

Laura Briggs

CONTEMPORARY
ROMANCE



ONLY IN NOVELS

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LET THE ADVENTURE BEGIN

Only in Novels

by

Laura Briggs

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“Is it ten o’ clock, yet?” Lannie Maxwell glanced at her teenage assistant and pulled a stack of books from beneath the counter. “This display’s only half-ready, and she’ll be here any minute.”

The display consisted of two card tables covered with a sheet and several glossy hardbacks. A banner proclaiming “Welcome Ms. Modern Homemaker!” fluttered from the bookstore’s upstairs balcony. Gwen, Lannie’s freckle-faced assistant, was busy stacking copies of the Ms. Modern Homemaker series: recipe books, sewing manuals, covers featuring big balls of yarn and knitting needles.

“Relax Lannie,” Gwen said, checking her wrist watch. “She won’t expect us to be ready for at least thirty minutes.”

The “she” in question being Dora Eve Hensen, the author of the hottest-selling title in how-to and crafts. In fact, the *only* hot-selling title in the Bayside Bookstore.

“You’re just nervous, that’s all,” Gwen added, stepping back to inspect a paper poster with Ms. Modern Homemaker’s beaming image.

“Of course I am,” Lannie snapped as she clipped her hair out of the way with a barrette. A second later, she regretted her tone. “It’s just...you know, if this doesn’t work out, there’s no Plan B. That’s it.”

No need to explain what that meant; they both knew. No more Bayside Bookstore. No Jane Austen book nook upstairs, no rows of Charles Dickens and

Shakespeare.

Gwen gave Lannie a reassuring look. "In the letter I got from the booking agency, they promised ten o' clock on the dot."

With a deep breath and a prayer for courage, Lannie forced her lips into a smile. "Right. I know that." The clock on the counter chimed the half-hour. Nine-thirty and counting until she could save her business from ruin.

The sound of a roaring engine distracted her from the clock. Glancing out the window, she watched as a motorcycle gunned up the street and swung into a parking space opposite the store. A man in leather climbed off, removing a helmet to release dark, shaggy hair from beneath.

Tall. Dark. Rippling muscles beneath a fitted jacket. What was someone like that doing on old-fashioned Bay Street? Or prowling the streets of sleepy Macasia, New Hampshire, for that matter.

The motorcyclist looped his helmet over the handlebars and strode across the street, one hand smoothing his ruffled mane. Through the open jacket, she glimpsed a graphic tee shirt and a cross necklace made from nails.

"Um, is he coming here?" she asked. As the man's hand reached for the locked bookstore door. The entrance bell clanked slightly as he pulled. Scrambling from behind the display, she cracked the door open.

"Sorry, we're not open until ten," she said.

"Yeah, I know. I'm here for the book signing." He flashed a crooked smile.

She sensed admiration in his glance, and a warm blush climbed her cheeks as she returned his stare. Her voice had taken a momentary vacation. "Excuse me?"

she croaked.

He drummed his fingers softly on the door handle. "The book signing is today right?"

"Yes, it's today," she answered. "You're here for Ms. Modern Homemaker?" She tried to keep the incredulity out of her voice. Was he serious?

The man in leather's smile grew confused. "No. I'm D.E. Hensen. I'm here to *sign* books."

It took Lannie a moment to put it all together. Her eyes widened with horror as she realized what he said. She pulled the door open quickly, causing the overhead bell to jangle frantically.

"Come in," she said, slamming the door behind him. "Look, Mr. Hensen, there's some mistake. Maybe you've got the wrong bookstore or something. We're expecting—"

"I've got your letter right here." His long, tan fingers slipped inside the leather jacket and pulled out an envelope. "See? The Bayside Bookstore. That's your address, isn't it?"

From the corner of her eye, Lannie saw Gwen's jaw drop.

"Would you excuse me?" Slipping past him, she grabbed Gwen by her shoulders and propelled her down the nearest aisle.

"D.E. Hensen?" She stared at Gwen's blank face, waiting for an explanation. None came.

"Gwen, you *told* me you contacted the booking agency and arranged all this!" She tried to whisper, but her voice sounded harsh and echoing among the shelves.

"I wrote them," Gwen whispered back. "I used the contact information in the computer system."

"Are you sure you looked up the right author?"

Dora Hensen, right?"

Gwen gave her a pathetic look. "The database said 'D.E. Hensen.' I just assumed—"

"Then who is that guy out there?" Lannie peeked around the corner. The man in leather was studying one of the promotional posters affixed to the wall. "He obviously thinks he's here to sign books."

Comprehension dawned suddenly on Gwen's face.

"Wait, I know who he is!" She raced down the shelves until she reached the far end. Standing on her toes, she pulled a book from the upper corner and shoved it into Lannie's hand. "There!" She breathed triumphantly.

Lannie turned the novel and looked at the cover. A tan, muscular man who bore a strong resemblance to their mystery author stood posed on a rock. Khaki shirt slightly open, an Indiana Jones fedora cocked over one eye, he brandished a long sword.

"*Danger on the Nile*," she read aloud. "What is this, some kind of a romance novel? It's modern trash, Gwen." She tried to suppress the anxiety building in her voice.

"Not so loud, he'll hear you," whispered Gwen. "I know it's not the stuff we usually carry, but frankly, it's pretty good. I mean...I read it." The last part she added shyly, wincing under Lannie's glare.

"Great. So we've got Crocodile Dundee instead of the homemaker we promised every cake-baking, hat-knitting customer we have in town." She groaned and closed her eyes. What now? Should she close the shop and go home to bury herself in misery and a box of chocolate?

The sound of a masculine throat clearing sucked

her back into reality. D.E. Hensen stood a foot away, his hand resting on the nearest shelf.

"So, um, where should I set up?" he asked. "The letter didn't have any details about what you wanted. Casual, formal, something with a little pizzazz..."

Pizzazz? She tried to muster an apologetic smile, but the site of those sea green eyes beneath the shaggy brows made her feel slightly dizzy.

"Mr. Hensen, I'm truly sorry," she began, her resolve weakening as she spoke. "But it seems there's been a mix up. We were expecting...well, we were expecting someone else today."

He arched his eyebrows. "I see." An awkward pause followed as she fumbled for words.

"I think maybe it's best if we forget about this," she continued. "I mean, you're obviously not what we anticipated." She glanced towards the display table, where Gwen had started packing up the homemaker books. "Of course, we'll still honor the fee. One thousand dollars for the charity of your choice."

He, too, watched as Gwen carried away the "Modern Homemaker" series. Leaving the table bare and Dora Eve Hensen's smile stripped from the shelves.

"Look, I—" he took a deep breath. "I don't quite understand what's happened here. And I definitely can't take a check I didn't earn."

Lannie looked away, guilt pricking her conscience. "It's just we don't have any reason to detain you since we don't have any customers for you. I'm so sorry."

He opened his mouth, but the ring of the entry bell interrupted. Gwen must have unlocked the door to take down the book signing poster, unwittingly signaling that the shop was open for business. Two

customers, faces beaming, now made their way inside.

"Oh, Lannie," called one of the women, a bright smile stretched across her plump features. "I hope you don't mind that we're here early. We just couldn't wait any longer." Her companion, a tall, smiling woman well past middle age, clutched a *Modern Homemaker* edition to her chest.

"Hi, Camille, Mavis," Lannie said nervously. "There's been a little change of plans." But the two women had ceased smiling at her and were now staring at D.E. Hensen.

"It's him," Mavis said through a breath.

Camille's expression melted in astonishment. She let out a loud shriek of surprise. "Oh, I can't believe it!" She all but lost her grip on her handbag as she reached for his hand. "It's a privilege, an absolute privilege to meet you," she babbled, her eyes shining like a teenager's.

"Likewise," D.E. Hensen responded. Sneaking a look at his face, Lannie witnessed an enigmatic smile flash across it. "I'm always glad to meet a reader."

"I know I have it here, somewhere." Mavis fumbled with her bag, the *Modern Homemaker* volume set aside on the counter. She pulled a battered paperback from her purse. It showed signs of wear from multiple readings and sported a muscular hero battling a crocodile in what seemed to be the Amazon River.

"Would you sign it for me?" she asked, holding out a pen.

Hensen let out a chuckle. "Of course, ma'am. That's why I'm here, right?" He sent a wink in Lannie's direction as he scribbled something on the book's title page. "This one is my favorite novel, by the way."

Lannie's gaze flickered to the cover. *Jaws in the Jungle* was emblazoned in swirling caps. Oh, please. She tried not to roll her eyes at the thought of what must lay inside.

Camille let out a girlish giggle. "Oh, mine, too. And that one about the pirate ship off the Jamaican Coast. You know, *Pirates of Parrot Island*."

Behind her, Gwen's head bobbed enthusiastically. "I loved that one, too."

Maybe she imagined it, but Lannie thought she saw that same lovesick glow in her assistant's eyes. Camille pulled a cell phone from her pocket as Mavis clutched D.E. Hensen's hand, a sappy smile curving her lips.

Lannie groaned inwardly. How did this morning spiral out of her control? Too late to change their plans, too late to close for the day with an apology posted on the door. Already, she could see two or three customers approaching the shop, books tucked beneath their arms.

Why me, Lord? What happened to the perfect book signing with America's favorite hostess? Instead, a paperback novelist who made a living from her least favorite kind of literature would be stuck in her shop for a whole day.

"You *have* to come down here. It's him! It's really him!" Camille whispered on the phone, obviously calling reinforcements. Sharing the good news with more D.E. Hensen fans.

There was no way out of this, not if Lannie wanted to save the shop. And wasn't that the most important thing? Maybe this was a blessing instead of a mistake.

With a sigh of resignation, she motioned in Gwen's direction. "Grab some poster board from the

back and make a new sign for the door.”

“What for?” asked Gwen.

Lannie stuck out her chin. “So we can advertise our book signing with the famous author of *Jaws of the Jungle*, of course.”

Behind her, she heard a scream of surprise as her newest customer recognized D.E. Hensen. “And help me find some extra books,” she added in a whisper.

After digging around in a storeroom box, Lannie unearthed a dozen D.E. Hensen novels. Gwen helped her set them up on the display table, working frantically as more customers piled into the bookstore.

“This is the last of them.” Gwen dumped four more books from the store shelves.

“I’m surprised we even have these,” Lannie replied, with a twinge of sadness. Sixteen books wasn’t much to go on. A handful of sales just when she needed them most.

She glanced at the handsome author, currently surrounded by a group of adoring fans. Practically everybody who came in seemed to recognize him. And thus far nobody lodged even one complaint about the missing *Modern Homemaker* author.

“Please, will you take a picture with us?” Camille asked, pulling a camera from her oversized bag and handing it to Gwen.

“Of course. I’d love to,” he answered, slipping his arms around her and Mavis’s shoulders.

“Girls, line up! He said ‘yes!’” called Camille, officiating a sudden line of eager customers armed with paperbacks. Mavis practically melted as he drew her close for the photo— something Lannie sympathized with beneath her own blush.

No matter what she thought of his books, she couldn't deny his good looks and charm. Or the natural rapport with his fans. He scribbled autograph after autograph with a genuine smile, thrilling his fans with adventure stories that couldn't possibly be true...Or could they?

Lannie found herself wanting to believe this was real as she watched from her stool behind the counter, half-hidden by the stack of abandoned *Modern Homemaker* copies.

"Ring me up, Lannie, dear," said Joanne, one of Lannie's oldest and dearest customers. She placed two copies of D.E. Hensen's novels, freshly signed, on the counter.

Joanne chuckled. "I didn't even realize you carried these. I've been ordering mine through one of those catalog companies, but I'd much rather browse when I buy."

"Well, I'm glad you found something new." Lannie put on her brightest smile, despite the sting of disappointment she felt over the catalog remark.

Behind Joanne, one of the store's teenage patrons shuffled up to the counter with several books. Not D.E. Hensen's, but copies of *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *The Scarlet Pimpernel*.

"Mr. Hensen recommended them," gushed Annie. "He says they're even better than his. Plus, there's so many of them to choose from. He even signed them!"

Lannie widened her eyes in amazement as she opened the front of one of the books to confirm this. She wasn't sure whether to thank him for his advice or scold him for autographing some of the world's greatest literature. She sneaked another peek at the crowded signing table where D.E. Hensen shrugged

off his leather jacket, revealing tanned, muscular arms and a tattoo of a rose. Noticing the absence of a ring on his callused left hand was unavoidable. He must have sensed her stare; he caught her in his gaze and grinned. She blushed.

A loud *thud* sounded as several more books landed on the counter in front of her. This time a Charles Dickens novel and a Jane Austen one.

Her middle-aged customer giggled. "Mr. Hensen just loves these."

With a wry smile, Lannie reached for the scanner. She had to admire his influence over his readers.

By afternoon's end, the signing table stood bare of books and writing paper. The shelves of the shop itself were also somewhat empty. They had sold out of copies of Austen, Dickens, Brönte, and other classics. Camille, Mavis, and several other women insisted upon buying D.E. Hensen lunch. To Lannie's surprise, he accepted.

"What a day." Gwen tugged the sheets off the table and folded them. "How many sales did we make? Seventy? Eighty?"

Lannie's fingers tapped over the computer keys, her eyes scanning the list of receipts for the day. "That much or more," she admitted.

"We did OK without Ms Modern Homemaker, huh?" Gwen wore a teasing smile.

Lannie shrugged and tried to keep her tone casual. "At least our customers had fun."

"Fun? They had a blast." Gwen sighed dreamily. "What a shame we can't have him here every day. Or ever again."

Lannie didn't take the bait. She refused to turn

into a gooey-eyed D.E. Hensen fan. Even though she *had* gotten a little weak in the knees when he said goodbye, her heart doing a quick dance as he pressed her hand.

"Of course, you'll see him again, won't you?" Gwen's words caused Lannie to fumble with the stack of books on the counter, tumbling two of them to the floor.

"What?" she blurted.

Gwen stared at her blankly. "To find out what charity he wants to receive his fee," she answered. "Unless, of course, you'd rather me do it. I could swing by after work sometime." Her gaze took on that same wistful quality Lannie remembered from Camille's and Mavis's eyes.

"Maybe we could just write to him," Lannie said, trying to change the subject. Somehow, the thought of seeing D.E. Hensen again made her want to crawl inside a warm, safe space for the rest of the day.

Gwen frowned. "Why write? He only lives twenty minutes from town." She reached over and pulled a slip of paper from beneath the keyboard. "Here's his address. He gave it to us when he confirmed the book signing."

Lannie hesitated. This seemed like a bad idea...but why? A simple business transaction shouldn't be this hard.

Gwen pushed the address into Lannie's hand. "All you have to do is drop by, ask, then post the check." She gave Lannie a mischievous look. "Unless you're too scared to face him alone."

Lannie blushed and returned the paper. "Not exactly. It just seems simpler to let the agency handle it."

“All right. If you’re afraid then that’s what we’ll do. Or maybe the agency will give us his *phone number*—”

Lannie snatched the piece of paper back. “Fine. I’ll do it.”

The address belonged to a tidy little stucco cottage whose paved steps were lined with rows of brightly-colored flowers. There was something West-coast in its appearance, a touch of adventure in the midst of a sleepy sea harbor town.

She climbed the concrete steps and rang the doorbell. To the right, a terrace with two wicker chairs and a table invited her to sit down; a lace curtain waved from an open window upstairs.

The door opened to reveal D.E. Hensen dressed in faded jeans and a white button-up shirt, dark hair curling above the open collar. Barefoot, he held a sheaf of papers in one hand and the doorknob in the other.

Lannie fought the urge to melt then and there on his doorstep. With her voice stuck stubbornly in her throat, she could only stare. And plot vengeance on her assistant for goading her into this.

“Hi.” He spoke softly, a look of surprise on his face.

“Um, it’s Lannie Maxwell. From the bookstore, remember?” She winced, realizing they’d never been formally introduced until now. “I’m here about the charity check. For the book signing,” she added, fishing through her purse for a checkbook.

He opened the door wide and gestured towards the entryway. “Come in.”

She stepped inside, her gaze scanning the open room. A pleasant clutter of books and furniture greeted

her; shelves crammed full of hardbacks, paperbacks, and peeling leather binding. A series of papers spilled across a sofa and coffee table, along with a couple of sprawling houseplants.

He tossed a leather jacket and fedora from the seat of a chair, then stacked the pages on the sofa and laid them next to an old-fashioned typewriter. Lannie seated herself on the chair.

"So, what charity did you have in mind?" she asked, pulling a pen from her purse.

He sat across from her on the sofa, resting his arms on his knees in a casual attitude. "Make it out to the local children's cancer ward at the Mercy Wings Hospital," he said. "I volunteer for them sometimes and donations are down right now."

"A worthy cause," she agreed, her heart warming. Her pen flew over the check, but something inside pushed her to slow down. After all, what was the rush?

He cleared his throat. "Can I get you something to drink? Coffee? Tea?"

"Tea would be nice."

A small, pleased smile crept across his face, adding a boyish charm she hadn't observed until now. He rose and disappeared into a tiny kitchen just off the living room.

As she tore the check free, she let her mind wander to their first encounter. Watching him interact with his fans that day, she'd detected a glimpse of self-pride over his work. But she also saw a friendly and kind person, someone who appreciated his readers as people and not just part of the adoring masses.

Reaching down, she lifted one of the pages scattered across the floor. She glimpsed a few brief paragraphs, typed in the dancing letters of a vintage

keyboard:

Maurice knew it was just a matter of time before the locust population swept the fields and vanished in a cloud over the horizon. Maybe it would buy him enough time to find the jewels before the mercenaries caught up with him—or maybe it put him in more danger if they, too, took refuge in the caverns...

She dropped the page hastily as he entered with a tray bearing a plain brown teapot and two cups. A few cream and sugar packets were scattered across the surface.

With a steady motion, he poured two steaming cups. "Thanks for taking the time to see about the check. They'll put it to good use, I'm sure."

"Oh, I know they will." She took the cup he handed her and cradled it against her palms. "I'm sorry if I interrupted your work, Mr. Hensen," she said, glancing at the manuscript on the table.

"You don't have to be so formal. The 'D' stands for Dexter. Dex is fine too."

"Then call me Lannie." Warmth rushed to her cheeks with this sudden first-name basis. She gestured towards the pile of papers beside him.

"Is that your newest story?" Somehow, she couldn't bring herself to call it a book, like the ones she observed on his shelves. A battered copy of Shakespeare, a C.S. Lewis novel.

"It is," he answered. "I've got a deadline coming up. The publishers want it out before the end of summer."

"That's the best season for paperback fluff," she said carelessly, before realizing how that statement must sound to him. Like the literature snob she was, no doubt.

"I—I didn't mean it that way," she apologized. "It's just ... well, paperback adventures aren't exactly my thing. I'm more of a classics girl, I'm afraid." That statement sounded even worse than the one before it, making her cringe.

He shrugged. "There's no real difference. Just a few hundred years or so."

She raised her eyebrows. "No difference? Between you and Shakespeare?" She set her cup on the table, trying not to laugh at the absurdity of his words.

"You honestly think that classics were always the cream of the writing crop in their decade? I mean, Kipling, Doyle even Dickens, they were all authors of popular literature. Their books just outlasted the competition because they were good storytellers."

She recognized the passion in his voice as matching her own when it came to reading. "So those books inspired you to write?" She asked, reaching for her cup again.

He chuckled slightly. "I guess so. I mean, as a kid, I always loved action stories. Even in Sunday School, my favorite lessons were the adventures. Moses, David, and Elijah. They were all heroes with a higher cause, just like the heroes in fictional stories."

She glanced around the room, noticing the framed posters for Hollywood "B" action films, classic adventure stories from the silent era, even a poster for *The Ten Commandments* movie.

"Well, I'm guessing adventure comes naturally to you," she said. "You seem pretty much at home in that world. Judging from your Indiana Jones hat," she added with a sly smile, glimpsing the fedora on the floor beneath his chair.

He grinned sheepishly, his cheeks reddening. "So

what about you? I'm guessing Bayside Books is yours, since you're here making out that check."

She took a sip of tea and nodded. "It is for now."

"For now?"

"Well, I mean, things can change. They don't always work out the way we want them to." She could kick herself for letting it slip. No need to pour her troubles out to a stranger.

"Why do you say that?" Gentle concern filled his sea green eyes, tugging at Lannie's heartstrings. Making it impossible to look away.

"Times are tough." She ran her finger around the rim of her tea cup, grappling for the right description of her circumstances. "You see, the *Modern Homemaker* book signing-that-wasn't—well, that was sort of a last-minute stunt. To keep from going under."

"I see," he murmured. "No wonder you went pale when I introduced myself."

"Yes. I am sorry for the rude welcome." She rose and slipped the purse strap over her shoulder. "I never did thank you for sticking around. You helped us a lot, maybe more than Dora Eve Hensen would have. And I'm grateful."

His eyes flooded with a friendliness that made her heart hammer. Propelled by the need to escape, she inched backwards towards the door. "I should go. Thanks again, Mr. Hensen—I mean, Dex."

Dex spring sprang to life. He set down the cup of tea and rose from the sofa. "Look, Lannie," he said, moving to intercept her before she reached the door. "Maybe I can help you with this."

"You've done more than enough," she answered, willing herself to smile. "I can't take charity. That's not how business works, you know."

"I know." He looked into her eyes, filling their depths with his pleading gaze. "I'm not offering you charity, but a business proposition."

"A business proposition?" She crossed her arms and gave him a look. "What is that supposed to mean? You'll buy me out or something?"

"Not a partner. More of a consultant. You know, marketing strategy, public relations, advertising, that kind of thing." He slipped his hands into his pockets. "It just so happens I do all the P.R. for my books."

"Selling a bookstore isn't the same as selling a book," Lannie replied. Words that seemed unduly harsh as she watched his disappointment grow. "I don't mean to be rude," she added, softly. "It's just not that simple."

"I can help you," he insisted. "Give me a chance, Lannie. Trust me; I can make this work for you. Your business will turn around in two, maybe three weeks."

There was something in his smile—half-cocky, half-serious—that made her hesitate for a moment. He placed his hands on her shoulders, locking gazes with her. She could read the passion for his argument in his eyes. And something else in their depths that made her knees tremble.

"All right," she said finally. "You've got one week. That's all. At the end of that time, we'll call it off, and I'll handle it myself."

He let go of her and ran his fingers through his hair, a triumphant grin sneaking across his face. "Then we have a deal?"

She nodded. "We have a deal."

She regretted the words the moment they left her mouth.
