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Let Them Talk (Encounters)

By Susanna Carr



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TALK OF THE TOWN

Armed with a seduction how-to guide, librarian Isabel Bennett is pulling out every trick in the book to tempt Sean Hawkins. The oh-so-sexy businessman is about to find out just how bad this good girl can be...

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Susanna Carr has been an avid romance reader since she read her first Harlequin at the age of 10. She has written sexy contemporary romances for several publishers and her work has been honored with awards for contemporary and sensual romance.

Susanna Carr lives in the Pacific Northwest with her family. When she isn't writing, Susanna enjoys reading romance and connecting with readers online. Visit her website at susannacarr.com.

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Sydney Tate swore she was never going to do this again. She scratched out a sentence with her pen. Why had she accepted her friends' writing challenge? And why had she thought she could write something steamy and make it sound confessional? It shouldn't be this difficult! She sighed and tried again.

My chest rose and fell as his hand dipped beneath my collar, his fingers splaying against my breast. His skin was warm and rough. I was certain he could feel the heavy beat of my heart. And then—

And then...? Sydney paused and raised her pen. And then what?

She rubbed her forehead and stared at the lined notebook she favored as a journalist for writing down keywords and quotes. Ordinarily she had no problem putting down words. She bought notebooks by the pack because she was constantly running out of paper. But her job as a reporter meant writing down facts—what she was writing now was pure fiction.

She scowled at the page and twirled the pen around her fingers. She had been so confident that she could write a few fictional confessions and prove her point about how easy it was to fake an erotic diary. All because she didn't think that a published diary was the real thing.

When Isabel Bennett, the town's librarian, insisted that their book club read *The Secret Diary of an Anonymous Victorian Lady*, Sydney had supported the decision. It wasn't her first choice of reading material but she had been curious about why it was a phenomenal bestseller across the nation.

Well, a bestseller everywhere except for the little agricultural town of Seedling, Washington. *The Secret Diary* was banned from the town's library and the only bookstore in the area for its erotic content.

But Isabel had bought a copy online and it had become her favorite book. Sydney should have kept her mouth shut and not questioned its authenticity. Laura Dawson, the youngest and wildest member of the book club, didn't have a problem with the book. Her only complaint had been that there was not *enough* sex. But Sydney couldn't help but notice the inconsistencies in the diarist's story.

It was impossible that Hazel, a sheltered, single Victorian woman, could have risked everything—and had sex with Ernest in so many public places—without getting caught. Sydney should know. She'd survived the crash and burn of a secret love affair of her own.

But she wasn't going to think about her past mistakes and bad decisions. It had been six months since she'd lost her boyfriend and her career in one fell swoop. She had a new start in a new town. She was still working

in journalism. It wasn't investigative reporting, but she had proven to herself and others that she wasn't cut out for that.

Okay, concentrate. You write for a living. You can do this. She pressed her pen against the paper. The story was about to get juicy. What happened next?

Her mind went blank. She tapped her pen against her bottom lip. *And then... ?*

Nothing. Absolutely nothing! These characters were going to be stuck at second base forever. She gave a loud exasperated sigh that seemed to echo in her corner of the public library.

Sydney scrawled a big X across the sheet of paper and tossed her pen down. "Come on," she muttered to herself. "It hasn't been that long since you've had sex. You know what happens next."

"Writer's block?"

Sydney jumped when she heard Matthew Stone's voice. She glanced up and saw him smiling at her. Sydney's heart started to race. *Keep it together*, she warned herself, but there was something about Matthew that made her forget how to act like a normal human being.

When she first met him months ago, she couldn't believe he was the interim mayor for Seedling. He was young, vibrant and sexy. He was always dressed in flannel shirts, faded jeans and boots, as if he was ready to work the land in his family's orchard, and she soon realized it was because he didn't need to wear suits to impress people. Mayor Matthew Stone had a commanding presence. People, mostly women, gravitated to him.

"Hi, Matthew." She felt her face turn bright red. "Uh...how much did you hear?"

His smile widened.

"It's a writing challenge," she answered weakly. Sydney tried not to notice the interest in his warm brown eyes. "It's... Never mind."

"Too bad I can't help."

Sydney's heart knocked hard on her chest. What was he suggesting? She had to be completely misreading his offer. Not that she didn't wish he would offer himself up to research—she had the sense that one brief encounter with him would make her forget her previous boyfriends. But a guy as gorgeous and sexy as Matthew would not be interested in her. Unless he had an ulterior motive. She had learned that the hard way.

"I've been meaning to ask you," Matthew said. Her skin tingled at his low, rough voice. He rested his hand on the back of her chair and leaned forward.

Matthew towered over her. Surrounded her. He blocked out the world around them and yet she wished he'd move closer. She wanted to inhale his scent and feel his warm skin graze hers. Have him whisper sweet promises in her ear.

"Yes?" she asked hoarsely. Was he going to ask her out? Sydney's breath hitched in her throat as anticipation tightened in her chest. She hadn't felt this jittery and excited in a long time. She knew if he asked she should

decline. No way was she going to mix personal and professional relationships again, but she desperately wanted to go on a date with Matthew Stone.

She had always been drawn to Matthew, even when she had sworn off men altogether. She couldn't ignore his lean, muscular body or the earthy sexuality that made her very aware of her delicate femininity. But it was more than that. He was an intriguing mix of gentleness and strength. He never raised his voice or showed force to get his way. He took care of the town with pride, confidence and a playful glint in his eyes.

"Matty?"

The gleam in Matthew's eyes dimmed and he took a step back as a small, elderly woman approached him. Sydney saw frustration flicker across his face before he offered a polite smile to the woman.

Sydney recognized her as Doris Brown, a retired nurse who made it her business to know everything that went on in Seedling. "I've been looking all over for you, Little Matty Stone."

Sydney dipped her head and chuckled. She wasn't sure why the townspeople insisted on calling him "Little Matty." With his broad chest, powerful legs and impressive height, there was nothing little about Matthew.

"I have a complaint with the mayor's office."

"Of course, Miss Doris. Let's talk about it privately." He nodded to Sydney. "I'll see you later."

"Later," she promised, trying not to let her disappointment show as Matthew escorted the woman to the other side of the room.

"Hey, Sydney." Her friend Laura sat down across from her at the table. "What are you doing at the library at this time of day? Oh, the fake diary, huh? How's that going?"

With her shocking bright red hair and wild print shirt, Laura looked out of place in the old library building. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Completing my community service hours." She leaned in closer and glanced at the writing with a giant X through it. "I guess Isabel was right."

Sydney slapped the notebook closed. "This is just a rough draft."

"Yeah, whatever." Laura called out over her shoulder, "Hey, Isabel. Come over here. You gotta see this."

Sydney heard the chorus of shushing as Isabel walked over to their table. "What's going on?" she asked in her "please be quiet: this is a library" tone.

"Seems you won the bet." Laura pointed at the notebook. "Sydney is having trouble writing a fake erotic diary."

"It's only been three days." Three days? It seemed much longer since she'd declared she could write a few entries and make it sound authentic. "I think it's the historical stuff that's slowing me down."

"Then set it in today's world." Isabel's eyes twinkled with delight. "Even better, place it in Seedling."

"That's not going to make a difference," Laura said. "Quit now, Sydney, and admit that *The Secret Diary* could very well be what the publisher says it is—an authentic diary that was recently discovered in a hope chest."

"I haven't given up yet." It had become a matter of pride. And maybe something a little more. The diary made a forbidden affair sound exciting and worth the risk. From Sydney's experience, a secret love affair led only to disaster and regret. This so-called diary suggested that a woman was missing out on a grand love if she didn't throw caution to the wind and indulge in a sexual escapade. What about the loss and devastation, especially when the man had so much more power and privilege than the woman? Sydney had to prove that this diary was fake and that love affairs weren't all rainbows and unicorns.

"Sydney, why is it so important to you that this book be fictional?" Isabel asked as she sat down next to her. "You really questioned everything about *The Secret Diary*."

Sydney didn't want to advertise her lack of judgment or the affair that had cost her her job and her reputation. Only one person in town knew the details of her inglorious fall from grace and that was her editor. She and Wendy had been friends since college, so when Sydney had run into trouble, the other woman had offered her a job and a place to lie low.

"You question everything, Sydney. It's why you got kicked out of our old book club," Laura said.

"I was encouraging discussion," Sydney said. "And I got kicked out because I questioned the book selection process. It wasn't transparent or democratic. Plus, the president of the club thinks I'm a troublemaker."

"You've been determined to tear this book apart," Laura said. "Instead of analyzing everything, you should try reading a book for entertainment."

"You got kicked out of the other book club, too, Laura. You didn't like what they were reading, either. Why were you part of the club, anyway?"

"My mom made me. She put my name on the waiting list and she didn't want me to turn down the 'honor' of getting invited to join the club. The Seedling Women's Reading Circle has been going for decades and it's a big deal. It's practically a rite of passage in this town."

"I had no idea." The reading circle hadn't vetted Sydney or made her wait to join. They'd invited her when she first moved to Seedling. But then, she didn't have a reputation like Laura's—that they knew about, anyway. If the president of the book club had discovered her history, Sydney probably wouldn't have been asked to join the club in the first place.

"I think my mom and sisters worked behind the scenes to get me invited. They're regretting it now. I'm the only Dawson woman in the family tree who's been blacklisted from the reading circle," Laura proudly added.

"Well, now it's not the only book club in town," Isabel said. "There's the Seedling Women's Reading Circle and the Blacklist Book Club."

"The Blacklist Book Club?" This was the first Sydney had heard of a name for their impromptu reading group. "Is it because we read blacklisted books like *The Secret Diary*, or because we were blacklisted from the book club?"

"Both," Isabel said with a smile.

"Perfect! I get to choose next month's book," Laura said. "And, oh—" she rubbed her hands together and gave a wicked laugh "—it's going to rock your world."

"What about *The Secret Diary*?" Isabel asked. "Didn't that rock your world?"

"I love it, and you know why, Isabel?" Laura rested her elbows on the table and leaned forward. "You had the guts to recommend the book to the Seedling Reading Circle and you got kicked out because of it. That is the only reason I joined the Blacklist Book Club and read this book from cover to cover."

"It's the reading circle's loss," Isabel said defiantly, as if the book hadn't caused her trouble with her job or her good-girl reputation. "I love this diary. It changed my life."

"In what way?" Sydney asked. She had noticed a few subtle changes in the librarian recently. Isabel had always been the epitome of elegance and grace. She often wore tailored clothes in quiet colors, but these days she no longer wore cardigans and scarves to cover up her curves. In fact, she had also started choosing bolder colors and her shoes were downright sexy. "Wait a second. Are you saying it inspired you?"

Isabel blushed and nodded.

Laura gasped. "You reenacted a scene, didn't you? The staircase one, I bet."

"I'm not telling you," Isabel said as her blush deepened. "And lower your voice. We're in the library."

"Who were you with?" Laura whispered fiercely. "I want details."

"I already said too much."

"This book really changed your life?" Sydney bit her lip with worry. She was trying to disprove the book, to show that the affair between Hazel and Ernest was fictional and no forbidden love could be that beautiful and life affirming. Hers certainly hadn't been. But Sydney had never thought about the consequences of successfully proving that the diary could be fictional. Would Isabel retreat back into her shell? "How would you feel if you found out this diary is really a work of fiction?"

Isabel looked away as she considered the question. "Disappointed," she said. "Disappointed and betrayed. But I really do believe this happened. Hazel and Ernest are very real to me. What do you think, Laura?"

"I believe Hazel and Ernest were real people, but did all those things happen to them? I don't know. It could be...what's it called? Artistic license. If Hazel didn't do all this, she definitely fantasized about Ernest. Ernest may have been her muse more than her lover."

Muse. The writer had probably had a muse. Someone she knew but couldn't touch. Sydney understood what that felt like. She glanced over to where Matthew stood on the other side of the room. How many times had she imagined unbuttoning Matthew's shirt? She shivered as she daydreamed about dragging his clothes off and revealing his muscular body.

"No, this happened. I'm sure of it," Isabel argued. "She wouldn't have risked everything by writing down her fantasies."

"Sure, she would," Laura shot back, "if it was the only way she could explore the things she wanted to do."

Sydney pulled her gaze away from Matthew, her pulse skipping a beat. Maybe she had approached this diary challenge the wrong way.

She sat up straight. Instead of making up Victorianera characters she didn't understand and couldn't imagine, she should write down all the things she had dreamed of doing to Matthew Stone. She bit her lip as fragments of several fantasies crowded her mind.

"We'll discuss this later." Isabel glanced at her watch. "Come on, Laura. We need to get back to work."

Work. Sydney flipped open her notebook and grabbed her pen. This idea could work. But she didn't dare use Matthew's real name. She couldn't have it get around town that she had the hots for the mayor. She would be accused of showing favoritism to a man she had to report about in the paper.

"Already?" Laura slumped in her chair and groaned. "When will this community service end?"

"You only have a few more hundred hours left," Isabel said in an encouraging tone. "They'll go by fast, I promise."

Laura reluctantly stood and followed Isabel to the shelving carts. "All this for damaging my ex-boyfriend's stuff when I threw it out my window."

"See you later, Sydney," Isabel said. Sydney gave an absent wave as she wrote. In her mind, the buttons on Matthew's shirt were flying off.

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