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A Novel Seduction

By Gwyn Cready



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Can romance novels save the day

Snobbish book critic Ellery Sharpe has made the strategic mistake of unleashing her scathing wit on the memoir of the world's leading romance publisher. As damage control, her boss at Vanity Place magazine assigns her the ultimate punishment: write an ode to romance novels, a genre she considers the literary equivalent of word search puzzles. To make matters worse, he hires her sexy ex, Axel Mackenzie, to shoot the photos.

When it looks like true love hasn't a chance?

Axel has reasons of his own for wanting to convince the strong-willed Ellery to paint romance in an attractive light. He decides to take his cue from Kiltlander, a much-adored romance, and starts secretly drawing lessons from the book's compelling hero. Because getting Ellery to fall for romance novels might be just the push she needs to believe people can change...even him.

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"Sexy second-chance romance." -*RT Book Reviews*, 4 stars

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STARRED REVIEW



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Editorial Review

Review

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- "New York Times" bestselling author Rachel Gibson

"Passionate, suspenseful, adventurous, and highly entertaining!"

--"Romantic Times "on "Aching for Always"

About the Author

Gwyn Cready is a writer of contemporary, Scottish, and time travel romance. She's been called "the master of time travel romance" and is the winner of the RITA Award, the most prestigious award given in romance writing. She has been profiled in Real Simple and USA Today, among others. Before becoming a novelist, she spent 25 years in brand management. She has two grown children and lives with her husband on a hill overlooking the magical kingdom of Pittsburgh.

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Chapter 1

Offices of Vanity Place Magazine, Manhattan

"Cripes, Axel," Kate, the photography editor, said. "You look like you slept in the street."

Sleep? Now, there was a novel prospect. Axel Mackenzie scratched the bristle on his cheek and stretched his aching neck. Did the floor of an abandoned warehouse count? He was getting too old for this kind of life. What would really hit the spot was an ice-cold beer. For a number of reasons, including the fact that even the most liberal-minded New York City bar didn't open for a good three hours, the idea was a nonstarter. He took a sip of the magazine's thick, strong coffee and made a noncommittal noise.

Kate shook her head, frowned at a missing button on his thoroughly wrinkled shirt, and gestured at her scuffed Nikes. "And it's not exactly like we set the bar real high around here, either." She scanned his proofs. "Lucky for you, you're good."

"Ah, if I had a dollar for every time an editor's said that to me," he said, stuffing his shirt into his jeans.

"I notice you didn't say 'woman.'"

"I notice you didn't say 'great.'"

Buhl Martin Black, Vanity Place's Humpty Dumpty-esque publisher, burst into view at the far end of the hallway, gripping the latest issue of his magazine, cheeks puffed in fury. With his upper torso angled toward his destination like some sort of fleshy road sign and his short legs pumping furiously to keep up with his head, he looked like a character in some cartoon.

Axel instinctively tucked himself out of sight against the cubicle wall. Kate, who was directly in the line of fire, clutched the corners of her desk like a spectator in one of those fifties atomic bomb films, waiting for

the blast.

But Black roared by without a word. He passed his admin, flew into his office, and slammed the door.

Two terrifying beats later, Axel watched as one head after another rose along the wall of cubicles and gazed wordlessly at the others. Yeesh. There were many reasons he preferred freelancing to full-time employment, but avoiding intra-office hissy fits was definitely one of them.

He had worked with Kate for years, and if there was one thing he knew, it was she was always the professional. She buzzed her wheelchair to life and swung it around her desk. "If you don't mind, I think I'd better see what's going on."

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead." She disappeared, and Axel grabbed the current issue of Vanity Place. A moment later, his phone vibrated. He swiped to answer and stood, like the others, to take in the battlefield beyond the wall.

"Mackenzie here."

"Dammit, where's my money?"

Axel kicked himself for not checking the caller ID. His buddy Brendan was selling his microbrewery, and Axel wanted it. Unfortunately, Axel's bank account didn't seem nearly as supportive of the idea as Axel.

"C'mon." Axel lowered his voice. "You know I'm good for it. I've sent you almost all of it."

Kate wheeled not into Black's office, but into the office of Phil Peck, the managing editor and the man most likely to have some insight into his publisher's dark mood. Phil jumped up to close the door behind her.

"'Almost,' Axel. 'Almost,'" Brendan said. "I got a guy here who's got the whole thing. He's waving a check at me."

Brendan had run the microbrewery in Pittsburgh as a hobby. Sadly, the beer tasted that way. Now Brendan's ten-year marriage was going bust, and he needed every spare dollar. Axel had liquidated everything he owned to buy his pal out. Microbrewing was his dream.

"C'mon, Brendan. I'm what? Ten short?"

"Ten? Try twenty-three."

Twenty-three? Axel winced. "Look. Give me another month-

"A week. I'll give you a week."

The sound of glass shattering in Black's office blasted through the quiet. Then the lever on the Black's door jiggled, and every head including Axel's ducked. But the door remained closed.

"A week?" Axel said under his breath. "This is your college roommate here. Gimme two at least."

"Not sure you want to harken back to those days, my friend. You wrecked my car, stiffed me on two months' rent, and I'm still not entirely sure if you made a pass at Tracy the night of our engagement dinner."

"In retrospect, you'll admit, probably not a bad thing-

"A week, Axel."

The line went dead and so did most of Axel's hopes. But before he could consider next steps, the greatest set of legs he'd ever seen-as familiar to him as his favorite Leica-emerged from a conference room. Ellery Sharpe, the owner of the legs, was talking to some overwhelmed junior editor. Axel could tell the poor schmuck was an underling by the Judge Judy finger she was wagging in his direction as she spoke.

The pair parted, and Ellery bent to get a drink at a fountain. Her dark ponytail shone against the softness of her blue sweater, picking up the black of her pumps, and he found himself entranced with the way her fringed wool skirt made it look as if she were wrapped in a Hudson's Bay blanket, a situation in which she'd been in his bed on more than one occasion. She straightened, unaware he was watching, and started down an adjacent hallway.

"Pssst. Pittsburgh."

She swung around as if she'd been hit with a spitball.

His doctor would have called it an unconscious death wish-which is what he had called a lot of Axel's former habits-but God, he'd forgotten the fire that could blaze in those eyes, the same stunning violet as the pills that had once been his favorite recreational drug.

She marched toward him, looking left and right to see if anyone had overheard. "I told you never to call me that."

"You told me a lot of things. A friendly heads-up-if I were you, I'd consider a long walk to the cafeteria."

Her gaze narrowed. "Why?"

"Black," he said. "Something's up with him. Something bad."

She shrugged, the thick sable hair flipping over her shoulder like the tail of an irritated cat. "Not my problem. I'm heading to the art department to look at layouts. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

He gave a theatrical bow and waved her on, but after two steps, perhaps feeling the prickle of something she didn't like, she stopped and turned. Axel dropped his eyes, but it was too late. She'd caught him gazing dreamily at the swaying fringe.

"Hudson's Bay," he explained, heat rushing up his neck.

She rolled her eyes. "Canadians."

With a sigh, he dropped into the chair, returning to the more prosaic parts of his day. A week, Brenden had said. He might as well have said an hour. Axel had already short-leased his apartment for the month to a visiting couple from Osaka to try to scrape up more cash, and was crashing on friends' couches when he could and warehouse floors when he couldn't. His leg bounced anxiously. All he had left to hock were his cameras, and he wasn't quite ready for that.

Damn. He would have given his left eye for a smoke, a Seconal, and about three quick beers, but he settled for a hard rub through his hair. He picked up the magazine and, as always, flipped immediately to the book review section. He scanned the lead story. Vanity Place won the award for the most pretentious thing going. He felt like he needed to apologize for dropping out of grad school whenever he read something in it, and that was often no more than the table of contents. But this review-a beautifully constructed Stinger missile

aimed at the recent memoir of Bettina Moore, head of Pierrot Enterprises, the world's most successful romance novel publisher, and the darling of the publishing world-carried razor-edged pomposity about as far as it could go.

Moore's estimation of her impact on American culture is as overstated as her dress on the book's cover. If romance novels are, as Moore says, "candy conversation hearts that speak to the soul of a woman," let's hope aphorisms employed in the future include "There's more plot in the phone book," "Romance Novels: Publishing's Answer to Farmville" and "Get a Library Card!"

Axel shook his head. Incisive prose was one of Ellery Sharpe's gifts. But he hated to see her use it as a weapon of mass destruction. What had happened to that starry-eyed twenty-two-year-old who was going to revolutionize journalism with her own biweekly rag, who had convinced him to work for her for free when he had national offers pouring in, and whose fierce pride in her hometown had caused him in a semi-drunken glow to nickname her "Pittsburgh"?

Kate wheeled in. "Sorry, Axel. Bit of a firestorm. Where were we? Oh, right, the photo proofs." She pulled up to the monitor and hit Page Down a couple times. "These are fantastic."

She'd upgraded them from "good." About time. "Right. What's next?"

"Hmmm." She punched up the project list.

"I'm looking for something fast," he said. "Fast and lucrative."

She lifted a brow. "How about a shot of Sasquatch?"

"Will it pay twenty-three grand?"

She snorted. "Sure. If you get him having a beer with Jimmy Hoffa. Seriously, though. I've got a John Irving shoot I'd love you for."

"Is it soon? Is there travel?" He thought of the per diems he could pocket in addition to his fee.

"Yes to both. It was supposed to be next month, but his schedule changed and he wants to do it this week. Ellery's finalizing the date."

Axel's dreams of a quick payoff sputtered like a rapidly deflating balloon. "Ellery's writing the article?"

"She is the head of the literary section here."

"Yeah, um..." He gave Kate a polite but regretful shake.

She angled her head. "What? You two don't click?"

He remembered when his relationship with Ellery imploded five years ago, after which he'd given up and split for New York, and imagined himself as Sylvester the cat, listening to the click, click, click of the bomb Tweety has slipped into his catnip canary. "Oh, no, we definitely click. It's like a freakin' click fest when we're together. We just, um...do our best work with others."

"Is that so?"

Kate gave him a piercing look, but he hadn't spent thirty-six years with four older sisters without developing

strong self-preservation strategies. He kept his face blank.

Kate went back to her screen. "Well, other than that I've got-"

Black's muffled voice shook the room. "Yes, Phil," he shouted, "I mean now! Find her and get her in here!" This was followed by the sound of a phone being slammed into its cradle and perhaps through the desktop.

"I take it," Axel said, "there's a problem."

"Sixth sense of yours?"

"What can I say? Years of experience."

"Yeah, well, Black's not too happy about the article Ellery wrote on Bettina Moore," Katie said.

Axel cast a quick, concerned glance down the corridor, where he'd spotted the legs. Pittsburgh's grand ambitions would be imperiled. Technically, he should have no interest in what happened to her one way or another, but even after all these years, he hated to see her get into trouble. "Why not? Does Black's wife love romance novels or something?"

"I don't think Black's wife loves anything about Bettina Moore."

"The article was a little harsh, I suppose, but nothing out of the ordinary for this place." He gave Kate a "gimme a break" look.

She met his eyes. "'Publishing's answer to Farmville'?"

"Okay, okay, it was cruel. But you guys don't exactly encourage writers to use kid gloves."

Kate sighed. "Black doesn't see it that way. Not on this one."

So Pittsburgh would get a slap on the wrist. She'd live. Black could be quite vindictive if he chose, but it didn't seem like he had a real beef here.

"Why didn't he quash the article?" Axel had had more than one project end up in the circular file for no better reason than some suit upstairs didn't like the story.

"He was out of town when it was turned in."

Axel scratched his ribs. "You snooze, you lose."

"Only he wasn't snoozing."

Axel stopped. "Oh?"

Kate looked to see if anyone was close and lowered her voice. "Black was supposed to be at a publishing summit in London."

"'Plugged In: The Future of Publishing'?" Everyone who was anyone was supposed to have been at that. An old colleague, Barry, had mentioned it to him when they'd run into each other a few weeks ago.

"Nope, that's later this week. This was a magazine publisher summit, but the point is, Phil has it from a very well-placed source that Black was actually spending a long weekend with someone he shouldn't have been."

"And this makes our most reverend publisher suddenly sensitive to condescending writing?" Hell, if that's all it took to get this place to pull its head out of its ass, Axel wished Black had discovered the delights of adultery a long time ago.

"That someone was Bettina Moore."

Axel leaped to his feet. He needed to warn Ellery. He spotted her immediately, waving a cheery hello to Phil Peck as she joined him outside Black's office, unaware she was waltzing into certain annihilation.

"Oh, shit."

Kate nodded. "A conversation heart for the ages."

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