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Conversation with Beverly Jenkins

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Julie Moody Freeman: *It's my pleasure to have you with me today.*

Beverly Jenkins: I'm so glad for the invite.

JMF: *I want to start from the beginning. I want to talk about you as a reader first. I have my story about when I started reading romance. When did you start reading romance?*

BJ: Well, I grew up reading everything, and romance was just one of the shoots of the tree I guess – one of [the] branches of the tree. Of course, there were no romances for women of color back then. 'Cause I'm 69, so we're talking early 60s, late 50s, for when I first started reading. But I read, growing up, the classics. You know, Victoria Holt, Phyllis Whitney.

JMF: *Were they published American?*

BJ: Yeah, this was in my neighborhood library. I told the story of – I read everything in that library. From the children's books to the teen books, and then to the adult books where the romances were. So, I'm reading those. I'm also reading Zane Grey. I'm also reading Raymond Chandler. I mean, I read everything. So – and that was just one of the things that I read. And I didn't start reading it seriously probably until my thirties. 'Cause I'm a big fantasy fan also, so that's my go-to genre is science fiction and fantasy. I had a neighbor who read a lot of romance, and I would borrow some of her stuff. So, I sort of enjoyed it. I always loved a good love story even though nothing in mainstream media reflected my community or my culture. So, I was writing a romance for me, not to get it published, because there was no way to get it published back then. In 19, probably the late 80s, all I ever wanted to do was to work in the library. I had no intentions of being a writer. None. I had written some stuff in high school that had gotten some accolades from a teacher and all that but, you know, you're sixteen years old, you don't have any confidence. 'No, I can't, don't put me in a contest,' that kind of thing. I'm sort of getting away from your question here.

JMF: *You are right on track. Because I was going to ask you that question. I was going to ask when did you realize that you were going to be a writer? Were you in your thirties?*

BJ: I was in my thirties. But like I said, I was writing just for me. I wasn't writing for publication. I had no intentions of being published. My life goal was to work in a library. And that's what I was doing. I was content. I had been given the gift that I wanted from the universe. I was working in the library of Parke-Davis Pharmaceuticals. This was after I worked in the graduate library at Michigan State University, thus the hat [she was wearing during the interview]. I was working at Parke-Davis, and there was this young woman who worked with me who had just gotten published. Small press, what they call a sweet romance. No love scenes, at least fade-to-black, kind of Barbara Cartland kind of thing. And so, we were celebrating her, and I told her about this romance that I was working on after work. That, like I said, I wasn't planning on getting published. Then she said, 'you know, you really need to see about getting this published.' And I'm like 'where?' 'Cause like I said, the market is closed to us. So, I told the story that she harassed me every day. You know she and I are still good friends. I tell her this is all her fault and my mother's fault that I'm doing this. But some kind of way, and to this day I don't know how, but I found Vivian Stephens, who had been a big-time romance editor at Dell, who had first published Sandra Kitt, Elsie Washington, and all of the ladies upon whose shoulders I stand. Vivian had gotten out of publishing, and she was doing an agent kind of thing. And I don't know where or how I found her. I read the *Romantic Times* back then, so maybe I got a clue from that. I don't know. Anyway, I sent it off to wherever I sent it, and she called me at work, maybe three days later, and said that she wanted to represent me. So, I was like 'okay!' Still not looking

to get published, but she started soliciting people and sending the manuscript out. I got enough rejections to probably paper my kitchen and yours and everyone else that we know. And the publishing people were saying 'Great story, great writing, but.' The 'but' had to do with they had no box for it. Because in New York's mind and most of, you know, publishing's got boxes. You know, you fit in the mystery box. You fit in the romance box, okay?

JMF: *Okay.*

BJ: So, in New York's mind and in probably most of the country, when you write a nineteenth century story, featuring Black people, it should center on slavery. So here I come with this story, nineteenth century, Black people, living in a small town on the plains of Kansas, and they are like 'Huh? What do we do with this?' So nobody knew what to do with it. They loved the writing, they loved the concept but there was no box for it, even though it was romance. So, Vivian kept digging away and on June 3rd, 1993, which was my late husband's birthday, Ellen Edwards called me. And she was the executive editor at Avon Books, which at the time was the most prestigious – I still think – romance publisher. And she wanted to buy the book. That first book now is 26 years old, still in print. That was *Night Song.* And the rest, as they say, is history. 26 years later I'm sitting here talking to you, so.

JMF: *So was it that Vivian Stephens had forwarded the book to Avon, she saw it, and that's why she called you? Was that what happened?*

BJ: What do you mean?

JMF: *Because you said that she called you from Avon, right?*

BJ: Ellen did. Vivian had sent the manuscript to her; she had sent it out to some of the other publishers too. And if you're a writer, that first manuscript is a mess. It is absolutely terrible; you don't know what you're doing. But Ellen is an excellent editor, and basically, I had the talent, and I had the vocabulary and all that other stuff that goes in historicals, but I had no idea how to write commercial fiction. And she was very good a leading me, between her and Vivian, leading me to the goal of being published, so I'm always grateful to the both of them.

JMF: *I want to stay on* Night Song *for a minute. You said you were writing for yourself. What was it you wanted to see in a romance book?*

BJ: Somebody who look like me. That was basically it. Somebody who look like me. Somebody who reflected my history. Because back then when there were no women of color writing, you would see things. In *Romantic Times* where – and I don't even remember who it was – who said there would be no Black people writing historicals because we didn't have the talent, the history, we didn't have the scope. What? Really? So, you're up against those kinds of institutionalized racism, bigotry, ignorance. But I had all of that and all of the young women who are now writing have the same talents and the same skills and the same

scope. So, it was just a matter of allowing me in the door. I brought my own chair, sat at the table. Whether they wanted me at the table or not, I didn't care. And I was able to tell my stories.

JMF: *So, this was with Cara Henson and Chase. How did those characters come to you?*

BJ: A lot of my characters represent an aspect of history. So, Cara Lee represents the Exodus of 1879, which is what the history of the book is based on. She also represents the Black men and women, and in this case women, who were allowed to further their education at Oberlin. Because that was, back then, probably one of the few places where you could get an education that was considered a college level education. So, she represented that. She also represented free Black people living in the south, because her grandfather was free. So, a lot of different things went into her character. Dorothy Sterling says that Black women of the nineteenth century were so successful in many ways because of the gifts that they had. One was they worked. Whether they were enslaved or free, Black women worked. They had a commitment to the community. The third gift was pushing the envelope of gender and race. So, I try to give, maybe not even consciously, my heroines those gifts. And Cara Lee had probably all three. All of my heroines work. Nobody's sitting at home, being waited on. Because we had to work. If you were a slave, of course you worked. If you were free before the Civil War, Black women worked because their husbands or their fathers or whoever the male was in the home was not allowed to have a job that paid enough. So women worked in order to help put food on the table and pay the rent and all of that. So she represented at least two for sure. And maybe three, because not a lot of women were teachers back then. We didn't really start having Black women as teachers, or women as teachers, until after the Civil War. So, she represents those things. Chase represents all of the Black men who have served this country, in the armed forces, since the French and Indian war. Black men were fighting for the United States before the United States became a country and have not gotten the recognition and the honor and the respect that they have earned and that they are owed. And he also represents the Buffalo soldiers, who are the most decorated soldiers in the West. They patrolled from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande. They had the least incidents of drunkenness. They got everybody's used equipment. A lot of times they did not get the medicinals that they needed to handle sicknesses and injuries, so they relied sometimes on a lot of the Native remedies. So, they were the law in a lot of places where there was no law. You have one incidence where they put up all the telegraph poles. And you have incidences where they were guarding wagon trains going west, and the settlers didn't want them there. Like, really? You're gonna be that stupid? Anyway. America, what a country. So, he represents those men. He also represents the first generation out of slavery. There's an incident in the book where he talks about how honored he would be to have a child who was free-born because everyone in his mind, in his generation, had been slave-born. So to be able to hold a baby who was born free was one of the wishes that that he had. So they represent quite a bit of stuff. And I give you a bib list in the back so that you could do your own research and not have to reinvent the wheel.

JMF: *Yes, I love that about it, especially when I'm teaching. I'm teaching* Forbidden *in my class, so it becomes very useful. So, after you published* Night Song*, you published* Vivid *in 1995. Did you continue with Avon?*

BJ: I have been with Avon for 26 years.

JMF: *Amazing.*

BJ: 'You dance with the one that brung you,' is that old saying. They get my books. I've never had any pushback on what I've been writing, I've never been questioned or told not to write about certain things. I've had fabulous editors. I've been lucky enough to have one, two, three, four editors of color. Yeah, three or four… I don't know, I'd have to name them. But at least three, in my 26-year career, which has been a blessing. And they've been very very supportive throughout my tenure with them, so why would I go anywhere else, right? I did do some novellas on the side for Kensington and Arabesque. I think I did five of those. I've done two young adult, also with Avon, which are still in print also.

JMF: *And* Belle*, I like* Belle*.*

BJ: Right, and Belle has been, and JoJo too **–** well, Josephine for those who are unfamiliar, she's called JoJo, she's her little sister – has been parts of school reads in a couple places. Which is kind of awesome. I know that Brenda Jackson supported *Belle* at one of the systems down in Jacksonville, where she purchased books for everybody that was participating in the program. Because there's nothing historical like that for young women or young men of color. At least as far as I know. There might be something out there now. People are doing amazing things right now that they were not doing in the 90s, featuring characters of color which I absolutely adore. I keep telling all the young girls they're gonna put me in the poor house. 'Cause I'm buying all their books, right? They're writing amazing stuff.

JMF: *I know, I was talking to Alyssa Cole yesterday.*

BJ: She is such a treasure. The girl can write anything, whether it's AI. She's got a suspense coming out. They all make me tired just trying to keep up with them. When we first started, me and Brenda and Donna Hill and Shirley and all of us, there might have been ten of us.

JMF: *Shirley Hailstock?*

BJ: Uh-huh. Yeah. These young women now are our dreams come true in the sense of writing everything. Fantasy, there's a lot of Black women writing fantasy, a lot of women of color writing fantasy. So, it's an amazing time to be a reader and in many cases an amazing time to be an author.

JMF: *When you moved – I shouldn't say moved – but when you were writing for Avon and then you did some of the novellas for Kensington and Arabesque – as you wrote for different editors, did certain editors ask for more changes, or had certain guidelines more than others?*

BJ: Yeah, I think so. Kensington was a lot stricter.

JMF: *In terms of what?*

BJ: In terms of how they wanted the story presented. Different publishers suggest different things. Some of the suggestions that they gave me were interesting.

JMF: *Was it like they can't live together, or…?*

BJ: Well, for Kensington the women had to be a certain class, which I was not a real big fan of that.

JMF: *I see. So, you're saying sort of more like a middle-class, educated?*

BJ: Yeah, yeah.

JMF: *Your Black racial uplift narrative?*

BJ: Yeah, and I'm like 'mmm.' I did I think five or six and then I'm out of here. But they were very nice, and we got along well, but I'm not used to being restricted in what I write and who I write about. Let's put it that way. I'll be kind and say it that way.

JMF: *That helps me a lot to understand Hester from* Indigo *and Eddy from* Forbidden*. Hester is the Underground railroad, so she's undercover and then helping around the community. Can we dive into* Indigo *a little? I love that book so much. How did it come about? Galen? Where did Galen come from, where did Hester come from?*

BJ: Hester came from Julie Dash. I'd seen *Daughters of the Dust*, back when it first came out. And those purple hands really intrigued me.

JMF: *Yes.*

BJ: And in fact, *Indigo* was supposed be the second book. But Vivid with her sassy self was like 'I'm not waiting.' And Hester was like 'Okay,' so. I kept telling Vivian I had a story about these people with purple hands. And so it came directly from *Daughters from the Dust*. Sometimes you don't know where your influences will come from. And so that was the influence for Hester. And then I knew she would be in the sea islands because basically that's where *Daughters of the Dust* takes place. If I remember correctly, it's been a while. So I did the history, and I did the research. And I spent seven or eight years as the head clerk of the graduate library at Michigan State University, so researching stuff is very very easy for me. And I tell people my mother was Black before it was fashionable. And I grew up with African American history in the home. So, this whole career sort of is a biproduct of the way I was raised, and from working in the library. Michigan State University had a full set of the journal [inaudible] history when I was working there in the mid-70s into the early 80s, and I would take handfuls of those out on the red cedar river, which runs through campus, for my lunch hour and just looked through them because I was intrigued by the

history. Little did I know that back then I was preparing for the life I have now because some of the stuff I go, 'Oh okay I remember that from…' So, all of that and *Daughters of the Dust* went together to make [*Indigo*] and then I set it [*Indigo*] in Michigan because Michigan has a great history for the Underground Railroad. A lot of the cities had code names, and Detroit is called 'Midnight' because most of the freed escaped people would show up at midnight – well they wouldn't show up at midnight, but they would take them across the river to Canada at midnight because it was dark. If you've ever been to Detroit, and you stand on downtown, Canada's right there, it's right across the river. Ontario. So, you can see, not necessarily how easy it was, but how convenient it was for. So, I set Hester – yeah, Hester. My women are getting confused. Too many books, too many characters, girl! I set her in the area right here near me because there was a Black township back then, Whittaker, Michigan, which is what is in the book. It's still here, it's not all Black now. It's mostly developed farmlands and all that. So, I set her here. And Galen is just, he's like the over-the-top romance hero with a purpose. There were men who went in and stole slaves and brought them North. So, I wanted to make him that. That let me tell the history of that side of slavery and let me tell history of the order in Detroit with the coded handshakes, and the coded cities and all of that. Every character, especially in my older books, represented an aspect of African American history. Galen represents that. He also represents the gens de couleur of Louisiana, the rich, wealthy, free Black. They were free, but they couldn't vote, so they weren't that free. So, he represents a lot of different aspects of African American history, but he also represents the ideal oh-my-God romance hero.

JMF: *All I can remember is all the negligées.*

BJ: Negligées and him buying her oranges.

JMF: *Yes!*

BJ: He was over the top.

JMF: *He loved her. He loved her little purple hands and toes.*

BJ: He loved her to death. Yes, he did. It was really interesting because Hester is very dark skinned. When I did touring that year for that book, there were women in line weeping because very few of them had ever seen themselves portrayed as beautiful in literature. And they're crying, and I'm crying, and the booksellers are crying. I mean, we're all just weeping. It was a remarkable experience, and I didn't write it with that in mind. I wrote it because Black women come in so many shades and colors. So, if you're gonna represent ,you're gonna represent everybody. You're not gonna represent just the Halle Berrys of the world. So, it was moving. It was very very moving.

JMF: *Yes, it's a world that stays with you and what's so amazing about it is, if I recall, it's set in 1858, and it's a horrific time. This guy is hunting people.*

BJ: It's American history.

JMF: *Right.*

BJ: It's American history. It's a way to teach American history with all its warts and with all its bitterness, and there's no test on Friday, but you learn as you read. The 1850 Fugitive Slave Act was probably one of the most horrendous acts ever passed in American history. And even more horrific about it was that the magistrate would pay the hunters more if the slave went back than if the slave didn't go back. So if you brought a case to the court, and they find that the slave hunter is right, then you make a lot of money, not a lot of money, but you make more than – and I'm like 'really?' You had a mass exodus in places like New York and Philadelphia, people leaving the country because of how horrendous the act was because nobody wanted to go. I mean, they were snatching people up who had been free for generations. You didn't have to be a fugitive slave; you just had to be Black. Very very awful times with the slave hunters. But you know Black women fought back. They tell this story of – and I don't know which city it was – but the slave catchers came into the neighborhood. And Black women had whistles and they would see, and they would start blowing these whistles and they would chase these guys and beating them with these brooms and all of that and just run up. Black women were snatching in court cases. Rushing into court houses and taking fugitives off the witness stand and Harriet Tubman was involved with one, one time. It was funny because one of the newspapers, *The Colored American*, wrote an editorial and asked the Black men to 'please keep your women at home because they out here in the street cutting up,' and of course nobody paid any attention to them. It's one of those gifts, that commitment to the communities.

JMF: *And that's what I like of the complexity of your book so that it's set in really horrific times, but when I finish reading your books it stays with me. I feel like the people are like sitting there in this lovely community and I can just go back. But it's strange because it was a bad time but you're able to talk about another side of people who were whole and living and loving.*

BJ: And that's one of the things that writing historicals, one of the barriers of people who read the books has been saying that, 'well, you know, it's such a horrific time, we can't imagine how you get an HEA out of that time.' Black people love, you know, we still loved. We still had birthday parties. We still had children. We still celebrated marriages. We still went to church. And I think that is the aspect of African American culture that is missing from mainstream America is that all they wanna focus on is the pain. It's like pain porn is what some of the younger kids call it. And that's not our entire lives. It's an important part of our life. It's not a part that we're ever gonna forget, which is why folks are in the streets right now. But it's not always about the pain. It can be about the love, also.

JMF: *I was telling Alyssa Cole yesterday that I used to avoid a certain time period. 1800s. I didn't want to read any of those books because I knew. It wasn't until I read yours that I realized. I was like [exhales]. [Laughter] It was like a sigh of relief. Oh, it was a horrific time, but we are loving. It's love.*

BJ: I'm so glad you took a chance.

JMF: *I know sometimes you forget what's going on until it happens but, in the end, they end up together and it's happily ever after.*

BJ: [Inaudible] HEA all the way.

JMF: *Can we talk a little about* Forbidden*? I teach this one in my class. And it's funny, because the first time I taught it students kept wanting to do papers on interracial romance. So I decided that every time I taught it, I would start by talking about defining passing, what we mean by race, the difference between passing and interracial. Inevitably, even after I've done that, a student would come up to me and ask, 'I would love to do my final paper on* Forbidden *because it's an interracial romance' and I go, 'No!'*

BJ: It's not. It's not an interracial romance. It's a study in racial survival. Because that's how Rhine – too many characters – that's how Rhine chose to survive. If you start with *Through the Storm,* which is where he makes his first appearance, you will see why, or at least see his rationale for why he's doing what he's doing. The stereotype of passing through literature has been mostly 'oh, the tragic mulatto.' You know, 'oh, they don't know how to deal with who they are,' and they wind up harming themselves or jumping off a balcony or something. I don't do stereotypes. I wanted Rhine to pass, number one because he wanted to. He said he was tired of being treated like 3/5ths of a man. And if you read *Through the Storm,* you'd realize that he had passed when he was nine years old.

JMF: *Right, and he got beat for that.*

BJ: He got beaten, yeah. He and Andrew. But he saw it as a way to leave the law behind, the law that limited him behind, but not his community. He used passing as a way to help his community. I had not seen that in literature before. They might be out there. I majored in English, but I really didn't go to class [laughter]. Went to class in the 70s, nobody was going to class [laughter]. But he uses his passing as way to fight back. 'Cause he is funding businesses. He is making loans. He is standing in the gap for education. So, he's passing but he's not leaving. He hasn't left. *Through the Storm* came out in '97 or 98, somewhere around. And since that, in the time that that was published, and *Forbidden* was published, everywhere I went people wanted to know, 'Where's Rhine? Where's Rhine? Where's Rhine?' I called them my Rhine whiners, 'cause everywhere I go they're whining about 'where's Rhine Fontaine?'. I didn't know! I had no idea where he was. Until I read the article about the archaeological dig in Nevada. And when I read about the Boston saloon, I was like, 'Okay, I'm gonna give the saloon to Rhine.' Once again, he represents an aspect of African American history, because that saloon was owned by a Black man. Anyway, I didn't know where he was. I didn't know what he had been doing. So, when I read that about the saloon, I knew where he was, and I could write a story. I told them, my Rhine Whiners, that when I do write the story, I was going to give him the darkest sister I could find, so brother man would have to make a choice.

JMF: *Yes, he did have to make a choice.*

BJ: He had to.

JMF: *He did.*

BJ: So that's where I was going with that. He represents an aspect of African American history too, with that saloon.

JMF: *In your head, is it Eddy? Because my class argues over this.*

BJ: It's Eddy. I had a lot of people say, 'is it Eddy?' No, it's Eddy [E-D]. Like Eddy Adams from back in the day. Some of them don't even know who that is. She's an actress. Eddy Adams.

JMF: *How did Eddy come to you? Who or what does she represent?*

BJ: Interesting enough, as I said in the back of the book – I think I put it in the back of the book – I was researching, I don't even remember what it was. I read so much different stuff. And it was a diary excerpt from a Black man who had been on a wagon train going West. And he looked out one day, and there was a Black woman walking across the desert with a cookstove on her head. And he was like 'really? What?' and he didn't know where she was going, who she was, but here she was, striding across the desert. It was the only reference I could find, was his. So, I wanted to give her a name, and I wanted to give her story, and I wanted to give her a purpose. And she was dark-skinned, so it was perfect for Rhine, perfect for his story. So, I brought the two together, and it turned out to be a pretty good book.

JMF: *Yeah and he, like Galen, spoiled her too. That's what I like most about it is they really spoil their women. I love it.*

BJ: My late husband spoiled me too, so it's like, even though you don't see this in the mainstream media, Black men like spoiling their women. I lost my husband seventeen years ago, and every time I'd finish a book, he'd bring me flowers. We'd go away every weekend for my birthday which was on the 15th of February, so right there up next to Valentine's Day, so he would call it 'happy happy everything weekend' [laughter] and do something special. Black men can be very very loving. Very very loving. And we don't see that in the mainstream media. We just see dysfunction. We see abusers. We see 'deadbeat.' And I write my men the way I do to honor those men who do spoil their wives and take care of their kids, go to church on Sunday, or not, sometimes my husband would worship with the bowling gods on Sunday but, you know, [laughter] it's okay!

JMF: *I remember one of my students talking about Eddy complaining. 'Oh, she's cooking, cooking, cooking. Oh, the whole thing is just about cooking.' So, it struck me in the beginning when you talked about the type of romance that maybe another publisher wanted to see or the type of heroine where the heroine would be sort of more middle-class, educated. So, I remember the student was like 'she's cooking here, she's cooking here, she's just cleaning, that's all she does.' And I'm like, 'what do you want her to do?'*

BJ: Right.

JMF: *So was that part of what?*

BJ: She was gonna run a restaurant. She had to be cooking!

JMF: *Exactly.*

BJ: What they expect her to do? Be in school?

JMF: *Yes. And took pride and took pride in it.*

BJ: If you're running a restaurant, you're gonna be cooking. Hester was an Underground Railroad person; she had no money. She didn't cook. She didn't even eat. Cara Lee was a teacher; we saw her teaching all day. In my suspense, Max is a government assassin; we see her doing her thing. You develop your characters by having them doing what their gift is.

JMF: *In one of your novels, one is like a prostitute, right?*

BJ: Yeah, she's a sex worker.

JMF: *Sex worker. Exactly.*

BJ: She does her thing too.

JMF: *She does her own thing too. And teaches his mom how to engage in a healthy sexual relationship.*

BJ: Right. I mean you can't just disassociate a character from what they're doing. So, I'm sorry if she didn't like Eddy cooking. But that book did make me hungry the whole time [laughter].

JMF: *I know! I wanted to make the marmalade.*

BJ: Me too! Me too! Everybody was like 'Well, where's the recipe?' It's in that cookbook that I have in the back of the book.

JMF: *Absolutely lovely. So, a little more about it. So, the entire town, Rhine, Eddy, they're all engaged in raising funds for the orphanage. Why do you focus on it? Is it important for the hero and the heroine to sort of be engaged in lifting up the race?*

BJ: That's your pledge. That's your job. It's back to that second gift of supporting the community. There were orphans back then. They had a big orphanage in New York City that was burned down during the Draft riots. People raising money to take care of their elders. There's a group in Philadelphia called – what was the name of the company? But it was the beginning of the insurance companies. And it was when they put together whatever pennies they had left at the end of the week, and they pulled them together to pay for funerals, to pay for doctor's visits for people. To pay for maybe somebody who needs to

go to school. So, you see that throughout black communities all over the country. So, what they were doing in Nevada was just part and parcel of what was taking place all over the country. So, it's not like that was something novel. You took care of the community because there's nobody to take care of us but us. So that's why.

JMF: *So, in the contemporary, does this manifest itself in the contemporary too, this idea?*

BJ: Yeah. And *Edge of Midnight*, the heroine, who's a descendant of Vivid [Viveca, heroine of *Vivid*], all of my contemporary characters are descendants of my historical characters. I hadn't planned it that way but that's sort of how it worked out. So Sarita Grayson in *Edge of Midnight* runs a community center, and she said it's got to be more than kids coming in and playing basketball. So, they had a senior center. They feed people. They had tutors in the afternoon and in the evening. And she has to raise money in order to keep her place open. And what she has to do is something outside the law, and she gets caught by our hero, who was also sort of like the batman of Detroit, 'cause he's doing stuff outside the law in order to affect the drug trades. So, there are five contemporaries, five suspense. And the guy in *Edge of Midnight* and his brothers are all descendants of Hester and Galen.

JMF: *Okay, I'm listening. I'm hearing my summer reading list now [laughter].*

BJ: Yeah, and he is just as over the top as Galen is. She's like, 'stop buying stuff!' And he's like 'Hey –'

JMF: *[Laughter] This one's* Edge of Midnight*, you said?*

BJ: *Edge of Midnight*, yeah. That's the first one in the series, so start with that one.

JMF: *Yes, because I took an entire summer to read all your historicals, so I guess this summer it's going to be all the contemporaries.*

BJ: Enjoy, enjoy. They're different.

JMF: *So, my last two questions. What does writing romance mean to you?*

BJ: I get to tell stories that showcase our love and in doing so I also get to highlight the history in a genre that is reader friendly and that's important. History's important. I don't know, people say, 'Why romance?' and I'm like 'Well, that's the first thing that sold.' Not that I've tried. I've written some other stuff, but that's the first thing that sold. But I love what I do because romance gives hope. It gives clarity. It gives second chances. I had a woman who came up to me a few years ago and said that she didn't know she had a good husband until she started reading my books. I wanted to smack her. She said, 'I just thought that he was, like, boring.' I said 'what, 'cause he wasn't bringing drama to your door?' So I'm representing all those couples out there who are having a good time with their marriage. And nothing's perfect. I mean, I loved my husband madly but there were days I wanted to bury his ass in the backyard [laughter], you know, and I'm sure there were days he wanted to bury me in the backyard too, but – can you figure it out – love is hard work.

JMF: *Yes, it is. So, what are you working on now?*

BJ: Right now, I just got done with a latest historical, *Wild Rain,* which will be out in the winter. I think February. I had a bunch of turmoil going on in my life so it was a little late.

JMF: *I'm sorry about that.*

BJ: Oh, it was rough. I mean you lose your mother-in-law on Saturday and then you lose your mom on Monday. So, it was interesting. But I'm doing good, I think so. I'm doing good. So, I finished that finally. Now I'm on hiatus and trying to – my house looks like a hazmat site [laughter].

JMF: *All for us.*

BJ: All for you guys, I hope you appreciate it. So, I start *Blessings* 11 as soon as I get back to writing. I'm looking forward to not traveling at all this summer, so hopefully I can get some extra stuff done. Hope that the pandemic lifts soon so that I can get a haircut [laughter], so that we can all return to whatever the new normal will be. Because it's gonna be different.

JMF: *Definitely. Well I appreciate you taking time out to talk with me.*

BJ: This has been lovely.