

Conversation with Brenda Jackson

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Published online: May 2022

<http://www.jprstudies.org>

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Keywords: Black romance, Brenda Jackson, publishing

This conversation with Brenda Jackson originally appeared August 25, 2020 in two parts on the *Black Romance Podcast*, created and hosted by Julie E. Moody-Freeman:
<https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/brenda-jackson-part-one>;
<https://blackromancepodcast.libsyn.com/brenda-jackson-part-two>.

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Julie Moody-Freeman: *I'm so happy to see you. I am Julie.*

Brenda Jackson: I'm Brenda.

JMF: *Yes, oh my god, I've waited my whole life. I have my whole pile of books.*

BJ: Oh my goodness. Well, I've made sure I have my very first print and the most recent print of *Tonight and Forever*.

JMF: *I got this one.*

BJ: Oh my goodness.

JMF: *You know the newest ones are Kindle. But this is back in the day.*

BJ: Yeah.

JMF: *When I used to wait at Waldenbooks. And I'd go there waiting for it.*

BJ: Oh, good. Now you are in Chicago, right?

JMF: *I'm in Chicago. Yes. So what I wanted to do was start from the beginning. What was your favorite romance novel?*

BJ: Oh gosh, where is my favorite romance novel? I don't have it far from me; [it's] around here somewhere. It's a historical called *Shanna*. I don't know if you read *Shanna* by Kathleen Woodiwiss. She really is the mother of romance. I don't see *Shanna*. I think I have that book and so many different prints. It's a classic. I usually read it at least once a year. All over again.

JMF: *What was it that you liked about it?*

BJ: *Shanna*. Well, it was historical, and I like history. And it was about a couple. Shanna was this tall bratty daughter of an Earl, who lives on an island, and she wanted the best of everything. And I think what I liked about it is because I tell people *Shanna* shows pure love to me because it inspired me to write, because what we had was the hero that put up with all her crap. He was just so calm and gentle. She thought he was beneath her. When in fact he was wealthier than she was, but because he got arrested, his identity was changed, you know, but in the end, he loved her so she couldn't help but love him back. And then she thought she was loving someone beneath her. It didn't matter then because she loved him. And then she found out that she had married her equal. Yeah. So it was a beautiful love story.

JMF: *Yes, yes. So were there other favorite romance writers that you had?*

BJ: Oh, gosh. During that time, there were no African American romance writers or authors.

JMF: *So are we talking about the 70s, 80s?*

BJ: We're looking at 1980. I started writing. I started reading in the 1980s. I was taking college classes and I was working with my company. I'm a corporate America girl, and I love corporate America, and I would travel a lot. And I'm not adventurous when they send me all these places, I would not just go out, I will go to where I needed to go, and I will stay in my hotel room. And so I would tell my friends, you know, they said, 'how was the place, did you enjoy the city?'. I'm like, 'I didn't even go out of my room,' because I'm not

adventurous. I didn't go to the mall. I didn't watch TV. I just dabbled in writing. And so I also did some reading during that time, and it was more like an escape for me from the business world. I wanted to read something to take me away. So that's when I started writing and reading all these books. I read Nora Roberts of course. You have to read Nora Roberts. I read Jayne Ann Krentz, Judith McNaught, Julie Garwood, because I was more into the historical. I figured that if modern-day romance could not show me, I really didn't want to read it, you know. If it didn't show people that look like me, I really didn't want to deal with it. So what I did was basically dealt with historicals. That was back in the day, and I think that was not gonna be any Black earls or dukes or whatever. I didn't want to deal with it. But that was history. I did not want to deal with reading a modern-day or contemporary that did not show at least neighbors or you have friends. Even back in the 80s, I had white friends I worked with corporate America, and everybody, you know, we would go out after work and do something so everybody was friends, but then when I will pick up a novel, it didn't show any Black people in that novel. I didn't read a lot of them. But when I started reading. It's okay for me, you know, that's how it is. So let's now try to venture into contemporary romance. So that's what I did. I started reading Nora Roberts and those contemporary authors that I named.

JMF: *Yes, yes. So what was your first piece of romance that you wrote?*

BJ: I started writing romance when I was in the eighth grade. Oh, I started writing love stories and again out of a need that was not met. I'm from Florida. And there was always every summer, these Marie Funicello and Frankie Avalon beach movies that came on TV. And then I'm like, 'wow, they don't even have any Black friends at all. Why aren't there Black people on American Bandstand?' There were not. So I said, 'Okay, I'm going to entertain my classmates by writing short ten-page love stories.' And I would write them on the weekends. And during that time, you didn't have access to copy machines or computers. Everything was handwritten on notebook paper, and I would write all these different copies. I would write ten copies of a ten-page love story. Sometimes they had a different ending, and people would say, 'Why does it end like that?' 'Which copy you got?'

It was funny to see which copy they had, and everybody would meet me on Monday morning at my bus when I got off the bus, and I would just pass out all these up. You know, I had put little folders. Remember those little tiny folders. I would put ten pages in one folder, and each folder had different colors. I knew exactly if you got the red one how it would end. If you got a green folder... so it was fun. It was fun until my teachers started collecting my folders. They were cute romance and the teachers read it. My English teacher read it, but she said, 'Brenda, they're disrupting the class because kids are pretending to pay attention in class. So we're collecting these folders.' Instead of encouraging me they tried to discourage me [by telling me] 'do not to write the stories any more'. Instead of telling the kids, you know, you can't read it in class.

They were my stories, nothing was wrong with the story. They were cute stories. Clean wholesome stories about a guy and a girl. But they were disrupting the class. And, you know, I continue to write. That didn't stop me from writing. I just said, 'I'm gonna write anyway'. And I got in big trouble with the principal. And my mom, they call my mom out to the school. They figured if they tell me in front of my mom, then that will have more credence. They told me to stop writing these stories, and I told my mom, you know, my

mom tried to explain to me why I couldn't write my stories anymore. And I told her it's the story in me. I have to get out. She said, 'Well, write it for me and your dad.' But it wasn't the same. It's not the same. You know my mom and dad got to read the story, you know, and so after a while... but my teachers loved poems, and they would come to me, 'Brenda Streeter we need a poem. It's Martin Luther King Day. We need a poem.' They loved my poems, but no one wanted a story. No one wanted a book. And so when I got to senior high school, I had pretty much stopped writing stories. I was just writing poems, but one of my teachers – that's all it took was one – and right before graduation he asked me what I plan to do, and I said, 'I plan to go to college. I want to work in corporate America.' And he said, 'I think you're wasting your talent. You should be writing. Even though we didn't agree with you writing your stories in school. We thought you were a good writer, and you had a wonderful imagination.' But that wasn't enough for me because I figured I wanted to go to corporate America and get a paycheck. I always knew about starving writers, at least I heard about starving writers. So what I did: I worked in corporate America and then I started reading the contemporary. I didn't try to compete with the historical, but the contemporary I'm like, 'I can do this, you know. It's no different than what I can do, other than my characters are going to be Black.'

So I complained so much that my husband said, 'write a book'. And I said, 'okay', and I started writing on notebook paper when I travel. And so when I went to my class reunions, all these teachers would remember me and asked me, 'did you ever write a book?' and I said no, that I'm in corporate America, and I don't have time to write books. And they said, 'well maybe that's something that you should do'. And that day, me with my husband and my former teachers, that's when I began writing. So I wrote my first book *Tonight and Forever* from a dare from my husband to not only write the book, but to finish the book.

JMF: *Yes.*

BJ: He said you need to finish the book. And so I didn't take any writing classes in college, but I did join a writing group of women, Romance Writers of America. I joined them, a group. And I was the only Black in the Romance Writers of America. I was the only Black in the group. I was a founding member of the chapter that formed up in Jacksonville. And so it was, like, me understanding their culture and them understanding my culture. Because a lot of things when they were, you know, read my work and critique it they would take it out, and I'm, like, 'no, that needs to go back in because that's true, that's happened, you know, and that one is part of my culture'. And then when I read their work I would tell them, 'you need to put Black people in your book. We have white people in ours. Why can't you put Black people in yours?' But then when I read their book, there were a lot of stereotypes in there and words, like when one of my lady writer friends would describe a Black girl, she would put her hair as nappy, and I'm like, 'where do you get that from? You could use curly not nappy, you know,' and so I had to tell them about words that they thought were okay. No, that's not okay! It was so messed up. So it was a learning lesson for both of us.

JMF: *Yes, yes. Did any of those stories from early survive, the ones that you used to write for your classmates? Did they survive?*

BJ: When you say survive do you mean do I have any of them?

JMF: *Yeah.*

BJ: No, because they were like ten pages. They were like about teenagers, you know. It was, like, stories that I would want to read as a teenager.

JMF: *Yeah.*

BJ: You know, and that's what a lot of people thought that I'll be good at writing young adult because that's what I was writing during that time. But I could not get my mind into writing young adult. I went on to adult because I was an adult then. So I'm like, I don't know what these young people are doing. They are doing a lot more than we were doing, you know, my book ended up with the guy building up enough courage to kiss the girl, you know, and usually it was like a big kiss that was the culmination of everything working up to the kiss. Now, you know, kids don't get it. That should happen like in the first chapter. So that's why I said no, they would not, you know, survive right now, so what I did [was] I started reading to see what subjects they were writing about and see exactly, so I could know what type of books publishers were looking for. Whenever I went to our meetup day, they'd say in order to know what we're buying we need a lot of our books. And that's when I started reading a lot of Harlequin and a lot of a Silhouette. It was Silhouette and Harlequins, two separate companies, Silhouette Intimate Moments. And then I started reading a lot of other types of novels.

JMF: *Yes, so your husband dared you and you finished *Tonight and Forever*. And then what happened next?*

BJ: Well, when I finished *Tonight and Forever*, I wasn't ready to send it off to anywhere. I guess when I wrote *Tonight and Forever* I wrote Justin's story, but I know he had three brothers, sister and uncle. It was going to five books. And so each book ended at 100 pages. That's it, a hundred pages and move on to the other. So I had already written three books when I had written Justin, Dex, and Clayton's story.

JMF: *Yes.*

BJ: And so when I would take it with me to RWA, and of course they said, 'first of all it is too short. It doesn't meet our word length. You need to expand on the story.' So that's what I had to do to take each book... okay, I just gave everybody the meat. Now I have to develop a plot within each story. So that's what I did. I went back and created a plot because I had all three books written, and I said, 'okay now I got three brothers and there's an uncle and a sister, but I'm not going to try to sell get a five [book deal]. As long as I can get one book [deal as] long as they know there are two others already written, it's a five book series.' So I thought that would be my hurdle, but it wasn't my hurdle. My hurdle was the characters were Black. That was the hurdle. If we, you know, and I'm sure a lot of publishers right now will not tell you some of the things they said to Black authors during that time that was very discouraging to us.

I've had one that told me, 'we love your book. We love the story. If you were to make Justin and Lorren white, we will buy it.' And I'm like, 'but they aren't white. They're Black, you know,' and I just couldn't see, you know, and I was working in corporate America, I had a good job making good money. And I'm like, 'no. I don't need the money that bad that I'm going to change my characters'. And there were writers out there that we're writing as Black, but all their stories, you know, was white, you know, and they name some of them and say 'they're Black. They're writing white stories.' But I'm like, 'but I don't want to do that'. So several publishers turned me down for that reason. And that was very disappointing.

JMF: *Are you talking late 80s or early 90s when this is happening?*

BJ: I'm talking about the late 80s... 1989 and 90, but my book didn't get published until 1995. And up until I'll say, I started going to conferences back in 1988 and 1987. So all those years I'm there seeing other Black authors, Francis Ray, Maggie Ferguson, Margie Walker. We are there being seen. And, you know, again, I went to learn what to write and how to write. I took workshops that were taught by Nora Roberts and Linda Howard. I took all their workshops, and I took all of that back, and I was able to expand on my 100 page book into two and three hundred pages. And even doing all of that that's not why y'all don't want the book. Y'all don't want the book because my characters are Black.

And they would tell me that, 'we don't have an audience for them, or if the publishing industry isn't broken why fix it? We have plenty of readers who are satisfied. Black women are satisfied with reading our white books. So why should we change it or add it just for them?'

Then they would worry about the women in the Bible belt. You know how they would not want to read about Black Romance because in their mind, Black men were not romantic. They were criminals or in jail, wife beaters, you know all these narratives, and here I am introducing upper middle-class families of educated Black men that own land. You know that was unheard of, and they said unbelievable. So I knew until their mindset changed, it wouldn't change.

So the only thing I think that helped us was the emergence of Arabesque by Kensington back in 1994. Walter Zacharius, he basically decided to take a chance, and I'm told it was basically Kathryn Falk that at the time was over [at] *Romantic Times* magazine, and all of us were members or subscribers who would go to her conferences, and she knew what our argument was. There were no major publishers willing to publish our books, and so Walter decided to take a chance on us, but he let us know it was a risk he was taking. He only paid us half the amount the white authors' books were. Whatever their percentage was we got half of that. And we would have to pretty much promote our own book. They would not do any promotion of a book. They would print it for us and get it published. In addition to having a less than normal contract, we also had to do our own promotion.

We accepted the contract 'cause we said okay he [Zacharius] understood that, 'if this works, then your next set of contract, we will increase your royalty rate to whatever the white authors are, and we would add some promotional funds in.' So it was beneficial to us because we wanted the books out there, so we accepted that contract. So I did a three book contract with the three Madaris books under that lower contract and by the time Clayton's

story came out, everyone wanted the next book. Everyone wanted more, so I went to the next contract. I had something of value to negotiate with the contract.

And I negotiated it on my own because it was hard to find an agent to represent a lot of Black authors, so I'm like, you know, I'm an educated Black woman. I deal with contracts. I work at State Farm and part of my job was contracts. Somebody came in and told us that we had the same contract. Get an agent if you want to. The contracts are not going to change. Your agent can't fight for anything because you're new. You know, we're not going to increase anybody's, whatever. The only thing I think they were willing to give was the movie part of it. Some people asked for their movies. I let it stay in because at the time I didn't see anyone come in, they didn't want to buy the book, why would anyone want a movie of it?

So that wasn't a big deal to me. But that was something later I wish I would have gotten. because of BET made movies, and they didn't get our permission to make the movies. They bought the publishing company, and since we didn't sign that we own the movie rights they felt that they owned the movie rights through the book, and they turned out making a movie, not like the book, but anyway they wanted to make it.

JMF: *Exactly, yes. So was it Walter Zacharius that called you, or you heard about him and reached out to him?*

BJ: What Walter Zacharius did is that he started Arabesque. It was a line of books and he hired Monica Harris. He hired Monica Harris and her job was to basically hire authors just to write for Arabesque, and I was one of the first authors, not the first author, Francis Ray and Sandra Kitt were the very first authors. I was in a group, all their books came out in '94, and my books came out in '95, so I was in the second wave of books for Arabesque.

JMF: *Well, how did she hear about you to know to call on you? Was it RWA?*

BJ: They introduced her at RWA because that's where all the Black authors who wanted to be published, but she took our names down, and we gave our business cards. And so they made an announcement that if you want to write, this is the submission requirement. Submit your book to Monica Harris. Some of us she knew by face because she had met us that year, and we gave her our card. So she had said, 'if you send us something, I got your card. I'll get it out of the slush pile and read it right away'. So we had an advantage over someone who may not have taken the time to go RWA 'cause she could put a face with a card. So they called us and said, 'okay, submit'. So we submitted, and she pulled it out, and she read Justin's story, and she loved it, and I told her that there were three more. You know, two more already written and she said 'really?'. So basically, she got all three. So what she did is instead of doing a three book deal, she gave me a contract based on each book.

JMF: *Which helped you get a bigger contract for the second and the third.*

BJ: Right. That was wonderful.

JMF: *So okay, so you had this book written when she got it. Once she got it, were there things that she asked you to change, specific things about character representation?*

BJ: The first thing she did was change the title of the story *Tonight and Forever*. That was not my original title. My original title was *Always Tomorrow*. Dex's title was *Whispered Promise*, and Clayton's title was *Eternally Yours*. She liked those titles, but she did not like *Always Tomorrow*, and I say in the book that was one of the things that Justin would say to Lorren when he says there's always tomorrow, always tomorrow. I'm here for encouragement about different things because I tried to tie in my title with whatever is in the story. So when she came out and said that the book was *Tonight and Forever*, I'm like, 'what?'. But at that point my husband said, 'choose your battles. You want to lose getting your book printed just because of the title?' But as far as everything else, it was basically that she loved the story. So I didn't have any major changes in that book.

JMF: *Yeah, so I want to talk a little about Tonight and Forever because you're writing this in the 80s. What's going on? What helped to inspire that story and to even deal with some of the issues? In the book, it talks about the use of condoms; tiny mention of HIV/AIDS. I think it's expanded much more in Eternally Yours where Clayton has a closet full of condoms. So what's going on that makes you write about that?*

BJ: Well, because I have a lot of nieces and nephews that I knew at some point in time, although the boys were young, they were, like, under ten. I was not worried about them. I have nieces and nephews that I knew if their mom got the book, they were gonna read it, and I wanted to write a book that was responsible, you know. That's why if you notice in the beginning – of course not with Lorren because she was already married before. All of my girls were virgins, and the very beginning for Syneda, even as old and mouthy as she was, she was a virgin. And the next book... that's the one with the movie star Sterling Hamilton, *One Special Moment*, and she was a virgin. All of my girls were virgin. They were not promiscuous in any way. And I did that for a reason. I knew my cousins read it. I wanted to tell a love story and it's like, 'Okay, if you do not wait, I prefer you wait until you marry, but if you do not wait until your marriage to engage in this, then you really do need to be responsible, whether you're male or female', and that's why my guys they always talk really nice to the ladies.

I wanted to write a book that was very responsible, you know, that basically they could read it and say, 'Oh auntie is writing about sex before marriage but this is what the guy is doing, The guy is being responsible and taking care of the girl, because you don't want any babies'. That's why the first book that I wrote and during that time publishers will start, you know, telling you when I got to Corinthians' story, *Corinthians' Fire and Desire*. I knew I wanted a pregnancy in that book. I wanted Corinthians to get pregnant from that encounter. So I wrote it in a way, you know, did he use a condom or they didn't use a condom, or was the condom broken? You know, I wanted to tell about what could happen when you didn't use it. But of course it had a happy ending. The publisher would say – which I was doing anyway – we are pushing condoms. We want all our authors to be responsible authors to what's happening now, and so unless, it's an intentional pregnancy, and it goes a part of the story, otherwise he needs to wear a condom.

JMF: *You think they're saying that because it was the HIV/AIDS era?*

BJ: They never said that. They said because of lifestyles, they wanted people to wear condoms, and I think because of the spread of infectious diseases we are pushing the use of condoms more. If you notice in the earlier romance books, they did not bring out condoms. If they didn't get pregnant we figure, 'oh, you must've been lucky', you know. Now, we pretty much say, 'Can she bring a condom?'. Or she's watching him put on a condom; you watch to make sure he puts one on. We try to be responsible for what we write.

JMF: *Right, yeah. So, before they even asked you in that first one, Tonight and Forever. You already had it?*

BJ: I already had it in the book.

JMF: *Yeah, it's so funny. I started grinning when you said that you were talking about responsibility because I wrote an article on this particular book. And the title of it is something like Scripting Black Love: Respectability and Responsibility in the Era of HIV/AIDS. I didn't know that that's what you were necessarily talking about that in the book. But you made it... It wasn't like a lecture. It was a beautiful incorporation of even her looking at him. And that was a way that responsibility is if you love somebody, you would protect them.*

BJ: You will protect them. Yes, that's true.

JMF: *That definitely came out. So another thing that shows up in this first book Tonight and Forever is that Justin helps with the Children's Home Society with the boys and takes them camping and even Lorren goes with him at one point. Why incorporate that into it?*

BJ: I incorporated that because that was part of Justin's nature. Justin is my beta guy. There was nothing alpha about Justin at all. When you compare him to Dex or to Clayton, he's the diplomat. And in trying to separate their type of personalities, I can see him doing that. In fact Dex, I never said anything that he was doing. But with Clayton, Clayton was the Big Brothers guy. He was part of the Big Brothers organization even though he was out there doing what he was doing. But then I looked at their parents. I said that they had very good parents. Jonathan and Marilyn, who is still getting them to do the right thing, to be socially active and doing a lot of things. It wasn't anything anyone asked me to do. It was just something that I knew was part of his character to go in and do some of the things that he did like spend time with the boys at the shelter and all of those things. Yeah, that's just a part [of] his character.

JMF: *When you're putting together the story or developing ideas for your book, are you thinking about what lessons? Well, first of all, you want to happily ever after story, and it's a romance, but are you also thinking about lessons you want people to learn about life? Does that just come naturally or are you conscious that in this book...?*

BJ: I'm conscious, because with Justin and Lorren that was my first story. Sometimes it's teaching me versus getting a lesson out there. [...] So what I did. I didn't want Lauren and Scott to grow apart. I had to give them a reason why they could not be together. Scott was mentally abusive. I can see that. I can see her divorcing him having a bad taste left in her mouth for marriage because he was mentally not physically. 'Cause my thing is you should've left the first time he raised his hand to you. But mental abuse is something different, and I talked to different psychologists and social workers who explained what mental abuse was to me. And once I got that down pat, then that's when I wrote Justin's story. So my whole thing was me, understanding divorce. And as you notice, Lorren had a problem with her vows that she felt she did not keep because of Scott but even though Mama Nora and everybody said 'you tried,' but there are some things that you have to just walk away from. And then, as you know, Justin's wife's death. He had a different outlook on remarrying Lorren. He didn't want to remarry, she had a problem with it. And then with Dex, it was forgiveness.

JMF: *Yes, and they spent time apart.*

BJ: Yes, Dex is forgiveness, and he was my person that found it hard to forgive. And so my whole thing with Dex is that you got to learn how to forgive. So I knew I needed to write a story on moving past and forgiving. And with Clayton, whether you know it or not, there's somebody out there for everybody. Whether you are ready for them or not, they're going to come into your life. And that was the model of my story for Clayton.

JMF: *And I see you even exploring that in terms of Strictly Business also where they divorced, but he [Mitch] comes back.*

BJ: Yes, that there's an opportunity to come back and make amends. They were divorced. And so he [Mitch] knew where he went wrong in the marriage. At the time, he thought he was building the marriage to make her safe and to make her not want anything and all she wanted was his love and his time. It took them a while to understand that. Then he went back after the woman he loved.

JMF: *So overall, what does writing romance mean to you? You've written over 125 books. What does romance mean to you?*

BJ: Romance means love and all its finest splendor. The expressing of love, and the open communication. People ask me why I write romance. I write romance because I fell in love with my boyfriend at fourteen, and he ended up being my husband. And I was the romantic. I was the one that would expect things – okay, on Valentine's Day. I need some candy, I need some flowers. We know if you don't do it any other day. I'm not accepting not having it on Valentine's. Come on. So I'm the one who not only does that, but I would encourage others guys. You know, next week is Valentine's Day. I will go into work with my candy, and they would say, 'Are you giving us extra money?' And I said, 'wait a minute'. And they say, 'Aw naw, you don't want to hear her talk,' you know, your wife is your queen, you should treat her right, and they'll be like, 'Yada yada yada,' I'm the one that will push all of that at work, not just for the men but for the women. Your husband is your king. You know, I'm not

gonna say he's a doggy dog, and no matter how good you treat them at home, he's going to go out here. What most by far and large, most men, they want their home as their castle. Treat them like a king. It's not gonna hurt. In the end it's benefiting the both of you. And I would say, the Lord said that I'm his workmate. Okay, I can influence my husband, more than anybody and that's the way it should be. Because I'm going to be looking out for him. I got his back. When nobody got your back, baby I got your back. And I'm going to benefit you, because if I benefit you, it'll benefit us. The same thing with me. I told my husband. I want to go back to school, but I want to help you to be able to help us move from point A to point B. I don't want to put it all on you and have you worried about moving us out of this area to a better area. I love school. If you let me do it and give me the background and give me the backing and the pickup that I need help with kids, I can do it. And he believed in me. So it wasn't me or him. It was us together. And all of that to me was a part of romance. So that's why I write those stories. It shows that you have two people who don't want to fall in love in a lot of situations like Trevor and Corinthians. They did not want to fall in love. But they were destined to fall in love. I mean, when he found out those terrorists were taking over the whole building, he could've said let them get the ol' mouthy woman, she ain't nothing but trouble anyway. Her room was the first he went to and got her out of there okay, and he got her through the jungle with him and all of that. You know, not that he thought he loved her at the time. It was just that she needed saving, and he was going to be the hero and do it as part of this character.

JMF: *So when you're developing your Black heroes. What are things that are standard for you that your Black hero must have?*

BJ: Morals, he has to have morals. I mean, sometimes I know some of them are questionable like Clayton with the condoms. But that showed that he was responsible. And then you had his parents, so you know, he wasn't a bad guy. He was just a guy that wanted to have fun and wasn't ready to settle down. And even the ones that are coming after him, all of his cousins or whatever, they're all good guys. So when I look at my hero, I wanted a guy who's gonna win. Even though he may not think that he loves a woman, when he has determined that this is the woman [he] wants, he's going to love her until death do them part. He's going to treat her like the queen that she deserves to be treated. No matter what occupation, and I've had heroes with a lot of different occupations, when they fall in love or even the path into falling in love, they may fight it, but they never abuse a woman. They never mistreat a woman either physically or mentally, and they basically treat her in a way – even the ones that didn't have a mother, or didn't know where their mothers were – know how to treat a girl. Because I'm the momma when I write the book, there's certain things that they have to know, because to me if I don't give them that, it'd be hard for me to make a woman fall in love with them because I wouldn't.

JMF: *Yeah. And are you modeling them after Black men in your life that you know?*

BJ: My husband was my role model for a lot because I learned everything from him. I was only fourteen when we started dating. I got married at nineteen. I've never had another boyfriend or husband, so I only knew how he treated me on dates. I knew how it was important to him that I never spent money when we went on dates. We didn't go dutch or

whatever. No. Gerald was going to make sure he covered the entire date. He had a problem with a woman who paid for any part of it, even after we got married. I was married for over forty-two years. Whenever I wanted my hair or nails. I went to him because it made him feel that I depended on him. He always, when he got paid, he had a little cookie jar that he would put money in for my hair, my nails and things like that, and I'd use it. That's what he put it there for. I wanted him to know that no matter what I make, I still want to use your money too, and he did good with that. Men need to feel that they are still needed. And so I tried to incorporate that in my stories too.

JMF: *Yeah, so when you're developing the Black heroine, what's the thing that she needs to have?*

BJ: I don't want her to be weak. I want her to be strong in her own way. But I don't want her strength to overpower the male strength. You know I've had some like *Tonight and Forever*, where the girl could fight and do justice. Tori was an ex-CIA agent like her husband Drake was an ex-CIA agent. But in the end, he still rescued her. I want an intelligent woman who recognizes a man's fault. Knowing that man isn't perfect. I know he's not perfect, but I'm willing to work with him. I see the goodness in him even when he doesn't see the goodness in himself. Syneda and Clayton started out just as friends. When he knew what her problem was, he knew her dad. So what did he do? He said, 'I'm about to find this man. I want to know. I want to see him. I want to know who her dad is.' She wasn't looking for her dad. He thought, 'I'm going to do that. I'm going to find her dad. I want to know why he didn't come for her.' I want heroines that are smart and educated in their own right. Not that I have a problem with homemakers or anything like that, but I wrote during the 80s and 90s when women were coming into their own. They were not just teachers, you know. You had Lauren who was the writer. Syneda was the attorney. Then you have Kaitlyn who was [a] computer person. So everybody had a job. They had their own. They brought something to the table.

JMF: *Who are your readers, and what are their responses to your book? Do they ever push back?*

BJ: My readers have grown so much, and I have a whole new group of readers now that are just finding out about Brenda Jackson. I have a book club of over 4000 and these are women who have read me from the beginning. So they're telling the older ones this is what you need to read first. It floors me when I get a group of women, and I talk to them either on Zoom, and they only want to talk about the Westmorelands [books]. They haven't read the Madaris. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. Y'all need to read the Madaris books. But no, they came in on the Westmorelands, and that's all they want are the Westmorelands. They love the Westmorelands because they see them as totally different. A totally different set of characters, you know, from the Madaris. I have people. And then there are the Steeles. People just want to read about those bad news Steeles. The six brothers that were from Phoenix. They were bad boys. Women like alpha males. They love Alpha males. I'll throw a Beta male in there, and they'll say he's too nice. Justin Madaris was too nice; we got tired of Lorren. He put up with her too much. That's the young people thinking that way.

JMF: *What made you decide to turn your books into film?*

BJ: Because of the first one that was made with BET. It wasn't made like the book and that bothered me so much. I swore I never ever let anyone else make another book into a movie. It disappointed me and my readers.

JMF: *Which one did they turn into a film?*

BJ: *One Special Moment.* It was nothing. What they did was use the character's name. It was nothing like the book. And they [readers] let me know that they hate the movie. It's a beautifully written book.

JMF: *Yes, it is.*

BJ: I knew what they were doing. And I've accepted what they were trying to do at that point. They wanted to reach out more to men and not just women. But my husband saw it – [he] hadn't read my book, and he liked it. The movie was not like the book. I said no more. Even though Hollywood was calling me for a lot of my Madaris books, a lot of them let me know that once they got it, they'll make it into a movie based on demographics. The Grangers, if we want to make them white instead of Black, we will make them white instead of Black. And I'm like, ah that's okay. So I always turn down Hollywood until my husband gave me an idea that you've got all these books. You have a son who just graduated with a Masters in Film from Florida State Film School. I want to see what eight years of college has taught him. Let him make one of your books into a movie, and I explain to my husband, 'honey, it takes money and time.' 'Okay,' he says, 'I'll put up my 401k. Let's get the money back, but I need you on that set to make sure that in the end I get my money back.' My husband got every penny of his money back. He put up close to a half million dollars, put up his 401k, and we bought two houses. We bought a small warehouse because we wanted a place to film. So it was easy. I couldn't come up with my own film studio. So I figure. Okay, these are the things that I can eliminate, locations. Another thing I can eliminate is people working on film. We wrote letters to some of the top film schools in the country and asked them to send some of their top students, and they did. My crew was 80% white because of that. Because all these schools sent in [students]. And parents were driving their kids bringing and dropping them off. And I felt so honored that they would trust me with their kids. This was Florida. All of them were under twenty, and all of them were in college. So here I am, Miss Corporate America, trying to teach all these twenty-year-olds how to be professionals. Because they were film students and were not professional. What I mean by professional, I mean corporate minded people. We filmed mostly at night, so I bought one house just to house them in. And they spent their day at the beach because you know I'm surrounded by water. Jacksonville is a beach town and then in the afternoon when it got dark, we will start filming. And we've worked on the weekends. During the daytime we would film the day scenes. So it worked out fine. I was the executive producer, my husband and I, and my son was the director. And he assembled a really good team. We made *Truly Everlasting*. It was a Christmas movie we made in August. We had the community where we bought one of the houses because my son said, 'Mom, could we ask these people to decorate their house for Christmas?'. I'm like, 'in August?'. And people did. The

neighborhood decorated their homes. When they found out their house was going to be part of the movie, they put up their Christmas tree. Some of them didn't take it down. Some of them left it up until December. But it was a wonderful movie. It had a movie premiere and Warner Brothers picked it up. Netflix picked it up. My husband ended up getting his money back and some. I think we would have continued doing others, then my husband passed away. A couple years later.

JMF: *I remember that I was working. I was finishing up the chapter that I talked to you about scripting Black love, and I wanted to find out because in all your books, you talk about the love story between you and him. And so I went online just to confirm something and you had posted it and I just...the pain.*

BJ: It's still there. When you've been with someone for as long as I was with Gerald. I mean, people ask me all the time. In December it'll be seven years. I still wear my wedding ring. I have no desire, and I tell people, look, it took me all these years to work him into shape. I don't have time to whip another man into shape. Don't want to do it. I have my memories. I love reading. I love reminiscing on that. I'm fine. And he left me well off enough where I travel. I go on to one or two cruises a year, me and some girlfriends, relatives. I'm having a ball, the way you want. I'm living life the way he would want me to live.

JMF: *Right. Right. Yes. Wonderful. So, final question. What, what are you working on now?*

BJ: Oh, I just finished a book yesterday. It's a new series. It's the *Man of Action* series. If people have read my Grangers series, and that's the one Passionflix made. They're gonna make all three in the movies. They've already made the first one of *Brothers Honor*, available on Amazon Prime. You can go to Amazon Prime. You can go to Passionflix.com and pull it up on a streaming service. It's \$5.99 a month. But they're going to make all three. That's the one reason I let Tosca Musk have those three books because I knew she was gonna make them by the book. I was on set every day. Three weeks I was on set every day. They could not change anything in that preapproved script that I approved unless I gave them permission. I love the final version of it. I think that's good. So that's what I'm writing now is the *Men of Action* series.

JMF: *So when do you think that we will expect that to come out next?*

BJ: First book coming out this August. August 20.
It's called *Entangled Pursuit*

JMF: *Well, Mrs. Jackson you over the years, ever since 1995 when you published Tonight and Forever, and I was always waiting at Waldenbooks for those – now I download them on Kindle – you've brought a lot of joy into my life.*

BJ: Thank you. Thank you.

JMF: *You. It's been an honor to talk to you.*

BJ: Thank you. Thank you. And thank you for having me.