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DESIRE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**BRENDA
JACKSON**

NEVER TOO LATE

A snowbound reunion they never saw coming in this sizzling novella from New York Times bestselling author Brenda Jackson, previously published as a serial and in the Forged of Steele Bundle!

Headed for divorce, Sienna Bradford pays one last visit to the picturesque vacation cabin she once shared with her husband, Dane Bradford. What she didn't expect was to see him there too, and he looks as good as ever. Dane never stopped loving Sienna and wants answers about what went wrong.

When a sudden snowstorm traps them in the cabin, they are finally forced to face one other—and the spark that still sizzles between them! When the snow ends, can Sienna and Dane find the way back to each other or will the problems of their past keep them apart?

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Book 13: *Claimed by a Steele*

Never Too Late

Brenda Jackson



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CHAPTER 1

Twelve days and counting...

Pushing a lock of twisted hair that had fallen in her face behind her ear, Sienna Bradford, soon to become Sienna Davis once again, straightened her shoulders as she walked into the cabin she'd once shared with her husband—soon-to-be ex-husband.

She glanced around. Had it been just three years ago when Dane had brought her here for the first time? Three years ago when the two of them had sat there in front of the fireplace after making love, and planned their wedding? Promising that no matter what, their marriage would last forever? She took a deep breath knowing that for them, forever would end in twelve days in Judge Ratcliff's chambers.

Just thinking about it made her heart ache, but she decided it wouldn't help matters to have a pity party. What was done was done and things just hadn't worked out between her and Dane like they'd hoped. There was nothing to do now but move on with her life. But first, according to a letter her attorney had received from Dane's attorney a few days ago, she had ten days to clear out any and all of her belongings from the cabin, and the sooner she got the task done, the better. Dane had agreed to let her keep the condo if she returned full ownership of the cabin to him. She'd had no problem with that, since he had owned it before they married.

Sienna crossed the room, shaking off the March chill. According to forecasters, a snowstorm was headed toward the Smoky Mountains within the next seventy-two hours, which meant she had to hurry and pack up her stuff and take the two-hour drive back to Charlotte. Once she got home she intended to stay inside and curl up in bed with a good book. Sienna smiled, thinking that a "do nothing" weekend was just what she needed in her too frantic life.

Her smile faded when she considered that since starting her own interior decorating business a year and a half ago, she'd

been extremely busy—and she had to admit that was when her marital problems with Dane had begun.

Sienna took a couple of steps toward the bedroom to begin packing her belongings when she heard the sound of the door opening. Turning quickly, she suddenly remembered she had forgotten to lock the door. Not smart when she was alone in a secluded cabin high up in the mountains, and a long way from civilization.

A scream quickly died in her throat when the person who walked in—standing a little over six feet with dark eyes, close-cropped black hair, chestnut coloring and a medium build—was none other than her soon-to-be ex.

From the glare on his face, she could tell he wasn't happy to see her. But so what? She wasn't happy to see him, either, and couldn't help wondering why he was there.

Before she could swallow the lump in her throat to ask, he crossed his arms over his broad chest, intensified his glare and said in that too sexy voice she knew so well, "I thought that was your car parked outside, Sienna. What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER 2

Dane wet his suddenly dry lips and immediately decided he needed a beer. Lucky for him there was a six-pack in the refrigerator from the last time he'd come to the cabin. But he didn't intend on moving an inch until Sienna told him what she was doing there.

She was nervous, he could tell. Well, that was too friggin bad. She was the one who'd filed for the divorce—he hadn't. But since she had made it clear that she wanted him out of her life, he had no problem giving her what she wanted, even if the pain was practically killing him. But she'd never know that.

“What do you think I'm doing here?” she asked smartly, reclaiming his absolute attention.

“If I knew, I wouldn't have asked,” he said, giving her the same unblinking stare. And to think that at one time he actually thought she was his whole world. At some point during their marriage she had changed and transitioned into quite a character—someone he was certain he didn't know anymore.

She met his gaze for a long, level moment before placing her hands on her hips. Doing so drew his attention to her body; a body he'd seen naked countless times, a body he knew as well as his own; a body he used to ease into during the heat of passion to receive pleasure so keen and satisfying, just thinking about it made him hard.

“The reason I'm here, Dane Bradford, is because your attorney sent mine this nasty little letter demanding that I remove my stuff within ten days, and this weekend was better than next weekend. However, no thanks to you, I still had to close the shop early to beat traffic and the bad weather.”

He actually smiled at the thought of her having to do that. “And I bet it almost killed you to close your shop early. Heaven forbid. You probably had to cancel a couple of appointments. Something I could never get you to do for me.”

Sienna rolled her eyes. They'd had this same argument over and over again and it all boiled down to the same thing. He thought her job meant more to her than he did because of all the time she'd put into it. But what really irked her with that accusation was that before she'd even entertained the idea of quitting her job and embarking on her own business, they had talked about it and what it would mean. She would have to work her butt off and network to build a new clientele; and then there would be time spent working on decorating proposals, spending long hours in many beautiful homes of the rich and famous. And he had understood and had been supportive...at least in the beginning.

But then he began complaining that she was spending too much time away from home, away from him. Things only got worse from there, and now she was a woman who had gotten married at twenty-four and was getting divorced at twenty-seven.

"Look, Dane, it's too late to look back, reflect and complain. In twelve days you'll be free of me and I'll be free of you. I'm sure there's a woman out there who has the time and patience to—"

"Now, that's a word you don't know the meaning of, Sienna," Dane interrupted. "*Patience*. You were always in a rush, and your tolerance level for the least little thing was zero. Yeah, I know I probably annoyed the hell out of you at times. But then there were times you annoyed me, as well. Neither of us is perfect."

Sienna let out a deep breath. "I never said I was perfect, Dane."

"No, but you sure as hell acted like you thought you were, didn't you?"

CHAPTER 3

Dane's question struck a nerve. Considering her background, how could he assume Sienna thought she was perfect? She had come from a dysfunctional family if ever there was one. Her mother hadn't loved her father, her father loved all women except her mother, and neither seemed to love their only child. Sienna had always combated lack of love with doing the right thing, thinking that if she did, her parents would eventually love her. It didn't work. But still, she had gone through high school and college being the good girl, thinking being good would eventually pay off and earn her the love she'd always craved.

In her mind, it had when she'd met Dane, the man least likely to fall in love with her. He was the son of the millionaire Bradfords who'd made money in land development. She hadn't been his family's choice and they made sure she knew it every chance they got. Whenever she was around them, they made her feel inadequate, like she didn't measure up to their society friends, and since she didn't come from a family with a prestigious background, she wasn't good enough for their son.

She bet they wished they'd never hired the company she'd been working for to decorate their home. That's how she and Dane had met. She'd been going over fabric swatches with his mother and he'd walked in after playing a game of tennis. The rest was history. But the question of the hour was: Had she been so busy trying to succeed the past year and a half, trying to be the perfect business owner, that she eventually alienated the one person who'd mattered most to her?

"Can't answer that. Can you?" Dane said, breaking into her thoughts. "Maybe that will give you something to think about twelve days from now when you put your John Hancock on the divorce papers. Now if you'll excuse me, I have something to do," he said, walking around her toward the bedroom.

"Wait. You never said why *you're* here!"

He stopped. The intensity of his gaze sent shivers of heat through her entire body. And it didn't help matters that he was wearing jeans and a dark brown leather bomber jacket that made him look sexy as hell...as usual. "I was here a couple of weekends ago and left something behind. I came to get it."

"Were you alone?" The words rushed out before she could hold them back and immediately she wanted to smack herself. The last thing she wanted was for him to think she cared... even if she did.

He hooked his thumbs in his jeans and continued to hold her gaze. "Would it matter to you if I weren't?"

She couldn't look at him, certain he would see her lie when she replied, "No, it wouldn't matter. What you do is none of my business."

"That's what I thought." And then he walked off toward the bedroom and closed the door.

Sienna frowned. That was another thing she didn't like about Dane. He never stayed around to finish one of their arguments. Thanks to her parents she was a pro at it, but Dane would always walk away after giving some smart parting remark that only made her that much more angry. He didn't know how to fight fair. He didn't know how to fight at all. He'd come from a family too dignified for such nonsense.

Moving toward the kitchen to see if there was anything of hers in there, Sienna happened to glance out the window.

"Oh, my God," she said, rushing over to the window. It was snowing already. No, it wasn't just snowing... There was a full-scale blizzard going on outside. What happened to the seventy-two-hour warning?

She heard Dane when he came out of the bedroom. He looked beyond her and out the window, uttering one hell of a curse word before quickly walking to the door, slinging it open and stepping outside.

In just that short period of time, everything was beginning to turn white. The last time they'd had a sudden snowstorm

such as this had been a few years ago. It had been so bad the media had nicknamed it the “Beast from the East.”

It seemed the Beast was back and it had turned downright spiteful. Not only was it acting ugly outside, it had placed Sienna in one hell of a predicament. She was stranded in a cabin in the Smoky Mountains with her soon-to-be ex. Things couldn't get any more bizarre than that.

CHAPTER 4

Moments later, when Dane stepped back into the cabin, slamming the door behind him, Sienna could tell he was so mad he could barely breathe.

“What’s wrong, Dane? You being forced to cancel a date tonight?” she asked snidely. A part of her was still upset at the thought that he might have brought someone here a couple of weekends ago when they weren’t officially divorced yet. The mere fact they had been separated for six months didn’t count. She hadn’t gone out with anyone. Indulging in a relationship with another man hadn’t even crossed her mind.

He took a step toward her and she refused to back up. She was determined to maintain her ground and her composure, although the intense look in his eyes was causing crazy things to happen to her body, like it normally did whenever they were alone for any period of time. There may have been a number of things wrong with their marriage, but lack of sexual chemistry had never been one of them.

“Do you know what this means?” he asked, his voice shaking in anger.

She tilted her head to one side. “Other than I’m being forced to remain here with you for a couple of hours, no, I don’t know what it means.”

She saw his hands ball into fists at his sides and knew he was probably fighting the urge to strangle her. “We’re not talking about hours, Sienna. Try days. Haven’t you been listening to the weather reports?”

She glared at him. “Haven’t you? I’m not here by myself.”

“Yes, but I thought I could come up here and in ten minutes max get what I came for, and leave before the bad weather kicked in.”

Sienna regretted that she hadn’t been listening to the weather reports, at least not in detail. She’d known that a snowstorm was headed toward the mountains within seventy-

two hours, which was why she'd thought, like Dane, that she had time to rush and get in and out before the nasty weather hit. Anything other than that, she was clueless. And what was he saying about them being up here for days instead of hours? "Yes, I did listen to the weather reports, but evidently I missed something."

He shook his head. "Evidently you missed a lot, if you think this storm is going to blow over in a couple of hours. According to forecasters, what you see isn't the worst of it, and because of that unusual cold front hovering about in the east, it may last for days."

She swallowed deeply. The thought of spending *days* alone in a cabin with Dane didn't sit well with her. "How many days are we talking about?"

"Try three or four."

She didn't want to try any at all, and as she continued to gaze into his eyes she saw a look of worry replace the anger in their dark depths. Then she knew what had him upset.

"Do we have enough food and supplies up here to hold us for three or four days?" she asked, as she began to nervously gnaw on her lower lip. The magnitude of the situation they were in was slowly dawning on her, and when he didn't answer immediately she knew they were in trouble.

CHAPTER 5

Dane saw the panic that suddenly lined Sienna's face. He wished he could say he didn't give a damn, but there was no way that he could. This woman would always matter to him whether she was married to him or not. From the moment he had walked into his father's study that day and their gazes had connected, he had known then, as miraculous as it had seemed, and without a word spoken between them, that he was meant to love her. And for a while he had convinced her of that, but not anymore. Evidently, at some point during their marriage, she began believing otherwise.

"Dane?"

He rubbed his hand down his face, trying to get his thoughts together. Given the situation they were in, he knew honesty was foremost. But then he'd always been honest with her, however, he doubted she could say the same for herself. "To answer your question, Sienna, I'm not sure. Usually I keep the place well stocked of everything, but like I said earlier, I was here a couple of weekends ago, and I used a lot of the supplies then."

He refused to tell her that in a way it had been her fault. Receiving those divorce papers had driven him here, to wallow in self-pity, vent out his anger and drink his pain away with a bottle of Johnny Walker Red. "I guess we need to go check things out," he said, trying not to get as worried as she was beginning to look.

He followed her into the kitchen, trying not to watch the sway of her hips as she walked in front of him. The hot, familiar sight of her in a pair of jeans and pullover sweater had him cursing under his breath and summoning up a quick remedy for the situation he found himself in. The thought of being stranded for any amount of time with Sienna wasn't good.

He stopped walking when she flung open the refrigerator. His six-pack of beer was still there, but little else. But then he

wasn't studying the contents of the refrigerator as much as he was studying her. She was bent over, looking inside, but all he could think of was another time he had walked into this kitchen and found her in that same position, and wearing nothing more than his T-shirt that had barely covered her bottom. It hadn't taken much for him to go into a crazed fit of lust and quickly remove his pajama bottoms and take her right then and there, against the refrigerator, giving them both the orgasm of a lifetime.

“Thank goodness there are some eggs in here,” she said, intruding on his heated thoughts down memory lane. “About half a dozen. And there's a loaf of bread that looks edible. There's some kind of meat in the freezer, but I'm not sure what it is, though. Looks like chicken.”

She turned around and her pouty mouth tempted him to kiss it, devour it and make her moan. He watched her sigh deeply and then she gave him a not-so-hopeful gaze and said, “Our rations don't look good, Dane. What are we going to do?”

CHAPTER 6

Sienna's breath caught when the corners of Dane's mouth tilted in an irresistible smile. She'd seen the look before. She knew that smile and she also recognized that bulge pressing against his zipper. She frowned. "Don't even think it, Dane."

He leaned back against the kitchen counter. Hell, he wanted to do more than think it, he wanted to do it. But, of course, he would pretend he hadn't a clue as to what she was talking about. "What?"

Her frown deepened. "And don't act all innocent with me. I know what you were thinking."

A smile tugged deeper at Dane's lips knowing she probably did. There were some things a man couldn't hide and a rock-solid hard-on was one of them. He decided not to waste his time and hers pretending the chemistry between them was dead when they both knew it was still very much alive. "Don't ask me to apologize. It's not my fault you have so much sex appeal and my desire for you is automatic, even when we're headed for divorce court."

Dane saying the word *divorce* was a stark reminder that their life together, as they once knew it, would be over in twelve days. "Let's get back to important matters, Dane, like our survival. On a positive note, we might be able to make due if we cut back on meals, which may be hard for you with your ferocious appetite."

A wicked sounding chuckle poured from his throat. "Which one?"

Sienna swallowed as her pulse pounded in response to Dane's question. She was quickly reminded, although she wished there was some way she could forget, that her husband...or soon-to-be ex...did have two appetites. One was of a gastric nature and the other purely sexual. Thoughts of the purely sexual one had intense heat radiating all through her. Dane had devoured every inch of her body in ways she didn't even want to think about. Especially now.

She placed her hands on her hips knowing he was baiting her; really doing a hell of a lot more than that. He was stirring up feelings inside her that were making it hard for her to think straight. “Get serious, Dane.”

“I am.” He then came to stand in front of her. “Did you bring anything with you?”

She lifted a brow. “Anything like what?”

“Stuff to snack on. You’re good for that. How you do it without gaining a pound is beyond me.”

She shrugged, refusing to tell him that she used to work it off with all those in-bed, out-of-bed exercises they used to do. If he hadn’t noticed then she wouldn’t tell him that in six months without him in her bed, she had gained five pounds. “I might have a candy bar or two in the car.”

He smiled. “That’s all?”

She rolled her eyes upward. “Okay, okay, I might have a couple of bags of chips, too.” She decided not to mention the three boxes of Girl Scout cookies that had been purchased that morning from a little girl standing in front of a grocery store.

“I hadn’t planned to spend the night here, Dane. I had merely thought I could quickly pack things and leave.”

He nodded. “Okay, I’ll get the snacks from your car while I’m outside checking on some wood we’ll need for the fire. The power is still on, but I can’t see that lasting too much longer. I wished I would have gotten that generator fixed.”

Her eyes widened in alarm. “You didn’t?”

“No. So you might want to go around and gather up all the candles you can. And there should be a box of matches in one of these drawers.”

“Okay.”

Dane turned to leave. He then turned back around. She was nibbling on her bottom lip as he assumed she would be. “And stop worrying. We’re going to make it.”

When he walked out the room, Sienna leaned back against the closed refrigerator, thinking those were the exact words he'd said to her three years ago when he had asked her to marry him. Now she *was* worried because they didn't have a proved track record.

CHAPTER 7

After putting on the snow boots he kept at the cabin, Dane made his way out the doors, grateful for the time he wouldn't be in Sienna's presence. Being around her and still loving her like he did was hard. Even now he didn't know the reason for the divorce, other than what was noted in the papers he'd been served that day a few weeks ago. Irreconcilable differences... whatever the hell that was supposed to mean.

Sienna hadn't come to him so they could talk about any problems they were having. He had come home one day and she had moved out. He still was at a loss as to what could have been so wrong with their marriage that she could no longer see a future for them.

He would always recall that time as being the lowest point in his life. For days it was as if a part of him was missing. It had taken a while to finally pull himself together and realize she wasn't coming back no matter how many times he'd asked her to. And all it took was the receipt of that divorce petition to make him realize that Sienna wanted him out of her life, and actually believed that whatever issues kept them apart couldn't be resolved.

A little while later Dane had gathered more wood to put with the huge stack already on the back porch, glad that at least, if nothing else, they wouldn't freeze to death. The cabin was equipped with enough toiletries to hold them for at least a week, which was a good thing. And he hadn't wanted to break the news to Sienna that the meat in the freezer wasn't chicken, but deer meat that one of his clients had given him a couple of weeks ago after a hunting trip. It was good to eat, but he knew Sienna well enough to know she would have to be starving before she would consume any of it.

After rubbing his icy hands on his jeans, he stuck them into his pockets to keep them from freezing. Walking around the house, he strolled over to her car, opened the door and found the candy bars, chips and... Girl Scout cookies, he noted, lifting a brow. She hadn't mentioned them, and he saw they

were her favorite kind, as well as his. He quickly recalled the first year they were married and how they shared the cookies as a midnight snack after making love. He couldn't help but smile as he remembered that night and others where they had spent time together, not just in bed but cooking in the kitchen, going to movies, concerts, parties, having picnics and just plain sitting around and talking for hours.

He suddenly realized that one of the things that had been missing from their marriage for a while was communication. When had they stopped talking? The first thought that grudgingly came to mind was when she'd begun bringing work home, letting it intrude on what had always been their time together. That's when they had begun living in separate worlds.

Dane breathed in deeply. He wanted to get back into Sienna's world and he definitely wanted her back in his. He didn't want a divorce. He wanted to keep his wife but he refused to resort to any type of manipulating, dominating or controlling tactics to do it. What he and Sienna needed was to use this weekend to keep it honest and talk openly about what had gone wrong with their marriage. They would go further by finding ways to resolve things. He still loved her and wanted to believe that deep down she still loved him.

There was only one way to find out.

CHAPTER 8

Sienna glanced around the room seeing all the lit candles and thinking just how romantic they made the cabin look. Taking a deep breath, she frowned in irritation, thinking that romance should be the last thing on her mind. Dane was her soon-to-be ex-husband. Whatever they once shared was over, done with, had come to a screeching end.

If only the memories weren't so strong...

She glanced out the window and saw him piling wood on the back porch. Never in her wildest dreams would she have thought her day would end up this way, with her and Dane being stranded together at the cabin—a place they always considered as their favorite getaway spot. During the first two years of their marriage, they would come here every chance they got, but in the past year she could recall them coming only once. Somewhere along the way she had stopped allowing them time even for this.

She sighed deeply, recalling how important it had been to her at the beginning of their marriage for them to make time to talk about matters of interest, whether trivial or important. They had always been attuned to each other, and Dane had always been a good listener, which to her conveyed a sign of caring and respect. But the last couple of times they had tried to talk ended up with them snapping at each other, which only built bitterness and resentment.

The lights blinked and she knew they were about to go out. She was glad that she had taken the initiative to go into the kitchen and scramble up some eggs earlier. And she was inwardly grateful that if she had to get stranded in the cabin during a snowstorm that Dane was here with her. Heaven knows she would have been a basket case had she found herself up here alone.

The lights blinked again before finally going out, but the candles provided the cabin with plenty of light. Not sure if the temperatures outside would cause the pipes to freeze, she had

run plenty of water in the bathtub and kitchen sink, and filled every empty jug with water for them to drink. She'd also found batteries to put in the radio so they could keep up with any reports on the weather.

“I saw the lights go out. Are you okay?”

Sienna turned around. Dane was leaning in the doorway with his hands stuck in the pockets of his jeans. The pose made him look incredibly sexy. “Yes, I’m okay. I was able to get the candles all lit and there are plenty more.”

“That’s good.”

“Just in case the pipes freeze and we can’t use the shower, I filled the bathtub up with water so we can take a bath that way.” At his raised brow she quickly added, “Separately, of course. And I made sure I filled plenty of bottles of drinking water, too.”

He nodded. “Sounds like you’ve been busy.”

“So have you. I saw through the window when you put all that wood on the porch. It will probably come in handy.”

He moved away from the door. “Yes, and with the electricity out I need to go ahead and get the fire started.”

Sienna swallowed as she watched him walk toward her on his way to the fireplace, and not for the first time she thought about how remarkably handsome he was. He had that certain charisma that made women get hot all over just looking at him.

It suddenly occurred to her that he’d already got a fire started, and the way it was spreading through her was about to make her burst into flames.

CHAPTER 9

“You okay?” Dane asked Sienna as he walked toward her with a smile.

She nodded and cleared her throat. “Yes, why do you ask?”

“Because you’re looking at me funny.”

“Oh.” She was vaguely aware of him walking past her to kneel in front of the fireplace. She turned and watched him, saw him move the wood around before taking a match and lighting it to start a fire. He was so good at kindling things, whether wood or the human body.

“If you like, I can make something for dinner,” she decided to say, otherwise she would continue to stand there and say nothing while staring at him. It was hard trying to be normal in a rather awkward situation.

“What are our options?” he asked without looking around.

She chuckled. “An egg sandwich and tea. I made both earlier before the power went off.”

He turned at that and his gaze caught hers. A smile crinkled his eyes. “Do I have a choice?”

“Not if you want to eat.”

“What about those Girl Scout cookies I found in your car?”

Her eyes narrowed. “They’re off-limits. You can have one of the candy bars, but the cookies are mine.”

His mouth broke into a wide grin. “You have enough cookies to share, so stop being selfish.”

He turned back around and she made a face at him behind his back. He was back to stoking the fire and her gaze went to his hands. Those hands used to be the givers of so much pleasure and almost ran neck and neck with his mouth...but not quite. His mouth was in a class by itself. But still, she could recall those same hands, gentle, provoking, moving all over her body; touching her everywhere and doing things to

her that mere hands weren't suppose to do. However, she never had any complaints.

“Did you have any plans for tonight, Sienna?”

His words intruded into her heated thoughts. “No, why?”

“Just wondering. You thought I had a date tonight. What about you?”

She shrugged. “No. As far as I'm concerned, until we sign those final papers, I'm still legally married and wouldn't feel right going out with someone.”

He turned around and locked his eyes with hers. “I know what you mean,” he said. “I wouldn't feel right going out with someone else.”

Heat seeped through her every pore with his words. “So you haven't been dating, either?”

“No.”

There were a number of questions she wanted to ask him—how he spent his days, his nights, what his family thought of their pending divorce, what he thought of it, was he ready for it to be over for them to go their separate ways—but there was no way she could ask him any of those things. “I guess I'll go put dinner on the table.”

He chuckled. “An egg sandwich and tea?”

“Yes.” She turned to leave.

“Sienna?”

She turned back around. “Yes?”

“I don't like being stranded, but since I am, I'm glad it's with you.”

For a moment she couldn't say anything, then she cleared her throat while backing up a couple of steps. “Ah, yeah right, same here.” She backed up some more then said, “I'll go set out the food now.” And then she turned and quickly left the room.

CHAPTER 10

Sienna glanced up when she heard Dane walk into the kitchen and smiled. “Your feast awaits you.”

“Whoopee.”

She laughed. “Hey, I know the feeling. I’m glad I had a nice lunch today in celebration. I took on a new client.”

Dane came and joined her at the table. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

She took a bite of her scrambled egg sandwich and a sip of her tea and then said, “It’s been a long time since you seemed genuinely pleased with my accomplishments.”

He glanced up after taking a sip of his own tea and stared at her for a moment. “I know and I’m sorry about that. It was hard being replaced by your work, Sienna.”

She lifted her head and stared at him, met his gaze. She saw the tightness of his jaw and the firm set of his mouth. He actually believed that something could replace him with her and knowing that hit a raw and sensitive nerve. “My work never replaced you, Dane. Why did you begin feeling that way?”

Dane leaned back in his chair, tilted his head slightly. He was more than mildly surprised with her question. It was then he realized that she really didn’t know. Hadn’t a clue. This was the opportunity that he wanted; what he was hoping they would have. Now was the time to put aside anger, bitterness, foolish pride and whatever else was working at destroying their marriage. Now was the time for complete honesty. “You started missing dinner. Not once but twice, sometimes three times a week. Eventually, you stopped making excuses and didn’t show up.”

What he’d said was the truth. “But I was working and taking on new clients,” she defended. “You said you would understand.”

“And I did for a while and up to a point. But there is such a thing as common courtesy and mutual respect, Sienna. In the end I felt like I’d been thrown by the wayside, that you didn’t care anymore about us, our love or our marriage.”

She narrowed her eyes. “And why didn’t you say something?”

“When? I was usually asleep when you got home and when I got up in the morning you were too sleepy to discuss anything. I invited you to lunch several times, but you couldn’t fit me into your schedule.”

“I had appointments.”

“Yes, and I always felt because of it that your clients were more important.”

“Still, I wished you would have let me know how you felt,” she said, after taking another sip of tea.

“I did, several times. But you weren’t listening.”

She sighed deeply. “We used to know how to communicate.”

“Yes, at one time we did, didn’t we?” Dane said quietly. “But I’m also to blame for the failure of our marriage, our lack of communication. And then there were the problems you were having with my parents. When it came to you, I never hesitated letting my parents know when they were out of line and that I wouldn’t put up with their treatment of you. But then I felt that at some point you needed to start believing that what they thought didn’t matter and stand up to them.

“I honestly thought I was doing the right thing when I decided to just stay out of it and give you the chance to deal with them, to finally put them in their place. Instead, you let them erode away at your security and confidence to the point where you felt you had to prove you were worthy of them... and of me. That’s what drove you to be so successful, wasn’t it, Sienna? Feeling the need to prove something is what working all those long hours was all about, wasn’t it?”

CHAPTER 11

Sienna quickly got up from the table and walked to the window. It was turning dark but she could clearly see that things hadn't let up. It was still snowing outside, worse than an hour before. She tried to concentrate on what was beyond that window and not on the question Dane had asked her.

"Sienna?"

Moments later she turned back around to face Dane, knowing he was waiting on her response. "What do you want me to say, Dane? Trust me, you don't want to get me started since you've always known how your family felt about me."

His brow furrowed sharply as he moved from the table to join her at the window, coming to stand directly in front of her. "And you've known it didn't matter one damn iota. Why would you let it continue to matter to you?"

She shook her head, tempted to bare her soul but fighting not to. "But you don't understand how important it was for your family to accept me, to love me."

Dane stepped closer, looked into eyes that were fighting to keep tears at bay.

"Wasn't my love enough, Sienna? I'd told you countless time that you didn't marry my family, you married me. I'm not proud of the fact that my parents think too highly of themselves and our family name at times, but I've constantly told you it didn't matter. Why can't you believe me?"

When she didn't say anything, he sighed deeply. "You've been around people with money before. Do all of them act like my parents?"

She thought of her best friend's family. The Steeles. "No."

"Then what should that tell you? They're my parents. I know that they aren't close to being perfect, but I love them."

"And I never wanted to do anything to make you stop loving them."

He reached up and touched her chin. “And that’s what this is about, isn’t it? Why you filed for a divorce. You thought that you could.”

Sienna angrily wiped at a tear she couldn’t contain any longer. “I didn’t ever want you to have to choose.”

Dane’s heart ached. Evidently she didn’t know just how much he loved her. “There wouldn’t have been a choice to make. You’re my wife. I love you. I will always love you. When we married, we became one.”

He leaned down and brushed a kiss on her cheek, then several. He wanted to devour her mouth, deepen the kiss and escalate it to a level he needed it to be, but he couldn’t. He wouldn’t. What they needed was to talk, to communicate to try and fix whatever was wrong with their marriage. He pulled back. It was hard when he heard her soft sigh, her heated moan.

He gave in briefly to temptation and tipped her chin up, and placed a kiss on her lips. “There’s plenty of hot water still left in the tank,” he said softly, stroking her chin. “Go ahead and take a shower before it gets completely dark, and then I’ll take one.”

He continued to stroke her chin when he added, “Then what I want is for us to do something we should have done months ago, Sienna. I want us to sit down and talk. And I mean to really talk. Regain that level of communication we once had. And what I need to know more than anything is whether my love will ever be just enough for you.”

CHAPTER 12

You're my wife. I love you. I will always love you. When we married, we became one.

Dane's words flowed through Sienna's mind as she stepped into the shower, causing a warm, fuzzy, glowing feeling to seep through her pores. Hope flared within her although she didn't want it to. She hadn't wanted to end her marriage, but when things had begun to get worse between her and Dane, she'd finally decided to take her in-laws' suggestion and get out of their son's life.

Even after three years of seeing how happy she and Dane were together, they still couldn't look beyond her past. They saw her as a nobody, a person who had married their son for his money. She had offered to sign a prenuptial before the wedding and Dane had scoffed at the suggestion, refusing to even draw one up. But still, his parents had made it known each time they saw her just how much they resented the marriage.

And no matter how many times Dane had stood up to them and had put them in their place regarding her, it would only be a matter of time before they resorted to their old ways again, though never in the presence of their son. Maybe Dane was right, and all she'd had to do was tell his parents off once and for all and that would be the end of it, but she never could find the courage to do it.

And what was so hilarious with the entire situation was that she had basically become a workaholic to become successful in her own right so they could see her as their son's equal in every way; and in trying to impress them she had alienated Dane to the point that eventually he would have gotten fed up and asked her for a divorce if she hadn't done so first.

After spending time under the spray of water, she stepped out of the shower, intent on making sure there was enough hot water left for Dane. She tried to put out of her mind the last

time she had taken a shower in this stall, and how Dane had joined her in it.

Towelng off, she was grateful she still had some of her belongings at the cabin to sleep in. The last thing she needed was to parade around Dane half naked. Then they would never get any talking done.

She slipped into a T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants she found in one of the drawers. Dane wanted to talk. How could they have honest communication without getting into a discussion about his parents again? She crossed her arms, trying to ignore the chill she was beginning to feel in the air. In order to stay warm they would probably both have to sleep in front of the fireplace tonight. She didn't want to think about what the possibility of doing something like that meant.

While her cell phone still had life, she decided to let her best friend, Vanessa Steele, know that she wouldn't be returning to Charlotte tonight. Dane was right. Not everyone with money acted like his parents. The Steeles, owners of a huge manufacturing company in Charlotte, were just as wealthy as the Bradfords. But they were as down-to-earth as people could get, which proved that not everyone with a lot of money were snobs.

“Hello?”

“Van, it's Sienna.”

“Sienna, I was just thinking about you. Did you make it back before that snowstorm hit?”

“No, I'm in the mountains, stranded.”

“What! Do you want me to send my cousins to rescue you?”

Sienna smiled. Vanessa was talking about her four single male cousins, Chance, Sebastian, Morgan and Donovan Steele. Sienna had to admit that besides being handsome as sin, they were dependable to a fault. And of all people, she, Vanessa and Vanessa's two younger sisters, Taylor and Cheyenne, should know more than anyone since they had been notorious for getting into trouble while growing up and the brothers four had always been there to bail them out.

“No, I don’t need your cousins to come and rescue me.”

“What about Dane? You know how I feel about you divorcing him, Sienna. He’s still legally your husband and I think I should let him know where you are and let him decide if he should—”

“Vanessa,” Sienna interrupted. “You don’t have to let Dane know anything. He’s here, stranded with me.”

CHAPTER 13

“How was your shower?” Dane asked Sienna when she returned to the living room a short while later.

“Great. Now it’s your turn to indulge.”

“Okay.” Dane tried not to notice how the candlelight was flickering over Sienna’s features, giving them an ethereal glow. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and for a long moment he stood there staring at her.

She lifted a brow. “What’s wrong?”

“I was just thinking how incredibly beautiful you are.”

Sienna breathed in deeply, trying to ignore the rush of sensations she felt from his words. “Thank you.” Dane had always been a man who’d been free with his compliments. Being apart from him made her realize that was one of the things she missed, among many others.

“I’ll be back in a little while,” he said before leaving the room.

When he was gone, Sienna remembered the conversation she’d had with Vanessa earlier. Her best friend saw her and Dane being stranded together on the mountain as a twist of fate that Sienna should use to her advantage. Vanessa further thought that for once, Sienna should stand up to the elder Bradfords and not struggle to prove herself to them. Dane had accepted her as she was and now it was time for her to be satisfied and happy with that; after all, she wasn’t married to his parents.

A part of Sienna knew that Vanessa was right, but she had been seeking love from others for so long that she hadn’t been able to accept that Dane’s love was all the love she needed. Before her shower he had asked if his love was enough and now she knew that it was. It was past time for her to acknowledge that fact and to let him know it.

Dane stepped out the shower and began toweling off. The bathroom carried Sienna's scent and the honeysuckle fragrance of the shower gel she enjoyed using.

Given their situation, he really should be worried what they would be faced with if the weather didn't let up in a couple of days with the little bit of food they had. But for now the thought of being stranded here with Sienna overrode all his concerns about that. In his heart, he truly believed they would manage to get through any given situation. Now he had the task of convincing her of that.

He glanced down at his left hand and studied his wedding band. Two weeks ago when he had come here for his pity party, he had taken it off in anger and thrown it in a drawer. It was only when he had returned to Charlotte that he realized he'd left it here in the cabin. At first he had shrugged it off as having no significant meaning since he would be a divorced man in a month's time anyway, but every day he'd felt that a part of him was missing.

In addition to reminding him of Sienna's absence from his life, to Dane, his ring signified their love and the vows that they had made, and a part of him refused to give that up. That's what had driven him back here this weekend—to reclaim the one element of his marriage that he refused to part with yet. Something he felt was rightfully his.

It seemed his ring wasn't the only thing that was rightfully his that he would get the chance to reclaim. More than anything, he wanted his wife back.

CHAPTER 14

Dane walked into the living room and stopped in his tracks. Sienna sat in front of the fireplace, cross-legged, with a tray of cookies and two glasses of wine. He knew where the cookies had come from, but where the heck had she gotten the wine?

She must have heard him because she glanced over his way and smiled. At that moment he thought she was even more breathtaking than a rose in winter. She licked her lips and immediately he thought she was even more tempting than any decadent dessert.

He cleared his throat. "Where did the wine come from?"

She licked her lips again and his body responded in an unquestionable way. He hoped the candlelight was hiding the physical effect she was having on him. "I found it in one of the kitchen cabinets. I think it's the bottle that was left when we came here to celebrate our first anniversary."

His thoughts immediately remembered that weekend. She had packed a selection of sexy lingerie and he had enjoyed removing each and every piece. She had also given him, among other things, a beautiful gold watch with the inscription engraved, *The Great Dane*. He, in turn, had given her a lover's bracelet, which was similar to a diamond tennis bracelet except that each letter of her name was etched in six of the stones.

He could still remember the single tear that had fallen from her eye when he had placed it on her wrist. That had been a special time for them, memories he would always cherish. That knowledge tightened the love that surrounded his heart. More than anything, he was determined that they settle things this weekend. He needed to make her see that he was hers and she was his. For always.

His lips creased into a smile. "I see you've decided to share the cookies, after all," he said, crossing the room to her.

She chuckled as he dropped down on the floor beside her. “Either that or run the risk of you getting up during the night and eating them all.” The firelight danced through the twists on her head, highlighting the medium brown coiled strands with golden flecks. He absolutely loved the natural looking hairstyle on her.

He lifted a dark brow. “Eating them all? Three boxes?”

Her smile grew soft. “Hey, you’ve been known to overindulge a few times.”

He paused as heated memories consumed him, reminding him of those times he had overindulged, especially when it came to making love to her. He recalled one weekend they had gone at it almost nonstop. If she hadn’t been on the pill there was no doubt in his mind that that single weekend would have made him a daddy. A very proud one, at that.

She handed him a glass of wine. “May I propose a toast?”

His smile widened. “To what?”

“The return of the Beast from the East.”

He switched his gaze from her to glance out the window. Even in the dark he could see the white flecks coming down in droves. He looked back at her and cocked a brow. “We have a reason to celebrate this bad weather?”

She stared at him for a long moment, then said quietly, “Yes. The Beast is the reason we’re stranded here together, and even with our low rations of food, I can’t think of any other place I’d rather be...than here alone with you.”

CHAPTER 15

Dane stared at Sienna and the intensity of that gaze made her entire body tingle, her nerve endings steam. It was pretty much like the day they'd met, when he'd walked into his father's study. She had looked up, their gazes had connected and the seriousness in the dark irises that had locked with hers had changed her life forever. She had fallen in love with him then and there.

Dane didn't say anything for a long moment as he continued to look at her, and then he lifted his wineglass and said huskily, "To the Beast...who brought me Beauty."

His words were like a sensuous stroke down her spine, and the void feeling she'd had during the past few months was slowly fading away. After the toast was made and they had both taken sips of their wine, Dane placed his glass aside and then relieved her of hers. He then slowly leaned forward and captured her mouth, tasting the wine, relishing her delectable flavor. How had she gone without this for six months? How had she survived? she wondered as his tongue devoured hers, battering deep in the heat of her mouth, licking and sucking as he wove his tongue in and out between teeth, gum and whatever wanted to serve as a barrier.

He suddenly pulled back and stared at her. A smile touched the corners of his lips. "I could keep going and going, but before we go any further we need to talk, determine what brought us to this point so it won't ever be allowed to happen again. I don't want us to ever let anything or anyone have power, more control over the vows we made three years ago."

Sienna nodded, thinking the way the firelight was dancing over his dark skin was sending an erotic frisson up her spine. "All right."

He stood. "I'll be right back."

Sienna lifted a brow, wondering where he was going and watched as he crossed the room to open the desk drawer. Like her, he had changed into a T-shirt and a pair of sweats, and as

she watched him she found it difficult to breathe. He moved in such a manly way, each movement a display of fine muscles and limbs and how they worked together in graceful coordination, perfect precision. Watching him only knocked her hormones out of whack.

He returned moments later with pens and paper in hand. There was a serious expression on his face when he handed her a sheet of paper and a pen and kept the same for himself. "I want us to write down all the things we feel went wrong with our marriage, being honest to include everything. And then we'll discuss them."

She looked down at the pen and paper and then back at him. "You want me to write them down?"

"Yes, and I'll do the same."

Sienna nodded and watched as he began writing on his paper, wondering what he was jotting down. She leaned back and sighed, wondering if she could air their dirty laundry on paper, but it seemed he had no such qualms. Most couples sought the helpful guidance of marriage counselors when they found themselves in similar situations, but she hadn't given them that chance. But at this point, she would do anything to save her marriage.

So she began writing, being honest with herself and with him.

CHAPTER 16

Dane finished writing and glanced over at Sienna. She was still at it and had a serious expression on her features. He studied the contours of her face and his gaze dropped to her neck, and he noticed the thin gold chain. She was still wearing the heart pendant he'd given her as a wedding gift.

Deep down, Dane believed this little assignment was what they needed as the first step in repairing what had gone wrong in their marriage. Having things written down would make it easier to stay focused and not go off on a tangent. And it made one less likely to give in to the power of the mind, the wills and emotions. He wanted them to concentrate on those destructive elements and forces that had eroded away at what should have been a strong relationship.

She glanced up and met his gaze as she put the pen aside. She gave him a wry smile. "Okay, that's it."

He reached out and took her hand in his, tightening his hold on it when he saw a look of uncertainty on her face. "All right, what do you have?"

She gave him a sheepish grimace. "How about you going first?"

He gently squeezed her hand. "How about if we go together? I'll start off and then we'll alternate."

She nodded. "What if we have the same ones?"

"That will be okay. We'll talk about all of them." He picked up his piece of paper.

"First on my list is communication."

Sienna smiled ruefully. "It's first on mine, too. And I agree that we need to talk more, without arguing, not that you argued. I think you would hold stuff in when I made you upset instead of getting it out and speaking your mind."

Dane stared at her for a moment, then a smile touched his lips. "You're right, you know. I always had to plug in the last

word and I did it because I knew it would piss you off.”

“Well, stop doing it.”

He grinned. “Okay. The next time I’ll hang around for us to talk through things. But then you’re going to have to make sure that you’re available when we need to talk. You can’t let anything, not even your job, get in the way of us communicating.”

“Okay, I agree.”

“Now, what’s next on your list?” he asked.

She looked up at him and smiled. “Patience. I know you said that I don’t have patience, but neither do you. But you used to.”

Dane shook his head. “Yeah, I lost my patience when you did. I thought to myself, why should I be patient with you when you weren’t doing the same with me? Sometimes I think you thought I enjoyed knowing you had a bad day or didn’t make a sale, and that wasn’t it at all. At some point what was suddenly important to you wasn’t important to me anymore.”

“And because of it, we both became detached,” Sienna said softly.

“Yes, we did.” He reached out and lifted her chin. “I promise to do a better job of being patient, Sienna.”

“So will I, Dane.”

They alternated, going down the list. They had a number of the same things on both lists and they discussed everything in detail, acknowledging their faults and what they could have done to make things better. They also discussed what they would do in the future to strengthen their marriage.

“That’s all I have on my list,” Dane said a while later. “Do you have anything else?”

Sienna’s finger glided over her list. For a short while she thought about pretending she didn’t have anything else, but they had agreed to be completely honest. They had definitely done so when they had discussed her spending more time at work than at home.

“So what’s the last thing on your list, Sienna? What do you see as one of the things that went wrong with our marriage?”

She lifted her chin and met his gaze and said, “My inability to stand up to your parents.”

He looked at her with deep, dark eyes. “Okay, then. Let’s talk about that.”

CHAPTER 17

Dane waited patiently for Sienna to begin talking and gently rubbed the backside of her hand while doing so. He'd known the issue of his parents had always been a challenge to her. Over the years, he had tried to make her see that how the elder Bradfords felt didn't matter. What he failed to realize, accept and understand was that it *did* matter...to her.

She had grown up in a family without love for so long that when they married, she not only sought his love, but that of his family. Being accepted meant a lot to her, and her expectations of the Bradfords, given how they operated and their family history, were too high.

They weren't a close-knit bunch, never had been and never would be. His parents had allowed their own parents to decide their future, including who they married. When they had come of age, arranged marriages were the norm within the Bradfords' circle. His father had once confided to him one night after indulging in too many drinks that his mother had not been his choice for a wife. That hadn't surprised Dane, nor had it bothered him, since he would bet that his father probably hadn't been his mother's choice of a husband, either.

"I don't want to rehash the past, Dane," Sienna finally said softly, looking at the blaze in the fireplace instead of at him. "But something you said earlier tonight has made me think about a lot of things. You love your parents, but you've never hesitated in letting them know when you felt they were wrong, nor have you put up with their crap when it came to me."

She switched her gaze from the fire to him. "The problem is that *I* put up with their crap when it came to me. And you were right. I thought I had to actually prove something to them, show them I was worthy of you and your love. And I've spent the better part of a year and a half doing that and all it did was bring me closer and closer to losing you. I'm sure they've been walking around with big smiles on their faces since you got the divorce petition. But I refuse to let them be happy at my expense and my own heartbreak."

She scooted closer to Dane and splayed her hands against his chest. “It’s time I became more assertive with your parents, Dane. Because it’s not about them—it’s about us. I refuse to let them make me feel unworthy any longer, because I am worthy to be loved by you. I don’t have anything to prove. They either accept me as I am or not at all. The only person who matters anymore is you.”

With his gaze holding hers, Dane lifted one of her hands off his chest and brought it to his lips, and placed a kiss on the palm. “I’m glad you’ve finally come to realize that, Sienna. And I wholeheartedly understand and agree. I was made to love you, and if my parents never accept that then it’s their loss, not ours.”

Tears constricted Sienna’s throat and she swallowed deeply before she could find her voice to say, “I love you, Dane. I don’t want the divorce. I never did. I want to belong to you and I want you to belong to me. I just want to make you happy.”

“And I love you, too, Sienna, and I don’t want the divorce, either. My life will be nothing without you being a part of it. I love you so much and I’ve missed you.”

And with his heart pounding hard in his chest, he leaned over and captured her lips, intent on showing her just what he meant.

CHAPTER 18

This is homecoming, Sienna thought as she was quickly consumed by the hungry onslaught of Dane's kiss. All the hurt and anger she'd felt for six months was being replaced by passion of the most heated kind. All she could think about was the desire she was feeling being back in the arms of the man she loved and who loved her.

This was the type of communication she'd always loved, where she could share her thoughts, feelings and desires with Dane without uttering a single word. It was where their deepest emotions and what was in their inner hearts spoke for them, expressing things so eloquently and not leaving any room for misunderstandings.

He pulled back slightly, his lips hovering within inches of hers. He reached out and caressed her cheek, and as if she needed his taste again, her lips automatically parted. A slow, sensual acknowledgement of understanding tilted the corners of his mouth into a smile. Then he leaned closer and kissed her again, longer and harder, and the only thing she could do was to wrap her arms around him and silently thank God for reuniting her with this very special man.

Dane was hungry for the taste of his wife and at that moment, as his heart continued to pound relentlessly in his chest, he knew he had to make love to her, to show her in every way what she meant to him, had always meant to him and would always mean to him.

He pulled back slightly and the moisture that was left on her lips made his stomach clench. He leaned forward and licked them dry, or tried to, but her scent was driving him to do more. "Please let me make love to you, Sienna," he whispered, leaning down and resting his forehead against hers.

She leaned back and cupped his chin with her hand. "Oh, yes. I want you to make love to me, Dane. I've missed being with you so much I ache."

“Oh, baby, I love you.” He pulled her closer, murmured the words in her twisted locks, kissed her cheek, her temple, her lips, and he cupped her buttocks, practically lifting her off the floor in the process. His breath came out harsh, ragged, as the chemistry between them sizzled. There was only one way to drench their fire.

He stretched out with her in front of the fireplace as he began removing her clothes and then his. Moments later, the blaze from the fire was a flickering light across their naked skin. And then he began kissing her all over, leaving no part of her untouched, determined to quench his hunger and his desire. He had missed the taste of her and was determined to be reacquainted in every way he could think of.

“Dane...”

Her tortured moan ignited the passion within him and he leaned forward to position his body over hers, letting his throbbing erection come to rest between her thighs, gently touching the entrance of her moist heat. He lifted his head to look down at her, wanting to see her expression the exact moment their bodies joined again.

CHAPTER 19

Sienna stared into Dane's eyes, the heat and passion she saw in them making her shiver. The love she recognized made her heart pound, and the desire she felt for him sent surges and surges of sensations through every part of her body, especially the area between her legs, making her thighs quiver.

"You're my everything, Sienna," he whispered as he began easing inside of her. His gaze was locked with hers as his voice came out in a husky tone. "I need you like I need air to breathe, water for thirst and food for nourishment. Oh, baby, my life has been so empty since you've been gone. I love and need you."

His words touched her and when he was embedded inside of her to the hilt, she arched her back, needing and wanting even more of him. She gripped his shoulders with her fingers as liquid fire seemed to flow to all parts of her body.

And at that moment she forgot everything—the Beast from the East, their limited supply of food and the fact they were stranded together in a cabin with barely enough heat. The only thing that registered in her mind was that they were together and expressing their love in a way that literally touched her soul.

He continued to stroke her, in and out, and with each powerful thrust into her body she moaned out his name and told him of her love. She was like a bow whose strings were being stretched to the limit each and every time he drove into her, and she met his thrusts with her own eager ones.

And then she felt it, the strength like a volcano erupting as he continued to stroke her to oblivion. Her body splintered into a thousand pieces as an orgasm ripped through her, almost snatching her breath away. And when she felt him buck, tighten his hold on her hips and thrust into her deeper, she knew that same powerful sensation had taken hold of him, as well.

"Sienna!"

He screamed her name and growled a couple of words that were incoherent to her ears. She tightened her arms around his neck, needing to be as close to him as she could get. She knew in her heart at that moment that things were going to be fine. She and Dane had proved that when it came to the power of love, it was never too late.

Sienna awoke the following morning naked, in front of the fireplace and cuddled in her husband's arms with a blanket covering them. After yawning, she raised her chin and glanced over at him and met his gaze head-on. The intensity in the dark eyes staring back at her shot heat through all parts of her body. She couldn't help but recall last night and how they had tried making up for all the time they had been apart.

"It's gone," Dane said softly, pulling her closer into his arms.

She lifted a brow. "What's gone?"

"The Beast."

She tilted her head to glance out the window and he was right. Although snow was still falling, it wasn't the violent blizzard that had been unleashed the day before. It was as if the weather had served the purpose it had come for and had made its exit. She smiled. Evidently, someone up there knew she and Dane's relationship was meant to be saved and had stepped in to salvage it.

She was about to say something when suddenly there was a loud pounding at the door. She and Dane looked at each other, wondering who would be paying them a visit to the cabin at this hour and in this weather.

CHAPTER 20

Sienna, like Dane, had quickly gotten dressed and was now staring at the four men who were standing in the doorway... those handsome Steele brothers. She smiled, shaking her head. Vanessa had evidently called her cousins to come rescue her, anyway.

“Vanessa called us,” Chance Steele, the oldest of the pack, said by way of explanation. “It just so happened that we were only a couple of miles down the road at our own cabin.” A smile touched his lips. “She was concerned that the two of you were here starving to death and asked us to share some of our rations.”

“Thanks, guys,” Dane said, gladly accepting the box Sebastian Steele was handing him. “Come on in. And although we’ve had plenty of heat to keep us warm, I have to admit our food supply was kind of low.”

As soon as the four entered, all eyes went to Sienna. Although the brothers knew Dane because their families sometimes ran in the same social circles, as well as the fact that Dane and Donovan Steele had graduated from high school the same year, she knew their main concern was for her. She had been their cousin Vanessa’s best friend for years, and as a result they had sort of adopted her as their little cousin, as well.

“You okay?” Morgan Steele asked her, although Sienna knew she had to look fine; probably like a woman who’d been made love to all night, and she wasn’t ashamed of that fact. After all, Dane *was* her husband. But the Steeles knew about her pending divorce, so she decided to end their worries.

She smiled and moved closer to Dane. He automatically wrapped his arms around her shoulders and brought her closer to his side. “Yes, I’m wonderful,” she said, breaking the subtle tension she felt in the room. “Dane and I have decided we don’t want a divorce and intend to stay together and make our marriage work.”

The relieved smiles on the faces of the four men were priceless. “That’s wonderful. We’re happy for you,” Donovan Steele said, grinning.

“We apologize if we interrupted anything, but you know Vanessa,” Chance said, smiling. “She wouldn’t let up. We would have come sooner but the bad weather kept us away.”

“Your timing was perfect,” Dane said, grinning. “We appreciate you even coming out now. I’m sure the roads weren’t their best.”

“No, but my new truck managed just fine,” Sebastian said proudly. “Besides, we’re going fishing later. We would invite you to join us, Dane, but I’m sure you can think of other ways you’d prefer to spend your time.”

Dane smiled as he glanced down and met Sienna’s gaze. “Oh, yeah, I can definitely think of a few.”

The power had been restored and a couple of hours later, after eating a hefty breakfast of pancakes, sausage, grits and eggs, and drinking what Dane had to admit was the best coffee he’d had in a long time, Dane and Sienna were wrapped in each other’s arms in the king-size bed. Sensations flowed through her just thinking about how they had ached and hungered for each other, and the fierceness of their lovemaking to fulfill that need and greed.

“Now will you tell me what brought you to the cabin?” Sienna asked, turning in Dane’s arms and meeting his gaze.

“My wedding band.” He then told her why he’d come to the cabin two weeks ago and how he’d left the ring behind. “It was as if without that ring on my finger, my connection to you was gone. I had to have it back so I came here for it.”

Sienna nodded, understanding completely. That was one of the reasons she hadn’t removed hers. Reaching out she cupped his stubble jaw in her hand and then leaned over and kissed him softly. “Together forever, Mr. Bradford.”

Dane smiled. “Yes, Mrs. Bradford, together forever. We’ve proved that when it comes to true love, it’s never too late.”

* * * * *

Looking to settle down, Alaskan CEO Garth Outlaw thinks he wants a convenient bride. What he doesn't know is that his pilot, Regan Fairchild, wants *him*. Now, with two accidental weeks together in paradise, will the wife he needs be closer than he realized?

Read on for a sneak peek of

The Wife He Needs

by New York Times bestselling author Brenda Jackson,
the first book in her Westmoreland Legacy: The Outlaws series!

CHAPTER ONE

“So, when is the wedding, Garth?”

Garth Outlaw raised his eyes from studying his cards. Was his brother playing mind games to mess with his concentration?

“And just what wedding are you talking about?”

Garth glanced around the table and saw the smirks on the faces of all four of his brothers. Even Jess had made a trip home from the nation's capital for a week long visit.

“Is anyone going to answer?” Garth asked.

Jess grinned as he threw out a card. “I heard it from Dad the moment I walked through the door. He claims you've gotten over Karen Piccard, decided to settle down and do whatever needs to be done for the benefit of the company, which includes getting a wife and making babies to guarantee the Outlaw dynasty. Those were his words, not mine.”

“We heard the same thing,” Cash said, with Sloan and Maverick nodding in agreement.

Garth didn't say anything. Being the oldest son of Bartram “Bart” Outlaw wasn't easy, especially when his father liked spreading information that wasn't true. However, in this case,

it was. At least partly. He was planning to do what needed to be done for the company. But he seriously doubted he would ever get over Karen. She would always have his heart.

“No wedding date has been set because I haven’t chosen a bride.”

His brother Cash sat up straight in his chair. “Are you really thinking about settling down with a wife and making babies?” he asked, as if the thought of doing such a thing was as unheard of as living in outer space.

Garth threw out some chips. “Why not? I don’t see any of you guys rushing to the altar to continue the Outlaw legacy. Not even you, Jess, and you’re the politician in the family. You of all people should be thinking about acquiring a wife.” A couple of years ago, Jess had gotten elected as a senator from Alaska.

A grin touched Jess’s lips. “No, thank you. I’m not ready to fall in love.”

Garth shrugged. “Who said anything about falling in love?”

“You’re thinking of marrying a woman you don’t love?” This question came from Sloan.

“For me there’s no other way.”

There was no reason to explain what he meant. They knew.

“And you’ll do it because Bart says it needs to be done?”

Garth rolled his eyes at his youngest brother, Maverick, who’d been quiet up to now. “No, I’ll consider doing it because I think it’s about time I settled down. I’m thirty-eight, and dating gets old.”

“Speak for yourself,” Maverick said, grinning. “I happen to enjoy dating a lot of women.”

Garth shook his head. “And Walker got me thinking. Look how long he was a loner before he got married. If he can do it, then anyone can.”

Walker Rafferty was Garth's best friend. A couple of years ago, Walker had met his current wife and now they were parents to twins, a boy and a girl they'd named Walker and Westlyn. Nobody thought Walker would ever remarry after losing his first wife and son in a car accident. Surprisingly, ten years later, Walker had fallen in love again. Garth was happy for Walker, and inspired to settle down, but honestly, he couldn't see himself falling in love. He was convinced Karen was the only woman he was meant to love.

He and Karen had met in the Marines. They'd fallen in love immediately and made plans to marry after their enlistment. They'd dated six months and then one morning during a routine border check in Syria, her military chopper had crashed, killing everyone on board. He'd never even gotten the chance to bring Karen to Fairbanks and introduce the woman he'd loved to his family.

"Walker certainly does seem a lot happier these days, thanks to our cousin," Cash said, intruding into Garth's thoughts.

Garth nodded as he studied his cards. Yes, Walker had become the Outlaws' cousin-in-law after marrying Bailey Westmoreland. Bailey was a cousin they hadn't known existed until it was proven that the Westmorelands and the Outlaws were related. The physical resemblance between the two families could not be disputed, although for some reason their father still would not accept the fact that the Outlaws and Westmorelands were kin. However, like Garth and his siblings had told Bart, it didn't matter whether or not he accepted the kinship, it was the truth.

The Westmoreland extended family spread from Georgia and Texas to Montana, Colorado and California. After growing up with no other relatives, it was fun joining the Westmorelands whenever they had get-togethers or family events, like the annual Westmoreland Charity Ball in Denver. Garth loved it whenever the Westmorelands and the Outlaws got together.

Hours later, after the poker game ended with Cash winning all their money, everyone retired to bed except for Garth and

Jess. Although all six Outlaw offspring owned homes in Fairbanks, every once in a while, to appease the old man, they would stay under his roof at the Outlaw Estates.

Some people found it amazing that the six Outlaw siblings were as close as they were, considering each one of them had a different mother. Unfortunately, some of those women had turned out to be gold diggers. When the divorces became final, Bart's attorneys made sure he was given full custody of his children.

Garth was the oldest. His mother had been Bart's first wife and had come from a wealthy family. She had married Bart against her parents' wishes. And when her family finally got to her, she had asked Bart for a divorce. He told her he would give her one but she couldn't take his child. In the end, she'd left without Garth. She'd remarried a couple years later, to the man her parents had chosen. After marrying her second husband, Juanita pretty much forgot Garth existed. However, his maternal grandparents had left him a pretty hefty trust fund when they'd died twenty or so years ago.

Jessup or Jess, as he preferred to be called, was thirty-six and the second oldest, and had always wanted a career in politics. Jess's mother, Joyce, had been the first gold digger, and Bart had ended his marriage to Joyce before their first anniversary rolled around. Bart had taken her to court for custody of Jess.

Cashen, who was usually called Cash, was thirty-four and the third-born son. Cash's mother, Ellen, had been a decent woman and Bart's third wife. In a way, she'd been too decent for Bart. She was soft-spoken and had tried bringing out the good in Bart. When she'd realized such a thing wasn't possible, she'd left. Even with Bart's threats, Ellen had called Bart's bluff and tried to take Cash with her. In the end, she'd lost the custody fight after finding out Bart had friends in high places.

Sloan was thirty-two. His mother, Barbie, had been another one who'd picked Bart for his money. Although the marriage had lasted less than six months, that was long enough for Sloan to be conceived. Barbie'd had no problem leaving

Sloan behind—for the right amount—when she split. She hadn't been seen or heard from again.

Maverick, at twenty-nine, was the youngest Outlaw son and the most womanizing. Granted, all of them enjoyed their share of the opposite sex from time to time, but Maverick had his share and then some. His mother had been an exploiter, too. Rosalind was the one who'd been caught having an affair right under Bart's nose. However, there hadn't been any question that Maverick was Bart's kid, since he favored the old man more than any of them. Right down to the cleft in his chin.

Last but certainly not least, was Bart's only daughter, definitely his pride and joy, twenty-five-year-old Charm. To this day, Charm's mother, Claudia, was the only woman Bart had ever loved and the one he couldn't handle. And...she'd been the only one Bart hadn't married, but not for lack of trying.

Claudia had refused to accept Bart's marriage proposals. All five of them. The most recent was four years ago, when Charm had turned twenty-one. The Outlaws saw Claudia frequently because, unlike the other mothers, she had an open invitation to visit as often as she liked, but she never visited as often as Bart would have wanted. Claudia didn't tolerate Bart's grouchiness and seemed to bring out the best in Bart...if there was such a thing.

Bart hadn't known Claudia was pregnant when their affair had ended. She'd left for parts unknown. Fifteen years later, Claudia reappeared with Charm in tow, telling Bart she couldn't handle Charm's sassiness anymore and for him to now deal with it.

Unfortunately, Bart dealt with it the wrong way by spoiling Charm even more rotten. It had taken the five older brothers stepping in and applying the firm hand their father had refused to apply. In the end, their spoiled sister had settled down. That didn't mean she didn't try their patience every once in a while, because she did.

“So, what’s the real deal with you and this marriage thing, Garth?” Jess asked, intruding into Garth’s thoughts. “Unlike what Dad thinks, I find it hard to believe you’ve gotten over Karen...although it has been close to ten years now.”

Garth glanced over at Jess as he took a sip of his wine. Garth was close to all his siblings, but there was a special closeness between him and Jess. Jess had confided his intentions to Garth when he’d decided to run for United States senator. Jess had won the election in a landslide victory. And he knew just what Karen had meant to Garth, because it was all in the letters Garth would write home to Jess.

Garth leaned back in his chair. “It could be twenty years and I still won’t get over Karen, Jess. I loved her too much. But I’m not getting any younger, and I want the same happiness I see that Walker and our cousins have. Besides,” he said with a chuckle, “I figure if I make the first step, the rest of you will follow suit.”

Jess threw his head back and laughed. “Don’t expect that to happen. Some of us aren’t ready for home, hearth and the sound of little feet yet.” Then Jess added, “Now that you’ve made up your mind, have you decided on a particular woman? Anyone we know?”

Garth shook his head. “Nope. Taking Charm’s advice, I—”

“Wait! Hold up. You took Charm’s advice about something?”

Garth chuckled. “Yes. I know it sounds scary, but I liked what she suggested. It’s a totally different approach to meeting a woman who is wife material.”

“What approach is that?” Jess asked, taking a sip of his beer.

“A private dating service.”

Jess nearly choked. “You’re serious?”

Garth smiled. “Yes. I thought it was way out there at first, too, until Charm convinced me how productive it would be. She did all the legwork for me and found this high-class dating agency that’s located in Beverly Hills, California. Just to be

considered as an applicant the men must have a specified financial portfolio, and the women are required to not only be attractive but have a certain level of poise, education, classiness and sophistication.”

Shifting in his seat, Garth added. “I further specified I wanted a woman who was trustworthy, had good morals and was one who wants to become a wife and mother one day. Sooner than later. And she must share my interests and hobbies. I provided a list of them.”

“Have they found such a paragon of a woman who met all your specifications?”

Garth grinned. “Surprisingly, yes. Trust me, any woman who comes through this particular dating service is well vetted. She’ll keep things confidential and private during the entire process.”

“Have you met her yet?”

“No, but she has agreed to spend two weeks with me, at a location we both agreed to, so we can get to know each other better. Of course, I’m covering all the expenses, including those to get her there.”

“And exactly where is *there*?”

“Santa Cruz, Spain. I’m flying there next week.”

“This method sounds so impersonal. More like a business arrangement.”

“In a way, it is. I’m hiring the service to match me with someone who’s compatible with my needs and desires. I’ve seen pictures of her and she’s beautiful, and her résumé is impressive. If things work out the way I’m hoping they will, after our Spain trip we’ll continue to date and then eventually talk marriage.”

“A loveless marriage.”

“Yes, a loveless marriage. I will honor her, respect her and take care of all her needs, but I won’t ever love her,” Garth said bluntly. “I’ll be honest and forthright with her about that,

Jess. I won't have her entering the marriage with false hope or illusions."

"Why use a dating service? I would think you're capable of finding a woman on your own."

"Didn't have time."

"Any reason you're in a rush?" Jess asked.

"No."

Jess studied him intently and Garth wished he wouldn't do that. Jess could always figure out his motives, and Garth hoped like hell that he didn't figure out this one. The less Jess knew, the better.

"Well, you're an ace when it comes to strategic planning, and I wish you the best. I hope the woman is everything you want, Garth, and things work out."

"Thanks, Jess. I hope so, too."

* * *

Regan Fairchild's job as a corporate pilot was one that anyone who enjoyed flying would love. Then why was she thinking of leaving it? The answer to her question was the gorgeous specimen of a man walking toward the plane with his briefcase in one hand and a cell phone in the other. His long black coat whipped against his legs as he headed toward the plane while ignoring the strong gust of Alaskan wind that always accompanied October weather. The shoulders beneath the coat were massive and powerful, which gave him a totally heart-stopping, virile look.

He was handsome, and she was convinced that in another life he'd been an explorer, discovering and invading new territories. He was always busy. He always had a plan. He rarely slowed down, and lately he rarely dated.

Her heart pounded in her chest like it always did whenever she saw him. How long had it been since she'd fallen hopelessly in love with Garth Bartram Outlaw? Had it been ten years ago on her eighteenth birthday, when he'd flown her and two of her besties to Las Vegas as a high school

graduation gift? Or had it been at sixteen, when he had helped her father surprise her with a “sweet-sixteen” party at Disney World? Deep down she knew it didn’t matter when it had happened. The key thing was that it *had* happened, and she needed to do something about it before Garth became her downfall.

Regan knew that as much as she wished otherwise, realistically, quitting her job was not an option. Her father, Franklin Fairchild, had been the corporate pilot for Outlaw Freight Lines for over forty years. When he retired a few years ago, she had taken over. She loved her job. She also loved the man who was headed toward her with a huge smile on his face. He did that whenever he saw her. She’d never known a time when Garth hadn’t given her a smile. It was a smile that meant everything to her.

She knew Garth’s smile was a natural part of his makeup. He rarely frowned, and when he did, everyone knew there would be trouble. He was an astute businessman, and the company had grown in leaps and bounds since he’d taken over from his father. It wasn’t that Bart Outlaw hadn’t been good at his work, but Garth’s approach was a lot different from his father’s. Bart ruled with a hard hand and was distrustful by nature. He was hard-nosed and inflexible. On the other hand, Garth knew the art of compromising, and he was also brilliant. Everybody liked Garth, and she of all people knew how easy he was to love.

She also knew about that period of sadness in his life when he’d returned home from a stint abroad as a marine. He had come back a broken man, after the woman he loved had been killed. For a while there had not been any smiles, and he’d thrown himself into working beside his father to make the company bigger and bigger.

Then, when Bart retired, or more specifically when the company’s board threatened to oust him, it was Garth who’d taken over and put in all those long hours, sometimes without a social life, to pull the company through difficult times. Regan guessed that he’d also been trying to rid himself of the pain of losing the person he’d loved. More than once, she had

walked in on him unexpectedly, in one of his quiet moments, to see grief in his eyes.

“Good morning, Regan,” he said now, when he came to a stop in front of her.

She tilted her head back to look up at him. He was tall, but the first things that caught her attention were Garth’s handsome features. Namely his smooth, coffee-and-cream complexion, piercing dark brown eyes, a perfectly shaped nose, a pair of full lips and a sculpted chin. He garnered plenty of feminine attention no matter where he went.

“Same to you, Garth. Ready to fly?” She knew she would be flying him to Santa Cruz, Spain.

“I’m ready whenever you are, and how’s Franklin?”

“Dad is fine.”

“Good. I need to check up on him soon. Maybe even pay him a visit.”

Her father was close to all Bart’s offspring but would admit that Garth had always been his favorite. Franklin had been working as Bart’s pilot when Garth was born. When Bart had gained full custody of Garth, oftentimes Garth and his nanny had accompanied Bart when he traveled extensively.

“I miss him.”

Regan missed her father, too. She hadn’t been surprised when her father had left the cold state of Alaska to move to Florida upon retirement. He was enjoying sunshine nearly all year round.

“Everything is in order, Garth, and we’ll be taking off soon.”

Less than twenty minutes later, she was cruising the skies. They would make a couple of pit stops to refuel before reaching Santa Cruz. She’d never been there but had heard it was beautiful. One thing she did in addition to studying the layout of the private airport of any destination was get familiar with the area. The plan for this trip was for her to drop him off and return to get him in two weeks. She had two rest days

before flying back to Alaska and would use them to get in as much sightseeing and shopping as she could. Depending on his business plans, there were times when he asked her to remain with him during the entire trip as his private chauffeur. He hadn't asked for that on this trip.

“Mind if I join you?”

She smiled. “Sure.”

It wouldn't be the first time Garth had joined her in the cockpit, claiming he was bored in the seating area. Although calling it a seating area was an understatement when this jet included luxurious sleeping quarters as well as an office.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw how easily he slid into the copilot seat beside her. As usual, he smelled good. She didn't have to glance over at him to know he was gearing up with the headset. Her father had taught a teenage Garth to fly and he'd enhanced those skills while in the Marines. More than once, he'd copiloted with her on long flights.

“Estimated flight time?” he asked her.

“Twelve hours.”

“First stop?”

The FAA required her to take a break after piloting for nine hours. “Bolungarvik, Iceland,” she replied.

He nodded. “Nice place. I visited there a few years ago while in the Marines. It's a beautiful coastal fishing town with breathtaking scenery. Especially the mountains surrounding the harbor.”

“Sounds gorgeous.”

“It is.”

She eased the jet into a glide while moving around a huge mountain. “You're good at that, Regan,” he said.

“Thanks. I was trained by the best.”

She considered her father the best pilot there was, and he'd made sure she'd gotten her private pilot license at sixteen. Her mother had died of an aneurysm when Regan was five. She

and her father had a close relationship, and missed him now that he was in Florida. However, she'd understood him wanting to spend his later years in a warmer climate. When he had sold her childhood home, he'd split the proceeds with her. She'd taken the money and purchased a home on the Tanana River.

Because Fairbanks had a military base, most of the men she'd dated had been soldiers. All were nice guys, and although she'd enjoyed their company, she hadn't gotten serious about any of them. At least not as serious as some of them had liked. Earlier in the year, she had broken up with Craig Foster. They'd dated for six months and then he'd developed jealous tendencies she hadn't cared to deal with.

“I love being up here.”

She knew what he meant. There was just something about being in the beautiful blue sky, this close to heaven. “Me, too. I guess I don't have to ask if you're prepared for your meetings this trip.” She knew that when it came to any business regarding Outlaw Freight Lines, Garth was always prepared.

He chuckled. “Not this trip. It's strictly for pleasure.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, a pain settled around her heart. That meant his two weeks in Santa Cruz would be with a woman. The thought of that bothered her even when she had no right to let it.

“No one back in Fairbanks will have need for the company jet while I'm in Santa Cruz. They have their own planes anyway,” Garth said. “If you like, instead of returning to Fairbanks, you can use the time to visit your father in Florida before returning for me.”

He was right; all the Outlaws had their own personal planes and could fly them. Even Charm. Due to Alaska's very limited road system, one of the most common ways of getting around was by aircraft. Locals liked to say that more Alaskans owned personal planes than cars.

“Thanks, but Dad left two days ago for a twenty-day cruise. However, if you don’t mind, I’d like to spend a couple of days in Los Angeles to visit Simone.” Garth knew Simone was her best friend from college.

“Of course, I don’t mind. By the way, chances are we might have a guest flying back with us on the return.”

Regan’s stomach knotted. “A guest?”

“Yes. I’ll let you know when I’m certain so you can file the proper flight information.”

“All right, Garth.”

The one thing Garth had never done was bring a female friend on board to spend time with him. He always kept his business and personal lives separate. But then, hadn’t he said this was not a business trip?

Regan glided around another mountain and tried concentrating on piloting the plane and not on what Garth had told her. Maybe it was time for her to finally accept that the only place she had in Garth’s life was this one, as his pilot. She would never be the woman who would one day wiggle her way into his heart to remove that sadness she often saw in his eyes. As much as she wished otherwise, it would never happen, and it was time for her to make her peace with that.

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