



Stern (Harlequin Desire)

By Brenda Jackson

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

Stern Westmoreland never makes mistakes—until he helps his best friend Jovonnie "JoJo" Jones with a makeover...for another man. Now Stern wants JoJo for himself. Their attraction is undeniable and there's only one way to test it: one long, steamy night together as much more than friends!

Look for the other stories in Brenda Jackson's Westmoreland trilogy: ZANE and CANYON. Available now! And don't miss Brenda's 100th book, A MADARIS BRIDE FOR CHRISTMAS, available November 2013!

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Editorial Review

About the Author

A New York Times and USA TODAY bestselling and award-winning author of more than 100 romance titles, Brenda divides her time between family, writing and traveling . Readers may write Brenda at P.O. Box 28267, Jacksonville, Florida 32226, by email at WriterBJackson@aol.com or visit her website at brendajackson.net.

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"Stern, what can a woman do to make a man want her?" Stern Westmoreland, who had been looking through the scope of his hunting rifle, jerked his head around at the unexpected question, nearly knocking the cap off his head.

He glared at the woman beside him who was staring through the scope of her own rifle. When a shot rang out, expletives flowed from his lips. "Dammit, JoJo, you did that on purpose. You asked me that just to ruin my concentration."

She lowered her rifle and frowned at him. "I did not. I asked you because I really want to know. And if it makes you feel better, I missed my target just now."

Stern rolled his eyes. So what if she had missed her shot *now*? Nothing had stopped her from taking down that huge elk yesterday when he had yet to hit anything, not even a coyote. On days like this he wondered why he always invited his best friend on these hunting trips. She showed him up each and every time.

Lifting his rifle and looking through the scope again, he drew in a deep breath. He knew why he always invited JoJo. He liked having her around. When he was with her he could be himself and not a man trying to impress anyone. Their comfortable relationship was why she'd been his best friend for years. "Well?"

He lowered the scope from his eye to look at her.

"Well what?"

"You didn't answer me. What can a woman do to make a man want her? Other than jump into bed. I'm not into casual sex."

He couldn't help but chuckle. "I'm glad to hear that."

"What do you find funny, Stern? It's okay for *you* to be into casual sex but not *me*?"

Stern stared at her in astonishment. "What in the heck is wrong with you today? You've never been into drama."

JoJo's expression filled with anger and frustration. "You don't understand, and you used to understand me even when nobody else did." Without saying anything else she turned and walked off.

He watched her leave. *What the hell?* JoJo was being temperamental, and in all the years he'd known her she'd *never* been temperamental. What in the world was going on with her?

Deciding he wasn't in the mood to hunt anymore today, he followed JoJo down the path that led back to his hunting lodge.

After a quick shower, Jovonnie Jones grabbed a beer out of the refrigerator, pulled the tab and took a refreshing sip. She needed that, she thought as she left the kitchen to sit outside on the wooden deck and enjoy the picturesque view of the Rocky Mountains.

A few years ago Stern had stumbled on this lodge, an old, dilapidated place that sat on more than a hundred acres of the best hunting land anywhere. In only two years, with the help of his brothers and cousins, the building had been transformed into one of beauty. It was a perfect hunting getaway. It offered black bears, deer, fox and other wildlife, but this was mainly elk country.

The lodge had been a good investment for Stern. When he wasn't using it, he leased it. It was a huge two-story structure with eight bedrooms, four full bathrooms and wooden decks that wrapped all the way around the house on both the first and the second floors. The common area included a huge kitchen and dining area and a sitting room with a massive brick fireplace. Plenty of floor-to-ceiling windows provided breathtaking views of the Rockies from every room.

She eased down in one of the outdoor cedar rocking chairs. Even after her hot shower and cold beer, she was still feeling frustrated and angry. Why couldn't Stern take her seriously and answer her question? It should work in her favor that she was best friends with a man most women believed to be the hottest thing on legs. Stern got any woman he wanted. If anybody ought to know about a woman's appeal, it should be him.

JoJo chuckled, remembering. In high school, girls would deliberately pretend to befriend her for no other reason than to get close to Stern. It never worked for long because once Stern learned the truth he would drop them like hot potatoes. He refused to let anyone use her. To him, friendship meant more than that. If those girls didn't want to be her friend because of who she was, then he wanted no part of them.

In truth, most of the girls she'd known in high school, and even some of the women she knew now, preferred not to hang around with someone who wasn't very girly.

JoJo preferred jeans to dresses. She liked to hunt, practiced karate, could shoot a bow and arrow, and knew more about what was under the hood of a car than most guys. Of course, that last skill set had come from her father, who had been a professional mechanic. And not just any mechanic—he had been the best.

A deep lump clogged her throat. It was hard to believe he had passed away two years ago. He'd suffered a massive heart attack while doing something he loved—working on a car. Her mother had died when JoJo was eleven, so her father's death had left her parentless. She'd inherited the auto mechanic shop, which had given her the opportunity to come out of the classroom and get under the hood of a car.

After she had gotten the teaching degree her father had wanted her to get, she'd obtained a graduate degree in technical engineering. She had enjoyed being a professor at one of the local community colleges, but owning and operating the Golden Wrench was what she truly loved.

"So are we still on speaking terms?"

Stern placed a tray of tortilla chips and salsa on the table beside her. He then slid into the other rocker.

"Not sure if we are or not," she said, reaching over and grabbing a chip to dip into the salsa and then sliding

the whole thing in her mouth. "I asked you a question and you didn't answer me because you assumed I wasn't serious."

Stern took a sip of beer and glanced over the can at her. "Were you serious?"

"Yes."

"Then I apologize. I honestly thought you were trying to mess with my concentration."

A smile touched her lips. "Would I do that?"

"In a heartbeat."

"Well, yes," she admitted, trying to hide her amusement. "But I didn't today. I need information."

"On how a woman could make a man want her?"

"Yes."

Stern leaned forward in his chair and pierced her with a dark, penetrating gaze. "Why?"

She lifted a brow. "Why?"

"Yes, why would you want to know something like that?"

She didn't answer right away. Instead she took a sip of her beer and looked out at the mountains. It was a beautiful September day. A red fox flashed through a cluster of pine trees before darting between a patch of woods to disappear.

After she'd gathered her thoughts, she turned back to Stern. "There's this guy who brings his car to the shop. He's sexy. Oh...is he sexy."

Stern rolled his eyes. "I'll take your word for it. Go on."

She shrugged. "That's it." Stern frowned. "That's it?"

"Yes. I've decided I want him. The question is, how can I get him to want me, too?"

As far as Stern was concerned, the real question was, had JoJo lost her ever-loving mind? But he didn't say that. Instead, he took another sip of his beer.

He knew JoJo better than he knew anyone, and if she was determined to do something then that was it. He could help her, or she'd find help somewhere else.

"What's his name?" he asked.

She slid another chip into her mouth. "You don't need to know that. Do you tell me the name of every woman you want?"

"This is different."

"Really? In what way?"

He wasn't sure, but he just knew that it was. Using the pad of his thumb, he rubbed the tension building at his temple. "First of all, when it comes to men, you're green. And second, for you to even ask me that question means you're not ready for the kind of relationship you're going after."

She threw her head back and laughed. "Pleeze, Stern. I'll be thirty next year. Most women my age are married by now, some with children. And I don't even have a boyfriend."

He wasn't moved by that argument. "I'll be thirty-one next year and I don't have a girlfriend." When she looked over at him, he amended that statement. "Not a steady one. I like being single."

"But you do date. A lot. I'm beginning to think that most of the men in town wonder if I'm really a girl."

He studied her. There had never been any doubt in his mind that she was a girl. She had long lashes and eyes so dark they were the color of midnight. Those eyes were staring straight ahead now, looking out over the thick woods. She had her bare legs lifted in the rocker with her arms wrapped around them. Her pose emphasized the muscles in her limbs. He knew she did a lot of physical work at the shop, but the two of them also had memberships at a gym in town.

She had changed out of her hunting clothes and was wearing cut-off jeans and a short top. She had gorgeous legs, long and endless. But he knew he was one of the few men who'd ever seen them. She opened the shop at eight and closed after five. It wasn't unusual for her to work late if she had a car an owner needed. And during that whole time, she wore an auto-mechanic's uniform splattered with grease. A number of men would be surprised how she looked wearing something other than that uniform.

"You hide stuff," he finally said.

She glanced over at him, frowning. "I hide what?"

"What a nice body you have. Most of the time men see you in your work clothes."

Her frown deepened. "Well, forgive me for not wearing stilettos and a slinky dress while I change a carburetor."

A vision of that flashed through his mind and he smiled as he took a sip of beer. "Stilettos and a slinky dress? You don't have to go that far, but."

He glanced over at her and saw she was pouting. He kind of liked it when she pouted. She looked cute.

"But what?"

"You would probably gain more men's interest if you were seen around town after hours in something other than jeans and sweats. You're a female, JoJo. Men like women who look soft and sexy once in a while."

She studied the contents of her beer bottle. "You think that might do it?"

"Probably." He suddenly sat up straight in the rocker. "I have an idea. What you need is a makeover."

"A makeover?"

"Yes, and then you need to go where your guy hangs out. In a dress that shows your legs, a new hairdo—"

"What's wrong with my hair?"

Honestly, he didn't think there was anything wrong with her hair. It was long, thick and healthy. He should know. He'd helped her wash it numerous times over the years. He loved it when she wore it down past her shoulders, but these days she rarely did.

"You have beautiful hair. You just need to show it off more. Even now you're hiding it under a cap."

He reached over and took the hat off her head. Lustrous dark brown hair tumbled to her shoulders. He smiled. "See, I like it already."

And he did. He was tempted to run his hands through it to feel the silky texture.

He leaned back and took another sip of his beer, wondering where such a tempting thought came from. This was JoJo, for heaven's sake. His best friend. He should not be thinking about how silky her hair was.

"So, you think a makeover will work?"

"Yes, but like I said, after the makeover you need to go where you think the guy's going to be—with a date. Whenever you pull it all together, I'm available."

She met his gaze. "Not sure that will work. If I'm with someone, he might not check me out."

"Most people around here know we're best friends and nothing more."

"He's new to town and probably won't know that."

Stern thought for a moment. "You're probably right. I wouldn't come on to a woman if I saw her with another man. But you want him to accept you as you are. The woman who works as a mechanic during the day and the same woman who can get all dolled up at night, right?"

"Right."

Stern smiled. "Then I suggest you let him see you with another man. Makes it obvious that you can be sexy when you want to be and that other men appreciate you. I bet once he's seen you, even if you're with me, he'll contact you for a date. And then when he does see you in your work clothes, he'll look beyond the uniform and imagine what's underneath."

Stern's smile faded. For some reason the thought of men checking out JoJo that way, of men calling her for a date, bothered him. Suddenly, he was thinking that maybe a makeover wasn't such a great idea after all.

"That's a wonderful idea, Stern! As soon as I get back to Denver I'm going to get started on the makeover. First, I need to find out where this guy hangs out. Then I'll find the name of someone who can make me look

pretty."

"You're already pretty, JoJo."

She patted his hand. "Ah, that's sweet of you to say, but you're my best friend so your opinion of my looks doesn't count. I'll get in touch with your cousin Megan for the name of her hairstylist, and it shouldn't be hard to find a makeup artist. Then, I'll go shopping. I'll get some of your other cousins and sisters-in-law to go with me because they all like to shop. I'm excited."

He took another sip of his beer. "I can tell."

Why did her interest in a man bother him? The only reason he could come up with was that she was his best friend and he didn't want to lose their special bond. He didn't want to lose *her*. What if this guy found it strange that a man and woman were best friends? What if he pushed her to end the friendship they'd shared for years?

His gut twisted. His brothers and cousins had always said they wouldn't want any girlfriend of theirs to have the sort of close relationship with another man that he and JoJo shared. What if this guy thought the same way?

Stern did not like problems, and he always preferred dealing with them head-on.

Stern frowned. "What's his name, JoJo?"

She chuckled. "You don't need his name, Stern. Besides, you'll find out soon enough when I set my plans into motion."

Stern took a sip of his beer. He couldn't wait.

Users Review

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