



Bane (The Westmorelands)

By Brenda Jackson

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New York Times bestselling author Brenda Jackson's last Westmoreland bachelor is a navy SEAL on a mission to protect the woman who got away...

After five years, navy SEAL Brisbane Westmoreland is back home on his ranch and ready to reclaim the woman he left behind. But when he tracks her to Dallas, he's in for a shock.

Crystal Newsome isn't ready to forgive Bane for saying he loved her then vanishing from her life. Only now the beautiful chemist needs his protection. As their own irresistible chemistry takes over once again, can Bane keep Crystal safe and convince her they can have the second chance they both deserve?

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Bane (The Westmorelands) By Brenda Jackson Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #39982 in eBooks
- Published on: 2015-12-01
- Released on: 2015-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

About the Author

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Leaving her job at Seton Industries, Crystal Newsome quickly walked to her car, looking over her shoulder when she thought she heard footsteps behind her. She tried ignoring the sparks that moved up her arms, while telling herself she was probably getting all worked up for nothing. And all because of that note someone had left today in her desk drawer.

Someone wants the research you're working on. I suggest you disappear for a while. No matter what, don't trust anyone.

After reading it she had glanced around the lab. Her four colleagues seemed preoccupied, busy working on their individual biochemistry projects. She wondered who'd given her the warning and wished she could dismiss the note as a joke, but she couldn't. Especially not after the incident yesterday.

Someone had gotten inside her locker. How the person had known her combination she wasn't sure, since there hadn't been any signs of forced entry. But whoever it was had taken the time to leave things almost exactly as she'd left them.

And now the anonymous note.

Reaching her car, she unlocked the door and got inside, locking it again behind her. After checking her surroundings and the other cars parked close by, she maneuvered out of the parking lot and onto the street. When she came to a stop at the first traffic light, she pulled the typed note from her purse and reread it.

Disappear? How could she do that, even if she wanted to?

She was currently working on her PhD as a biochemist, and was one of five chosen nationally to participate in a yearlong research program at Seton Industries. Crystal knew others were interested in her research. Case in point: just last month she'd been approached by two government officials who wanted her to continue her PhD research under the protection of Homeland Security. The two men had stressed what could happen if her data got into the wrong hands, namely those with criminal intent. She had assured them that even with the documented advances of her research, her project was still just a theoretical concept. But they had wanted to place her in a highly collaborative environment with two other American chemists working on similar research. Although their offer had been tempting, she had turned it down. She was set to graduate from Harvard with her PhD in the spring and had already received a number of job offers.

But now she wondered if she should have taken the men's warning seriously. Could someone with criminal intent be after the findings she'd already logged?

She glanced in her rearview mirror and her heart pounded. A blue car she'd noticed several traffic lights back was still there. Was she imagining things?

A short while later she knew she wasn't. The car was staying a few car lengths behind her.

Crystal knew she couldn't go home. The driver of that blue car would follow her. So where could she go? Who could she call? The four other biochemists were also PhD students, but she stayed to herself the majority of the time and hadn't formed relationships with any of them.

Except for Darnell Enfield. He'd been the one intent on establishing a relationship with her. She had done nothing to encourage the man and had told him countless times she wasn't interested. When that hadn't deterred him, she'd threatened to file a complaint with the director of the program. In anger, Darnell had accused her of being stuck-up, saying he hoped she had a lonely and miserable life.

Crystal had news for him. She had that already. On most days she tried not to dwell on just how lonely the past five years had been. But as far as she was concerned, Loneliness had been her middle name for further back than five years.

Born the only child to older, overprotective parents, she'd been homeschooled and rarely allowed to leave the house except to attend church or accompany them to the grocery store. For years, her parents wouldn't even allow her to go outside and play. She remembered when one of the neighbor kids had tried befriending her, the most she could do was talk to the little girl through her bedroom window.

It was only after their pastor had encouraged her parents to enroll Crystal in public school to enhance her social skills that they did so. By then she was fifteen and starving for friends. But she'd discovered just how cruel the world was when the other girls had snubbed her and the guys had made fun of her because she'd been advanced in all her studies. They'd called her a genius freak. She had been miserable attending school until she'd met Bane.

Brisbane Westmoreland.

The man she had secretly married five years ago on her eighteenth birthday. And the man she hadn't seen since.

As a teenager, Bane had been her best friend, her sounding board and her reason for existing. He'd understood her like no other and she'd felt she had understood him. Her parents made the four-year difference in their ages a big issue and tried keeping them apart. The more her parents tried, the more she'd defied them to be with him.

Then there was the problem of Bane being a Westmoreland. Years ago, her and Bane's great-grandfathers had ended their friendship because of a dispute regarding land boundaries, and it seemed her father had no problem continuing the feud.

When Crystal came to another traffic light she pulled out a business card from her purse. It was the card those two government officials had left with her. They'd asked her to call if she changed her mind or if she noticed any funny business. At the time she'd thought their words were a scare tactic to make her give their offer more consideration. But could they have been right? Should she contact them? She replaced the card in her purse and looked at the note again.

No matter what, don't trust anyone.

So what should she do? Where could she go? Since her father's death, her mother was now a missionary in Haiti. Should Crystal escape to Orangeburg, South Carolina, where her aunt Rachel still lived? The last thing Crystal wanted was to bring trouble to her elderly aunt's doorstep.

There was another place she could hide. Her childhood home in Denver. She and her mother had discovered, after going through her father's papers, that he'd never sold their family homestead after her parents moved to Connecticut. And even more shocking to Crystal was that he'd left the ranch to her. Had that been his way of letting her know he'd accepted that one day she would go back there?

She nibbled her bottom lip. Should she go back now? And face all the memories she'd left behind? What if Bane was there? What if he'd hooked up with someone else despite the promises he'd made to her?

She didn't want to believe that. The Bane Westmoreland she had fallen in love with had promised to honor their wedding vows. Before marrying someone else he would seek her out to ask for a divorce.

She thought about the other promise he'd made and wondered if she was the biggest fool on earth. He'd vowed he would come back for her. That had been five years ago and she was still waiting. Was she wasting her life on a man who had forgotten about her? A lot could have happened since he'd made that promise. Feelings and emotions could change. People could change. Why was she refusing to let go of teenage memories with a guy who might have moved on with his life?

Legally she was a married woman, but all she had to show for it was a last name she never used and a husband who'd left her with unfulfilled promises. Her last contact with him after her father had sent her away was when he'd called to let her know he was joining the navy. Did he expect her to wait until he got tired of being a sailor, moving from one port to the next? What if an emergency had come up and she'd needed him?

She knew the answer to that without much thought. Had an emergency arisen, she could have reached him through his family. Although the Westmorelands had no idea where she lived now, she'd always known where they were. She could have picked up the phone and called Dillon, Bane's eldest brother, if she'd ever truly wanted or needed to contact Bane. Several times she'd come close to doing that, but something had always held her back. First of all, she knew the Westmorelands blamed her for a lot of the trouble Bane had gotten into.

As teens, her and Bane's relationship had been obsessive and she didn't want to think about the number of times they'd broken the law to be together. She'd had resorted to cutting school, and regardless of what her parents had assumed, the majority of the time it had been her idea and not his. Nothing her parents or his family said or did had torn them apart. Instead, their bond had gotten stronger.

Because of the difference in their ages, her parents had accused Bane of taking advantage of her, and her father had even put a restraining order in place and threatened Bane with jail time to keep him away from her. But that hadn't stopped her or Bane from being together. When they'd gotten tired of their families' interference, they had eloped.

She reached inside her shirt and pulled out the sterling-silver heart-shaped locket Bane had given her instead of a wedding ring he couldn't afford. When he'd placed the locket around her neck he'd said it had belonged to his deceased mother. He'd wanted her to have it, to always wear it as a reminder of their love. His love. She swallowed a thick lump in her throat. If he loved her so much, then why hadn't he kept his promise and

come back for her?

Her mother had mentioned that Bane's eldest brother, Dillon, had called a year ago when he'd heard about her father's death. According to her mother, the conversation had been brief, but Dillon had taken the time to inquire about how she was doing. According to her mother the only thing he'd said about Bane was that he was in the navy. Of course her mother thought her daughter was doing just fine now that Bane was out of her life, and the Westmorelands probably felt the same way since she was out of Bane's. What if her mother was right and Bane *was* doing just fine without her?

Drawing in a deep breath, Crystal forced her thoughts back to the car following her. Should she call the police for help? She quickly dismissed the idea. Hadn't the note warned her not to trust anyone? Suddenly an idea popped into her head. It was the start of the holiday shopping season and shoppers were already out in large numbers. She would drive to the busiest mall in Dallas and get lost in traffic. If that didn't work she would come up with plan B.

The one thing she knew for certain was that she would not let the person tail her home. When she got there, she would quickly pack her things and disappear for a while. She would decide where she was going once she got to the airport. The Bahamas sounded pretty good right about now.

What would Seton Industries think when she didn't show up for work as usual? At present that was the least of her worries. Staying safe was her top priority.

Half an hour later she smiled, satisfied that plan A had worked. All it took was to scoot her car in and out of all those tenacious shoppers a few times, and the driver of the blue car couldn't keep up. But just to be certain, she drove around for a while to make sure she was no longer being tailed.

She had fallen in love with Dallas but had no choice except to leave town for a while.

Sitting in the SUV he had rented at the airport, Bane tilted his Stetson off his eyes and shifted his long legs into a more comfortable position. He checked his watch again. The private investigator's report indicated Crystal was employed with Seton Industries as a biochemist while working on her PhD, and that she usually got off work around four. It was close to seven and she hadn't gotten home yet. So where was she?

It was the holiday season and she could have gone shopping. And she must have girlfriends, so she could very well be spending time with one of them. He just had to wait.

None of his family members had been surprised when he'd announced he was going after Crystal. However, except for Bailey, who knew the whole story, all of them were shocked to learn he'd married Crystal when they had eloped. His brother Riley had claimed he'd suspected as much, but all the others hadn't had a clue.

Bailey had given Bane a huge hug and whispered that it was about time he claimed his wife. Of course others, like Dillon, had warned Bane that things might be different and not to expect Crystal to be the eighteen-year-old he'd last seen. Just like he had changed over the years, so had she.

His cousin Zane, who was reputed to be an expert on women, had gone so far as to advise Bane not to expect Crystal to readily embrace her role as loving wife or his role as long-lost husband. Zane had cautioned him not to do anything stupid like sweeping her off her feet and carrying her straight to the bedroom. They would have to get to know each other all over again, and he shouldn't be surprised if she tried putting up walls between them for a while.

Zane had reiterated that regardless of the reason, Bane hadn't made contact with his wife in almost five years and doubts would have crossed Crystal's mind regarding Bane's love and faithfulness.

He had appreciated everyone's advice. And while he wished like hell he could sweep Crystal off her feet and head straight for the nearest bedroom when he saw her, he had enough sense to know they would have to take things slow. After all, they had been apart all this time and there would be a lot for them to talk about and sort out. But he felt certain she knew he would come back for her as he'd promised; no matter how long it had taken him to do so.

He was back in her life and didn't intend to go anywhere. Even if it meant he lived with her in Dallas for a while. As a SEAL he could live anywhere as long as he was ready to leave for periodic training sessions or covert operations whenever his commanding officer called. And as long as there was still instability in Iraq, Afghanistan and Syria, his team might be needed.

Thinking of his team made him think about Coop. It was hard to believe his friend was gone. All the team members had taken Coop's death hard and agreed that if it was the last thing they did, they would return to Syria, find Coop's body and bring him home. His parents deserved that and Coop did, too.

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