

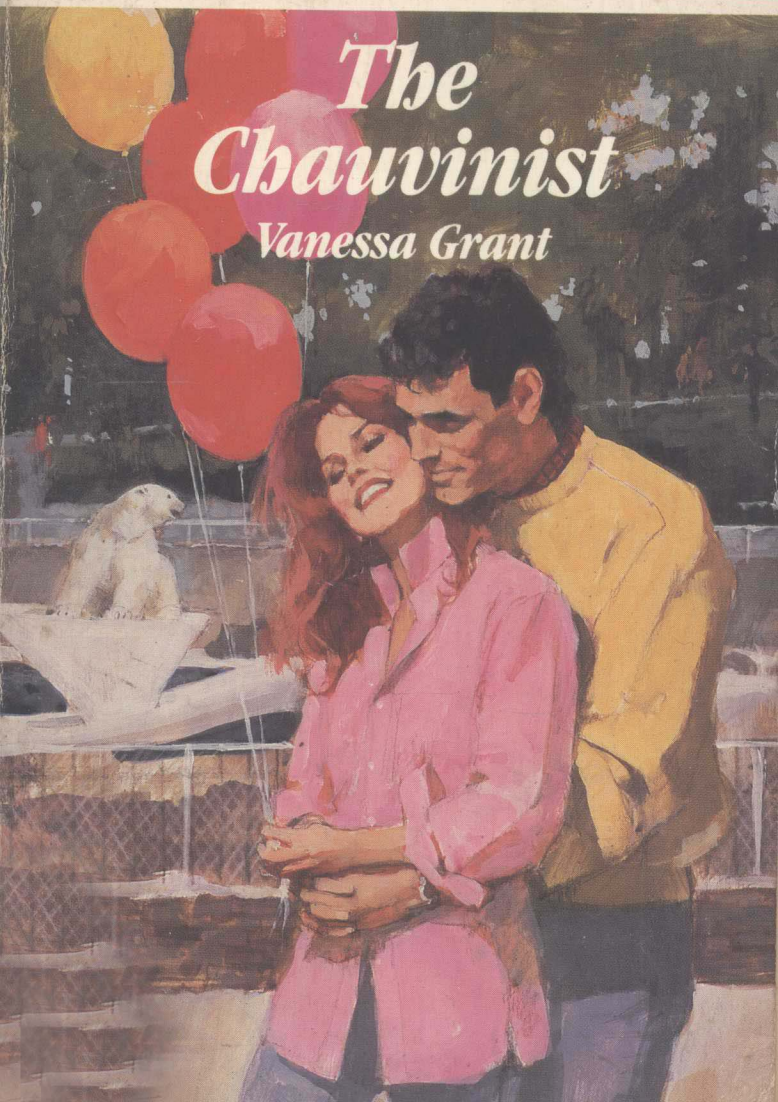


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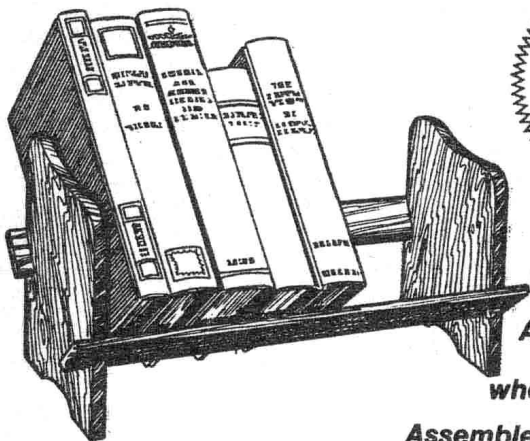
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Vanessa Grant



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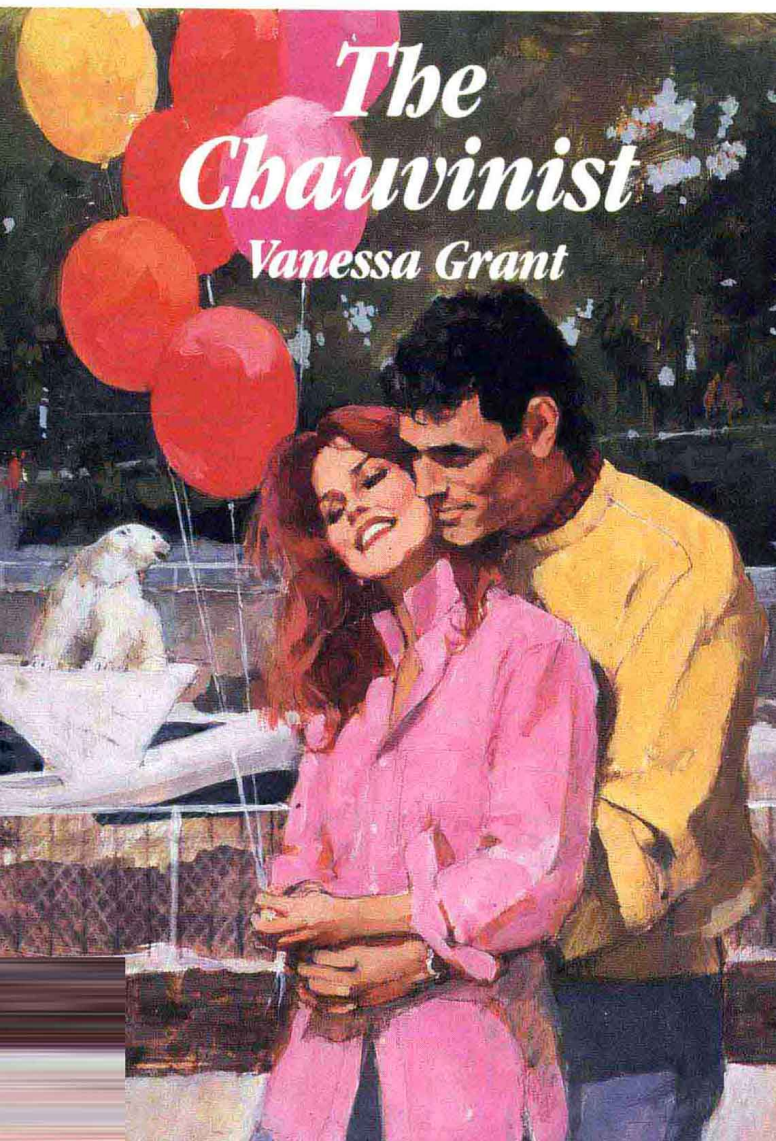
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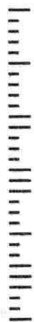
The Chauvinist

Vanessa Grant



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**“You don’t want a wife,
you want a maid.”**

Kristy’s voice was scornful as she continued. “You’re just a middle-aged chauvinist who’s bored with life, looking for a new distraction.”

“Putting a label on me may make you feel better, but it won’t stop me,” said Blake, a smile forming on his lips.

“You mean you’re going to pursue me regardless of my wishes? Don’t be an idiot.”

“I’ve dreamed of you, Kristy.” His hand caressed her back, her shoulders, and threaded through her hair. “You’ve been haunting me for years and now you’re going to inarry me”

“You’re twelve years too late, Blake. I don’t want to marry you, or anyone for that matter ”

His hand moved suggestively against her hip. “A year from now,” he said, “you’ll be my wife. So you can stop worrying about this job. You won’t need it.”

Vanessa Grant started writing her first romance at the age of twelve and hasn't forgotten the excitement of having a love story come to life on paper. Currently she teaches business at a community college, but she and her husband are refitting the forty-six-foot yacht they live on with their sons for a world cruise some time in the future. Vanessa believes in love. "After all," she confides, "the most exciting love story I know of is my own."

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***The
Chauvinist***
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This Book is Dedicated
to
The Crew of Tarka—Gerry and Janet—
with thanks for the story idea
and, of course,
to Brian
for everything

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CHAPTER ONE

BLAKE HARDING scowled at the book in his hands. A spy thriller. He had bought it in Vancouver last summer, picked it up in a drugstore just before he and his mother flew out to the summer home on Saltspring Island. It had disappeared before he got around to reading it. Tonight, a year later, he'd found it resting innocently on the bookshelf, as if it had been there all along.

The book was a cliff-hanger from the start. The hero was immediately thrown into hair-raising danger. Blake closed it with a snap, pushed it back on to the shelf and swung his tall body around, striding silently across the carpet towards the window.

'What do you see out there?' His mother's quiet voice hardly disturbed the gentle music her fingers were coaxing from the piano keys.

'Nothing. Only the lights from across the bay.' He tossed back the dark lock of hair that persisted in falling across the forehead. 'I think I'll go out for a walk.'

'You've been restless this summer. You remind me of your father—Elliott always started prowling when he wasn't working on a project. You wouldn't remember that; you were so young when he died.'

Blake smiled tolerantly at his mother. He was thirty-five years old, but his mother was still searching for similarities to the young husband she had lost thirty years ago.

'I've plenty of projects to keep me busy. There's no end of work waiting back at the office. Canning is

waiting for the financial forecast for his new shopping centre, and I've been asked to set up a new information system for the Emerson——'

'I'm not talking about work! I know you enjoy managing the finances of half of Vancouver, but I don't believe you're satisfied with your private life! This year, you've stopped laughing—did you realise that? When was the last time you laughed at a challenge? I keep remembering watching you as a very young man, arguing with Kristy Murdock on the veranda. You were laughing at her. She was furious, and you had that devilish glint in your eye, determined to get your own way. I haven't seen you laugh like that in years. It's time you married, Blake. Time you had a wife and family.'

'Have you got a wife picked out for me?'

'Stop teasing, Blake! Brenda——'

'Brenda?' Something flashed in his eyes, reminding her again of the rascal he had been as a boy. 'I've had enough lazing about. I think I'll go back tomorrow. Will you come, or stay here?'

'Oh, I'll come. But really, Blake! Lazing? This was supposed to be your holiday. You've worked yourself silly, repaired everything that couldn't fight back, not to mention all the work you did over at the Murdocks.'

'Wasted work. Kristy'll never come back. It won't matter to her if the lawn is cut.'

'I miss that child. Remember how—I suppose she's not a child any more. She'd be almost thirty by now.'

For a moment his black eyes were deep and bleak, then he shook off his thoughts. 'Twenty-eight. Next week she'll turn twenty-eight. I think I'll go out for a walk.'

'Shouldn't you take a jacket?'

'It's warm enough.'

Outside, he walked swiftly towards the water, down the gentle slope of the lawn. The faint light from a sliver of moon drew long shadows from the seaplane moored at the wharf.

He'd fly back tomorrow, bury himself in work for another week, escape the growing discontent that had been stalking him recently.

And would he marry Brenda?

Long streamers of light reached across the water from the summer homes on the other side of the bay. A shadow glided silently across the reflections. Mr and Mrs Hankenson, taking their nightly canoe ride.

Two weeks of relaxing had him climbing the walls. Saltspring Island, home of sunshine and seascape. This summer, the old memories were haunting him.

'I'm supposed to be a practical man,' he told the frog that croaked loudly into the darkness. 'But what do I do about this?'

He had tried work. Work at the office, guiding Earl Canning through his latest money-making project. Work here on the island, repairing the leak in the roof, mending the fence that had never kept the neighbours' children away from his mother's kitchen. This year he had overhauled the garden tractor and used it to mow the extensive lawns. When he ran out of little jobs on his own property, he had prowled next door and mended the broken step at the back of the long-deserted Murdock house, even mowed the lawn.

He had run out of jobs to do.

All day he'd been prowling, thinking, feeling something in the air, as if a storm were building.

'When profits are down,' he explained to the frog, 'you cut costs, try innovations to increase sales. What do you do about this, when satisfaction is down? Yet there's nothing missing.'

He had it all. A successful career, a smoothly

beautiful girlfriend available whenever he called her, a comfortable home—two homes. The official one, presided over by his mother, and the small but well-equipped apartment above his office.

Tame. Too tame.

He laughed, admitting that tonight what he really wanted was a wild young redhead in his arms.

Kristy. She was real enough, or she had been, but she was so far away in both time and distance that he might as well spend his nights wanting the beautiful women on his television screen.

Tonight, she seemed close enough to reach out and touch.

She'd be married by now, spending her days driving her children to school, her nights . . .

Time he had a wife of his own, children of his own.

Brenda would walk through the years with him if he asked her. She would keep everything calm and controlled, just as she kept her smooth, dark hair controlled without any indication of effort.

Kristy's hair had been wild, curling free and uncontrollable. Had she managed to tame the beautiful riot of her red hair with hairdressers' magic?

The house at the top of the slope rested in a dark, ghostly shadow. Except for Blake's recent attention to its needs, no one had been near it in years.

Tonight, the past seemed closer than the present. On the veranda of the darkened house, he could see her ghost, sixteen and incredibly innocent, yet unbelievably desirable in her frothy, low-cut gown. At first she'd been a persistent kid tagging behind him, a young urchin charming him. Then she had begun to change, to show signs of the woman she would be. Against his will, each summer had strengthened the intense longing he felt for her.

Her youth and innocence were more than adequate protection against his desires until that night when,

suddenly, she had become a passionate, seductive woman in his arms, driving him to madness . . .

The sound of water brought him abruptly back from the past. It was too early for the Hankensons' canoe on its way back. He wouldn't have been surprised if a long-necked crane had flown away with a lazy swoop of its wings and a loud, hoarse cry, but there were no cranes, no seabirds of any kind. The ocean glistened smoothly in the moonlight, reflections cutting the darkness with bands of intense light.

A slender arm sliced silently through the water. A gleam of white skin in the moonlight. Her pale back glistened in the soft light, then disappeared in shadows. He stood silently, hardly breathing, listening to the sounds of water as she stood up, half in shadow, emerging from the sea.

Summer after summer, all through his years of high school and university, they had used Kristy's beach as a taking-off point for countless swimming and boating trips, their scantily clad young bodies darkening under the hot sun.

He hadn't seen anyone here in years, hadn't seen either Kristy or her parents since Kristy's sixteenth birthday. This might be a friend they had loaned the summer home to, or perhaps a neighbour out for an ambitious evening swim.

Would his heart pound like this for an anonymous friend of the family? All day, he'd felt——

The damp grass silenced his footsteps.

He watched the sharply defined silhouette as her arms raised. Her hair tumbled half-way down her back as she rubbed it hard with the towel. Her breasts were high and full, her hips flaring from a narrow waist. She wasn't tall, but she moved impatiently, as if she would cover more ground than a girl with longer legs.

She shook her wet hair back, picking up a pair of