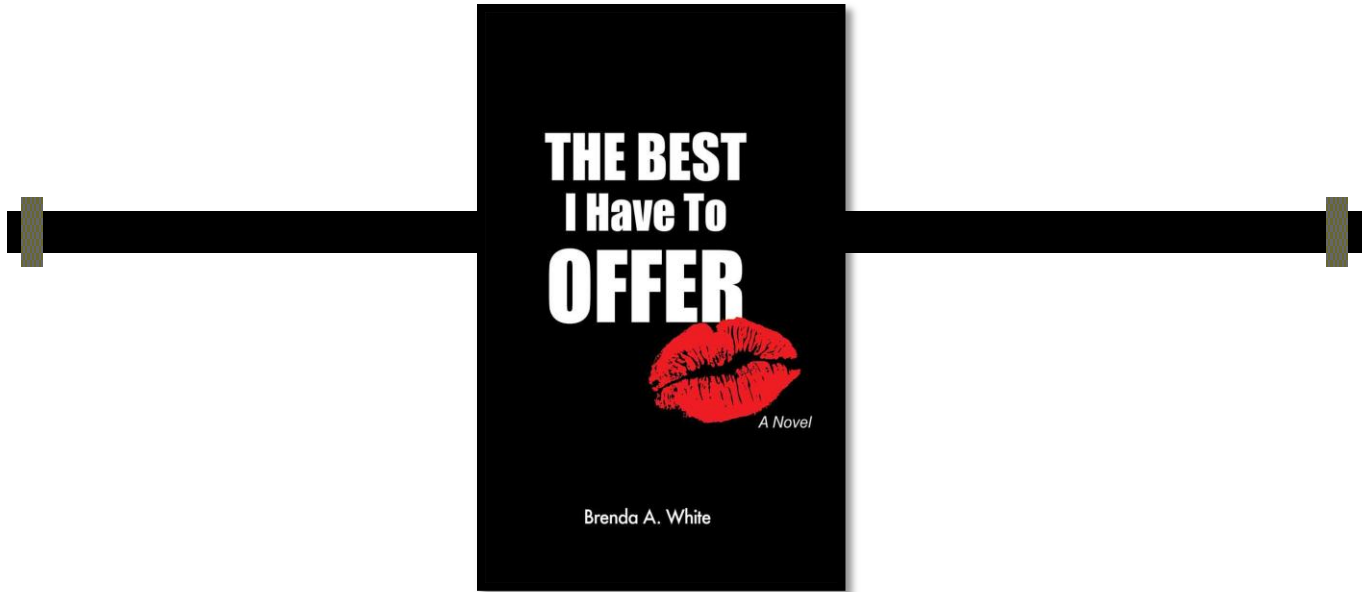
“You don’t know, you were gone when daddy found out I wasn’t his daughter. I didn’t understand then, but it’s all clear to me now. Everybody treated me differently. I was only twelve.” I wiped away a tear with the back of my hand.

“That is complete nonsense.” Her voice filled with frustration.

“No, it’s not,” my voice trembled. She didn’t respond, so I continued, “And Shay, I look just like the lady. So identical, I could be her daughter.” I waited, still no response. “She gave me her number.”

“Goodbye, Madison.”

My jaw clinched and I took one long sniff as a sign to suck it up, because that was the last time, I would cry about how my family treated me. Shay knew I was telling the truth. She had never hung up on me because she knew that pissed me off and everybody in the family knew what I did when I got pissed off.



CHOICES WITHIN, LLC

Houston

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THE BEST I HAVE TO OFFER

Mia Nixon has had her share of heartaches. That's why the budding entrepreneur has hung up all hopes of happiness. That is, until she meets Gary Matthews. Sexy, handsome, intelligent, and looking for a monogamous relationship, Gary is everything Mia ever wanted in a man. He breaks down her wall and just when Mia decides to let down her guard and take a chance on love, she discovers that Gary's got drama. How much is too much? Between a certifiably crazy ex, and an assistant who continuously crosses the lines, will it all prove too much for Mia to take? Before all is said and done will the best these two have to offer be enough?

Prologue

Dark Secrets

She broke one of her truisms, *some things you need to go to your grave with*. She sat in the low back contemporary-styled Italian leather chair, cigar in hand, right leg crossed—never inhaling—blowing circles into the air, her five-inch black patent-leather stiletto rhythmically swinging from her foot.

“They both were laid out when I left. She was sprawled out on the chaise-lounge and he went down after the gun went off.” She paused. “Hit his head on the wall.” She looked down, then back up. “He should have known I am not to be messed with. I told him that, several times. I told him that I learned how to shoot—I’m licensed to carry—self-defense, you name it, and he still tried me. Damn fool. You know, I’ve been told that I’m just like my grandmother. I must say, people will learn, one day.”

She sat up straight, tapped the cigar in the ashtray, crushed it, picked up her wine glass, took a slow sip, and allowed the taste to linger on her palette for a moment. She swallowed and leaned back again, took a deep breath, exhaled through her nose. Her breast rose and fell. She stared at the ceiling. All of the feelings and memories of that dismal evening crowding her mind like the fans at Cowboys Stadium to see the Dallas Cowboys play. She fidgeted in her chair as her heart sped up. Though she tried to pretend she was confident and cocky, she was scared.

“His wife came in acting all crazy, had a knife in her hand waving it like a fool. He started acting like a damn wimp. He suddenly charged at her, took the knife and took her down, then had the nerve to try the same thing on me and I stopped him, dead in his damn tracks. It was that simple, but just too much drama that I didn’t expect. I felt like I was moving in slow motion. You know, I never heard anything about them again, absolutely nothing about the story. I guess because they covered it locally and I left immediately, and went back to Dallas; though I thought about it every minute or every day for months. Nevertheless, I’m past that now. That was years ago when I first moved to Dallas. I dabbled with that for a short time against my better judgment; suffered minor consequences and scars, and moved on. Dealing with him was hazardous for my health.”

She stood up, looked down, smoothed out the wrinkles in her black pencil skirt, and started her casual and slow stroll toward the door. She stopped and turned around. “You know what? I’m never smoking again.”

She gave her signature wink and walked out, leaving so many unanswered questions.

Chapter 1

MIA

I was standing in my office window on the thirtieth floor, looking over downtown Houston. The sun was forcing its way between two buildings, onto the expressway and directly into my face. What a beautiful sight.

Thank you Jesus, I thought. I sure was going to miss this view. I sat back down in my chair amid all of the boxes in my office, leaned my head back, and meditated for a few moments. This had been my morning ritual and now interrupted by my cell phone ringing. I sat up straight, inhaled, and exhaled, before picking up my Blackberry. I smiled when I saw the picture displayed on the screen. “Talk to me, talk to me!” I sang into the phone.

“What’s going on, girly?” It was Dena Thomas, one of my very best friends.

“Good Mernin’, Good Mernin’,” we both said in unison, mocking Dena’s great-grandmother.

“Hey, I want you to meet me at the park for lunch, on the swings. I feel like being a little girl today and I need to talk to you,” Dena requested.

“Okay, I’m down for that.” I sat up straight and continued to put more of my personal items into the boxes. “Today is my last day here. So I’m out of here early. I’m done with recruiting, policies, and procedures. I have recruited my last college student, from this position anyway. I have a few things to wrap up and then I can meet...”

“Yeah, that’s right,” she interrupted. “Today is your last day over there.”

“Yes indeed.” I thumbed through a few papers before tossing them in the trash. “I’m ready to do what you taught me and try this entrepreneur thing. Learning and Development here I come! It is about time I utilize my hard-earned education from Associate’s Degree to Ph.D. It’s a little unnerving, but I’m ready.”

“Yes, girl you are. You lined it up because you knew the lay-offs were coming. You said they were discussing it three years ago, right after they promoted you to run the place.”

“I know.” I dropped into the chair. The guy from the mailroom knocked on the door and pointed at the boxes. “Hold on for a second, Dena.” I rolled my chair closer and pointed at the labels to guide him to the boxes that were going to storage because they were outsourcing my entire team, including me. “Okay, go ahead.”

Dena continued. “Girl, they just gave you that gentle push that you needed to get started on your dream, with a ninety day notice and a nice severance.”

“Thank the Lord and I am not complaining about that.” I stood to look out the window.

“You’ve spent two years planning and focusing on the right things, breaking that entrepreneur dream down to little manageable pieces. What’s that board you created?”

“A vision-board,” I added as I paced back and forth.

“Yes, the good ol’ vision-board, you sacrificed and saved, you will be okay. I assure you, Mia,” she encouraged.

I needed to hear that again because a hint of fear had landed on me this morning like a heavy weight. My company, ACC had given me a heads-up in early January that lay-offs in the recruiting division were imminent. I had eight recruiters on my team covering forty cities across the U.S.

“Whew! Thanks, Dena.” I fanned myself with a folder as I scanned the office to make sure I wasn’t about to leave behind anything important. “You always know what to say and when to say it. You are the angel on my shoulder encouraging me keep moving my feet and I thank you.”

“Yepper. That’s what I’m here for. You can do it, girl. I got your back! But, one thing you will miss is the nice bonus in the spring. Umph.”

“And I know it. So keep my bedroom ready over there just in case. But anyway, enough about me, what do you need to talk about?”

“Didn’t I say meet me at the park?” She huffed, jokingly.

“I know, but I wanted to get my mind ready for the conversation. And pray and meditate and all of that good stuff.”

She paused for a moment and then said, “I just want to go to the park and swing and chill.”

She was not telling the truth and although I didn’t know what was going on, I had planned to hang up the phone and continue my morning ritual, which now included a longer prayer for her. I knew my friend very well and when she wanted to go to the park, on the swings, and become a little girl all over again, something was bothering her. Sitting on the swings allowed us to go back, if only for a moment, and relieve some stress. I prayed she didn’t have an impending confession because she had done something to that deadbeat boyfriend of hers. Because Lord knows, they have had enough drama for everybody.

I conceded with no pressure. “Okay, I’m down for that. I have some things that I must do today so I need to skedaddle and get to them. I’ll probably be ready by eleven-ish.”



It was eighty-nine degrees. The park was beautiful as always at the beginning of spring. A golf course next to it, the grass looked like thick green carpet, sand boxes with fallen and half-constructed sand castles adorned the area, which was evident that happiness had visited the spot. The flowerbeds and trees were placed strategically throughout the park, an allergy nightmare.

Dena enjoyed sitting in the swings, staring at nothing. It was a great stress relief to go back to childhood, enjoy the outdoors, listen to the birds, and just be thankful.

I had seen Dena handle tragedies from a young age. I believe that was the reason for many of her demons, despite her success professionally.

My mind went back to the summer of 1985 when Dena and I met in elementary school. Dena was walking on the sidewalk in Queens with one of her friends, Tory, a car drove onto the sidewalk and hit him, then just kept going. Tory died on the sidewalk. Dena's mother found out that Tory had been hit on purpose so she sent Dena to Arkansas to live with her grandmother as the "investigation" took place. We were at recess when I invited Dena to join my friends and me on the swings. At the time, she appeared very shy. All of the swings were full, so I volunteered my swing to her, and pushed her until she got her momentum going. From that day on, she joined in our daily competition of who can swing the highest. She really enjoyed it. Sometimes the two of us would go to the swings and just sit, we did not talk until she was ready to talk. She was going through her grieving phase of losing her friend and being taken away from the environment where she was most comfortable. We would always go to the swings when we needed to talk and that has been our tradition ever since.

I pulled into a parking space beside Dena's Lexus and spotted her already sitting on the swings in her golf attire. I hopped out of the car and walked toward her. I noticed a woman standing at a distance with a camera that had one of those long lenses on it, like the professional photographers use.

"Hey Dena." I reached for a hug. "How are you doing Missy? Did you notice if that lady was snapping pictures of you or was she just taking pictures of the park?" I motioned my hand in the air and walked over to the blanket that Dena had spread on the ground, dropped my bag, and returned to plop down in the swing next to Dena.

"What woman? I wasn't paying attention."

“My gosh, Dena, please pay attention. That woman over there.” I moved my head toward the woman, trying not to be obvious as I thrust my legs forward to get a slight momentum of my swing.

Dena lowered her sunglasses to get a better view of the woman. “She’s too far away, I can’t see her.”

“You’re not under surveillance for any reason are you?” I joked.

“I’d better not be. But there’s no telling who Monty’s dumb self has hired. Oh no, wait. He’s broke and hiring anybody to do anything would require money, huh?” she scoffed.

“Well, that camera is aimed in this direction for some reason and it’s making me nervous. Why would Monty hire somebody?”

“Because he’s trifling, broke, about to be homeless, and accused me of cheating this morning,” she blurted out.

“Umph. Glory,” I mumbled.

I decided to wait to see if she would elaborate before I made any comments. I knew all about Monty and his tricks, but for him to be on the homeless track, he had really pissed her off.

She remained quiet and kept her eyes on the woman with the camera. She stood up and stretched as I struggled to stop my swing because I knew she was getting ready to do something that she had no business doing.

“Who is this woman? She is really bold standing here just snapping away. I know she’s not taking pictures of the scenery,” she muttered.

“Dena, uh, maybe she’s uh…” I stood beside her.

Dena ignored me and started a brisk walk that turned into a sprint, in the direction of the woman. The woman saw Dena coming toward her, lowered her camera and rushed back to her convertible Volkswagen and drove away.

“Damn it!” Dena declared when I caught up to her. She rushed back to the picnic area, dropped to her knees and rummaged through her things until she found a pen. “I’m not gonna chase her ass, but I can write those license plates down.”

My eyes followed the direction of the Volkswagen until it was out of sight.

Chapter 2

GARY

”Mr. Matthews, do you have any children?” a little boy asked.

”Do you have a daughter?” a little girl yelled out before I could answer the first question, as the whole class giggled at their questions.

”I bet he has a son!” another little boy yelled.

”Hold on, guys.” I placed the palms of my hands together, leaned forward and smiled “And girls. No, I do not have any children.”

I couldn’t remember how this conversation went from understanding money to my personal life.

”Well, do you want some?” another kid yelled.

I looked at the teacher in a ‘please help me’ expression. She appeared to be enjoying the barrage of questions by the class.

”Okay, now class, that’s enough,” Mrs. Griffin conveyed.

”Thank you.” I mouthed, as I nodded, and smiled.

The bell rang and the kids scrambled to line up at the door. I was actually impressed because they were so quiet. One little boy kept looking at me. I gave him the peace sign and he gave it back. The students left and Mrs. Griffin and I went through the normal ‘thank you so much for coming’ speech, I stopped by the principal’s office to sign out and I left the building.

I volunteered for Operation Money, a program that teaches children how to become financially savvy. It was a six-week commitment and I had just enjoyed week number three. My parents shared financial knowledge with me at the appropriate time and I took pleasure in giving it back.

I took my jacket off as I always do when I drive. I put my cell phone within reach, as I got in the truck because I needed to call Sean before I got to the office. We used to talk at least twice per week but I was so busy, I hadn’t talked to him in over two weeks. Sean is my very tall, dark, muscular buddy, born and raised in Houston, Texas. I met him on one of his visits to New York through my cousin, Sam over ten years ago. When the three of us walk into a room, most people mistake us for members of a professional sports team or bouncers. Sean and Sam look a lot alike and are both larger than me and I considered myself a pretty sturdy dude.

”Mr. Matthews,” I heard a female voice call out before I closed the door. It was Mrs. Griffin running toward me, waving a piece of paper.

“Mr. Matthews, you forgot something,” she panted as she tried to catch her breath.

“Oh, I’m sorry, I would’ve come back in. You didn’t have to run. What is it?” I stepped out of the truck.

She appeared to be at least ten years younger than me, nice hair, was a little on the heavy side, and not bad looking but I could tell that she wasn’t up on her cardio regimen. Her chest was noticeably moving up and down.

“I wanted you to...I wanted you to... have this.” She slouched on the door of the truck.

“Are you okay?” I gently touched her elbow to try to steady her.

She nodded. “Yes. Yes.”

“You sure?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I just didn’t want you to leave here another day without me giving you this.”

“What is it?” I asked again.

I opened the folded piece of paper. A flyer for a little league football camp that had already happened but there was also a name, phone number, and email address written in the corner. My eyes scanned the flyer.

I was puzzled. “What is this for? Who is Melinda G?”

“It’s me.” She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. “I just used this paper to make it seem like something legit, just in case someone saw it.”

“Oh. Melinda Griffin.” I looked at the wedding ring on her left hand.

Her eyes followed mine. “Oh. That. I just wear it for school.” She wiggled it in the air. “I’ve been separated for some time now. I decided to get back into the dating scene and thought I’d just put myself out there and see what happens.”

“Oh, I see, with your ring on, huh?”

“He won’t be needing that.” A familiar female voice resounded as the paper was removed from my hand, ripped into several smaller pieces, and tossed into the air.

“Oh hi, Nina. I’m sorry, Ms. Briggs, is this your man?” Mrs. Griffin asked sarcastically.

Ohh damn, I thought.

“He was and you know that,” Nina bolstered.

“Yes. I did and the keyword here is *was*.” Mrs. Griffin stepped toward Nina who didn’t flinch.

Nina Briggs was my ex-girlfriend whom I had not spoken to in several months and hadn’t seen in a year. When we dated, she was short-fused and bad-tempered and blamed it on the hours she worked on

two jobs and the people she worked with. Nina allowed the work she did as a nurse to control her mood. She was very unhappy. Her second job as the backup school nurse brought her to the school and I could see that nasty mood hadn't changed.

"Ladies, come on now, there is no need for this." I glanced around the parking lot to make sure no one was watching and stepped between them. "Nina, what are you doing here?"

"I work here. Remember?" She folded her arms and shifted her weight to one leg.

"No. I don't remember. So, why are you out here?"

"I drove up and saw Mrs. Griffin slouched all on your truck so I decided to come over here and save you from yourself, so you won't mess around with a married woman."

I gasped. "What? Save me from myself?"

"I'm not married, Ms. Briggs." Mrs. Griffin chimed in and stepped around me. I'm sure her plan was to give me her number and saunter back into the classroom as if nothing happened but Nina stopped all of that. "I've been separated for months and you know that."

"Nina, you stay right there." I turned toward Mrs. Griffin and gently grabbed her shoulders. "Mrs. Griffin, I'm flattered but I, I uh, I will be in touch, okay? Please go back inside, we don't need this. I promise, I'll be in touch."

She looked disappointed but she turned on her heels and headed back toward the building. "I'll be in touch," she said loudly. She and Nina glared at each other as she walked away.

"No. You won't," Nina called back.

I turned back toward Nina. "Nina, stop! Save me from myself? Are you serious?"

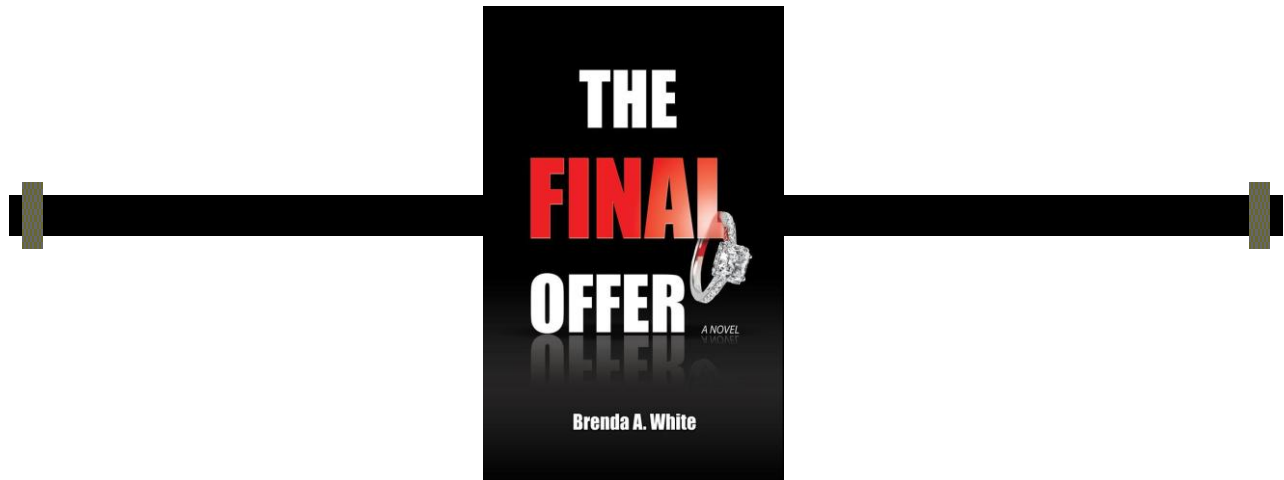
"Save me from myself," she chortled derisively. "That lady is married Gary, and you, being the bona fide player that you are, I needed to save you, from, yourself." She leaned forward.

I folded my arms and narrowed my eyes at her. *I could argue with her or I can concede. I want to argue because she just disrespected me and I want to make my point but if I argue that will cause a scene so I must concede and deal with her later or not at all.* "You know what? Thank you, Nina. Thank you so much for saving me because you know I don't do married women."

"I know." She swirled around and started her walk into the building.

I got back into my truck and wondered what just happened. I sat there for a moment and watched Nina. I rested my head on the headrest. *She is nuts. What in the world is going on with her. Nahhhh, I can never go back there. Ever.* I shook my head and cranked the truck.

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CHOICES 
WITHIN, LLC
Houston

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THE FINAL OFFER

Would you marry your distant cousin if you found out after you were already in love? From Arkansas to New York surely there is no chance that could every happen to Gary and Mia.

Gary Matthews is intelligent, affluent, sexy, and handsome, but all of these wonderful attributes could appear futile since he has no control over the actions of his exes, his biological mother, nor the health of his business partner of his thriving litigation consulting firm. In spite of it all, Gary maintains that he will give his fiancée, Mia Nixon, the best he has to offer, which is him, as is. While he fights to maintain the success of his firm, keep his ex-girlfriends away, and keep his meddling biological mother out of his business, his personal life with Mia is unraveling. Does Gary have enough fight left to give her the best he has to offer and mend the torn threads, or will he stand firm and give Mia the final offer before he calls it quits?

M I A

We were so in love.

THE sound of a roaring car engine and falling glass interrupted our once serene and tranquil afternoon. I remember that sound because it was the beginning of another change in the relationship with the man that I loved dearly.

We had been engaged for almost a year and I had not made a single step toward planning our wedding. I was paralyzed by fear that had commandeered my entire being and had me completely idling. My best friend, Dena Thomas, on the other hand was eager, willing, and ready to start the planning. She practically begged me to start. It was not about event planning as her lucrative and main source of income nor was it about the money she'd make because she had offered to do the wedding for free. Dena just wanted us married and soon. She was still riding the cloud of our introduction that she concocted over two years ago, and I was running scared at the very thought of marrying the wrong man whose past could potentially land me six-feet under in a tragic way. "I'm afraid, Gary! I'm afraid of what would happen to me if I marry you and I'm stuck for the rest of my life in fear and misery!" I had yelled those words to my fiancé, Gary Matthews, as I packed my bags to run away to Arkansas two months after we were engaged. He was definitely all I ever wanted in a man, but drama followed him like a shadow.

Gary is a partner at Matthews and Jefferson Consulting, LLC. His former assistant, Lynn, was in jail awaiting trial for trying to kill me by running through a red light and ramming a truck into my car, a Corvette. A tiny car compared to the dump truck like vehicle she was driving. Since the accident, Lynn's conniving children had vanished. They were not our current concern, but one of Gary's ex-girlfriends, Nina Briggs, resurfaced frequently. Nina wanted Gary back and I was tired of dealing with her nonsense. I was tired of seeing her almost everywhere I went and I really wanted to pummel her. I wanted to physically harm her badly, but I had been taught and got frequent reminders from others that a lady should not resort to fighting. Real women used their words not their fists. I thought that was a bunch of bull and I wanted to behave like Dena. I wanted to use my fists, my feet, and any other object to harm Nina. She would not leave us alone. Because of her, Gary and I stepped away from each other for a couple of months; well, I stepped away from him. During our hiatus, he went out with a lady named Roni, who was a bit of a psycho also. He says he never slept with her and did not understand why she was so obsessed with him. He pretended like he was clueless regarding advances and feelings from other women toward him. I don't believe him, but what can I say, I had left him at that time. I was certainly not without fault. I had allowed Dena to pull me into so much mess over the years that both of us should have at least one misdemeanor, if not a felony. I carelessly recreated my own scene of drama while I was in Arkansas

during my first hiatus. I just pray it doesn't reemerge at the most inopportune moment. I should've let that giant remain asleep.

It was a beautiful day, I had finished my yoga session and I was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. Dena called me every morning at seven-thirty. She was an early riser, regardless of the time she drifted off to sleep the night before. I saw her name and our picture flash on the screen. She was on time with her call.

I removed the ear bud from the Bluetooth device around my neck and pressed it into my ear. "Good morning, lil' devil," I joked as I twisted the wand to open the blinds over the kitchen sink.

She gasped. "I know you didn't call me a devil. I'm the furthest thing from it."

"Okay. I apologize." My voice dripped with sarcasm. I meandered around the kitchen opening all of the blinds to let the natural light in then back to the stove to check the omelets.

"You know you always try to act like Miss Innocent and Miss Corporate America and your butt did a one eighty when you left there. Just as ratchet as the next person now," she exclaimed.

I chuckled. "You're a lie. I have my quirks, but I ain't ratchet, far from it."

"See there, I ain't ratchet," she mocked me.

"Whatever, Dena. I have an image to uphold. In this case, it is what people think of me. My reputation is how they choose me to present, to speak at their events, facilitate, consult, and yada, yada, yada. There's nothing in running around behaving ratchetely. I know I just made up a word."

She giggled. "I heard you, but I know Jesus' disciple is not putting her fate in the hands of another human being. Your steps and your success are ordered by God! Anyway, Miss Angel Wings, why are we wasting time discussing 'ratchet' anyway? What are you doing?"

I was slightly taken aback by the comment, especially coming from her, but she was right. I sometimes forget that people are neither my source nor my provider, but the image and behaviors I was speaking of at that moment were also those of a mature Christian and I was tempted to pop back at her with such a comment, but I changed my mind. "I'm preparing a to-go breakfast for my sweetie before he rushes through here grabbing unhealthy stuff on the way out the door. He's running late today."

"Well, aren't you a sweetheart." Her tone had changed.

"I'm doing the best I can."

"Okay. I need to go to the park today. It's supposed to be a beautiful day, seventy-five degrees for the high, low humidity, no rain, a perfect day for swinging. What do you have on your agenda?"

"I just have a conference call for my life coaching class later today. Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I just need to get on the swings. Swing away some stress, some evil thoughts. I just need to swing."

Dena and I have been swinging away stress since we were kids. We'd meet at the park by the swings, spread out a blanket with food, swing for a little while, and then sit on the blanket and talk. It was always at her request though, at least once per quarter like clockwork.

“Oh, okay. What time?” I sprinkled shredded cheese inside the omelet, flipped it onto the croissant, added a couple of slices of avocado and quickly wrapped it in wax paper and foil, then slid it into a sandwich bag.

“Around eleven o’clock would work, not too early, not too late.”

“Okay, I think I can work that in. My call is late afternoon.”

“We shouldn’t be long.”

“Hold on for a second, Dena.” I reached for the phone to put it on mute.

“Good morning, babe.” Gary leaned in to kiss me as he rushed through the kitchen adjusting his tie with his jacket draped over his arm. He pulled the refrigerator door open and grabbed an orange juice. He took a swig and set the bottle on the countertop. His tailored navy blue pants swathed his firm glutes and rested neatly on top of his Dover Split toe shoes from Edward Green that I had picked up for him the day before.

“Hey, honey. You look nice. I like. And you smell good, too.” I stepped back in admiration and gave him a seductive once over.

“Thank you.” He blushed as he adjusted his cufflinks.

“Here you go. I made two smaller ones today.” I handed him a bag with turkey sausage, croissant with egg, shredded cheddar, Pico, and avocado and another one with a tiny omelet on a croissant with similar ingredients. He loved my little creations in the kitchen. He used to cook all the time, but now I had turned into the perfect housewife without the title.

“Thank you. I appreciate you.” He leaned in again for more kisses with tongue. “Ummm, I gotta go.” He moaned and looked at me seductively. He winked at me and turned to walk out the door. I followed him toward the garage.

“Okay, see you later. Love you.”

“I love you more.” He hung his jacket on the hanger in the back seat of his truck and hopped in.

I yelled, “Knock ’em dead today. I know you will.”

He gave me thumbs up. I leaned on the door then blew him a kiss and waited until he backed the truck out of the garage before I pressed the button to let the garage door down.

I pressed the mute button and focused my attention back to Dena. “Oh, how I love that dude. Okay, ma’am.”

“It took you long enough,” she spat.

“It did not. Anyway, do you need to swing or do you need to chill? Because I was thinking, you should come here and I can expand this breakfast menu to add some grits and waffles or French toast or something.”

“Can you add some wings too?”

“Ummm, now you’re running out,” I murmured as I looked in the freezer for wings. “Yes, I can add wings.”

“Swing, chill, it’s all the same to me. I’m on my way. I’ll be there in forty-five or less. Bye.”

“Good-bye,” I said for not, because she had already disconnected the call.

She always hung up before I could say goodbye. My phone vibrated. I touched the text message icon and smiled as I shifted my weight to one leg.

Hey, love, I wanted to tell you how much I really appreciate what you're doing and all you do for me. This croissant is good as hell! I know you don't care much for the kitchen and other domestic stuff but you're awesome and I appreciate it and I don't take any of it for granted. I got you.

I could hear his voice saying those words and it made my heart smile. He loved me and appreciated me and I knew it. Before I sold my house and moved in with him, I had a maid, Millie, who came once per week to clean, do laundry, and sometimes cook for me. I abhor domestic duties. I kept things tidy because I didn't like a mess, but I certainly didn't enjoy it. My parents made me do so many house chores growing up; I vowed to never do them when I got my own house.

During my first budget session with Gary, that was the first area he reviewed to save money until we determine our expense to income ratio while I worked to get my business running smoothly again. He promised it wouldn't last forever, but we needed to make some observations before going overboard on "nice to haves." I replied to the text after reading it a few times with a smile plastered on my face. *Thanks, babe! You really know how to make my day. :-)*

I could tell he was typing so I sent another quick note. *Does this mean I'll never see Millie again?*

Ha, no, that's not what that means. You'll be able to see Millie for a couple of things soon.

Thanks, babe. Love you. Getting ready to fix wings and waffles for me and Dena.

Okay, love you too, have fun.

Dena arrived on time as she always does. We sat by the pool and lounged for over two hours talking, eating, and drinking mimosas as the light wind kissed our skin and the sun gave us our daily dose of Vitamin D. She didn't complain about her deadbeat boyfriend, Monty, but actually said a few good things about him. He had been with the same company for more than a year. They were in love again. We talked about life and leaving a legacy for our children, grandchildren, our sorority, our alma mater, and the world in general. She shared some of the documents she'd started on like her will and her living will. I know this needed to be done, but I was a little concerned about why she was all of a sudden focused on it now. I didn't push it; I reviewed the documents and handed them back to her and made a mental note to get mine done also.

"I'm really happy that you and Monty are doing better these days. It seems he's much better to you and everyone else when he's working."

"Yeah, he's one of those men who have a problem if his woman makes more money than him."

"I figured as much. When are you all getting married?"

She twisted her face. "I don't know. He's mentioned it a few times lately, but he doesn't want a big to do wedding. He thinks that I want something extremely elaborate because those are the types of weddings I plan, but that is so far from what I want. Simple is so much better for me. My nerves can't take it."

“But, you’re pushing the wedding of the century on me?”

“Yes, because that’s what you need.” She smiled. “I plan extravagantly for other people and especially for my BFF.”

“Oh, really?” I stared blankly at her.

“Mia, my treat today.” She stood up. “Mani-pedis on me, before your class.” She was good at changing the subject.

“Let’s go.”

“Wow. That was easy.”

“You said the magic words—your treat. What’s difficult about that?”

“You’re silly. Let’s go. I’ll even drive.”

“Well, you kind of have to since I haven’t purchased a car yet.”

“Gary has a fleet in the garage. Pick one. You’re not driving yet because you don’t want to. He’s running and carting you around like Miss Daisy.”

I shot her a look and she held up both hands. “But hey, I’m like Kermit, that’s none of my business.”

“Ha! You’re stupid, Dena.” I laughed as her reference to the social media memes with Kermit the frog where the tag would say something extremely messy, mean, or condescending and ended with ‘...but that’s none of my business.’

“Help me clean the kitchen and we can roll.”

I contemplated telling her about my encounter with Nina, Gary’s ex-girlfriend, the other day, but I decided against it. I ran into her at the grocery store. She had intentionally bumped my shopping cart twice while I was shopping. I quickly completed my shopping and left the store and I mentally beat myself up for the remainder of the day because I felt I should have responded in some type of way. Later that night, Gary was so focused on his work; he didn’t notice my irritation with myself. So, it was easy for me to bury myself in a novel and fall asleep, but I remember when he turned off the light and pulled me close and planted a kiss on my shoulder before I heard his muffled snoring.

If I told Dena the story she would’ve been ready to go find Nina. By noon we were in our chairs getting manicures and pedicures. The place was crowded for midday on a Wednesday. Something was certainly on my friend’s mind, but she wouldn’t spit it out and I decided not to pressure her about it. We tried to maintain a mutual understanding. Unless it was life threatening, we would not automatically intervene unless it was requested. We’d had our issues in the past by one of us jumping into the business of the other one unrequested and it didn’t turn out well. Dena and I laughed and chatted for a few minutes, but then Dena leaned her head back on the chair as the massager shook her body to the different settings. I didn’t like that thing so I decided to listen to “The Empress Has No Clothes” on my Audible app. The narrator speaking in my ear was low enough that I could hear

and understand the book and hear anything going on around me, which is why I still heard the commotion at the register.

“I can’t believe the type of service you provide and the people you let enter this establishment,” the lady yelled as she looked in our direction. Kayla, the shop owner, was trying to calm her down but the lady was too irate to hear anything.

I turned to look at Dena and nothing was lost on her; her eyes were wide open. “Who the hell is this trick?” She leaned forward. “She looks familiar.” She narrowed her eyes as if that would help her to see clearer.

“She needs to calm down, looks like she’s performing. I’m not giving her the satisfaction by looking her way.”

“Girl, that’s that chick Gary went out with.”

“What? When?” I sat up straight.

“Mia, that’s Roni.”

She was about six feet tall with her stilettos on, sturdy, dark brown hair, nothing special, just a normal lady with an apparent attitude at the moment. Gary had never mentioned her physical attributes; he never said much about her at all. We both had agreed to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and start over, never asking about what happened while we were apart. Neither one of us knew at the time, that would be a huge mistake on both sides.

“What the hell are y’all looking at?” she snapped.

“Free my feet, Hannah.” The nail tech appeared puzzled by Dena’s request. Dena removed her feet from the bowl and leaned forward to wipe them off with the towel.

“No, no, no, Ms. Dena. You stay in your seat,” Hannah begged.

Hannah stood up to see what was going on.

“Now, Sarah, you know you’re gonna have to pass me that towel. This woman just might be crazy enough to try us in this place today. You know good and well, you and Hannah can’t protect us,” I said.

“I know y’all just came in here to mess with me.” She snapped in our direction, but she wasn’t coming any closer.

Dena and I looked at each other, confused. “Is this heffa schizophrenic? We’ve been coming here for years and have never seen your crazy ass. What are you talking about?” Dena yelled as she pulled the arm of the chair up so she could stand.

“Dena, be quiet. Please don’t entertain this fool unless she comes over here.”

“Well, if she makes that bad decision, I’ll be ready for her ass.”

Kayla’s husband, Mike, stopped working on his customer and walked to the front. “Ma’am, I’m sorry you’re gonna have to leave, you’re upsetting our customers.”

“Upsetting your customers? They’re upsetting me! I just stopped in here to get my nail fixed and y’all trippin’,” she yelled.

“Ma’am, please leave or we’ll have to call the police,” he pleaded. “Ma’am?”

“My name is Roni, not ma’am, damn!” She snatched her purse off the counter and tried to storm out, but her stilettos caused her to walk a bit more carefully.

Dena and I returned to our chairs and Mike watched as Roni got into her car.

“Well, so much for a relaxing afternoon. We can’t go anywhere without freakin’ drama. We’re too old for this ish, Mia.”

“I know, Dena. We’re not starting it, but somehow, we always end up in it.” As Mike and his wife were standing in front of our stations explaining to everyone what had happened, the sound of crashing glass and a roaring motor invaded the sound of soothing music and conversation—a sound that sent all of us scrambling to safety. Roni had driven her car through the building and my relationship with Gary had changed again.

Eighteen months later...

Chapter 1

MIA

VALENTINE’S Day had come and gone and it was 4:30 a.m. “Gary! Oh my God...that feels so, oh, good, baby.” I managed a whisper after he touched that spot. My back arched into shallow breaths, shivers swarmed around my feet, marched slowly up my calves to my thighs, to my spine, and then back down. My eyes did a fancy swirl, my head flipped back, and my toes curled. “Ahh.” My entire body shuddered and I collapsed onto the bed. Why is makeup sex the best? We had just completed round four. I knew the playful tug would arrive just as it did every morning. I’m glad I’d always made sure cleanliness was at the top of my list of priorities. Using the flushable feminine cleansing clothes in the middle of the night if I got up to use the bathroom and the dab of toothpaste on the back of my tongue before going to bed made me comfortable enough to let him do what he did every morning which was wake me up with kisses, licks, and sucks anywhere on my body.

He lingered for a few minutes staring at the ceiling. The sun had made its way through the window and reflected off the mirror and onto our bodies sprawled on the bed.

“You okay?” He smacked my thigh and got up to walk into the bathroom. I stretched out across the bed. Gary walked back into the room a few minutes later with a hot towel. We both turned toward the TV when the anchor announced the concert coming up at the end of the month. “You still want to go to that?” he inquired as he moved the towel across my body.

“Of course, I do.” I never turned my attention away from the TV. “Why would you ask that? You know I’m the biggest fan ever since...since before I was a teenager.”

“Wow, okay, I just asked, making sure.” He walked back to the bathroom, draped the towel on the rack, and returned to the bed. He kissed me on the cheek and gazed at me. “I love you, lil’ girl and I’m sorry about last night.”

“I love you, too.” I snuggled into his arms.

I was in a car accident caused by his obsessive ex-Administrative Assistant that resulted in a miscarriage and me being in a coma for several days. She’s in jail now. I was getting my nails done when one of the obsessive women from his past, Roni, whom he had taken on a date, ran her car through the building and claimed failed brakes. I’m not sure what he did to her, but we have not heard from her since she changed her story after the first one didn’t stick. She claimed she was in emotional duress and made a mistake and put the car in drive instead of reverse. He wanted to “protect” me so I allowed him to talk me into moving in with him after we were engaged. Our wedding plans had been off and on at my emotional call. He still does not want me to work because he wants to “provide” for me which was the reason for our disagreement last night, and now we’re here—emotions running

high, then low, and then back to high again, all stemming from the pieces of me. I needed help badly. My current therapy sessions were beginning to make progress and he was scheduled to join me after a couple more sessions.

I snuggled in tighter, rubbed my leg over his, played with his nipples, and cooed. “Gary Matthews, baby you make me feel so good, and thank you for everything you’re doing for me, but you are very good at distracting me. We still need to talk about Nina. You want me to stay home so I won’t encounter some of this foolishness on the outside. Me not working will not solve that. I’m done walking away from her.”

I knew it was not the best time to talk about it but he had avoided this conversation ever since I told him she bumped my cart at the grocery store and he brushed it off, saying it was probably someone else and was more irritated because I had gone to the store without him.

“Mia Nixon, I’m not trying to distract you. I was just making love to my fiancée. The woman who I’m dying to marry but also keeps blowing me off. I’m not trying to distract you; I’m trying to love you and show you that it’s time for us to move on with our lives, happy, raising a family, enjoying our families, and contributing to society, just living a simple, normal, and joyful life.” He rubbed his fingers through my hair and then reached for my hands and pulled it toward his lips to kiss it.

I looked up at him and sighed as I contemplated my next comment. He continued, “Babe, Nina is no longer a problem. I promise. Can we talk about that some other time? I’m not trying to spoil my day nor yours by talking about her. She should be the least of your worries.”

“But, how do you know that? As long as I’m breathing and moving around this city, she will be a problem. She’s in love with you and obviously wants you back, and she pops back up every few months in some kind of way. And I’m not sure if she thinks that harassing me would help her to get you back or what, but one thing it will guarantee her is an ass whooping. For sure.”

He pushed up to press his back against the headboard with a frown plastered on his face. “No, she is not in love with me. She just likes drama. Don’t worry about her, anymore.”

I was slightly irritated that he moved from our cuddling position on the bed, but I guess cuddling is not the perfect position for an imminent argument. I moved to mirror his position. “Gary, honey, look.” I paused for dramatic effect. “I love you more than anything or anybody in this world.” I paused again then continued in a matter-of-fact tone. “But I bullshit you not, if you don’t get Nina’s ass under control, I’m gonna kick her ass—hard. And I’m not playing. This is high school shit and I don’t have time for it.” I was looking directly into his eyes, my voice slightly elevated. I had allowed profanity to invade my vocabulary a lot more than usual.

He started shaking his head. “You need to calm down. Babe, outside of a lady, whose face you did not see, bumping your cart at the store, what has she done lately? And fighting over a dude is high school shit.”

I rose up on my elbows. “Trust me, I will not be fighting over you, I’ll fight because she crossed the line.”

He sighed. “Now Mia, you know that’s not who you are. That’s not how you handle things. Is there something you’re not telling me? Do we need to get a restraining order?” he bellowed. His tone surprised me a little as I’m sure my tone and words had surprised him without notice.

“I, uh, yes, I do.” I shook my head. “No, no I don’t. I’ll handle it myself.” I threw the covers off me, stepped onto the cold, hardwood floor, and walked into the bathroom for a shower. “When I finish with her silly ass, she’ll want a restraining order against me,” I mumbled.

“Babe, come on now.” He followed me into the bathroom. “Don’t start shutting me out again. Tell me what’s going on. What happened?” He rubbed my shoulder with his massive hand and pulled me into a side hug. “I’m sorry, let’s talk. Let’s talk. Please.”

“I don’t have a desire to talk now. I need to take a shower. I’m meeting Dena at the gym in less than an hour.” My tone was flat. I pulled away from him and looked toward the floor. Tears were threatening to gush out of my eyes. I was getting madder by the second. So, I put a shower cap on and hurriedly stepped into the shower to let the water hit my face.

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THE BEST I HAVE TO OFFER - BLING T-SHIRT

Excerpt from an Interview
with
Author Brenda A. White



by Dr. Michael L. McFrazier at The Final Offer Book Launch

Dr. McFrazier: Tell us about the t-shirt that some of the women are wearing here.

Brenda: My intent was that The Best I Have to Offer bling t-shirt be inspirational to those who wear it and to all who see it. I hope it brings a “walk tall – head up – chest out” kind of confidence and serve as a reminder that you are the best you have to offer anyone. So always be your best and always do your best by giving whatever you endeavor to do, your very best shot in that moment.

Thank you for taking the time to review a sample of my work. You can purchase copies of my novels at www.brendaawhite.com.



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