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By Brenda Jackson

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From New York Times bestselling author Brenda Jackson—The first of a new trilogy starring three Westmorelands who are impossible to resist: Zane, Canyon and Stern.

No woman walks away from Zane Westmoreland. But when Channing Hastings does just that, it leaves the rancher reeling—and then she returns to town engaged! Zane will do whatever it takes to show her that there is no man for her but him.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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"What do you mean Channing's back in Denver?" Zane Westmoreland dropped down in the chair across from his sister, a dark frown covering his face.

He fixed his gaze on Bailey, waiting on her response. Bailey knew that any mention of Channing Hastings would make him mad, but it seemed she was intent on ignoring him while she continued to eat her bowl of ice cream. Anyone else would have jumped at the anger that was apparent in his voice but not this particular sister. She didn't do anything until she was good and ready. While he waited, even more irritation bubbled up inside of him.

After what seemed like an enormous period of silence, Bailey finally angled her head. "I meant just what I said. I saw Channing today when I had lunch at the hospital with Megan. I understand she arrived in town last week. She looks good by the way."

Zane wasn't surprised. As far as he was concerned, there was never a time when Channing hadn't looked good...even after a sweaty workout session at the gym.

Suddenly, unbridled fury worked its way along his stomach lining. Why should he care how an ex-girlfriend looked? More importantly, why did the thought of her being back in town trigger such deep-seated anger within him?

Zane could answer that question without much thought. It hadn't been their breakup that still pissed him off but rather *how* they had broken up. Usually he was the one who decided when one of his relationships ended, but Channing had surprised the hell out of him and ended it herself.

"Is Channing's fiance with her?" He could have bitten off his tongue for asking.

"No, she's only here for six weeks, hosting a medical symposium at the hospital." Bailey didn't say anything for a minute and then, "That man got under my skin."

Zane lifted a brow. "What man?"

"Channing's fiance. He was checking out the women at Megan's wedding reception, even with Channing standing right beside him. He had a lot of nerve."

Zane had noticed the man's roving eyes, as well. He really shouldn't care. If Channing was inclined to put up with that kind of foolishness, that was her business. It shouldn't concern him. But it did.

He glanced out the window while his mind wandered back in time. He had dated Channing longer than he'd

dated any other woman—nine months exactly. Things had been almost perfect between them. But then she'd started hinting that she wanted more from their relationship. That was when he'd reiterated that he was not the marrying kind and never intended to be.

She never brought up the issue again, and Zane had assumed things were back to normal. But less than a month later, out of the clear blue sky, she told him that she had accepted a job at a hospital in Atlanta and would be moving away.

That had annoyed the hell out of him. She was trying to force his hand, and he wouldn't allow any woman to do that. So he'd called her bluff, refusing to offer a proposal. But then she'd moved to Atlanta as planned. That was almost two years ago, and he hadn't seen or heard from her until she'd shown up at his sister's wedding last month an engaged woman.

Engaged.

The very thought made him angry. She'd had the nerve to bring her fiance to the wedding knowing full well Zane would be there. And like Bailey had said, the man had checked out other women even with Channing by his side. That she was so desperate to have a ring on her finger that she would settle for such a man—the realization made Zane madder.

"This is simply delicious."

Bailey's words intruded on his thoughts. He glanced over at his sister, and his frown deepened. He had come home to find her sitting at his kitchen table like she lived there. In his current mood, her presence aggravated him. "And what do you think you're doing?"

She smiled. "What does it look like? I'm eating ice cream."

"My ice cream," he muttered. "How did you get in here, anyway? I changed the locks on my door."

Bailey leaned back in her chair and chuckled. "I noticed. Did you forget that I know how to pick a lock, Zane? Bane taught me ages ago. And as far as the ice cream, you only bought it because you knew I'd eat it."

You don't even like ice cream, and this is one of my favorite flavors."

"They're all your favorite flavors," he said, forcing himself not to grin. The last thing he needed was for her to think he was getting soft. And as far as picking locks, he had forgotten that talent had been just one of the many ways she and their cousin Bane used to get into trouble.

Getting up from the table, he headed for the door.

"Hey, where are you going?" Bailey called after him.

"Since I can't find peace in my own home, I'm going to ride my horse a spell. I'll be gone for an hour or so and hopefully that will give you time to find someone else to visit."

He then walked out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

"Channing, wait up!"

Channing stopped and turned around. She smiled when she saw Megan Claiborne walking briskly toward her. Megan had been one of the first doctors she'd become good friends with while working at the hospital four years ago, and their friendship had remained intact. Last month, Megan married Rico Claiborne, a gorgeous Bradley Cooper lookalike who worked as a private investigator in Philly. To divide their time between Philadelphia and Denver, Megan worked six months as a doctor of anesthesiology in Denver and the other six months at a hospital in Philly.

Megan looked different. "Marriage agrees with you," Channing said when Megan came to a stop in front of her.

Her comment made an infectious smile settle on Megan's lips. "You think so?"

"I know so. There's a radiant glow about you. You seem happy. I mean truly happy," Channing said.

Megan's smile widened. "*I am* happy, and I have to concur that marriage does agree with me. Rico is the best. He's everything I could ever want in a man."

"Then you have a reason to smile and look radiant." Channing was happy for her friend and she wanted that same happiness and radiance for herself.

Long marriages were common in Channing's family. Her parents had been married for more than thirty-five years, and her grandparents would be celebrating their sixtieth wedding anniversary next year. Her aunts and uncles had been in wedded bliss for more than twenty years, and her cousins and oldest brother, Juan, had all been married eight years or more.

When Channing had dated Megan's brother Zane a few years back, she had believed he was the one. Although he had told her more than once that he never intended to marry, she'd actually thought he'd change his mind. Over the course of their relationship, although he'd never spoken any words of love, his actions had convinced her he had feelings for her. He'd been so attentive, possessive and protective. She was the first woman he'd invited to his family's weekly dinner gatherings and the first woman he'd given a key to his place. So, quite naturally, she had assumed she meant more to him than all the women he'd dated in the past.

But as time went by, it became obvious that he had no intention of making their relationship more than the affair that it was. Then, one day after they'd dated exclusively for almost nine months—she'd come out and asked him how he saw their relationship evolving. He'd told her nothing had changed. He never intended to marry. He'd said that although he cared for her, he didn't love her—and never would.

She'd appreciated his honesty, but his words had hurt. To protect her heart from further damage, she'd decided to move on. She wanted more.

A week later, she'd accepted the position as a neurologist at Emory Hospital in Atlanta. She didn't tell Zane about her plans until the week before she was ready to leave Denver. She knew Zane was still angry with her about the way she'd ended things, but it wasn't as if she'd left town without telling him.

"I wanted to ask you to come to my family's Friday night chow-down," Megan said, intruding into Channing's thoughts.

Channing winced. "You know I can't do that."

"Why not? Things between you and Zane didn't work out, and you moved on. As far as I'm concerned, it was my brother's loss."

"But I don't want to make things uncomfortable, Megan. I saw the way Zane was staring me down at your wedding. He didn't like the way I ended things between us."

"Forget Zane." Megan bristled. "Did he honestly expect things to continue between the two of you without him ever making a serious commitment?"

Channing shrugged, even though she knew Zane *had* expected that. They had been dating exclusively, and to him that was enough. "I guess he did," Channing said softly, remembering how hard it had been to leave him, to move forward and not look back.

"Well, it served him right to find out he was wrong." Megan took a moment and seemed to choose her next words carefully. "Channing, you were my friend long before you became involved with Zane. You moved away, and now you're back for a short time. There's nothing wrong with me inviting you to dine with my family."

Channing could see plenty wrong with it. "Thanks, but I think it's best if I don't accept your invitation. I'll be in Denver for at least three weeks, six weeks if I decide to do a second symposium. Considering how Zane feels about me, he and I should keep our distance."

Megan didn't push...at least not right now. Channing knew her friend wouldn't let it drop. "You're welcome to come. If you change your mind, let me know."

Channing nodded, but she wouldn't be changing her mind.

By the time Zane had returned home, Bailey was gone. He headed up the stairs to shower, refusing to admit he missed his sister already. She was known for her drop-in visits not only to him but also to her other brothers, sisters and cousins.

Presently, there were fifteen Denver Westmorelands. His parents had had eight children: five boys—Ramsey, Zane, Derringer and the twins, Aiden and Adrian—and three girls—Megan, Gemma and Bailey. Uncle Adam and Aunt Clarisse had had seven sons: Dillon, Micah, Jason, Riley, Canyon, Stern and Brisbane. Over the past few years, nearly everyone had gotten married. Megan had married last month, and Riley would marry in September. The only holdouts were him, the twins, Bailey, Canyon, Stern and Bane.

His parents and uncle and aunt had died in a plane crash nearly twenty years ago, leaving Zane's brother Ramsey and his cousin Dillon in charge of the family. It hadn't been easy, especially since several of their siblings and cousins had been under the age of sixteen. Together, Dillon and Ramsey had worked hard and made sacrifices to keep the Westmorelands together. When the state of Colorado tried forcing Dillon to put the youngest four in foster homes, he had refused.

The deaths had been the hardest on those youngest four—the twins, Aiden and Adrian, and Brisbane and Bailey. Everyone had known that their acts of rebellion were their way of handling the grief of losing their parents. Now, the twins had finished college and were working in their chosen professions: Aiden as a doctor and Adrian as an engineer. Brisbane was in the navy and Bailey...was still Bailey. Considered the baby of the family, at twenty-six she worked for *Simply Irresistible*, a magazine for today's up-and-coming woman that was owned by Ramsey's wife, Chloe. But even with a full-time job, Bailey still managed to remind

everyone she could be a force to reckon with when she put her mind to it.

When Zane reached his bedroom, he glanced out the window at the acres and acres of land surrounding him. Westmoreland Country. Since Dillon was the oldest, he had inherited the main house along with the three hundred acres it sat on. Everyone else, upon reaching the age of twenty-five, received one hundred acres to call their own. Thanks to Bailey's creative mind, each of their spreads were given names—Ramsey's Web, Zane's Hideout, Derringer's Dungeon, Megan's Meadows, Gemma's Gem, Jason's Place, Stern's Stronghold and Canyon's Bluff. It was beautiful land that encompassed mountains, valleys, lakes, rivers and streams.

Zane loved his home, a two-story structure with a wraparound porch. He had more than enough space for himself and a family—if he ever chose to marry. But since settling down with one woman was not in his plans, he had the place all to himself. Some people did better by themselves, and he was one of those people.

Except when it came to business. He, his brother Derringer and his cousin Jason were partners in a lucrative horse breeding and training business along with several of his Westmoreland cousins who lived in Montana and Texas. The partnership was doing extremely well financially, with horse buyers extending all the way to the Middle East. Ever since one of their horses, Prince Charming, had placed in the Kentucky Derby a few years ago, potential clients had been continually coming out of the woodwork.

He was happy with his work. Zane liked the outdoors. The only thing he liked better was women. He didn't have a problem with the revolving door to his bedroom, and he didn't intend for any woman to get it in her head that she could be the one. There wasn't a woman alive who could make him think about settling down.

A quick flash of pain across his gut let him know he wasn't being truthful about that. There *had* been one woman. Dr. Channing Hastings.

Zane's sister Megan had introduced them, and he had been attracted to Channing from the first time he'd seen her. In addition to her beauty, she had a luscious scent that drew him like a bee to honey. She was the very thing erotic fantasies were made of. He'd only intended to date her for a couple of months. Then, the next thing he knew, he was in an exclusive relationship.

Zane reached under his bed for the locked box he'd placed there. Using the key he kept on his key ring, he opened the box and pulled out the calendar that was inside. It was a personalized photo calendar that Channing had made for him as a gift on his thirty-fifth birthday. Had it been almost two years ago?

He flipped through the calendar, beginning with January. By the time he'd gotten to December, he had worked up a sweat. Seeing Channing dressed in such scanty attire—a different outfit for every month—had sent memories soaring through his mind. In January, she wore a floor-length red gown, the same one she'd worn to a charity benefit he'd taken her to at the hospital and the same one he'd loved taking off of her later that night. By December, she was wearing nothing at all while stretched across her bed in one damn hot position, her body barely covered by a white bedspread decked with colorful Christmas ornaments. She had one of those *I want you now* looks on her face. The photographer had been another female doctor whose hobby was photography, and she had captured Channing in some unbelievable poses. Channing Hastings was definitely a beautiful woman.

Users Review

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