

Sweet Savage Prose

"We know why everyone is so mad for some of these books. Sex, lovey, sex! We're all wild about beards and thighs!"

THE SQUAT DEPARTMENT stores and convenient specialty shops seemed to beckon to Chunk Hefty as he crossed a busy street and advanced toward the mall. Of all the world's glittering, power-dizzy, glamor-mad fashion centers—Paris, Rome, New York—surely the Fremont Fashion Center was the most convenient to BART. But that alone was not reason to come here. What forces had lured him, what currents of destiny had swept him to this suburban plaza so far from his own neighborhood? "Damn!" Chunk swore softly to himself. He had long ago learned that he was the kind of man who would never attend to convention. But now here he was, attending a convention—the first West Coast Romantic Readers 'n' Rites Rendezvous, sponsored by the Romantic Writers of America and the publishers of the *Affaire de Coeur* newsletter.

He pulled back the heavy glass door of a defunct sporting goods outlet and entered the world that the initiates called Rom/Con I. Overhead hung strings of triangular pennants—like those at a used-car lot, Chunk thought wryly—and balloons, some of them in the form of metallic red or silver hearts. Underhead were long tables heaped high with display copies of the books written by the women who sat behind them autographing poodle-eared editions brought to them by fans. Chunk began to wander the room, and everything in him—the rough-edged ruggedness of his early, inexpensive dental work; the stock laugh lines that had formed around his conversation; the leftness of his ten thumbs—was given over to the intrigue of the mysterious scene. The table maintained by *Affaire de Coeur* offered newsletters, bumper stickers ("Put a Little Love in Your Life—Have an Affaire!"), and cleverly bent ball point pens promoting, for some reason, the California Chiropractic Association. Two women from Kenneth of London, which was in fact of Walnut Creek and other fine locations, styled the reckless tresses of all



comes into romantic dos. And a man handing out flyers for Mel's Self Defense for Women wore a black martial-arts robe on whose lapel a pink sticker advised that ROMANCE WILL NEVER BE THE SAME.

How true, Chunk Hefty chuckled to himself as he set forth to chat up the women who were filling their arms with books in the 15 percent-discount concession operated by Genny's Book Nook of Fremont. Most of the women, he noticed, were wearing the regimental uniform of the exurban troops—the skirted or panted suit, the defiantly oversized bow on the front of the smartly contrasting blouse.

"A friend of mine gave me Rosemary Rogers's first book," breathed a 43-year-old student of the Creative Arts from San Jose State. "She said, 'You just have to read it.' I can't remember the title, but I can see the story in my mind."

"*Sweet Savage Love*," murmured another woman who had drawn near.

"Yes. My favorite one of hers," the student continued, "is *Love's Wildest*

Heart. I like the depth, the historical detail. I'm into genealogy."

"Your own?" Chunk asked.

She shook her head. "My family's. I don't like TV, so when I'm not studying, I just pick up a book. If I can find a nice *thick* one, I might read only four a month. But then, last week, I read three." She wanted to show Chunk what she meant by "a nice thick one," and she lifted from the retail shelf a volume in which one might have expected to look up telephone numbers rather than crinoline skirts.

Then Chunk met Madelaine Havy, the president of the Romantic Writers' Riverside chapter. "I'm a new writer," she boldly told him. "I got my master's in psychology, and then I said, 'I'm tired of required reading. I'm going to read what I want to read.' My first attempt was Barbara Cartland. I was amazed by the history and the intelligence, and I said, 'I can write as good as this.' So I've been writing them and sending them off.

"I'll tell you something that turns me off: People put down romance novels as infantile garbage." Dark anger flashed darkly in her angry eyes. "They're out of their gourds. Women read them out of a deep psychological need. Men can watch football games and yell and smash things and act violent. That fills their fantasy need. Well, women have those needs too.

"My books make use of my background in psychology. My stories have more of a total approach—not just kiss kiss sex sex, not just a man and a woman in isolation, but how the interaction between people works. How does a romance between you and me (she pointed at herself and Chunk, and suddenly he knew how it felt to be used—in this case, for purposes of illustration), how does that affect somebody else?"

Chunk didn't have to look far to see who "somebody else" might be. Madelaine was pointing at another woman, who introduced herself as Neva Hoofnagle, of Cypress, California. "I do research for writers of romances," said Neva, the

sleeves of her skirt-suit filled with her arms on the inside and a big stack of books on the outside. She had researched England in the 1600s and 1100s and South Africa in the 1800s for writers whose desperate appetite for detail had craved such minutiae as the correct metal of the blazer buttons of a particular regiment of swashbucklers or, rather, swash buttoners. "I've also done medical research for a romance with an albino character," Neva said. Chunk whitened. "When writers come to me, they already have a plot and a period in mind. Say they pick the 1100s. I get them clothing information, battle information, coronation information. If in the romance we have the coronation happen on a Tuesday, it did."

BUT CHUNK knew that this was not the only kind of detail that concerned romantic readers 'n' riters these days: There was the small matter of sexual detail as well. Not so long ago, the pages of romances offered less in-and-out than a downtown parking garage. But now—especially in such series as Dell's Candlelight Ecstasy, Jove's Second Chance at Love, and Pocket's Silhouette Desire—the heroines, as they said in Chunk's neighborhood, be giving up some booty. It was as a 45-year-old sixth-grade teacher from Salt Lake City, standing in line with some books for Roberta Gellis to autograph, had told him: "They used to go from a chaste kiss in the middle to a warm embrace at the end. Now they're more explicit, but still tastefully so. I read the more explicit [publishers'] lines—the Ecstasy line is more, uh... I like the word *sensuous*. There'll be two or three sensuous pages at a time, and in some cases they'll be sensuous as many as ten times in a given book."

Her words echoed in Chunk's head as he passed a display of Silhouette Special Edition books. He stared—transfixed, confused—at the Silhouette slogan: "More Romance for a Special Way to Relax." Then he noticed that any of the books in the Silhouette line could be held open with one hand. The slogan, he decided, was a clever merchandising stroke.

Special relaxation, Chunk suspected, had been good for the romance business. *Publisher's Weekly* had reported that "upwards of \$200 million of paperback publishers' annual sales are represented by romance fiction" and that "readership is estimated at 20 million."

Chunk found a man who knew of these things firsthand—Stan Cohen, a Bay Area sales rep for Ballantine and Warner. "They sure sell a shitload of them," Stan said, his round-pupiled eyes seeming to look through the lenses of his and Chunk's glasses at the eyes of Chunk. "There aren't any books that sell five or six

million these days, except the Cube books, but romances are a very solid continuing genre. . . . I was taking an author around yesterday, Rebecca Brandewyne, and she gets a lot of compliments on her sex scenes."

"Rebecca Brandewyne?"

"Hey, it's my job, Jack," the less bald man retorted hotly. "She says her name's Rebecca Brandewyne; her *mom* says it's Rebecca Brandewyne. Hey, her name's Rebecca Brandewyne."

But not every publisher had yet gone sensuous. "My book is a contemporary romance-suspense thriller," an author at an autograph table told Chunk. "My editor at Pinnacle insisted that my character, Wendy, remain a virgin throughout. I even put her in bed with a man and still kept her a virgin, so you might say it's a fantasy-science fiction as well."

Wendy won't get much of a tumble, Chunk thought, from Flavia Knightsbridge, the reviewer for *Romantic Times*, who wrote: "[We] know why everyone is so mad for some of these books. Sex, lovey, sex! We're all wild about beards and thighs!" Nor, Chunk mused wryly, will that tempo virgin thriller thrill the editors of *Crissy's Critiques*, a Florida newsletter that trilled: "THIS MUST SURELY BE THE HOTTEST CANDLELIGHT ECSTASY EVER PRINTED. THANKS DELL!

WE'VE LOTS OF WOMEN WHO JOIN US IN SAYING THIS IS OUR KIND OF BOOK!!!!!"

ON A LARGE LANDING at the top of a spiral staircase, Chunk found a standing room audience of fans at a question-and-answer panel featuring the editors of several romance lines. "The first three chapters of your book tell us a lot," Second Chance editor Carolyn Nichols told the aspiring authors. "They tell us whether you have internalized the pacing of the category romance novel."

But the audience seemed more concerned with what the heroines might have internalized. "Are your heroines less pure now?" a fan asked Silhouette editor Karen Solem. "Is sex riding high at Silhouette? Last year, the heroines were pure."

The fan was told that it would depend on the line of books. "Well, if she is a virgin to begin with, then, at the culmination, does the man say, 'Aha, you were a virgin?'" The fan was told that it would really depend on the line of books.

Downstairs, a singer in a black velvet pantsuit and white bowed blouse was singing "Slow Hand" to recorded accompaniment. At a Playboy Paperbacks table, the male coauthors of a men's adventure series called *The Bounty Hunter* stood out like a journalist and a 389-pound biker, which they were. "The Playboy rep

thought we'd be such a contrast that we'd get some attention," the journalist said.

"Are you?" Chunk asked.

"Well, we get a lot of gazers. There seem to be a few 389-pound women here."

Behind an autograph table, facing a steady line of fans, sat a woman whose badge read "JAYNE CASTLE-STEPHANIE JAMES-JAYNE TAYLOR-JOYCE BENTLEY."

"You have to read this Jayne Taylor," a fan in line told a friend, "it's so funny. The girl is *snappy*—the heroine, she's *snappy*, and she's kind of plump."

The author signed a book and handed it back to the fan, a conspiratorial smirk seeming to form on her mouth. "Read the sex scenes," she said.

Chunk sat down beside her. There was, he noticed, something round and circular and O-shaped about the lenses of her glasses, just as there was something long and sticklike and thrusting about Chunk's pen as it sputtered notes across the once-pure pages of his Reporter's Notebook, whose wire binding seemed to spiral around and around, piercing the cardboard covers before plunging back and forth, back and forth, through the eager sheafs. The sex in her books, she explained, was understated.

"I write for Dell Ecstasy and Silhouette Desire. They're more sensuous than the other lines. Spicier. But still romances.

There's still a radiant glow about them. They're not mainstream fiction. Mainstream fiction is a little *harsh* for my taste."

"Aren't you all these people?" a fan asked, stacking her Castle/Taylor/Bentley/James books on the table—*Maiden of the Morning*, *Bargain with the Devil*, *Whirlwind Courtship*, *Gentle Pirate*.

"Jayne Castle is my real name, my real maiden name. My name now is Jayne Krentz," she said, her hand seeming to sign the books. "Every publishing house wants you to have a different name. I've written for a couple of houses that went under owing me money." She frowned, thinking, Chunk thought, of how it feels when you can never go back to a house where you have left too much behind.

"I started writing them when I was a corporate librarian," she continued. "I had exhausted all the science fiction and espionage thrillers at the local libraries, and in 1972 I started reading Harlequin romances. Harlequin dominated the market for a long time with that English fantasy, which is a fantasy of women being dominated by sheiks, Greeks, and Spaniards. The American fantasy is different. . . the American audience in general wants a more sensuous romance, and the fantasy here is of a relationship where two strong, spirited people wind up as equals. I make it a point that nobody gets trampled in the relationship and that the woman is strong and professionally competent."

LATER, CHUNK THOUGHT, he would pull back the pliant covers of her latest *Ecstasy* and let his eyes roam over her strong, professionally competent prose. He knew she was "fast"—she herself said she wrote a novel a month.

In time, he would read not only her book, but many others that he brought home from Rom/Con I. As he did, he would wonder whether this could ever be his world. He wondered if he could ever chuckle as wryly, or swear as softly, or flash his eyes as darkly, or be "lean and hard" as often as the men who walked the pages of these books. He doubted it. But then, perhaps this wasn't really anybody's world, for Jayne Castle had told him: "The editors say they want stories about 'real life,' but really, it's just a female fantasy. That's its value." Then he remembered what Madelaine Havey had said about male fantasy needs for violence, but football season was over. So he tried something different. When he read about "her green eyes dancing with mischievous humor," or of how "a strange sense of awareness of him sent a warm glow through her whole being," his eager, hungry hands sent the books winging into a wall of his home with a smart, snapping sound. It did a little something for him, he had to admit. □