

JOAN BRAMSCH



Ebon's Mate

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

JB Information Station

www.empoweredparent.com

Copyright ©2004 by Joan Bramsch

Originally published in the United States of
America, August 2004

NOTICE: This ebook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This book cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This ebook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[About The Author](#)

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 1

Heather Warren stopped her car at the entrance to Ozark Mountain College. Tears filled her eyes when she gazed at the sun-washed emerald valley below.

"It's been eight long years, Omsee."

She looked at the tree shaded granite school buildings and dormitories of brick and native stone nestled like mammoth eggs in the nest of green surrounding sparkling Lake Honor. She'd always considered the small, but eclectic, campus an intellectual shell collection of sorts.

"Dear Omsee."

Her voice wavered when she repeated the school's nickname. The pastoral scene unexpectedly made her senses reel with conflicting emotions. In some unknown way, though she was delighted to be here, she sensed this visit would change her life. Forever.

Feeling uneasy, she looked over her shoulder. It was because of him, she decided. If she allowed herself to be spooked like this, then outwitting him to slip away undetected would be for naught. Heather inhaled deeply. Nothing was going to disturb her joyous mood, she vowed. She was too glad to be back.

She eased her foot off the brake and drove down the hill to the Administration building. After she parked and got out, she patted her pre-owned automobile on its pale blue roof.

"Thanks, Baby," she said. "You made the drive from St. Louis to Point Lookout in record time."

Heat radiated from the asphalt road through the soles of Heather's deck shoes until she hurried to the manicured lawn by the tulip tree grove. A few yards away, Lake Honor beckoned. Sighing, she leaned against one gray trunked giant to watch the central fountain bubble in a synchronized dance. Heather wished she could stay here for a month, rather than only a weekend. Rest was what she needed, and a change of scenery.

She was tired of running interference for Kitty, her foolish and fearless kid sister. Last Saturday when Baxter Stockton, Kitty's insanely jealous husband, accused her of having an affair, she told him she'd had enough and was leaving him. Their fight raged on, but Heather could take no more and had gone home. Later that night, Kitty ran away.

Baxter refused to believe Heather didn't know where Kitty had run. He called day and night. She doubted the man ever slept. When he wasn't calling, he followed her, everywhere. Last night, when he confronted Heather as she walked to her apartment, he'd actually threatened to kill her.

"And you won't know when I'll strike," he'd added with a wild-eyed stare. "So you better tell me where my wife is."

Heather again declared she knew nothing. Then, for several moments, she'd watched with masochistic fascination as his large hairy hands repeatedly clenched and opened until he regained control of his violent temper.

Afterward, when she was safely locked inside her apartment, she'd tried to convince herself that Baxter had just tried to shake her up; that he wouldn't really harm her. But his bizarre behavior had frightened her. Was it any

wonder she'd left town? She'd had to escape, at least for a few days. And, as if that weren't enough, the nightmares had started again.

She'd thought she'd finally banished her reoccurring dream. The terrorizing apparition—always the same—had begun shortly after her parents' passing. But she hadn't experienced the dream for a long time. That is, not until her brother-in-law had begun terrorizing her in her waking hours as well.

Heather shuddered and then forced herself to relax and forget about Baxter and her bad dreams. This was supposed to be a weekend respite from her harried life, she reminded her skeptical mind. It was then that she looked across the water and saw the five swans. She wondered if they could possibly be the same birds who'd "owned" the lake when she lived on campus.

She stared, then smiled triumphantly when she identified her favorite—the different one—the lone black swan. It was obvious he'd retained leadership, she decided, as she watched him glide regally along the far shore. His white cohorts, two pens and two cobs, followed in close formation. Fascinated by her discovery, Heather wrapped her skirt around her legs and sat on the cool stone ledge at the water's edge.

"I wonder if he'd remember?" she mused.

She cupped her hands around her pursed lips and whistled. Instantly the bird jerked his charcoal head in Heather's direction. She repeated the secret signal she'd used daily, until that fateful morning eight years ago. The swan, alert and galvanized for action, flapped his great wings and

pointed his beak toward the cloudless sky. Then he trumpeted his raucous response to her call—once, twice—before he raced toward the spot where Heather waited.

"Oh, Ebon, you do remember." She stroked his satiny crown. "After all these years."

Ebon's lustrous button eyes shone like polished obsidian as he arched his neck and nudged against her caressing hand. "I wish I had some bread for you, baby," she said, "but I don't. I'm sorry, Ebon."

"Give him what I've brought."

Instantly Heather spun around to stare at the bearded man behind her. Her wide sapphire eyes collided with his sooty velvet gaze. "You startled me," she said as she gasped and tried to catch her breath.

Her momentary alarm faded when the man smiled. Then, feeling suddenly shy, she glanced back at Ebon who gabbled impatiently, waiting for his handout. "I was just greeting an old friend."

"So I gathered." The man's dark eyes—robust and rich and warm as espresso coffee—sparkled devilishly. "Here," he said, holding out a sack of bread. "You'd better feed that old reprobate before he starts nibbling on you."

The man's humorless chuckle revealed to Heather that he, too, was a pushover for the different swan. She smiled her thanks, then concentrated on the bird's feeding. After all the crusts were consumed, Ebon swam back to his flock.

"Thanks for letting me feed him."

"No problem."

"It's been a long time since I've had the chance." She watched Ebon glide behind the dancing fountain, and wondered if birds ever felt lonely, too. "He's just as independent as I remember him to be," she said. "But I'd hoped, by this time, he might have found another mate."

"And I'd hoped, by this time, to stop feeling guilty about his loss." The man sighed, then sank to the grass near her feet. "You see," he added softly, "it was my dog who killed her."

Heather turned so she could really look at the man for the first time. He was tall and powerfully built. His shoulders strained against the blue knit fabric of his shirt. Thigh muscles rippled inside his snug jeans when he relaxed against a tree trunk and crossed his bare ankles. She glanced at the man's handmade moccasins and saw that he had a "good understanding," as her father used to say.

Heather's gaze returned to his bearded face. There was a distinguished air about him, she decided. Though his cap of shiny black curls was unruly, a bit of silver frosted the strands at his temples. His dark, wide-set eyes, which seemed vaguely familiar, were framed by winged brows and high cheekbones.

She was also conscious of an undeniable sensuality in his penetrating gaze. That natural sexy look, together with his handsome features and rugged frame, probably created the potent magnetic field of a male Lodestone when he desired companionship in his domain, she guessed. Women probably lined up, just like molecules, all in a row.

Her suspicions were confirmed when he surprised her with a naturally sexy smile. Her feminine resistance evaporated and an unauthorized attraction positively tugged at her nether regions. Yes, she decided, he certainly was one magnetic fellow. But, above everything else in his appearance, she noted an aura of serene power emanating from his quiet form. Something told her he would allow nothing to disturb his way of life.

Insistently an old memory tape played and replayed in the back of her mind as if begging to be recalled. Finally she listened, then listened again. Was he who she thought he was? Absolute recognition caused her to inhale sharply.

Seeing her reaction, the man's smile disappeared and he muttered under his breath, something about his barbaric stupidity concerning a lady's delicate sensibilities. Then, he frowned, troubled by his assumption that Heather was revolted by his explanation concerning the death of the black swan's mate.

But, for Heather, his serious expression reconfirmed her first tentative identification. She knew this man. He was Professor Nicholas McCord, one of her former teachers at Omsee. And also, her favorite! Why hadn't she recognized him immediately? she wondered.

The answer seemed obvious now. At first, she'd been alarmed, thinking he was her brother-in-law. She'd momentarily believed Baxter had followed her, after all. And, to be fair to herself, Professor McCord did look different. He'd grown a beard, and he appeared to have become a serious devotee' of bodybuilding.

It was difficult for Heather to comprehend that his physical build today could be that far superior to the body he'd had eight years ago. Back then, every coed almost wept for joy, just to see him stroll across campus! But he really did look wonderful today, she thought with an approving glance. So, it seemed Nicholas McCord looked different today because he'd pumped iron for years and he'd grown a neat beard. She peered at his luxuriant whiskers and her fingers tingled.

"I understand how you feel about the special black swan ... Professor McCord." Heather gave him a shy smile. "You shared your pain with me not long after the accident."

Nicholas cocked his head and stared at her. "I've never told that sad tale to another soul."

His words rang with authority. Good Lord! he silently exclaimed, when he heard his authoritative tone. He was beginning to talk like his alter ego, Peter Roan, who wrote murder mysteries. Tough, assured, no room for argument.

"I apologize, Miss." But his modulated tone was no less confused. "Do I know you?"

"You used to." Heather's gaze wandered over his rugged features again, and she smiled. It was so good to see him. When she studied his neatly trimmed beard a second time, she guessed he was still trying to look older.

Silently Nicholas examined the young woman's delicate features. Who the dickens was she? he asked himself. She had to be one of his former students. Because the college's enrollment was so small, he could probably name every person he'd taught, he decided. If he were given sufficient time.

His off-the-wall sense of humor unexpectedly surfaced, and he wondered if he'd cast her as the heroine or the villainess in one of his Peter Roan novels? The solution was elementary, he decided. He'd conduct a thorough investigation. After examining the clues, he'd sift the evidence and, cleverly, deduce the answer. All in 182 pages!

Nicholas suppressed a sigh of frustration. Identifying this woman would certainly be less demanding than solving the other mystery in his life, he thought. That one was driving him nuts. He needed to discover the identity of a very sick person who kept sending him threatening letters.

Of course, he'd informed his fishing buddies, Ted Hastings, Branson's Postmaster, and Gary Eagle, the sheriff of Taney County. Both men took the threats seriously. And, if the party responsible for sending those letters was serious, as well, Nicholas knew he could be in real danger.

He pushed the disturbing thought from his mind as he gazed into the soulful eyes of the woman beside him. She presented no threat to him, he decided. His fine-tuned sense of survival instantly cautioned him to think again. So, look for evidence, he ordered.

Number One Clue: She's attractive.

Yes, he confirmed, he liked looking at her. But, he knew that already. He watched a gentle breeze toy with her long chestnut hair. Slender manicured fingers hugged slim legs outlined beneath her skirt. Her face was heart-shaped, accentuated by a widow's peak.

When his gaze settled upon her generous mouth, he decided he liked that feature best of all. But her eyes

disconcerted him. They were the color of blue sky and sparkled with the knowledge that she knew him, but he didn't know her. More expressly, they provided a window into her past.

Some of her experiences had been less than idyllic, he sensed, having been there on several occasions himself. He tried to penetrate the lingering shadows veiling her pain. Hers were the eyes of a person much older than this woman's years. What had happened to force such early maturity? he wondered. Inexplicably, he wanted, needed, to know.

"There's something about your eyes." His voice was low. "You've changed, but I remember your eyes, particularly when they laugh at me."

He moved closer. "I've known you before. But I don't know exactly where. Or when."

"Perhaps I can jog your memory," Heather offered. "As you might have already surmised, I was in one of your classes. Once upon a time I wrote an essay about Ebon, Omsee's black swan. Apparently you were touched by something I said because you wrote on the back of my paper about your unhappy experience." She smiled when she saw the light of emerging recognition flicker across his puzzled features.

"You're not Heather Warren." His decision sounded final, irrevocable. Then his dark eyes narrowed in a second swift examination. "No!"

"Have it your way."

He gave his head a firm shake. "You're not little Heather. You can't be." When Heather smiled again, dazzling his

already heightened senses, his assurance wavered. "Are you?"

"It's me, all right." When she nodded, her blue eyes sparkled and her face glowed. "I'm back for a visit."

Perplexed, he drew a hand across his sable chin. "But ... but you look so different." He made a quick mental calculation. "Has it been eight years?"

Heather's smile slid from her lips. "We all had to grow up, Professor." Then, unexpectedly, she laughed, contradicting her sober words. "Even you."

Nicholas blustered and tried to look upset. "I'll have you know, it's taken me the better part of a decade to mold an image worthy of a tenured professor."

Then his angular features softened when he smiled. Admiration increased the warmth in his espresso colored eyes. "But, you, Heather," he said. "You've grown into a beautiful woman." Again he gazed deeply into her soulful eyes. "More beautiful than a man could imagine."

Heather's cheeks warmed under his steady regard. She scolded herself when her heartbeat accelerated dramatically. There could be only one reason, of course—Nicholas McCord and his perennial charm. He'd been born, it seemed, knowing what to do, what to say.

Memories of similar physical reactions to him flooded her mind. It was true, Heather had had a crush on her serious young teacher from her first day as a Freshman in his Introduction to Literature class. Furthermore, she'd not been the only coed smitten by his breathtaking smile, his charismatic ways, and his utter determination to be a good

teacher. But when she'd indulged her secret fantasy, Professor Nicholas McCord belonged to her alone.

Eleven years later, it was a revelation to her own mind that thoughts of him still lay buried deep in her subconscious. She would have guessed he'd been forgotten, along with all her other collegiate dreams. None had come true. She'd received no degree. She'd won no honors. She'd had no career. And no man shared her life, appreciating her mental prowess as much as her passion.

Just then, the object of her forgotten chimera interrupted her thoughts. "Heather, I mean it." Nicholas captivated her with another sincere smile. "You're very beautiful."

She steeled herself, figuring the man just couldn't help it. He was simply being his usual charming self. But Heather knew she was too old to believe in knights on white chargers. That wasn't what she needed to survive the challenges out in the real world.

She paused for another moment to gaze into the man's dazzling dark eyes. Then again, she reconsidered, if a person wasn't careful, she could forget to rejoice in the moment. And this was definitely one of those moments!

Laughing softly, she reached for the amber sunglasses perched atop her head. "You're rather young for failing eyesight, Professor McCord." She offered them to Nicholas. "Perhaps, sir, you suffer from eye strain?"

Nicholas's errant curls danced when he shook his head and refused her playful gesture. "No way, Heather," he said with quiet emphasis. "It's no strain looking at you."

Easy, girl! she warned. She shoved the glasses back on her head and searched for a new topic of conversation. "Tell me, what's been happening around here since I left?" She gave him a gamin smile and tipped her head to one side. "Are you still shackled to the flaky freshmen in Intro to Lit-101?"

"No more freshmen." Nicholas cleared his throat importantly. "I head the English department now."

Simultaneously he wondered what Heather had been thinking after he'd told her she was beautiful. Whatever it was, the look in her eyes would have steamed his glasses ... if he'd worn glasses. He had to admit he was intrigued.

"I only take on upper class students these days," he continued. He lifted one winged brow jauntily. "And as for flaky students...?" He leaned forward to whisper. "I'll let you in on a little secret. They're not all freshmen. Not by a long shot."

And the flaky ones aren't all students, Heather silently added, thinking momentarily about her brother-in-law. "Congratulations, Professor." She shifted her gaze to the ground. "You always were my favorite teacher."

Nicholas lifted her chin with cool fingers. Smiling, he captured her reluctant gaze. "And you were my most gifted student," he replied, "ever." His smile faded. "You left so suddenly, Heather. I never had a chance to say good bye," he said. "What happened?"

When Nicholas witnessed the pain reflected in her eyes, he was devastated because he knew his words were the cause. Most inexplicable, he realized he was prying. Nine out of ten times, he knew why a coed suddenly left school.

"Lord, Heather, I apologize," he said. "It's none of my damn business." He reached out to her, then realized he had no right to touch her and dropped his hand back onto his leg. "I'm very sorry if I've opened old wounds. Forgive me."

"It's all right." But her voice trembled. "Really."

She wished he would have stroked her cheek. Would his palm have felt cool, soothing? she wondered. Unexpectedly she wanted to share with him her life's saga, right down to its latest distressing chapter. But he was now more stranger than friend. She couldn't burden him with details about her personal problems caused by her sister's irresponsible escapades.

Nicholas silently waited for her to speak. He watched Heather's wavy hair flow like silk across her smooth skin and fantasized how it might feel sifting through his fingers.

"There's no need to apologize," she said, "though, I'll admit, memories of those years aren't all happy ones." She turned to contemplate the far shore. "It's no big dark secret," she continued. "Midway through my last semester I was called back to St. Louis because my mother suffered a stroke." She glanced at the sky. "Dad had no health insurance. And he couldn't afford full time nurses so..." She shrugged helplessly.

Simultaneously Nicholas counted Heather among the coeds who made up the remaining one per cent of his hypothesis, and he wondered how she'd shouldered such a heavy family burden. It wasn't only because of her youth. Physically, she seemed no match for it.

"Dad couldn't take care of Mom and run his repair shop, too," she went on, unaware of his ruminating. When she turned to face him, her blue eyes brimmed with crystal tears. "Eighteen months later, we lost her. Dad wanted me to return to school then, but something told me not to leave him."

"I hope he appreciates his daughter's help."

"I think he did."

A chill went through Nicholas's body, but he had to ask. "Did...?"

Heather nodded. "My dad passed away four months after Mom," she explained. "To the day." She brushed away a tear. "His doctor said an autopsy would show Dad's death was caused by a massive coronary. But, in his opinion, Dad simply died of a broken heart."

She met Nicholas's concerned eyes and smiled sadly. "You see, my parents were very close. They were best friends."

Heather didn't add anything more, but Nicholas needed to know the whole story. "You were so close to graduating. Why didn't you come back to school then?"

"Because of Kitty."

"A cat?"

"No, my kid sister," she said, laughing. "Kitty had just entered high school the year our mom died. After Dad's passing, I sold the repair shop and that brought in a little money, but it wasn't enough to support us both, so I went to work for a small publishing company." She smoothed her skirt. "I'm a Jill of the trade—general manager, proofreader and I do production work, too."

"That was eight years ago." Nicholas scowled and folded his arms across his chest while one winged brow nearly took flight. "Surely, your sister has graduated by now."

Heather chuckled at his uncompromising stance and the obstinate tone of his voice. "Yes, she got her diploma."

Then her smile disappeared, her delicate features momentarily hardened, and Nicholas sensed something was terribly wrong.

"What happened to your sister?"

"She married."

When Heather said no more, he prodded. "Well?"

No! raged Heather's tormented heart. Kitty was not well. She was running away, from her husband and from life. Saddest of all, Heather didn't know where her sister had run, but she did know that temporary reunions were not the place to unload troubles.

"She travels all the time," she said, instead. "Kitty's a regular gadabout so I don't get to see her very often." She swallowed hard when she made a final admission. "I miss her."

Nicholas caught Heather's hand in his warm clasp, his gaze locked with hers. She moaned softly when she saw tears glisten in his eyes and catch on his thick lashes. Then, he looked away, coughed gruffly, tried to hide his emotions, but it was too late. And when he again met her gaze—now shimmering, too—she sensed in his fierce ebony eyes, a willingness to share her pain.

"You always were a pushover for a sad story," she whispered with a tender smile. "You've never learned to protect yourself, have you?"

"I can build a wall if I want to," he said. His craggy features suddenly took on the appearance of an obstinate little boy. And then the expression vanished. "But, with you, I find I'd rather share your experiences, happy or sad."

His thumb stroked the pulse point in her wrist. "You're a remarkable woman." His large hand tightening on her fingers sent tiny bolts of current to her shoulder and down her spine. When she blinked at the sensation, he became conscious of his firm grip and, reluctantly, released her.

"Sorry, Heather," he said. "I got a little carried away, but the reason is understandable. You're extraordinary." And so forlorn! added his heart.

"Extraordinary?" Heather shook her head. "Not me." Her gentle laughter dispelled some of the tension between them. "My family needed me, that's all." But her smile told him she appreciated his kind words.

"Why aren't you an editor by now?" he asked. Since she'd closed the door on her personal life, he'd seek information about her job. "With your talent and enthusiasm, you could head that publishing house."

This time her smile was indulgent. He hadn't changed a bit. Misplaced or not, he still had confidence in her abilities. "You're right, I could," she replied. "But they have some silly rule concerning editors and college degrees." She shrugged again. "Without it..."

He nodded grimly. "It's no different in academia," he said. "I was nowhere until I got my Doctorate."

"And that degree puts you two ahead of me. Got one you could spare?"

Without speaking, Nicholas rose from the grass and pulled Heather to his side. They stood in silence for a long moment. His penetrating gaze searched Heather's blue-sky eyes. She swayed toward him when waves of emotion nearly overwhelmed her. An infinitesimal change in Nicholas's breathing pattern signaled that he, too, had experienced some sort of inner disturbance.

"Would you like to walk 'round the campus?" He swept his hand to one side, then grinned boyishly and winked. "You can try the old place on for size."

Heather laughed and took his arm. "Lead on, Mac Duff."

As they strolled beneath the tulip trees, Ebon trumpeted. "'Bye, Ebon," she called. "See you later."

"Ebon," Nicholas repeated. "Such a poetic word for black." He looked at Heather and gently patted her hand. "Want to hear another secret?" He smiled when she bobbed her head. "Until I'd read your essay, I'd called the old boy Black Beauty."

Heather couldn't suppress her surprised chuckle. "I don't think I believe you."

Her laughter enveloped her escort in a bubble of smug satisfaction because it was he who'd triggered that exquisite musical sound. "No kiddin', it's the truth."

Hesitantly, she returned his smile because she still wasn't absolutely sure he was serious. "In my book of memories,

your outrageous imagination made you the fastest wit in the West," she said. "Or at least in west Missouri."

Nicholas stroked her hand, then watched the humor in Heather's eyes melt. His touch definitely had an effect on her, he realized. And, if he was honest with himself, touching her had produced like results in him. What the hell was going on? he wondered.

"Some days," he muttered, "I have more imagination than I can handle."

"That's a cryptic observation." Heather gave him a measured look. When Nicholas winked again, she had to take a deep steadying breath. "Care to clarify?"

"The mystery's easily solved," he said. Lord, she was lovely, he thought as he watched her cheeks fill with color. "Ebon just never entered one of my fantasies." He slid his hand along her arm until his fingers entwined with hers. "That is," he added, "not until a few moments ago."

Oh, this was too much for Heather! Was she losing her mind? she wondered. Or was Nicholas McCord really coming on to her? Every sensor in her body signaled that he was. And if it were so, so what? She was now a single woman, not a silly coed. That was it, she realized with sudden clarity. That was the key.

No wonder her insides kept shaking, and why she continued to feel slightly ill at ease. While in Professor McCord's presence, here on campus, she did feel like a student again. And if she were a coed, the man would be off-limits. But she wasn't. And she probably never would be

again. So ... he wasn't. And, therein, lay the New World, the Promised Land, the fulfillment of a girl's secret fantasy.

But, just in case she was wrong, she'd keep the conversation light. Heather deftly slipped her hand from his grasp. "You always had more than a wee touch of blarney about you, Professor."

He stopped walking and turned to her. "The name is Nicholas McCord, Heather. Do you think you can remember that?" He completely ignored her performance and captured her stunned gaze with solemn eyes. "Nicholas McCord." He repeated his name softly, sensuously. "Agreed?"

Heather had no idea how she continued to stand on legs turned suddenly to rubber. Yet she answered him in a quiet assured voice. "Yes, Nicholas McCord." Her smile was warm. "I'll remember."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

Nicholas nodded and they began to walk again.

"I always thought your name suited you."

"How so?"

"Strong."

"Like soap, right?"

Heather refused to look at him. She knew his laughing eyes would mock her. "Irish, no doubt."

"Ouch!"

"I was thinking more in terms of the particularly stellar traits I admired in you. Like cogent leader, charismatic teacher, probing intellectual, inspiring idealist..."

"Whoa there, lady. You're describing a paragon."

Heather sneaked a sidelong glance. Did she dare? she wondered. Yes! "Not to mention, your great body. All the girls loved to watch you jog."

He cleared his throat. "Aw, stop your kidding."

"Why do you think so many signed up for cross-country?"

Nicholas chuckled happily and shook his head. "My mom's going to love you."

Heather kept right on walking. But she had a difficult time trying to keep a straight face. Her mind was playing a really dirty trick on her.

Nicholas gave her a dark look because she laughed softly, as if at a private joke. He was fairly sure he knew what she was thinking.

Heather?" he murmured near her ear. "You just made a grand speech, and I thank you for it. But, be warned. If you make one crack about how I'd look with a long white beard and a round little belly, you'll walk by yourself."

She stared up at his stern face and instantly clamped her lips over another mutinous giggle. Her twinkling eyes, however, continued their merry dance. "Never in a million years, Nicholas," she gravely promised. "But some day..."

"Careful, Heather."

Oh, what the heck! she thought. "Some day I'd love to hear you say, 'ho, ho, ho.'"

Nicholas expelled a weary sigh. "Well, so much for decorum

"De who?"

Groaning, he slowed his pace as he lifted his fingers to his temple and gazed off into the distance. "Ah, yes, it's all

coming back to me now," he said. "Such intrepid behavior. You never did pay homage to your teachers, did you?"

He tried to summon an awesomely stern glare when, unrepentant, she sent her hair flying with a rapid shake of her head. "If there's not an instant improvement in your attitude, Ms. Warren, I shall have to throw you headlong into Lake Honor."

"Oh, no! Please, Nicholas, not that." Shivering, Heather relived Omsee's chilling traditional initiation. Every new student was tossed into the spring fed lake, usually when least prepared. "I don't think I could stand another dunking in that ice water." She gasped at the memory and shivered all over again. "I was blue for a week."

"But your color has returned nicely," he said. "You're a very pretty pink."

He gauged her reaction and was secretly delighted by her shy response. How could he have forgotten what fun it was to be with her? he wondered. "Heather, you're like a breath of fresh air," he said. "I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years."

"I'm glad you appreciate me." Oh, how she wished it was in the way she wanted to be appreciated by a man, she silently added. And why was Nicholas acting like this anyway? She mused. Was he flirting with her? Surely, not ... No!

"Really, Nicholas," she said. "You sound as old as Methuselah." Then she smiled impishly and met the challenge in his snapping eyes. "Personally, I think you've been in your Ivory Tower far too long."

"I'll be thirty-six in August." His announcement was punctuated with a grin. "So I'm old enough to appreciate a sweet young thing like you. Are you married?"

That did it! She almost swooned on the spot. "No," she finally answered, "I've never married."

"Committed?"

"Sure, but I'm out on a weekend pass." And that wasn't far from the truth, the way she'd been living lately. Besides, she had to do something to stop herself from taking him seriously.

"Heather, please. I'm trying to get information."

His sixth sense told him her wisecrack covered her nervousness. He could identify with the feeling. He kept thinking she was still an Omsee student, and that he was breaking his ironclad rule against fraternizing with a coed, a rule he'd kept faithfully since he pledged himself to it. And not a day passed that he didn't wish he'd had the rule on that fateful day long ago. The nightmare of that devastating experience still hounded his waking hours, haunted his nights. He'd given up the hope that it would ever leave him in peace.

"What I was hoping to find out," he continued, "was whether you had a steady boyfriend or were engaged?"

"I knew that." Nonchalantly she flipped her hair off her shoulder to cover her surprise. "I'm not ... any of those things." She dared to meet his gaze. "How about you?"

Nicholas's dark eyes twinkled, providing a delightful contrast to his solemn features. "The answer is no ... to all the above," he said. "I haven't yet found the girl of my dreams."

Oh, thank you, thank you, Lord! "And have you been searching long?"

"Oh, yes, a very long time." He gazed at Heather's radiant face, and the warmth of her endearing smile was reflected in his coffee colored eyes. "I wonder...?" He thought for a moment, then made a decision. "I wonder, Heather Warren..." He took her hand. "Would you be interested in exploring a relationship with an older man?"

Heather stared at her hand in his. She stared, yet she had the most difficult time, stopping herself from looking over her shoulder to see the person to whom Nicholas was speaking. He wasn't really talking to her, was he? she asked herself. Of course, he was, ninny! answered her heart. So be cool.

"How much older?"

"Oh, about seven years."

"That's not older. That's seasoned."

"Bless you." Nicholas kissed her fingers. When she didn't answer his question, he asked again. "Well ... are you?"

But Heather had become completely enamored by his smile. "You have the whitest teeth." She sighed, staring. "But then, you always did. I suppose they appear whiter now because of your black beard. When did you grow it?"

"Five years ago." He tapped her chin to get her attention. "You're evading the question, my friend."

"Ah, there's the missing ingredient. I knew something was awry."

Nicholas gave her a professorial glare that was awesome. "It was not a trick question."

"Do you mind?" She disconcerted him further when she stroked his whiskered cheek. "I know it wasn't a trick question," she said tenderly. "What I meant was..."

For a moment she was totally bemused. Besotted might have been a better word. His beard felt soft and springy. He didn't seem to mind her touching it, although her inner voice warned she had stepped beyond the boundaries of good taste and good sense. But she couldn't help herself. She smoothed her hand along his square jaw, unyielding now, and succumbed to an added temptation. She traced his firm lips, then smiled whimsically when she saw how they parted and relaxed at her touch.

"There's a step we need to take before we explore a relationship." She spoke more to herself, than to him. "First, we should be friends."

"I thought we already were..."

Distracted himself, Nicholas moistened his sensitized lips where Heather's fingers had touched. Then his tongue tingled, too, so he licked his lips again before he finished his sentence. "...friends, I mean."

Heather's gaze fastened onto Nicholas's unconscious actions. She bit the corner of her lower lip so her purr of unwarranted excitement wouldn't slip out. What in heaven's name was happening to her? she wondered. Dazed, she continued to watch his mouth, hoping ... She crossed her fingers behind her back and was rewarded for her faith in wishes—He licked his lips again! And it was just about the sexiest thing she'd ever witnessed.

She thought she must be flipping out for sure now. What kind of woman would become unhinged simply watching a man moisten his lips? A woman like Heather Warren, that's who, counseled her heart. But only because the man was Nicholas McCord.

Nicholas thought Heather's actions straightforward and delightful. She wanted to touch his beard so she asked permission ... then didn't bother to wait for his reply. But what the hell was she staring at? he wondered. Had he left some of his lunch in his whiskers? He was torn between an uneasy feeling about his appearance and a numbing frustration because she kept dodging his question. Dammit, he doubted she even heard him ask it. His ire started to rise, and he licked his lips before he spoke again.

A gentle, barely audible, sigh whispered forth from between Heather's parted lips. Her blue-sky eyes turned smoky.

Well, I'll be damned! Nicholas silently declared. He moistened his lips once more just to be sure his hunch was right. Then he almost laughed aloud at the ludicrous juxtaposition of their interests. While his blood pressure probably rose fifteen points because Heather wouldn't answer his question, her concentration was welded to his mouth and the tip of his tongue. No wonder his lips tingled, he thought. Her smoldering look was enough to blister them.

"Heather?" Nicholas's deep tone was now tempered by saintly patience. "Did you hear what I asked you?" He stroked her cheek with gentle fingers. "Heather?"

Heather blinked several times and felt foolish. "I've been daydreaming, Nicholas. I'm sorry."

"No need. I just wanted to know if we could be friends?"

Heather tipped her head to one side. There was an inquiring look in her eyes. "I thought we already were..." she began. "Didn't you consider us friends when I was in school?"

Nicholas tucked a silken strand of Heather's hair behind her ear as he smiled into her puzzled eyes. "Almost from the first day, little Heather." He paused. "Perhaps, from the first moment."

"Then I think that's settled." She stuck out her hand. "Friends?"

He tugged gently on a lock of her hair, then took her hand in his. "Friends."

They gazed into each other's eyes until Heather looked away and broke the spell. Silently, they walked to her car.

"You are staying on campus over the weekend, aren't you?" Nicholas's stomach knotted for fear she'd say she had to leave right away.

"Yes," she said while her mind continued to spin in an unfamiliar emotional whirlpool. "I've got to register before six or I'll lose my room."

He exhaled and his stomach muscles relaxed again. "Good," he said with a smile. "I've an idea for later. Let's go to the Hut for a pizza." He raised that quizzical brow and didn't wait for her answer. "Maybe you'll let me walk around inside your head for a few hours." He wore a droll smile. "I'd like to see how much of your literary sense you've retained."

"I accept your unique invitation, Nicholas. Thank you." Her gaze locked with his. "However, let me warn you, the challenge may be greater than you think. Just because I left school doesn't mean I stopped studying." She matched his droll smile. "You may even stub your literary toe."

"I'll wear my boots!" The anticipation of intellectual combat flashed in his dark eyes.

"I have a couple of errands to run," he said. Among them was a meeting with Gary Eagle so Nicholas could turn over his latest piece of evidence—a gory epistle received only this morning. "Shall I pick you up in an hour?"

"Sure, I think I can repair the ravages of time and travel in sixty minutes."

"I'd like to know you when you really are old and wrinkled."

Where the devil had that come from? Nicholas wondered. He could tell his unexpected wish had taken her by surprise, too. Well, he'd better fix it ... quick.

"But, we have decades and decades to wait, kiddo. I'm going to hobble on home now and pop double my usual allotment of vitamins." He gave her a naturally sexy wink. "I'm not used to walking on the wild side. See ya." Then he set off at a brisk pace, whistling a merry tune.

"A likely story!" Yet Heather felt like flying. She was going to have some fun for a change. And all because of a chance meeting. Or was it? Did anything ever happen by chance? she mused. Well, whatever the circumstances, she was finally ready to admit one thing. Over the years, she'd never quite gotten over the crush she'd had on Professor McCord, the

teacher. And now, she was warmed by the knowledge that, in less than an hour, she would be spending the evening with Nicholas McCord, the man.

* * * *

The evening was an unqualified success. It had been all Heather hoped it would be. She and Nicholas feasted on pizza and talked until closing. The next day, he picked her up for breakfast, followed by several more hours of debate and spirited discussion until it was time for her to leave.

"Thanks for a lovely weekend, Nicholas." Heather's smile was bittersweet. "I hate to leave."

"Then stay." Nicholas realized he was only half kidding. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had such stimulating conversations with, not only an interesting, but a beautiful woman.

"Don't tempt me, Professor." She sighed and glanced toward the sky. "One of my biggest regrets in life is that I never finished college."

"How many hours do you need?"

"Nine, I think."

"So come back and finish."

Heather began her reply with an unladylike snort of disbelief. "Sure, I'll just quit my job, pack my bags, and hop right down here for the summer semester." She gave Nicholas a patronizing smile. "I appreciate your encouragement, but I don't have enough money."

"Scholarships are available."

"For an ex-student?"

"For an ex-honor student."

"You're kidding me."

"Come back next weekend and we'll discuss it further."

Heather looked skeptical. "You're putting me on."

Nicholas stuck his hands into the back pockets of his snug jeans and rocked back on the heels of his moccasin clad feet.

"You'll never know unless you make the trip."

"That sounds suspiciously like a dare." She peered into his dancing dark eyes. "Nicholas McCord, have you forgotten what can happen when someone places a dare before me?"

He shook his head and grinned as he fondly recalled the night Heather emptied a bottle of detergent into the fountain in front of Branson First National Bank. He'd never seen so many bubbles! "I haven't forgotten, and I hope it's a challenge you can't refuse."

"Why?"

A pained look passed over Nicholas's face and he groaned. "Aahh, as always, you strike directly to the heart of the matter, don't you?"

"Well?"

"I want to see you again, Heather." He took her hand in his. "Come back next weekend. Please. There's a concert I think you'll enjoy."

Heather smiled dreamily and shrugged. "It's as good an excuse as any, I guess."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I want to see you again, too, Nicholas. Thanks for the invitation."

"My pleasure, Heather. I'll count the days."

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 2

Heather drove through the sun-dappled countryside on her way to Point Lookout and another weekend with Nicholas. It was hard to believe an entire month had passed since she'd returned to Omsee on her first visit. She'd been thrilled when Nicholas had asked her to come back the second weekend for the annual Spring recital on the chapel's Mighty Wurlitzer. They'd talked almost constantly during those two days. During the next weeks, when they were apart, they spent hours more, talking on the phone.

At first, Nicholas tested her intellectual mettle. He told her he needed to find out if she was still college material. "I'm not going to help you find a scholarship if you're going to flunk out."

Heather easily proved herself. From a capable student, she'd evolved into an extraordinary adult, questing answers to life's loftier issues.

The pair found they shared similar tastes in many areas. They agreed on a preference for certain fast foods: Pizza, at least once a week; a monthly fix of White Castle hamburgers—Nicholas had to drive all the way into Springfield for his; and Steak N' Shake's chili three ways anytime, but especially for a midnight snack. On a more serious level, they voiced their mutual objection to continued nuclear armament. In fact, the year before, they'd both marched in the same "Make Peace, Not War" parade in St. Louis and never knew it until their conversation.

In a nutshell, they were getting to know one another.

But beyond the cerebral discussions and her growing hope for a second chance to get her undergraduate degree, Heather simply enjoyed Nicholas's company. Although she knew she'd do just about anything legal to assure herself an opportunity to finish her education at Omsee—she'd probably draw the line at begging, she decided—she believed Nicholas would help her if he could. Even so, she preferred not to put a damper on the pleasure of her time with him by mentioning personal problems. That was why she hadn't told him about her runaway sister. Or how she feared her brother-in-law. Baxter had repeatedly threatened to “take care” of her for not revealing Kitty's hiding place.

Lord, if she'd known she would have told him! she fumed. She just wanted to be left out of it. She realized the man must be sick with worry. For weeks she'd told herself his outrageous behavior was simply his crazy jealousy and anger talking. But now she wasn't so sure. Maybe he was just plain crazy. She already knew he was crafty. His ability to follow her trail was uncanny. Whenever she left town she had to plan carefully if she wished to foil his plan to follow her.

In fact, she considered it little short of a miracle that she'd been able to slip away for a second Ozark weekend, and now a third, without being tracked by her brother-in-law, the human bloodhound. Last weekend she'd had to cancel her trip at the last minute, but it wasn't because of him. She'd had car trouble. When she'd called Nicholas it was approximately the time she should have been arriving. He'd been less than pleased, but his concern was for Heather, not himself.

"I worry about you, honey. You need a different car."

"Don't worry about the car, Nicholas. It's being fixed. I'm more upset that I can't be with you this weekend." She sighed. "Seeing your smiling face every five days has become a habit."

"Think you might be getting hooked on me?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"If I ever got unhooked from you after I left college."

"Don't tell me you were into professor worshipping?"

"Including the very ground on which he walked."

"I wonder how I'd have reacted, had I known?"

Heather burst out laughing. "Oh, Nicholas, surely you jest! I was just one of the thundering herd panting after you. You knew."

"Yeah." He chuckled darkly. "I knew about the groupies, but I really didn't know Heather Warren, my star pupil, was among them."

"Of course, you didn't know." Her tone was prim. "I kept my feelings about you secret."

"I hesitate to ask..."

"Go on, it's okay. If I blush, you won't see me."

"Did you have it bad?"

She groaned. "Ooh, I should never have opened this subject for discussion."

"You said it was okay, Heather."

"I know I did, Nicholas." She drew in a deep breath for courage. "All right, I admit it. As a Freshman, I had the worst case of teacher worship ever recorded in the annals of Ozark

Mountain College. It was almost terminal, Professor. And it was all for you."

"I never suspected."

"It's no wonder." She sniffed disparagingly. "How could you find the time when you and Muffy Haywood were in the middle of an X-rated off campus affair?"

"Geez, you knew about Muffy?"

"The whole darned school knew about Muffy." Heather tried to hold back a laugh and failed. "I guess you knew what the Whiz kids in your Advance Language class called her."

"Maybe." His reply was noncommittal. "Suppose you tell me what you heard."

"Magnanimous Muffy, the magnificent mammalian." She punctuated her revelation with an innocent giggle. "Wow, what a mouthful!"

Nicholas laughed so hard he choked. When he could speak again he could only wheeze. "Is nothing sacred?"

"Omsee's too small, Nicholas. No one escapes. Not even professors."

Nicholas was determined to repay Heather for recalling so blatantly, his sizzling affair with one Muffy Haywood, the wild woman in his life during the summer of ninety-two. A man, particularly a mature, tenured professor, shouldn't be reminded of past romantic dilettantes dating back to his formative years.

"I may not have escaped," he said, "but you did. I never knew you had the hots for me, kiddo."

"I wasn't even warm." Her tone was blasé. "My feelings about you were all quite subliminal."

"Can you honestly say you never once fantasized about how it would be with me in bed?"

If Nicholas's voice hadn't sounded so fantastically sexy, Heather knew she wouldn't have suffered such a terrible coughing spell. When she could speak again, all she'd say was, "No comment."

"You didn't picture us in bed?" Mock surprise shaded his words. "Where then? On a fur rug? In a pool?" He paused, setting her up. "You weren't thinking of the dining room table!"

Heather refused to speak. She could have answered yes to every place he'd suggested and then some, before she heard his sly chuckle.

"Could we please change the subject, Nicholas?"

"If you insist," he said. "I'm sorry you won't be here tonight. I wanted to take you to a new French restaurant on Tablerock Lake. But, no matter, we'll go next weekend. You are coming down, aren't you?"

Yes, I'll be there," she said. "If we're going to a place that serves food on real dishes, I'd better pack more than shorts and T-shirts. Let me think..."

"Heather?"

"Mmmm?"

"Would you say we're good friends now?"

"Oh, yes."

"More?"

"Probably." What was he hinting at? she wondered. "Why?"

"I want to tell you something when you get here," he said. "But I won't unless I know you'll keep my confidence."

"Any secret you have will always be safe with me, Nicholas," she said. "No matter what. You know that."

"Yes, I know. But I had to hear you say it."

Heather could hear his smile in his voice.

"We'll talk about it next Friday." There was a long pause, then a sigh. "Lord, I'm going to miss seeing you, honey."

"Me, too, you."

* * * *

Heather continued to ponder their conversation as she drove into the foothills of the Ozarks. What was Nicholas going to tell her? she wondered. She also thought about the way he called her 'honey'. She couldn't remember exactly when he'd started using the endearment. But she knew it pleased her, very much. She also believed she could tell Nicholas about her family now. She wouldn't feel as if she were taking advantage of their friendship, particularly since the trouble would soon be over.

Thank goodness! thought Heather. It was probably a good thing that she'd had to work this Saturday morning. The mail arrived before she left, and she'd finally received a letter from Kitty. It was postmarked Nashville. The message contained a short apology for causing Heather so much worry, a brief description of Kitty's plans, and an address where she could be reached. It wasn't much, but at least Heather knew where her sister had gone, and why. She hadn't run away from her husband, as much as, she'd run toward a career in country music.

On Monday morning, Heather would set her crazy brother-in-law straight. He was going to stop bothering her—she dared to use the correct word—terrorizing her ... or else. She wished he'd seek professional help in anger management to handle his feelings of rejection, but enough was enough. He should be talking to his wife. And since Kitty had promised in her letter to contact Baxter, Heather realized the end was in sight. The danger, real or imagined, would soon be over.

When she turned into the college entrance, she ordered herself to put all concerns on hold. Soon she would be with Nicholas. He was, at this very moment, in his office, correcting final term papers. He had dozens of grades to submit before the ten o'clock deadline tonight. But they'd decided that Heather would come to his office at seven o'clock sharp.

"I'll work straight through to finish, but you drag me from my desk if you have to," he'd told her. "Nothing's going to interfere with our evening, Heather. We have to play catch-up for our lost weekend."

Heather had to admit she'd like to play something more than catch-up tonight. Since they'd renewed their friendship as free agents, over a month ago, Nicholas seldom kissed her. And when he did, the kiss was little more than a quick buzz on the cheek or a brush of his lips across her mouth.

It was clear, he'd taken to heart, her premise of friendship before a possible relationship. Outwardly he appeared to play a fair game but, darn it, he was pushing her subliminal feelings to the limit. There had to be a way for her to push back, she decided. At least, a little.

After she registered at the campus motel, she walked down the hall to her room and unlocked the door. Inside, she placed her suitcase on the beige covered bed and looked around. All the rooms were alike, she was discovering. Two beige velour chairs by a table at a picture window, and shiny brass lamps on the pecan night stands.

She unpacked a Burgundy leotard with matching skirt. At the mirror, she held it before her. Nicholas had told her she was beautiful when they'd first met, she recalled. She smiled dreamily at her reflection. "Oh, please, let my wish come true tonight," she whispered as she waltzed around the room.

Heather felt the magic swirling with her. Was she finally destined, on this clear summer evening, to experience her all-time favorite fantasy with her all-time favorite fantasy man? If dreams came true, she'd share hers with Nicholas tonight. Friendship could be stretched just so far, she silently declared. Then something had to give.

After she bathed and applied makeup, she wiggled into the sleek leotard. Undergarments weren't needed, nor desired; the daring Lycra suit fit perfectly. She smoothed her hands lightly over her flat tummy and firm bottom, thankful she'd kept her daily exercise routine. The four-for-one tanning salon deal had been a godsend, too, she thought. She never could lie still long enough to sunbathe.

She wrapped the matching Burgundy skirt around her and tied the streamers in a soft bow at her waist. When she whirled around, she caught the reflection of her glowing cheeks, the gleam of adventure in her wide set, blue eyes.

Would Nicholas understand she was ready for a relationship now? she wondered. A romantic one?

"Nicholas," she sang. "Nicholas, Nicholas!"

At first, it'd seemed strange when she said his name aloud. Even after a month, it sometimes felt awkward. A part of her mind refused to relinquish the thought of Nicholas as her teacher. This false premise caused guilty feelings, as if she were entering into a clandestine affair.

"Isn't that preposterous?" she asked her reflection.

She brushed her hair, fastening a strand behind one ear with a decorative comb. Next, she added delicate gold jewelry and a mist of tropical perfume. After she stepped into her high heeled sandals, she remembered her beaded evening bag shaped like a seashell and her fringed shawl of wine silk, intricately embroidered in gold thread.

Outdoors Heather surrendered to an impulse and walked barefoot through the grassy shortcut to her meeting with Nicholas. She didn't replace her shoes until she was inside the building, where she paused in the hallway, balanced against the pale green wall near his office door.

"There's a saying about taking the girl out of the country..." said a familiar voice.

Embarrassed and elated at the same moment, Heather straightened and covered the flushed skin above her décolleté' with the corner of her silk shawl. Meanwhile, Nicholas leaned against the doorframe. One large tanned hand stroked his whiskered chin as he watched, obviously delighted by her shy smile.

"You weren't supposed to catch me." She pursed her lips, then smoothed her hand over the shawl, as if by touching it, she could regain her composure. He likes my outfit, she thought when she felt his smoldering gaze skim her figure. "Your first glimpse was supposed to knock you for a loop."

Nicholas pushed away from the door and moved to her side. "Even as I glimpse, I'm knocked into the aforementioned loop."

He bent to kiss her cheek. In the same instant, he wondered why he continued to feel as if he'd broken his ironclad rule about dating coeds. Heather was not a coed, he sternly informed himself. Even if he were successful in helping her regain that status at Omsee, she would never try to take advantage of him by putting her goals before their friendship. He'd bet on it. Heather was not like that other coed long ago. Lord, he wanted to really kiss her, but somehow, he controlled himself.

"You look ravishing, Heather, while I..." Apologetically, he surveyed his casual attire. "...have a way to go before we paint the town red."

Heather gave him a hesitant smile. Had she overdressed? she wondered. "Nicholas? Did I misunderstand?"

"No, you didn't misunderstand." He breathed in the flowery scent of her perfume. "I envision an intimate candlelight dinner ... for two." His dark eyes continued their bold appreciation. "Tonight, I want you all to myself."

One wish granted, several more to go! ciphered Heather with a mute sigh. Her trembling fingers continued to separate the long silk fringe on her shawl.

Nicholas finally broke the awkward silence. "That's very pretty."

"It belonged to my grandmother." She ordered her fingers to relax. "I think it could safely be called an antique."

"It shimmers just like you do, this fine evening." His eyes blazed when they met hers. "I've missed you, honey."

"I've missed you, too, Nicholas." But, just the same, his whispered compliment and the endearing admission of his loneliness unnerved her. "Isn't it time to go?" She glanced at the hall clock. "It's past seven, and I had strict orders..."

Nicholas blinked and cleared his throat. "Yes, we'd better go before my imagination gets me into deep trouble." Gently he stroked her cheek. "Will you excuse me for a moment more? I have to make an important phone call."

"Certainly." She smiled graciously, then glanced at the somber portraits on the walls. "I'll wait right here, among the literary giants."

Nicholas pointed his finger at her. "Don't you disappear, or I'll know I've been dreaming."

"I won't."

After Nicholas closed the door, he hurried to his desk which was strewn with copies of anonymous letters he'd received, all eleven of them. He rubbed the back of his neck. Dammit, a person would think he could find at least one clue in this pile of paper. He jammed the sheets into his briefcase, and reached for the phone. Dialing, he decided to postpone his concern about the escalating threats. The grades had been turned in, his work for today was finished.

This evening, Heather was all he wanted. She seemed somehow different, he thought. Perhaps she'd finally decided it was time to promote their friendship to the rank of relationship. Now, that kind of escalation, he could deal with! he silently proclaimed. It couldn't happen soon enough to suit him. He didn't know how much longer he could remain the gallant gentleman.

Something had to give. Friendship only was getting old fast, he'd discovered. That, and turning blue under cold showers. Soon he'd be tempted to use icy Lake Honor to cool his ardor. But why do something so drastic, he reasoned, when he knew many more pleasurable ways to expend his excess energy? And this evening he'd devote all his efforts toward achieving a few of them.

When his call was completed, he grabbed his briefcase and locked his office door behind him. At the sound of his key, Heather turned from her perusal of the old masters. Nicholas leaned his briefcase against the wall and smiled as he decided there was no time like the present to begin his new stratagem. He bowed and doffed an imaginary plumed chapeau. "Thy beauty overwhelms, fair maiden. Command me."

Oh, wouldn't I just like to have a crack at that! mused Heather with a sly grin. Her clear directions would have nothing to do with nobility, that much she knew. And they'd sound something like this—"Kiss me, you fool! Shed your clothes. Tear off mine! Have your way with me..."

Heather shook her head to dispel her crazy notions. Nicholas would be shocked right out of his socks if she issued

such orders. Instead, she executed a demure curtsy and sighed. "My Prince."

"For one sweet smile, wouldst brave the fiery dragon's lair."

"Oh, wouldst you?"

Nicholas winked broadly. "For soothe, m'lady."

At once Heather realized her prince was, not only a gifted teacher, but a silver-tongued actor, as well. His dulcet tones were pure. He bent on one knee, lifting Heather's hand to his lips for an orchestrated kiss.

"Reveal thy desire, oh, muse of my heart."

Boy, was he asking for it! thought Heather, trying not to giggle. Gingerly, she placed her hand upon Nicholas's ebony crown and reveled at his silky curls, meanwhile, scrambling for an acceptable wish. "Thy petition has touched this maiden's heart. But I, ah ... I tremble with fear and foreboding," she rushed on, the drama upon her now. "Thy life means much to me."

"Love protects me."

If he only knew!

Nicholas rose and kissed her hand again, playing his role to the hilt. At the same time he decided he'd give a lot to know what she was thinking right now. He couldn't tell if she felt sexy or silly. Lord, would he ever be able to figure her out? he wondered. He seriously doubted it. And so, he continued the play.

"Thy wish," he murmured. The quality of his voice vibrated across the short distance to Heather's body as he leaned

closer, closer still. Her moist lips parted when his warm breathe bathed her face. "Name it."

Our wish, our wish? raved her imperial heart. Our wish is that we make love till the cows come home! Aloud, Heather groaned. "I thirst, m'lord." She sighed as she ad-libbed in earnest. "It is a thirst so deep, nothing will quench it, save a cup of sparkling elixir..." She shaded her searching eyes and pointed westward. "...from icy Lake Honor, o'er yonder hill."

Nicholas staggered theatrically. His contorted features, however, were authentic as he recalled his recent reflection upon the lake due to his libido. "Not that!" He raised his hands in supplication. "Fair maiden, have mercy."

"Fear not, sweet prince." She smiled temptingly and lowered her voice to a sensuous whisper. "One kiss from my dewy lips will melt thee, make thy blood boil as the molten heart of the earth itself."

"I love the idea, honey," said Nicholas as he dropped out of character with a wicked chuckle.

"Wouldst break this maiden's heart?" Her instinct told her she must continue the melodrama. She batted her eyes, provocatively. "Wouldst?"

"Wouldst never do that, baby. Come here."

Nicholas's throaty whisper warmed Heather as he gathered her in his arms. Slowly he bent his head. She lifted her face in anticipation.

This was it! thought Heather, gladly. Together, they'd start anew.

But when they heard methodical applause, they moaned softly, separated, and turned. Standing behind them were two grinning, clapping young men.

"Bravo, Professor!"

"What a performance!"

Nicholas cleared his throat and rubbed the back of his neck. "Ah ... been here long, fellas?"

"Long enough." The taller of the two frowned. "Looks like there's a whole lotta serious fraternizin' goin' on here."

"Not that it's any of your business, Steve, but I haven't broken my rule."

"Oh, yeah?" The other fellow smiled knowingly. "Then who's this maiden fair? A Drury coed out slumming?"

Nicholas clucked his tongue, but the boys ignored his censor so he gave up. "Steve, Jimmy, may I present Ms. Heather Warren, a former Omsee student." He smiled warmly at Heather. "But I agree with you guys on one thing. She's a maiden fair."

"Be warned, Ms. Warren," said Steve, speaking behind the back of his hand. "He's a wordsmith with a wicked reputation. And since he's unattached..."

"Message received, Steve. But I'm just here for the weekend."

"Ships that cross in the night, huh, Professor?" Jimmy gave an excellent Groucho Marx imitation.

Nicholas grimaced. "That's ships that pass in the night, my scholarly friend."

"Whatever." Jimmy laughed, then executed a series of snappy hand movements which ended with his index finger pointed at his prey. "Gotcha!"

Nicholas keenly surveyed the beaming pair. "Say, don't you guys have some cows to milk or somethin'?"

"Yuck!" Steve looked nauseous. "What do you take us for, a couple of Aggies?"

"Well...." Nicholas's mouth curved in a merciless grin. "I would certainly never mistake you for potential English majors."

"Man, let's split, Steve. "Bye, Ms. Warren. We're outta here."

"Remember," Jimmy added, "you've been warned."

"Right!" Heather matched their thumbs-up farewell.

Nicholas chuckled as he watched the boys swagger out the door. "What a pair!" He retrieved his briefcase and led her down the hall. "They tread on thin ice, and fear not."

Heather laughed at his staid observation. "They joke with you because they trust you."

Nicholas paused and turned to her. "What about your humor?" Though he continued to smile, his dark eyes grew serious. "Does it mean you trust me, too?"

"Well, let me think..." Playfully she tapped her cheek with her forefinger. "I trust you to take me to dinner." And to play catch-up later on, she silently added. "But not yet enough to walk with you near Lake Honor. Anyway," she said with a crooked grin, "I'm just a ship you've crossed in the night."

Nicholas shook his head, his hooded eyes unreadable. "Not yet, honey," he said quietly. "Not yet." Then his gaze sparked

a warning as he traced her mouth with a fingertip. "But I loved testing the waters."

"I hope you can swim."

"Like a swan." When she wrinkled her nose at his instant riposte, he laughed. "It's a good thing the boys interrupted when they did."

"How can you call an interruption good?"

Nicholas swung wide the door and they walked into the warm night air. "Because, my pretty, I'd have had my way with you."

"Promises, promises."

Now he was certain Heather wanted to share more than a kiss. He was also positive the sharing would be worth the wait. Tonight, tonight.

"By the way, Heather, is it true?"

"Is what true?"

"That your kisses make a man's blood boil?"

Heather snapped shut her gaping mouth. "Did I say that?"

He nodded and held her astonished eyes with his steady gaze as he drew her into the shadows. Sighing, he considered her trembling mouth as he traced her lower lip in a deliberate erotic massage. The exercise effectively cut off her breathing.

"Well, Heather?"

His sweet breath flowed warm across her face, making her feel lightheaded. Her knees wobbled as her body absorbed the heat of his touch. What was happening to her? she asked herself. She was a woman. Not a silly coed with a crush. Right! agreed her heart. You're a woman ... with a crush.

"I might affect a novice Lochinvar," she said, forcing herself to respond with humor to his tantalizing question. Realistically she knew it would be Heather Warren's blood, set to boiling, when they finally kissed. It could be no other way. And it would happen soon. "But, Nicholas, a man of your vast experience would surely find my kisses lacking."

"Don't bet on it, Princess. Your name's not Ellen." His throaty reply was almost a growl. "The hell of it is, I can't prove it out here. I've an idea, once we start..." He inhaled deeply and massaged the back of his neck. "We need more privacy." Then he took her hand and led her to the parking lot as naturally as if they belonged together. "Let's go home, honey."

Heather drew in a calming breath, tried to still the clamor of her heart. Now that it looked like her fantasy would come true, how did a former coed respond when her former professor made a pass? she mused, bewildered. Like a woman! came her heart's swift reply. Because he's a man.

Why was Heather so nervous? Nicholas asked himself. He searched his mind for an answer. He considered, then discarded, the thought that he was moving too fast for her. No, he decided, they'd had days of face to face conversations, and many hours of intimate talks, long distance. Yesterday, when he got his phone bill, he'd been shocked to see the hours recorded. Thank goodness, he had an unlimited long-distance service. It wasn't hard to believe they'd talked that much. Heather was easy to talk to.

He believed he knew her well enough now to judge her character fairly, and he thought her character was just fine.

So what if she continued to occasionally ask him if he'd found out more about a scholarship? Hell, she wanted her diploma. Badly. And who could blame her? She'd given up everything important in her own life for her family's welfare, particularly for her kid sister, who he suspected was a spoiled rotten brat. Heather simply wanted the chance to finish what she'd started eight years ago, and if he could give her a hand, why not? Her sincerity was genuine, he was sure of it. He couldn't be mistaken twice, not after what it had almost cost him ten years ago.

Could her skittishness stem from the same emotional quandary in which he found himself? he wondered. A long time ago, she'd studied with him. Today, she was no longer a coed. Nor his student. So why did he continue to feel like a lecher? he asked himself. The very idea was ridiculous in the extreme. The facts were these: Heather was an attractive woman now. He was a man, interested in knowing her better. Much better. She'd intrigued him from the first moment they'd met by Lake Honor. There was absolutely nothing wrong in pursuing her, he told himself sternly. So stop feeling guilty!

"Your carriage awaits," he said as he opened the passenger door of a low slung, white sports car. "And I can assure you, it's got twelve sturdy and trustworthy steeds beneath the hood."

Nicholas expected a laugh from his last line, but all he heard was a nervous chuckle and a 'That's nice.' After he slid behind the wheel, he turned to her, dark eyes burning with a

mysterious golden light. "Heather?" His voice was soft, low. "Relax, honey. We've got all night."

She sighed, searching for words to quell her hammering heart. Lord, she felt as if she were being torn in two. "But my enchantment ends at midnight."

A pained expression crossed Nicholas's face. "Now I wasn't trying to be funny. What's with the fairy tale?"

"I'm sorry. Cinderella is my favorite."

"Why?" The question was gently spoken. When she didn't answer, he added, "Because all her dreams came true?"

Rather than risk speech, Heather only nodded. She stared out the side window, her features hidden from his astute gaze, and swallowed hard when she felt her heart constrict.

Intrigued, Nicholas watched her, his own features implacable. What had caused the abrupt change in her mood? he wondered. At a loss, he vowed to find the reason. More than once since they'd first met, he'd seen, what he supposed were, hidden painful memories, steal the vitality from Heather's entrancing blue eyes.

Would she ever trust him fully? he wondered. Enough to reveal to him, the source of all that pain? And if she did, could he slay the dragon, and rescue her from her prison of sorrow? Suddenly it seemed very important that he should try. Without another word he started the engine and drove up the long hill to the road leading south.

In the wayside forest, amethyst silhouettes and shadowed places merged when the sun stained the evening sky crimson. Lingering rays produced a crazy quilt on the landscape,

splashed color into hidden hollows, created shapes, grotesque, bizarre.

Heather shivered, disconcerted when she discovered she was momentarily afraid. To fear a sunset was lunacy, she scolded. Yet she had no idea if the chill she felt was emotional, or was simply the result of the cool night air. Vaguely she heard Nicholas speak, and she pulled herself from her reverie.

"A penny for them, Princess."

"I promise you, they aren't worth the price." Her voice was subdued. "I was thinking how my life has changed in the last eight years. Nothing deep, mind you," she qualified with a deprecating laugh. "Just thinking about it."

Nicholas released a grateful sigh. Heather had, in effect, trusted him. It was a start. "We'll be home soon, honey."

The pair whiled away the minutes making plans for their evening. Heather begged to hear what they'd have for dessert when Nicholas slowed the car to turn onto a winding gravel road.

"I think I'll keep it a surprise." He lifted one hand from the wheel to direct her attention up ahead. "We're here."

Heather gazed followed, then she gasped when she focused on Nicholas's house. The stone dwelling rested solidly on the mountain top like a Raja's palace. It looked, for all the world, like it had always been there, Heather thought. There it glowed with welcome in the last rays of the sun.

"The Board of Regents must have given you a whopping big raise when you became tenured." She sounded breathless. "Your home is absolutely magnificent, Nicholas."

"I'm glad you like it, Heather, but I'd be bringing you to a log cabin if I'd used my salary."

"What then?" Her curiosity overrode her good sense and manners. It was none of her business.

"I've been lucky enough to sell a few books," he said as he parked the car in the drive. "I invested some of the royalties in this property."

"Some of the royalties?" She gaped at him. "Are you telling me you've been published outside academic circles?"

He nodded.

"Is that the secret you were going to share with me?" She couldn't believe it. Books were her business. "I'm sure I've never seen your name on any of the lists of current literature I study as part of my job," she said. "I would have remembered. Do you use a pseudonym? Is that it?"

"Yeah, I do," he said. "But, even if you knew my pen name, I doubt you'd find my books on your lists."

He chuckled gruffly and looked embarrassed. Lord, he wished she already knew the truth. He hated risking the respect she had for him, not to mention the relationship they might share in the future. Everything hinged on her reaction to a few lousy murder mysteries that had made a little money.

"Damn, I can't do it." He gave her a sheepish grin. "Forget I said anything."

"Come on, Nicholas, don't be so mysterious," she cajoled. "I've been waiting all week. Besides, it was your idea, remember?" Then she grabbed the edge of the dashboard with both hands to brace herself. "I can take it. Shoot!"

Nicholas winced. "Woman, you've no idea how close you've come to the truth." He clasped her hands between his own. "I'd better hang on to you," he said, hoping to put off the moment. "The shock may be too great."

"Nicholas, cut it out. What I can't stand is the suspense."

He groaned. "I can't believe it. You've done it again." A melancholy expression momentarily shadowed his features. When he pressed her hands against his unyielding chest, his gaze narrowed dangerously. "Aw right, sister, here's da straight dope. You're in da company of da infamous ... Peter Roan."

Heather sucked breath through her teeth. "You don't mean...?"

"I do."

"...the creator of the Plain Brown Wrapper murder mystery series?"

"The same." Nicholas pronounced the words like a death sentence. "I wrote the movie adaptations, too."

Heather collapsed against the seat. "You're right," she said. "This is quite a shock. I don't know if I should faint from literary disillusionment, or swoon because the man next to me has had over a dozen best-selling books." She drew in a long breath. "Not to mention, four blockbuster movies."

Nicholas's eyes lit up and his voice filled with sexual innuendo. "My CPR skills may be a little rusty but, what the hell, we'll wing it." He mimicked Mike Slay, the hard-nosed private detective, who was the continuing character in the series. "Whadda ya' say, baby?"

"Will you stop?" Then, she laughed until she was breathless. "No more, Nicholas. I'm weak."

"That's too bad." His smoky eyes matched a lecherous grin. "I was just getting warmed up." He kissed the tip of her nose before he grabbed his briefcase and climbed out. His lean body moved like a predatory beast. "Come on, honey," he said, helping her. "Come see my enchanted castle."

Hand in hand, they followed the walk to the carved walnut front door, resplendent with an oval stained glass window in a classic red rose motif.

"Welcome!" he announced as he ushered her inside. "Welcome to my Ozark Camelot."

* * * *

"I'm so glad we came here first."

Heather tried to see everything at once. She admired three pastoral paintings—among them a small Grandma Moses—on one of the white walls. Then she examined several leather bound, first editions on the thick oak shelves built on either side of the stone fireplace. Silently she stroked a metal sculpture centered on an antique library table. "It's one of my favorites," she whispered, awestruck. "Remington's The Bucking Bronco. It's so true to life, I always expect it to move."

On the mantel she espied a small wooden carving of a young woman seated on a rail fence. "A Denton!" she exclaimed, moving closer. "A Jenny Denton." She dared not touch the fragile work, but feasted her eyes on its fine detail

instead. Then tears gathered like crystal stars on the tips of her sable lashes. "It's enchanting."

During her intense exploration, Nicholas had remained in the entry, lounging against the wall. When she turned back to him, he smiled at her wonder filled expression.

"You have a lovely home, Nicholas."

He straightened and moved to her side. Then he lifted his hands to her face, cupped her hair gently against her cheeks. "You've retained a childlike joy inside your woman's heart." His low voice vibrated with approval. "Never lose it, Heather."

When her lips parted by her surprise at Nicholas's words, his ebony gaze settled on her full mouth. He hesitated, then with a frustrated sigh, he only kissed her forehead, his lips warm against her skin. This wasn't the moment he was looking for. Not quite yet.

But Heather's body read its own definition of his kiss.

"Can you entertain yourself until I shower and change?" He was already walking toward the hall. "Feel free to explore, honey. I have no more secrets."

Heather couldn't reply because her brain had instantly conjured a secret scene all its own. In it, Heather explored one Nicholas McCord, a.k.a. Peter Roan, freely! She blamed her sudden weakness on the man's close proximity, in the car, in his home. But, eventually, she gave up the interior debate when she realized her careful arguments were being totally ignored by her willful body and mind. So she returned to his bookshelves.

She discovered a Peter Roan book on a lower shelf. As she scanned the pages, she became thoroughly scandalized by

the author's style, his tone, his bedroom beat phrasing. In fact, she couldn't read fast enough.

"Ahem!" With an exaggerated cough, Nicholas announced his presence. And Heather jumped a foot off the couch after she slammed shut the book. "Perhaps I should have forbidden you that particular shelf." He didn't smile, but his dancing dark eyes revealed his delight at her guilty expression. "Gotcha!"

Then, much to Heather's growing consternation, he executed the matching snappy hand movements. She knew she'd never be able to duplicate them if she lived to be one hundred.

"If you read my stuff, you might retire those sexy fantasies you have about me." The light in his eyes grew more intense. "I don't want you to give them up."

Heather placed the book on the coffee table. Caught red-handed, she silently admitted. But she'd talk her way out of this one like a shot.

"In a brief overview of your work, Professor McCord, I'd say you write lean and mean," she said. "And definitely to the point. But the language is quite shocking," she added. "Unnecessarily so, I think. You're an excellent writer. You don't need to use all those four letter words."

"Enjoyed it that much, did you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Well," he considered as his dark eyes twinkled, "when I walked in, it looked to me, like you were reading a mile a minute."

She almost choked on her response. "How could I possibly comment on your writing if I didn't read some of it?" Then she had to laugh. Apparently she hadn't gotten away as cleanly as she'd thought, but she was still going to try to tough it out, so she shook her finger at him and frowned. "It would be impossible, my dear Professor."

Even in jest, "my dear Professor" sounded rather nice coming from Heather, thought Nicholas. "Be fair now. These books are written for men, the kind of men who like their stories fast moving, hard hitting and ... rough!" He emphasized his point by driving his large fist into the palm of his other hand. "There's a method to this madness. It works. And as the old timers say, 'If it ain't broke, don't fix it.'"

Heather understood the tenets of his writing philosophy, although she wanted to argue several points. In her opinion, Nicholas McCord had yet to be challenged in the writing arena by the publishing lions. Someday, she prophesied, an exceptionally bright editor—perhaps, herself ... if she ever got that damned piece of all-fired important paper!—would join forces with an equally intelligent publisher, to pull from Nicholas, memorable stories, the stuff that changes lives. In a word, literature.

But, she knew, this was not the time for a debate on salient issues faced by wordsmiths at large, or one in particular. Besides, she kept getting distracted from her train of thought by the sparkling diamond drops of moisture glistening in the curls at Nicholas's nape. Obviously, he'd hurried and, for some reason, the idea pleased her inordinately.

"Granted, there's probably more violence in the Bible."

"More passion, too." Nicholas stepped toward her and his large frame blocked her view of everything. Except him.

"Take the Book of Solomon..."

Heather's body seemed to catch fire. Nicholas was so close, she breathed in his clean, personal scent. It was more intoxicating to her than a two hundred dollar a bottle designer fragrance. His natural aroma told her only one thing: I am a man.

Without warning he drew her to her feet. His hard body was closer still. And hers softened at his nearness. She drew in tremulous, shallow breathes. Her heart pounded against her ribs, and her firm breasts grew heavy with secret desire. Then, an imperceptive arch of one dark brow revealed that Nicholas, too, had become aware of her hidden longing. Tenderly, he kissed her lips.

But only once.

Heather stood with her eyes closed, wishing, wishing. But nothing happened.

Nicholas had no idea where he'd found the extra pound or two of strength he needed to kiss Heather just one time. But, again, he knew the time was not quite right. Gently, he touched her arm. "Shall we?"

Gratefully Heather took his arm and hoped he didn't feel her hand tremble. They took a few steps together, but when she turned toward the front door, he stopped.

"Aren't we going this way?"

"Our evening begins here." He guided her into the next room. "This is as private and intimate as I could get." He

pulled out one of the two chairs placed at a small round table, set with white linen, sparkling crystal and china, and a delicate flower arrangement. "Please, honey. Be seated."

"Nicholas?" Her heart-shaped face wore a bewildered expression. Then, her sparkling eyes matched her knowing smile as she sank into her chair. "Let me guess. You keep the table set, just in case Magnificent Muffy should return."

Nicholas chuckled good-naturedly, and paused to light the single white taper rising from the bowl of garden fresh, miniature pink roses. "Not a chance. Who could think long-term with a gal named Muffy?"

His guest instantly wondered if he'd be interested for the long-term in a gal named Heather?

"I called my housekeeper when I went back into my office," he continued. "Mrs. Johnson is indeed a wizard in the kitchen. Wizardess?" He cocked his head, then shrugged. "Anyway, her only request in exchange for our culinary pleasure is that I clean up." He paused, rubbed the back of his neck, and chuckled self-consciously. "Actually, it was more like an order."

His proud grin over his accomplishment was understandably broad. Heather couldn't take her eyes off it. Then it disappeared, only to be replaced by a cautious frown.

"I wanted to be alone with you, Heather." Was his surprise going to blow up in his smug face? "All alone."

"It's a lovely idea, Nicholas."

She sent up a second silent thank you for a wish granted. The unanswered request for a kiss was probably her fault, she decided. Apparently her wish list was out of sync. The kiss

would come later. Then she caught Nicholas's wary look, and smiled again.

"Can I help serve?"

Nicholas shook his head, then pressed a button on a wall console. Strains of soft music filled the room. Listening to the romantic melody, Heather sighed and began to feel truly relaxed for the first time in days. She also became totally aware of Nicholas's lean muscled body, clothed in tailored dark slacks and a shirt of cobalt silk. Opened at the collar, it revealed a tantalizing glimpse of his dark chest hair.

"Ah ... shouldn't you be wearing something a bit more formal for butlering?" She wore an impish grin. "A bow-tie, perhaps?"

His ebony eyes flashed. "That's where I draw the line," he said. "You'll just have to use your imagination."

She's already doing that! announced her heart.

Nicholas gazed longingly at Heather. A man could get arrested if he used his imagination with a woman like her, he silently declared.

"Excuse me for a moment, Heather." He swallowed soundlessly, pointing to the door. "The aperitifs..."

When he returned from the kitchen he carried a small silver tray containing two exquisite stemmed goblets filled with vintage wine. He handed a glass to Heather, simultaneously breathing in her tantalizing fragrance, then took his seat across from her.

One fragile crystal musically touched the other when he toasted her. "To our beginning."

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

“To our beginning.” Heather sipped the sparkling wine, and felt the golden liquid and Nicholas's special smile warm her heart.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 3

After dinner, Heather cupped her chin to contemplate Nicholas's neatly trimmed whiskers. "Mmm, you say you started growing your beard when your first mystery was published?"

"Did you know," he countered, twirling imaginary curls on the ends of his mustache, "there's a law against playing amateur analyst?"

"Just the same, it seems mighty peculiar to me. Why do you think you chose that particular time to cover your handsome face?"

"Handsome, eh?"

"Don't cloud the issue. Answer the question, please."

"It was just a coincidence."

"Nothing's a coincidence."

"You believe that?"

"Of course. What were the odds, do you suppose, on us meeting that day by the lake?"

"A million to one?"

"I rest my case." She folded her hands and smiled charmingly. "Now then, was writing fiction your idea?"

"I always wanted to try my hand at writing mysteries. It was my Mom who pushed for a high concept series."

"You mean a one sentence storyline?"

"You got it. My favorite is *Star Trek: Wagon Train in the sky.*"

"That's very good. But why did your mother say to do high concept writing?"

"She's a marketing analyst in New York City," he said. "Always told me to sell the sizzle, not the steak." He took a sip of his wine. "She also insisted I start building a nest egg for her retirement."

"Hers?"

"She says it's only fair, since she put me through college." He chuckled. "According to her, moonlighting as an author was the only way I was ever going to make up the income differential after I turned down an NYU appointment."

"You passed up a job at NYU?" Heather was so surprised she stopped chewing. "But I thought that's what you always wanted."

Nicholas poured more wine before he answered. "Thank God, I realized the flaw in my thinking before it was too late." He contemplated the swaying candle flame. "Successful living is more than jobs or money." His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm when he spoke. He smiled and gave her hand a little squeeze. "I'm telling you, Heather, it wouldn't matter if I never competed in the marketplace again."

"I don't understand." A frown creased Heather's brow. "Are you saying you're hiding out here in the mountains?"

Nicholas chuckled again. "You've lived in the big city far too long, my girl." Gently, he smoothed a curl away from her face. Lord, she had the most expressive blue-sky eyes in the world, he thought. "I'm not hiding from anyone," he said. "I discovered that my most valuable contribution to the world is

teaching. So, why not teach, I asked myself, in one of the most beautiful areas in the world, the Ozark Mountains?"

He fingered the petals of a tiny pink rose. "Though I work very hard at writing murder mysteries, it's really an avocation," he explained. "An outlet for some of my more bizarre creative juices."

Heather gasped. "You don't really mean that."

"Sure, I do. Teaching is what I do best." He traced a design on the top of her hand and smiled again. "You used to think so, too."

"You always were an excellent teacher," she said, nodding. "Interested, interesting, and..." She paused, and trapped his fingers under her palm. "And formidable."

"Formidable?"

"How else can I describe a tough teacher like you..." she asked with a soft laugh, "...in mixed company?"

Nicholas laughed, too, but he was unwilling to surrender his point in the debate. "The reason I'm such a tough teacher," he said, "is exactly why I've remained on this campus."

Heather tried to wait Nicholas out, but her curiosity was killing her. This silent routine was a technique he'd often used to stir his students' interest. To a frenzy, if possible!

"You're not going to answer until I ask, are you?"

Nicholas gave her an innocent look.

"Darn it, Nicholas McCord!" She shook her finger at him and laughed. "Tell me why you aren't writing full time?"

"Several years ago, I learned something about myself," he said as he gazed at her rosy face. "I have to teach. For me, it would be a sin, to gather knowledge and not share it."

"And another, would-be Great American novelist bites the dust."

"Not necessarily, but if there must be a tradeoff," he said, "then, perhaps a great American teacher shall rise like Phoenix from the ashes."

Heather raised her glass to his, then smiled mysteriously when she met his gaze with smoky eyes. "In this student's eyes," she murmured, "you reached that plateau years ago."

"Ah, but now you're not talking about my teaching skills," he guessed as he gazed into her starry eyes. "Are you?"

Heather became flustered. "The student in me thinks you're an excellent teacher."

"And the woman in you?"

"Um ... she thinks..." She paused, gathering courage. "She thinks you're better than a Peter Roan mystery."

Nicholas toyed with her fingers. "But you've never read a Peter Roan novel," he said. "You've no valid basis for comparison."

"An easily solved detail," she said. "I'll read one, and then we'll debate." She gave Nicholas an indulgent smile. "You must remember, Professor, words portray personalities and all their prejudices, plumb the depths and scale the heights of emotion, from adoration to zeal."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth is a former student with a photographic memory," said Nicholas, but he continued to grin. Lord, he thought, she had a perfect smile.

"Still mixing metaphors for fun and profit, I see."

"Don't you ever forget anything?"

Heather's perfect smile slipped from her lips.

"Unfortunately," she said, "I don't forget a thing."

Oh, no! Was Heather going to cry? He'd just made her laugh, and now was he going to make her cry? What couldn't she forget? he wondered. Had some lying bastard hurt her with his words? Or worse? What would she say if he offered his help?

"Want to talk about it, honey?" he asked. "You can trust your confidences with me, too."

"Not now." She shook her head. "But thanks anyway." And then she smiled.

"You look happy again," he said. "And that makes me happy, too." Obviously, she'd put aside her troublesome thoughts. "Your blue eyes are bright, your cheeks, rosy. Could it be, you're delighted we're together? Alone?"

"Could be." Secretly, she knew there was no other place in the world she'd rather be, than with Nicholas, in his home. "But I suspect my bright eyes and flushed cheeks are merely the result of too much wine." She looked away and laughed softly. "I think I drank much more than you, Nicholas."

"Perhaps." He smiled indulgently when Heather lowered thick lashes over flustered bright eyes and clasped her hands primly in her lap. "But tonight I've become intoxicated, simply watching you enjoy yourself."

When she didn't answer, Nicholas looked closer. "Heather, don't you believe a man could get drunk on the sight of you?"

She kept her head lowered, but gave it a quick shake.

He lifted her chin, then brought her hand to his lips and kissed it as his gaze locked with hers. "Believe it, my sweet," he murmured. "Believe it." He poured the last of the wine into Heather's half filled glass, then rose from his chair. "Drink up, honey. Dessert awaits us."

Heather closed her eyes and rubbed her stomach as she drew in a deep breath. Privately, she admitted it was more to steady her emotions, than to settle her dinner. "I don't think I can eat another bite."

Nicholas silently admired Heather's shapely form. Her small firm breasts strained against their thin covering. When she opened her eyes again, he averted his gaze because he knew she'd be disconcerted if she discovered his appreciative study.

"You'll just have to find a little room," he said. "You don't want to miss my surprise."

"You made the dessert?"

"It's my specialty." Unexpectedly Nicholas was thunderstruck by his reaction to Heather's eyes. When she'd opened them to look at him, her gaze had been positively erotic.

"Okay," she conceded with a throaty sigh. "I don't want to disappoint you, Nicholas."

Her reply held more meaning for Nicholas than she knew. He swallowed hard to control his impulse to bury his face in her soft shining hair. What the hell was happening to him? he wondered dazedly as he pushed through the swinging door. He was acting like a lovesick puppy. When he returned from the kitchen, in control again, he placed before Heather, a

small snifter containing five perfect Bing cherries, and sat down.

When she inhaled, an exotic fragrance filled her nostrils, and she was immediately transported to a deserted white beach by the sea. And, of course, Nicholas had been swept along with her. "It smells wonderful," she said. She lifted her dreamy gaze to meet his dark velvet eyes. Eyes, she thought intuitively, that could read her mind. "What is it?"

"Brandied cherries." Slowly he turned the glass. The Burgundy fruit glistened, reflecting the candlelight. "This dessert is designed to entice," he explained in a sensuous tone. "All the senses."

With his spoon he scooped up one cherry, and held it for their joint perusal. "The rounded shape, the deep crimson color, delights the eye." He held the spoon so Heather could again experience the tantalizing aroma. "When the bouquet of aged brandy blends with the fresh clean scent of the fruit, it excites the sense of smell."

Their gazes met and held.

"And, finally," he said, "when one puts the succulent morsel into the mouth, one's lips, one's tongue, rejoice at the smooth polished skin while the palate celebrates the heavenly combination." He brought the spoon to her lips. "Open for me, honey," he murmured. "Tell me what you feel."

The way Nicholas spoke the words made Heather's secret place pulsate with hot wet sensations and, in that moment, she obeyed. She opened and received the sweet brandied cherry on her tongue. Nicholas watched as she closed her eyes, savoring the heady concoction. Moaning softly in

gourmet ecstasy, she met his smoky gaze, and they exchanged an unspoken message of mutual pleasure.

"I've never tasted anything like it, Nicholas," she said. "It's superb."

He smiled seductively and held up the empty spoon. "More?"

"Oh, yes, please."

Silently he fed her, two, three, four spoonsful.

"Where's your dessert?" Heather lifted her gaze as she licked an ambrosial drop from the center of her lower lip.

Nicholas's gaze instantly narrowed, smoldered, as he watched her sensual exercise. The moist surface of her mouth still glistened in the candle glow and continued to burn in his mind. "I only prepared one dish." He scooped up the last of the fruit. "But I've been having a feast all my own, just watching you enjoy it."

"But you've not even tasted it."

Nicholas would have liked to suggest how he could get at least an aftertaste, but he only smiled instead. "It's okay."

"It's not okay," she insisted. "And if it's such a big treat." She took the spoon from his fingers. "Then I'd like a turn." She touched the silver spoon to his lips. "Come on, now." Her coaxing voice beguiled him. "Open up." She grinned when he obeyed. "Mmm, tastes good?"

He nodded solemnly as he chewed, and Heather tilted the snifter to her lips to drain its last brandied drop. At last, their moods mellowed along with their blended spirits.

"I'm very glad you came back for a visit last month," said Nicholas. His voice was quiet, sincere. "I might never have

had this opportunity to know Heather Warren, the woman." He smiled into her wonder filled blue-sky eyes. "It's an immensely interesting subject."

Heather was charmed by his manner. "I'm glad we met again, too, Nicholas. It's been a dream come true." She leaned forward and blew out the flickering taper, burned down to a two-inch stub. "I'll help you clear the dishes," she said. "It's getting late."

Nicholas placed his hand over hers. His dark eyes revealed his desire. "It's not late, honey," he murmured. "I don't want this evening to end. Not yet." He met her questioning gaze with one infused with steady determination. "I don't think you want it to end either," he added. "Let's have coffee on the terrace."

Without breaking contact with her smoky eyes, he lifted her hand and kissed each fingertip, then branded her palm with his lips. "Say yes."

Mesmerized by his romantic gesture, feeling the heat of his kisses rise along a meridian, directly to her heart, she could do nothing else. "Yes," she said, silently acknowledging the answer to yet another wish. He wanted her to linger, she realized. Truly! "I'll stay."

Unexpectedly she laughed and the soft sound filled the room. "Whoo-ee, I'm not used to drinking so much." When Nicholas chuckled, she fixed him with a wide-eyed stare. "How much do you think we drank anyway?"

"Not much." He rose from his chair and came around to hold hers. "Only the aperitif and two small bottles of bubbly. And, of course, that last drop of cherry juice." He tapped her

nose gently and she blinked several times. "I think you liked the cherry juice best of all."

"You call that not much?" She fanned herself. "Why ... why ... I think I must be tiddly."

Nicholas tried not to laugh. "Are you saying you're a little hiccius-doccus, my dear?"

"No, no." She shook her head, then wished she hadn't because now the room tilted at a precarious angle. "I'm certainly not filled with courage, Dutch or otherwise."

"Then shall we say you're somewhat, ah ... sloshed?"

"Oh, Nicholas, that won't do." She giggled softly. "Sloshed sounds so unrefined, you see, while tiddly is, ah ... um ... rather ladylike." She tipped her head back to look at Nicholas upside down. "You do see the difference," she gurgled, "don't you?"

"Certainly." He cleared his throat over another chuckle. "Why don't you find your wrap in the living room, honey?" he said. "I'll get the coffee."

Heather rose from her chair, turned, took one step and stopped still. The room waltzed, and she waited. When she leaned against Nicholas, his arms wrapped protectively around her waist. "Oh!" She sighed. "I feel so content."

She snuggled nearer when she realized her cheek lay cushioned on the soft thick curls of his chest. Unable to resist, she placed a hot little kiss upon his hair-roughened flesh. Then she laughed softly. "I've never felt like this before."

Nicholas chuckled at Heather's pun, but he kept her cradled securely in his arms. She felt the increased rise and

fall of his chest as he breathed, heard the accelerated beat of his heart.

"I've never felt like this either," he whispered. Then he leaned back to look at her. "You're not feeling ill, are you?"

"Huh-uh, just warm and cozy." And more than a little amorous, she silently admitted.

"You've not had much experience with wine."

Or intimate encounters with fantasies come true, she thought as she shook her head and replied. "Nope, not since college when we'd party in the woods, drinking home-brew that the boys aged in the heat tunnels under Omsee." She laughed at the memory. That stuff tasted godawful, but they'd all imbibed, primarily because Omsee was so against it!

"There's nothing I like more than a happy drunk," he said with a good-natured chuckle. "Do you think you can make it to the living room alone?"

"Nicholas, stop teasing," she said, but her grin ruined her frosty reprimand. "I'm not drunk." She began her careful exit. "See?"

Admiration glowed in Nicholas's dark eyes as he gazed at her slim form, and he had an overwhelming urge to hold her again. "It's a shame to waste all this beautiful music."

Heather paused to listen, a dreamy look upon her face.

"Shall we have one dance before we go outside?" said Nicholas as he walked up behind her so he could do something he'd been longing to do all evening. He nuzzled his face in her fragrant soft hair, blew gently against her ear. "One dance, little Heather?"

Mesmerized, she turned into his embrace. Every cell in her body reacted to his virility, his energy, his strength. "Yes, Nicholas," she murmured. "I've been waiting to dance with you all my life."

Nicholas's gaze turned lazy, sensual, and Heather watched the smoldering lights flare in his eyes. His hands came around her back, she placed hers lightly on his shoulders. He eased her close to his body as they began to sway with the music. But they'd taken only three or four steps when the slender heel of her sandal caught in the thick loop carpeting. She was thrown off balance, and he caught her in his arms. Then, all motion ceased.

Slowly, inexorably, Heather's vision was filled with Nicholas's bold features as he bent toward her, his dark gaze devoured her parted lips. She trembled when he covered her mouth with his. It was a gentle kiss. Nicholas waited, hoped for a favorable response, as he tenderly enticed her full lower lip. Then he explored its inner silkiness with the tip of his tongue. Heather stood transfixed in his embrace, while her body experienced a thousand different reactions until one emotion—pleasure—took precedence over the rest.

She moaned, her arms encircled his neck and her tingling fingers smoothed the thick curls at his nape. Nicholas continued to kiss her, his touch persuasive. Then her volatile response ignited his body. His arms tightened around her waist, slid downward, pulled her hard against his aroused frame. Heather felt the muscles in his shoulders ripple as he fought for control so he wouldn't crush her.

"I have a confession to make." He kissed her cheek, her fragrant lobe, her swanlike throat. "All those years ago, sometimes I'd gaze at you in class when you weren't looking, and I'd wonder..."

"Wonder what?" She hardly recognized her own voice.

"How it might be to kiss you." He gently blew at a wayward strand of her hair, watched it tremble. "I don't have to wonder anymore."

Heather leaned back and fixed him with a measured look. "I think you just now made that up."

Nicholas smiled, his gaze molten as he restored her to her former position in his arms. "Shhh, Princess," he murmured. "Please, stop thinking, and come here."

In the next moment, the time for testing kisses and responses had passed. Heather's senses exploded when Nicholas's tongue slid inside her mouth to explore the silken warmth there. Her mind ceased to function normally as her body surrendered to the master's touch. She melted against him, returned his deep kiss with a primal passion she'd never suspected she possessed.

The sounds of their ragged breathing merged as one double timed rhythm when her body shaped itself around his throbbing manhood. His moist kisses skimmed to the rapid pulse at the base of her throat and back to her lobe. Then his moist tongue flicked inside her ear, and the sensation burned a path directly to her center. The touch of his beard against her skin drove her wild. When he returned to her lips, he kissed her with such profound longing, the strength drained from her body and she grew weak with desire.

An eternity later Nicholas released her mouth from his thundering proficiency, and simply held her in his arms, gently rocking from side to side. He nuzzled his face in her sweet-scented hair again and, though he tried heroically to control his heavy breathing, his voice was husky with disturbed passion. "It's true, you know."

Heather continued to stroke his neck and play with his hair as she tasted the first great passion of her life. "What, Nicholas?" she asked with throaty effort. "I didn't hear you."

"I said, it's true," he repeated in that same husky voice.

Heather gazed up blankly into his dark, dancing eyes. She smoothed her hands over his bearded face. "What's true?" She was not entirely conscious of his words, caught as she was in the vortex of newfound desire.

"Your kisses do make a man's blood boil," he said. "I thought, at first, you'd pull away and refuse my kiss." He smiled tenderly. "I don't think you've been in a situation like this before."

"You're right, Nicholas." She smiled serenely. "I've never before lived a fantasy."

Touched by her honest reply, Nicholas gave Heather an impulsive bear hug. "You are so very sweet," he said. "But your kisses are pure passion." He gazed deeply into her starry eyes. "I think I may have awakened a sleeping beauty tonight," he said. "Right here in my arms."

Before Heather could respond, Nicholas's lips again branded hers, burning her soul as he sought to relive her awakening. He was not disappointed. The kiss went on and on, and it pushed Heather to dizzying heights, then dropped

her over to the edge of ecstasy. Trembling, she drew away. If Nicholas's compelling hands and demanding lips remained on her body for another instant, she'd be lost, driven out of control, out of her mind, with desire. Thrust into unfamiliar territory where she'd never before trod. These wild emotions were too much for her to handle.

"Nicholas, stop," she cried. "Please, stop. I don't know what I'm doing." She pushed a loose tendril of hair behind her ear. "The wine. The night." She lifted her stormy gaze to meet his. "Most of all, Nicholas, it's you."

Did Heather have any idea of the molten volatility of her eyes? Nicholas wondered. Or how her touching honesty affected him? "Take them off," he gently commanded.

"What!" she squeaked, blushing furiously.

"Your shoes, Heather," he clarified with another tender smile. "Take off your shoes. We haven't had our dance yet."

"I don't know if I can." Hysteria was about to overtake her, especially since Nicholas was determined to keep their bodies touching.

"Let me help you." He settled on his haunches to take off her sandals, purposely misconstruing the meaning of her words. Pivoting, he placed them on top of the raised hearth. Then he removed his own shoes and set them beside hers. "I wouldn't want to hurt your toes if we stumble again," he said as he turned, barefoot too, and took her back into his arms.

Heather peeked around his shoulder and laughed softly.

Nicholas gave her a measured look. "The wine?"

"No, no." She shook her head. "I was just thinking, it's a shame it isn't December."

She looked at Nicholas, tried to gauge his reaction to her words. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. "We might have been surprised by a visit from jolly old St. Nicholas," she continued. "He'd come down your chimney to fill our shoes with goodies." She couldn't help what happened after her whimsical speech. She giggled again. But just a little.

Nicholas ignored her laughter. Instead, he began a slow, seductive dance. His mouth performed magical tricks on her ear. "We've already had one pleasant surprise, Heather." His whispered breath played havoc with her senses. "The only other observation I can offer, is that you are dancing, at this very moment, with a man named Nicholas." He emphasized his name as he pulled Heather against his manhood.. "And he is definitely not a saint!"

"Why, Professor, you shock me."

"Into submission?"

"Not quite."

Nicholas chuckled. He appreciated her glib tongue. "I've not shocked the total you," he said. "Only the child." He laid her hands on his chest where she could feel the steady throb of his heart. "The woman in you has never enjoyed an evening more," he declared. "She loves every damn minute of it."

Heather moved closer. "She does," she admitted. "You're right, Professor."

"Professors usually are," he said. "It goes with the territory."

"But must they be so arbitrary about it?"

"Right is right."

"Ha!"

Nicholas held Heather's gaze, his dark eyes almost hypnotic. Then he leaned forward as if to kiss her again, but instead, he rounded his mouth into a perfect circle and said, "Ho, ho, ho!"

That did it. Heather collapsed in his arms, felled by delirious laughter. "I do believe," she declared, still breathless, "I can picture you..." She paused, closed her eyes momentarily. "Yes, I can. In a long ... white..."

"Enough, Heather!" His voice boomed menacingly. "Enough!"

She raised on tiptoe and pressed her nose against his. "I'm not afraid of you."

Nicholas gave her an Eskimo kiss. "You never were, sweetheart," he said. "And it used to scare the hell out of me."

Heather blinked and tried to look serious. "It did?"

"Yes," he admitted. "Now will you please get your wrap and meet me at the patio doors?"

"Since you've asked so nicely, of course."

After Nicholas left the dimly lit room, Heather found her shawl and put it on. Then she slid aside the patio door so she could look out at the sky. Planets and stars and the moon held her attention until she heard Nicholas's footsteps, then she turned.

He walked toward her with the small silver tray balanced on one hand. "Just like a waiter at the Ritz," he said. His smile teased her. "What do you think?"

"You look even better."

When he reached for the light switch, Heather touched his arm. "Don't turn on the lights yet," she said. "I'd like to see the mountains by moonlight first." She smiled enchantingly. "Do you mind?"

Nicholas gazed at her for a silent moment. "That's another thing we have in common," he said softly. "You believe in moon glow." He smiled lovingly. "You go ahead, Princess," he said. "I'll wait right here. But don't go forward more than six steps or you'll find yourself walking on water."

Heather gave him a quizzical look.

"The pool, honey," he said wryly. "I've got a pool."

Heather nodded, then stepped over the threshold. She counted her steps. Carefully. One, two, three, four, five. She stopped there, just to be safe. Then she gazed out over the splendid vista. Nicholas's home sat atop the highest point for miles. The view was spectacular. In the dark sky, a trillion stars twinkled while the rising moon hung above the countryside. The slopes were highlighted and fog lay in the valleys between, reflecting the silver luminosity of moon glow.

Heather hugged herself. Her bare feet were planted firmly apart to provide a steady foundation for her muddled brain which continued to spin crazily from too much romance. "It's absolutely breathtaking," she said. She tried to imprint a picture on her mind. "It's like standing on a cloud and gazing down on a surrealistic painting of earth by Dali."

Nicholas remained at the door. "I take it, you like the view."

"I've never seen anything quite like it," she said. "Never."

While Heather continued to savor her tranquil surroundings, Nicholas was somewhat surprised at his patience. He was perfectly content, just standing here.

Finally, she drew in a long breath and exhaled it on a sigh. "Thank you, Nicholas," she said. "I've made you wait long enough."

"Heather, don't move a muscle." His tone brooked no argument. "Wait until after I've turned on the lights. You've probably lost your bearings in the dark."

Heather stood as she was, feet wide apart, arms akimbo. When the lights flashed on, she blinked in surprise because the illumination came, not from the side of the house, but from the pool at her feet.

She had no idea of the picture she presented to Nicholas as he stood behind her at the patio door. Every inch of her silhouette was bathed in soft blue light. Like a magician's illusion, the fabric of her skirt seemed to vanish when the rays flowed around her legs, defining their shape for Nicholas's appreciative gaze. He stood with bated breath, staring. The only clue to the true condition of his physical state was the slight tinkling of the cups on the tray he still held above his shoulder.

"Can I move now, Nicholas?"

"If you must," he mumbled out of her hearing. He walked toward her, but he had to take his time because his legs were shaky. "Yes," he said aloud, "come over here and sit down."

Heather strolled across the terrace and sat in the chair he offered. Nicholas sat beside her and poured large cups of steaming coffee.

"I think you've just had a peak experience," he said, silently adding that he assuredly had. When he handed her a cup, he saw her sparkling eyes and was instantly captivated.

"I can't quite describe what I felt." She hesitated, then abruptly turned to face Nicholas. "But don't you get that wonderful sensation every time you look out your door?"

"I haven't had it for a long time, honey." His mouth lifted in a secret smile when his mind conjured the image of Heather, her light-traced form. "But I sure got it tonight." The warmth of the memory colored his words, flowed through his body, aroused him all over again.

Heather sipped from her cup. "This is good coffee," she said. Then she pinned him with a wary look. "You put something in it."

"Not just something," he said, chuckling. "That smooth flavor comes from fine old Irish whiskey."

"Well, it's wonderful," she said, taking another drink

"'Tis a better cup you'll be havin', colleen, with a dollop of whipped cream," he said, his thick brogue, warm, inviting. He shook the frosty canister, then made a snowy swirl in the middle of her brew.

"This is my only cup, Nicholas." She licked a whipped cream mustache from her upper lip and grinned. "I don't want to get tiddly again."

The moments passed quietly while they finished their coffee. Abruptly Heather straightened. "My feet are cold, Nicholas."

"Give them to me." He reached for her ankles. "I'll warm them for you."

She lifted her feet into his lap. He massaged her toes, brought back life and warmth and made them tingle. Heather watched him as he bent to his task. She experienced no embarrassment.

Perhaps she was destined to be here, she thought. In this place, at this time, with this man.

How strange, Nicholas mused, that he should be sitting here, massaging Heather's feet and legs. Had he ever thought of doing this? he asked himself. The answer was no. He'd only given her memory a passing moment, an "I wonder what ever happened to..." kind of thought. And now? He dreamed of her.

"Does that feel better?" When she didn't answer he lifted his head and saw that Heather's attention was riveted on the shimmering water in his pool. "You aren't even here."

"Yes, I am." Then she laughed lyrically. "Well, not right here here, in my chair, no," she admitted. She leaned forward to speak confidentially. "To tell you the truth, Nicholas, I've been trying to figure out why your pool attracts fog."

"It isn't fog, it's steam." When she just sat there, looking puzzled, Nicholas smiled indulgently. "The pool's heated, honey."

"It is?" Heather grinned from ear to ear and clapped her hands.

"And it costs a king's ransom."

"I'd like to take a dip now." Her tone was prim, though she continued to smile broadly. "Please."

"Is it the Irish coffee or you talking?"

She blinked, squinted, then gave up and giggled. "I betcha I'm stone cold sober."

Nicholas peered closely at the woman, gauging the reliability of her statement. "In my opinion, you are only one of the three. Cold!"

"Oh, don't be a pooppy old professor." She tipped her head from side to side as she clucked her tongue, very aware of what she was saying. Acting a little tipsy was a good cover. It freed her, but only because she trusted Nicholas. "Please," she begged, "Oh, please, please, please, Nicholas, let's swim."

"You didn't bring a suit." He felt honor bound to say it.

Instead of giving him an immediate answer, Heather's soft laughter vibrated across the space between them. It was provocative, downright sexy, he thought. He inhaled deeply so he wouldn't groan out loud.

"I've been walking around in one all evening, Nicholas." She pointed to her dress. "I'm wearing it."

Nicholas's brow shot up. Now he knew she was tipsy. "Heather, you can't swim in that beautiful dress."

Heather rose and stood before Nicholas. Then she smiled and handed him one of the long strings of her sash. "Pull," she ordered in a low, seductive voice.

Nicholas gasped when Heather's skirt slid away from her body and fell in a shimmering puddle around her bare feet.

"See?" She laughed softly. "I to-o-old you." She turned slowly, resplendent in her Burgundy leotard. From the high cut of the leg to the low cut of the bodice, it showed every

curve and valley of her body. "Did I surprise you?" Her childlike tone belied its source. "Did I?"

"Very!" wheezed Nicholas, almost choking.

"Then we can swim?"

Nicholas could feel his blood begin to boil again, but he had to give her one last warning. "You may regret this in the morning."

"Why?"

"You may catch cold?"

"In a heated pool?" She placed her hands on her hips, flexed one knee, and gave him a look of disbelief. "Pa-shaw!"

Then she stepped to the edge. "Come on, Nicholas, last one in is a poop old professor."

"Wait, Heather!" Nicholas shouted. "I have to get into my trunks." His alarm was genuine. He had no idea how she'd react when she hit the warm water. "You have to wait for me, Heather. I mean it."

Heather gave him a beguiling smile, a teasing light danced in her eyes. "I'll bet you've got something on under those slacks that'll serve."

Then she dove in.

There was nothing else for Nicholas to do. As quick as he could, he stripped to his briefs and rushed poolside. He searched the water while his heart pounded. He didn't know if he'd have to pull Heather, unconscious, from the bottom.

At that same instant, Heather's head popped above the surface. The sound of her delicious laughter vibrated up one side of Nicholas's bare frame and down the other.

"My, my, my!" Heather's provocative exclamation rose in the steamy vapors. Oh, acting a little tipsy was more fun than she'd had in years!

She floated toward Nicholas and continued to gaze at him where he stood, poised on the edge of the pool. She laughed again and the sound was totally decadent. Nicholas realized Heather's rather straight-laced spirit had finally been liberated. He'd thought from the first moment he'd met her at Lake Honor that she needed to make a conscious effort to begin to live her life again, after such a long period of putting other's needs before her own. It was obvious, tonight she'd reached the same decision.

With wanton deliberation, Heather surveyed Nicholas's body from the top of his dark curly head to the tips of his curling toes. Then she swept her smoky gaze back to his eyes. She detected suppressed excitement there, and perhaps a small measure of embarrassment, too.

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but his stubborn pride refused to permit retreat from her devouring visual perusal. She noticed how his hands were balled loosely on his narrow hips, yet his eyes remained defiant. Then her sultry gaze descended to his briefs.

"I had no idea professors wore those." Then she laughed musically, and blew bubbles in the water like an enchanted child. Yet she continued to hold his attention with her womanly gaze. "I simply had no idea!" she said again as her shimmering eyes admired his abbreviated black briefs. "A bikini?"

Nicholas's body stiffened with indignation, his dark eyes shot challenging sparks. "You'd be surprised at how many of us pooppy old professors are not nearly so crotchety as some of our former students might believe."

Dammit, his skin was crawling, he thought, fuming. Was this how a female beauty contestant felt on the runway? Or a guy who was a Chippendale dancer? Now, on top of everything else, he could feel his body change along with his chemistry. Would he be able to control it?

Although Heather would have been content to admire his athletic form forever, she knew she had to break the tension between them. Soon, Nicholas would become incensed enough to drown her.

Blowing more bubbles, she floated away on her back. Her firm breasts cruised above the waterline. Then she treaded water and hit the surface with great gusto, splashing the handsome professor full on his chest. He gasped and she laughed. That is, until she imagined she was floating in space with Nicholas. Then she gave him a dreamy smile.

"Come on in, Professor," she drawled. "The water's fine."

Nicholas swore mightily as he made a clean dive and swam under water to her side. He was determined to make her reconsider her description of him. Stodgy, indeed! Moving quickly, he lifted Heather high above the water and threw her over his head. She hadn't anticipated the speed of his attack, and when she came up again, she was coughing and sputtering.

"Oh, you fiend!" She tried to clear her throat. "I think I swallowed half your damn pool."

"That's what you get for tormenting me." His tone was pitiless. "Now come here like a good water baby," he instructed, "or..." He started toward her.

"No, Nicholas," she begged, "please, don't do it again. It scared me."

He glided to her side. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry." He eased her body against his length. "I didn't mean to frighten you, honey." He kissed her neck, sending delicious waves of heat through every fiber of her body. When he stroked her hair away from her eyes, his fingers caught on the comb in her thick hair. "Let me put this poolside," he said, "so it won't get lost, okay?"

Heather nodded, afraid her voice would reveal her heightened emotional state. What really frightened her was how she was reacting to Nicholas's nearness. Perhaps she'd let the genie too far out of the bottle.

Gently, he removed the comb. Her sable tresses cascaded to the water, lazily fanned out upon the surface. Nicholas smiled tenderly as he explored her features with his eyes and his fingertips.

"You look mystical, Heather," he murmured. He traced her brows, lingered at her cheekbones, slid languidly down the sides of her slender neck. His fingers administered a sensual massage along the responsive cords on either side while his thumbs played at the corners of her upturned mouth. "Magical, too," he said. "Like a Greek sea nymph rising from the emerald mist."

He continued to study her features until he centered his attention upon her full parted lips. Then he leaned toward

her, and just before he kissed her, he whispered. "And all these years, I thought it was a myth."

Nicholas's kiss was gentle, tender. He held her close to his body. Heather wanted to be kissed harder, but she was unsure of herself, shy about initiating the change. Tentatively, she dropped her hands to his waist where she could feel the tautness of his muscles. Then she lifted her hands slowly along his strong back.

He sensed her need then, and deepened the kiss. The subtle difference in his tactics, the increased pressure of his lips, the gentle surge of his tongue into her mouth, caused Heather to draw her nails along his spine until their sweeping journey ended at the elastic band of his low-slung briefs.

Her sigh of surrender was drowned out by the groan that erupted from deep inside Nicholas. Their response to each other exploded into a passion that wreaked havoc on their sensible intentions. Heather's brain spun, yet stored for tomorrow, this delirious, delicious moment she shared with Nicholas. It was her final dream come true.

I want this, she reflected. I want him!

That thought so unhinged her deliberation, she tightened her arms around Nicholas, tried to match the strength of his embrace. "Oh, Nicholas," she cried softly, "You're my fantasy come true."

He moved against her and she was made achingly aware of his throbbing arousal. "Fantasies have no substance," he said, his voice gruff. "It's me or nothin'."

"Then I guess you're it," she said. She slid her dripping index finger down his nose, across his mustache to his lips,

ending in a meandering circle on his bearded chin. "My one and only..."

Unexpectedly he kissed her so hard she was momentarily dazed. "The hell with all these word games," he declared. He kissed her again, but this time, Heather was ready. Their kiss set off Roman candles and skyrocketed inside their hearts.

"I think you're my dream girl, Heather."

Heather's eyes questioned his words. "How can you be so sure?"

Nicholas gathered her into his arms, and he kissed her boldly. "Because," he murmured, kissing her again and again, "I've been waiting for you for a very long time, only I didn't know it until we met again."

All pretense of being inebriated vanished. "Are you serious?"

"Of course, I'm serious, honey." He played with a curl on her cheek. "Who better to dream about, than my favorite honor student?"

"I'm not a student anymore," she said. His words caused a little ache in her heart. She now realized she was willing to move heaven and earth because she wanted to be. "Anyway, I doubt I could earn any honors today."

He smoothed her hair away from her forehead. "Actually, sweetheart, what you are today is a quantum leap better as far as I'm concerned."

"What could I possibly be, that would be better than that?"

"My equal."

Heather inhaled sharply, her long lashes settled on her flushed cheeks. When she opened her eyes again, stars

sparkled in their depths, so bright, they competed with those in the heavens. "Oh, Nicholas," she said. The kiss she gave him alluded to her unspoken thoughts. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me." He sounded breathless. "It's true." A groan slipped from his parted lips. "Oh, baby," he whispered, his voice ragged. "Come here."

They kissed. Their entwined bodies revolved slowly to a celestial carousal song. Silky smooth, they slid beneath the surface of the water, then rose languidly into the steaming vapor. The inner cadence of their hearts increased with each kiss, each touch. Their breathing became strained, harsh, as their galloping emotions overtook intense desire.

"Heather," murmured Nicholas. "I want to look at you."

Heather's head lolled to the side. Her heart beat rapidly, her loins ached. "Yes, Nicholas." Her voice was husky with emotion. "Oh, yes."

His trembling hands eased the narrow straps off her shoulders. Then he lowered the top to her waist. Eager to help him, Heather put her hands on his shoulders and lifted her body out of the water so he could peel the suit from her legs. Like an NBA star, he lobbed the garment over his head in a dripping sky hook, and they both heard it fall with a watery thud onto the patio.

When Heather began to slide back into the water, Nicholas gripped her tightly around her legs, holding her above him as he hugged her body against the unyielding solidness of his chest.

"Be still, Sea Nymph," he whispered. His dark eyes smoldered with desire. "I want to see you by moon glow."

To Heather, it seemed the most natural thing in the world to do.

"Oh, Heather, you're so beautiful." His voice was touched with wonder. "You're exquisite, sweetheart."

Heather gazed down at Nicholas's face and saw the worshipful look in his smoky eyes. Then he smiled. His warm gaze lazily explored the shape of her torso as he released his hold. Slowly, slowly, he let her slippery body glide over his hair-matted chest. The erotic sensation evoked twin moans of pleasure.

"I need to kiss you, Heather." His voice was soft, yet urgent. "I need to kiss you. Now."

"I want you to kiss me, Nicholas."

But she was overwhelmed by her stampeding emotions when Nicholas lifted her again, then tipped back his head to kiss her breasts, first one, then the other. He explored the hardened peaks, drew each one deep into his mouth. And then, he kissed the valley between. Afterward he kissed her lips with an unleashed passion that set Heather aflame. She arched her back, experienced overpowering desire when waves of molten pleasure washed away the pain in her soul.

"Tell me what you want, darling." Nicholas's voice sounded strained, almost out of control. "Tell me, Heather," he entreated. "What do you want?"

"I want you to..." Heather stopped to draw in a deep steadying breath. "I want you to love me." She tightened her hold on his shoulders. "Oh, Nicholas, I've waited so long. Please, love me."

Like a stranger observing another person's actions, Heather heard her voice rise in supplication. Then, from far, far away, she heard the screech of a siren. The sound grew louder and louder, until Heather thought surely her brain would disintegrate from the deafening sound.

Her tremulous moan at first signaled the panic she was beginning to experience, but soon, that message was overridden by the thrill of Nicholas's knowing touch when his lips brushed over her rigid nipples again. Then that sensation was eclipsed when his fingers outlined their round shape, and then rubbed them hard against his hair-roughened chest.

Meanwhile, another part of her mind sensed the excitement of the moment, experienced extreme gratification when Nicholas's manhood throbbed against the barrier to her hidden chamber of love. As she opened, she murmured over and over again, "Love me, Nicholas ... please, please, love me."

Suddenly she heard a loud report and a whistling sound near her head. Then another. And another. In the same instant, she realized it was gunfire.

"Oh, God, Baxter!" she screamed. "Don't kill me."

Nicholas held her so tightly she hurt. She tried to tell him she couldn't breath under water. Then she felt herself falling, spiraling backward, into a bottomless black hole.

The screaming siren followed her terrifying descent.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 4

When Heather awoke she felt deliciously rested so she smiled and stretched luxuriantly. Her fingers reached for the ceiling, her toes wiggled toward the end of the mattress. Then she exhaled on a sigh and let her arms drop in a wide arch upon her bed. A surprised "ooff!" made her eyes pop open.

"Do you have to take all the bed, honey?"

Heather's head snapped to the side. Next to her, lay Nicholas, propped on one elbow and smiling as he gazed down at her.

"Good morning." His voice was a silky whisper.

"What are you doing in my bed?" An instant after Heather screeched she was immersed in pain.

"Said Baby Bear." Nicholas pressed his nose to hers and she looked cross-eyed. "Got a big head, Baby Bear?"

Heather moaned disconsolately as she shut her eyes and clutched her skull with both hands. She was sure she could stop the bombs exploding in her brain if only she held tight enough, long enough.

"What are you doing in my bed?" This time she was careful to keep her voice modulated.

"If you'll take a peek around you, I think you'll agree that's my line."

"How absurd!" she said. But when she opened her eyes and looked, she jerked to a sitting position and was immediately punished. Her brain detonated into a million spinning pieces. "What am I doing in your bed?"

Nicholas chuckled softly. "Now that, Princess, is a very, very long story."

"Don't you dare laugh at me, you monster," she hissed as she fell back on her pillow. "I'm dying, Nicholas. I'm dying in a strange man's bed."

He let pass a correction for her unclear sentence structure. Was his bed a strange male? Did she think him strange? Or was it neither of the above choices?

"I'll tell you what's really strange, kiddo. You're dying without your boots on..." He paused, on the verge of laughter. "...or anything else."

"What?" Frantic, she ran trembling hands over her body. There was nothing but a thin satin sheet between her fingers and her flesh. "Oh, no!" She moaned again. "What have I done?"

"Nothing much," said Nicholas. "Don't worry about it."

But he sounded so smug, Heather feared the worst. "What's that supposed to mean?" she snapped. "I wake up in your bed. Naked as a Jay bird. And you tell me I've nothing to worry about. Well!" she huffed. "Your estimation of the situation and mine are light years apart." Then her haughty expression vanished, only to be replaced by a frown. "The awful truth is ... I can't remember."

"Shall I enlighten you, Sea nymph?"

"Sea nymph?" She watched sparks erupt in his smoldering dark eyes when he nodded. "I'm afraid to ask ... but I have to know." She held her head with both hands again and was unaware of the appealing picture she presented to Nicholas.

"Maybe if I just lie here, very still, I'll wake up," she whispered. "I might still be sleeping."

"Fraid not, sweetheart."

"I've never been in such a compromising position in my life." She covered her eyes with her arms when great tears gathered.

"But your position is very lovely to behold, Baby Bear." He grinned when Heather indignantly folded her arms across her breasts after she caught him looking at her blue satin clad torso. "I think it's a little late for modesty."

"Ooh!" Tears rolled from the corners of her tightly shut eyes. She turned her head away, her cheeks burned. "Tell me," she said. "But can you sorta skip over the gory details?"

"Can you remember anything at all?"

She tried to think. It was almost impossible. "We had dinner?"

"Yes."

"We danced."

"That's right."

"We kissed?"

"Oh, yes, and it was wonderful," he said. "What else?"

"We went out to the patio."

"Very good."

"And ... we went swimming."

"Excellent."

"And then ... and then..." Humiliation shaded her tone as her memory flooded back. "Oh, no!"

"What is it?" asked Nicholas. Had she remembered the danger? he wondered. The rifle shots? Her collapse? Her near drowning? "What do you recall, honey? Tell me."

"You took off my suit." She whispered the words. "I actually helped you."

"So what?" He leaned over and kissed her ear lobe. "You have a beautiful body."

His kiss sent her upright again. "Oh, Professor, I don't know what to say." Unexpectedly she felt like a coed again, and her use of Nicholas's title proved it.

"It strikes me, you're being overly formal for this scene," he said, "considering we're lying nude in my bed."

Heather's blue eyes registered shock. She clutched the slippery sheet under her chin when she twisted around to stare at Nicholas. Then she turned back again because she was too embarrassed to meet his calm gaze.

"Why ... why don't you have on any clothes?" She just wasn't up to saying nude or naked when it concerned him.

"I never sleep any other way."

"Stupid question," she muttered.

His gaze narrowed when he perused her smooth tanned back, all the way to the dimples decorating her tailbone. And though his body reacted sharply, he knew he could not follow suit. There was too much to be discussed.

"Honey, you'd better lie down again," he said. "The view from here is so tempting, I won't be able to control my lecherous instincts much longer."

When he feathered strokes all the way down her spine, she threw herself abruptly on her back and almost broke his wrist

under her. After he retrieved his arm, she lay stiff and resigned.

"All right, let's get this over with." Her voice quavered.

"Do you remember diving into the pool?"

"Yes."

"And do you also remember that you forced me to strip to my skivvies tout suite?" He released a deprecating chuckle.

"And enjoyed the view, I might humbly add."

"I remember," she said, "but you had a choice."

Momentarily, the corners of her mouth lifted in a secret smile. She'd really enjoyed acting as if she were totally tipsy; it had liberated her in a way she'd never thought possible.

"Some choice," he declared. "Either I could guard my gentlemanly virtue or let you drown. Then, to add insult to injury, you splashed me."

"And you dove in, and almost drown me," snapped Heather. "I remember that, too."

"Forget about our water fight," said Nicholas with a knowing smile. Since she still didn't remember the gun shots, he wanted to take full advantage of the situation. "Let's get to the good part."

"Go on." Inside, she felt excited, eager to relive the evening's pleasure, but something more was there, she sensed. "I can't stand not knowing. Everything."

"We kissed." He paused, savoring the moment. "It was gentle at first, but you wanted more," he said. "And so did I. After we kissed again, we took off your suit." He smoothed her hair away from her forehead. "Do you remember me watching you by moon glow?"

Heather pictured the scene in her mind. She couldn't speak, could only sigh and nod.

"Then I asked you what you wanted?" His words smoldered. "What you needed?"

Heather gasped. Her vivid memory was so intense, she slid down in the bed and yanked the satin sheet over her head.

Nicholas chuckled again, but this time, wickedly. He leaned over to where the outline of her ear was evident beneath the tautly held cover. "And then..." he whispered. "And then..."

"Yes, yes," she cried from beneath her protection.

"You passed out."

Heather was sure her brain disintegrated. "I what?" she shrieked, and then had to pay dearly for making such a loud sound. She folded back her winding sheet and stared at Nicholas. "I fainted?"

Nicholas nodded. "Dead away." He tucked the sheet over her breasts again. "Let's at least try to keep a modicum of modesty," he said, though he knew he was needling her. "That's better."

"But how did I get in here?" She bit on her lower lip, her eyes saucer round. "And how did you ever get me out of the pool?"

"I said it was a very long story," he reminded her. "Do you remember anything else?"

"No," she said, then instantly changed her mind. "I mean, yes. I heard a siren. Inside my head."

"You probably heard that noise as you were losing consciousness," he said. "Anything else?"

"I don't think..." she began. "Wait." Her brow furrowed in concentration as her brain fought against revealing what remained hidden in her memory. "I heard something else," she said. "An explosion? No, it wasn't that loud." She inhaled sharply, then whimpered in a terrified voice. "Nicholas, someone shot at me," she cried. "Someone tried to kill me."

Nicholas ignored propriety and gathered Heather against him. "Shh, sweetheart." He kissed her forehead and held her close. "I think the shooter was after me."

"But why would anyone want to kill you?" She snuggled her face between his hairy chest and his whiskered chin. "You're a very nice person."

In as few words as possible, Nicholas explained the circumstances of the last two months. "I got the eleventh letter yesterday morning. I'll show you copies later," he said. "The sender has to be very sick."

Silently Heather reviewed some of her more heated arguments with her brother-in-law. He was sick, too, she decided.

"Heather?" he said, breaking into her sober ruminating. "Who's Baxter?"

She gulped. "How do you know about him?"

"When the shots were fired, you shouted the name," said Nicholas. "Right before I pulled you underwater, you begged someone named Baxter not to kill you."

Nicholas lifted her chin and gazed into her frightened eyes. Whoever the bastard was, he'd have to settle accounts with Nicholas for terrorizing his little Heather. "Who is he?"

Heather tried to move closer to Nicholas's warm body because suddenly she was chilled to the bone by fear. "Baxter Stockton is married to my sister."

Then, as he forced himself to listen quietly to her long story, Nicholas's teeth gnashed and the muscles in his jaws went into spasm.

"I thought the end was in sight after Kitty promised she'd contact him," she ended. "But, now this?"

"I hate bullies." Nicholas swore under his breath. "We'll have to add this evidence to the sheriff's report, of course," he continued. "Personally I don't think he's the one who fired the gun, but if he doesn't have an alibi, he'll become a suspect."

"When did you call the sheriff?" she asked, shuddering in his arms.

"After I fished you out of the pool." Lord, he could drown in Heather's wide trusting eyes, he thought.

"Tell me exactly what happened. You're scaring me again."

"You scared me out of two year's growth," he countered. "At first, I thought you'd been shot. When I didn't see any blood I realized I'd either drowned you or you'd only fainted."

"Only!" She sniffed with disdain. How could she have gone through all that, and not remembered it when she'd awakened this morning? she wondered. The answer was simple. Overwhelming fear had blocked the memory. "You make it sound like women faint for you every day."

"Never in my pool," he said, deadpan.

"I can't imagine how you got me out." But her imagination obligingly conjured a small derrick at the side of the pool, hoisting her unconscious naked body from the water.

"I floated you over to the ladder," said Nicholas. "Then, I just lifted you out, dried you off, and put you to bed." He smiled at her flushed cheeks. "You are a very tiny person, honey."

"You could have put a pajama top on me."

"I don't own a pair," he said. "Remember?"

"Well, a T-shirt then," she countered. "Dammit, have you no shame?"

"Nope." He shook his head and grinned. "Besides, I've no reason to be ashamed. I put you into one of my sweat suits to warm you up."

"So where is this alleged sweat suit?"

"You took it off," he said. "I covered you with my electric blanket set on high. After the sheriff left I—"

"You mean to tell me he was here? And I don't remember?"

"Honey, you'd fallen into a deep sleep," he said soothingly. "You were exhausted. Anyway, when I checked on you, you'd tossed the suit on the floor." His dark eyes danced devilishly. "I think you got hot."

Heather gazed down at her lightly covered body. "I don't see any electric blanket, Nicholas," she said. "Are you sure you weren't my heater?"

Nicholas chuckled and patted her shoulder. "Very good," he said. "Obviously you haven't lost your sense of humor."

She folded her arms across her chest, her suspicious gaze narrowed. "I'm waiting for an answer, Nicholas."

"When you went to sleep, you weren't in this bed."

"Then how did I get here? Fly?"

"You walked in your sleep, I guess," he said. "When I went to bed, you were sound asleep in my guest room down the hall. I thought sure you'd rest comfortably in there," he said. "But, sometime before dawn, you surprised the hell out of me by showing up in my doorway."

"I came to you?" she said, subconsciously refusing to accept the truth. "Now, really!"

"Scout's honor," he replied as he made the Scout sign with his free hand. "And you frightened me, Heather."

"I frightened you?" she exclaimed, touching her chest with her index finger, still in denial. "Tiny me?"

Nicholas eased her more snugly in his arms. "It was what you were doing that scared me, honey," he said. "You were screaming hysterically. Over and over again, you cried out, 'I'm all alone. I'm all alone.'"

Her suspicions evaporated and she covered her gasp with her hand. "Oh, no! What's happening to me?"

"Easy, baby, easy. It's okay." He held her close. "You had a nightmare. When I told you I'd keep you safe, you came to bed with me, and I held you until you woke up."

Heather shivered violently. Nicholas held on tight.

"And that is how, Baby Bear, you came to be in my bed," he said, trying for a light touch. But then he gave up the effort. "Oh, honey, it must have been a terrible dream. I've

never seen anyone so frightened in my life." His words were soft, gentle. "Do you have these nightmares often?"

Heather closed her eyes and pulled in her lower lip. Now she knew what must have happened. "I hadn't had the nightmares for years," she said. "But when Kitty and Baxter started fighting, the bad dreams came back with a vengeance."

"Want to tell me about them?"

Heather felt as if she must tell him. She'd kept it a secret from everyone long enough, she decided. He was her friend. And she sensed she could trust him.

"The dreams started soon after my father died," she began. "At first, I experienced the terror only occasionally. Then, gradually, the frequency increased. Soon it was every night."

Heather took a deep breath and exhaled with a shudder. "I became afraid," she continued. "Afraid to fall asleep. I'd think of a hundred reasons why I had to stay up. But the sleepless nights took their toll until I'd simply collapse." She looked into Nicholas's compassionate eyes and saw her pain reflected there. "My body demanded rest, you see."

"How did you overcome the nightmares the first time?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"Promise."

"I psychoanalyzed myself," she replied. "I just sat down one day and had a long talk with me. And I was successful, too," she said. "I figured my parents' deaths were probably at the root of my disturbing dreams because the scene never changes. Mom and Dad walk, hand in hand, toward an

ethereal light on the horizon while I'm left behind. I call to them, beg them to come back to me." She inhaled deeply, then sighed. "They never do."

Nicholas kissed a tear from her cheek.

"I suppose it was difficult for me to accept the full responsibility for my little sister's welfare and education," she continued. "And, to be honest, I know I resented not being able to graduate from college."

Nicholas held her close, silently transmitting the warmth and comfort and safety of his strength.

Yet Heather trembled again. "I thought I'd cured myself," she said. "But there must be something I missed because the stress of my sister's marital situation triggered a return of the nightmares."

"It's no wonder you dreamed again last night," said Nicholas. "Especially when you thought Baxter might be the one who shot at us."

"Yes, the dreams are definitely tied to emotional stress." She gazed into Nicholas's eyes and felt the warmth of his compassion. "The attack was just the last of the evening's many unexpected and unusual emotional events."

Nicholas didn't like the look in Heather's eyes. "Tell me what you're thinking, honey."

"Last night I believe I overstepped the boundaries of my conservative nature," she said. She gazed at the ceiling, blinking against insistent tears. "It was stupid of me. Childish."

"Or, perhaps, you made an earthshaking discovery about yourself," he said. "You may have found out you're a

desirable woman capable of giving and receiving love." Gently he kissed her lips. "Do you want to know what I think?"

Solemn, she could only nod, suddenly at a loss for words.

"I think something very serious, but absolutely marvelous, has happened between us," he said. "I care for you, Heather. I care that you're happy or sad. Or that you've been frightened by a guy named Baxter." He kissed another tear from the corner of her eye. "Sweetheart," he whispered, "I want to protect you."

"And I hate the idea that someone wants to hurt you, Nicholas. Or worse," she replied. "I care for you, too, but I still think I acted foolishly."

"Then open your eyes and gaze upon another fool," he said. "There may be no turning back for me."

Heather scooted away from him and peered into his sparkling eyes. "Don't tease me, Nicholas." She bit the insides of her lips for control before she could continue. "The last thing I need or want from you is pity." She turned her head away. "You probably only feel sorry for me."

Nicholas changed her position so they were face to face again. He kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her pale cheeks. "I am sorry for all you've gone through, but that's just part of what I feel." He smoothed her long tousled hair as he searched for words to express his intense feelings. "My mind, my body. My very soul is telling me, I could spend the rest of my life with someone like you."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I think I might be falling in love with you."

"But people don't fall in love in a month," she declared.
"Do they?"

"Maybe not. But I was thinking Cupid had made quick work of me." His deprecating chuckle rumbled from his chest. "I do know I could have died with happiness last night, when you asked me to love you."

"You almost did die," she whispered, experiencing fear again.

"Don't think about that part, honey. Just think about us. Are you sorry you asked me to love you in the pool?" he asked. "Was it only moon glow madness?"

"No, I don't regret a moment," Heather said without hesitation. She gave Nicholas an impulsive kiss. "I'm still embarrassed, that's all. I've never behaved so ... so..." She shrugged and gave him a helpless look.

"I should hope it's not too different from your future behavior with me," he said, hugging her. "I had a wonderful time. That is, until we got shot at." He pressed against her, their lips only inches apart. "Shall we kiss again, without the moon glow? Let's see if anything's different this morning."

There was no gentleness in his kiss this morning. His firm lips covered hers with a wanton thirst, so great, he strove to quench it forever. When he tasted her lips, seeking entry, he thrust boldly within until his tongue mated with hers. He was a pirate, plundering her mouth for its treasure. Unafraid, she surrendered to his powerful embrace, willing to be his captive. Their passion took them to dizzying heights. Limbs entwined as Heather curved her body along Nicholas's solid length.

He buried his face in her mass of dark hair, inhaling her musky scent. With ragged breath, he tried to measure the intensity of his arousal. It was an impossible task. "Nothing's changed for me, Princess," he murmured. Wonder filled his voice as he kissed his way back to her mouth. "How about you?"

Before their lips met, Heather tried to wiggle free. "Time, time," she said, gasping.

"There's plenty of time, sweetheart," he said. He tightened his hold around her writhing body. "Come here, my little wench," he said. He ignored her unexpected request, and dazzled her instead, with his fiery kisses. "Tempt me with your womanly charms."

Heather knew she must convince him to stop now. If she didn't have time to get her newly discovered passion under control, she'd surrender everything to him. And this, she did not want to do.

"Nicholas ... your ... house ... keeper," she exclaimed between kisses. "She'll be here soon."

"It's Sunday," he replied as he increased his ardor. "Mrs. Johnson doesn't work on Sundays so you can belay your fears." He gazed into her smoky eyes and watched them change to those of a frightened doe. "Perhaps," he ventured, formally, "your fear wears a coat of a different color?"

Heather's worst fear was that he'd think her a tease. But until she could talk about it, she'd cloud the issue. "You even mix metaphors in bed."

"Only when I have nothing better to do," he said. "Come here, baby. One kiss on the lips is worth two metaphors in the bush."

When he smacked his lips together and winked, making known his intentions, Heather dissolved in laughter. But her lighthearted mood was short-lived after Nicholas gave her a tender kiss.

"I'd like to wake like this every morning," he whispered. "Only I wouldn't stop with kisses."

"I know."

"I want to make love to you, Princess."

"I'd like that, too."

Nicholas looked closely at Heather's face. Her brows were knit together. She was preoccupied. And worried. "Are you thinking about that overstuffed brother-in-law of yours?" he asked. "Don't be afraid of him. In no time, St. Louis's finest will pick him up for questioning. He can't hurt you, honey."

"I wasn't thinking about him," she said. She turned toward Nicholas and kissed his lips, his bearded chin, the dark curls on his chest. She could hear the thunder of his increased heart rate, and feel the leashed strength in his arms when they encompassed her body. "I can't stop worrying about you, Nicholas," she said. "Who would threaten you? And why?"

"Obviously, it's someone who's emotionally ill," he replied, returning her kisses ten fold. "Don't think about it, sweetheart."

"Do you think it's a man?"

So much for making love with possibly the woman of his dreams, he decided with a grievous sigh. "I've always thought it was," he said. "The evidence points, more and more, to a man, or to a large, stocky woman. Sheriff Eagle tracked size twelve boot prints from the lake shore to the place in the woods where the shooter hid," he continued. "He also found three ejected casings from an M-16 rifle at the site."

"Any prints?"

"Wiped clean. Say," he said, "you could be a Miss Marple type in my next book."

"Any Mike Hammer fan knows about prints."

Nicholas gave a roguish laugh, then kissed Heather soundly. "That's nothing to what you'll learn now that you're a Peter Roan fan," he said. "Want a quick lesson?"

"Yes, tell me more about the rifle."

"If I must," he said with another long suffering sigh. "That type weapon was used by our troops in Vietnam and in Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf, as well as, our military today. It's also preferred by the Minute Men and other militant groups in this area," he said. "For decades, since the Korean Conflict onward, they've squirreled away formidable arsenals in caves on backwoods property, where they train in gorilla warfare."

"For heaven's sakes, why did they do that?"

"They'd be the first line of defense when America was attacked by the Communists," he said. "Now they're preparing for more terrorist attacks. They think America might be overrun."

"But why would a member of a far right group be after you?"

"Maybe he's a former student," he said, chuckling. "Maybe I flunked him."

"Dammit, Nicholas McCord, you just stop," Heather said. "This is not a laughing matter. Now think. What could he have against you?"

Nicholas exhaled slowly. "I have been thinking, sweetheart," he said. "And I can't come up with a damn thing."

Heather had an idea. "Who knows you're Peter Roan?"

"Only my mother and my agent," he said. "My editor doesn't even know my real name."

"I do."

"You couldn't have shot at me," he said as he eased her against his chest. "You were in my arms at the time. Like this," he added. "Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Kitty is your twin."

"Kitty is not my twin," exclaimed Heather. "I can assure you, were she my twin, she wouldn't be doing such crazy things with her life. She'd ... she'd have some good sense," she said, blustering. "And she'd think before she leaped."

"Yeah," agreed Nicholas as he tried to control the laughter rumbling around inside his chest. "Your twin would never do anything nuts, like driving over five hundred miles on a weekend so she could be with her fantasy man."

"Oh, you!" cried Heather. "Will you stop?" She hit Nicholas over the head with her pillow. "Until I met you again, my fantasy man said what I wanted him to say."

"What did you have him say?"

"He told me I was beautiful and desirable."

"Heather, my sweet," said Nicholas. "You are so very beautiful. I desire you more each moment I have you in my arms."

He kissed her repeatedly. But just as Heather was warming to his kisses, melting in his embrace, he pulled away and fell back on his pillow, swearing under his breath.

"I'll have to buy a different car," he said. "The miles to St. Louis will add up fast."

When Heather finally cooled her ardor and understood his complaint, she too collapsed upon the bed. They lay, side by side, overcome by the prospect of weekend travel. Indefinitely. Or, perish the thought, cried her heart, until their relationship cooled.

"I never thought about all the trips, back and forth," said Heather. Her heart filled with despair. "I doubt my car will take too many more miles," she continued. "And I can't expect you to drive to St. Louis all the time." She didn't know if she could stand being separated from him for more than a week at a time, but she knew she had to try. "We can write to each other," she said, keeping a stiff upper lip. "And, of course, we can still call."

Suddenly Nicholas snapped his fingers. "Wait a minute, I've got an idea!" He bolted from the bed, his face wreathed with smiles.

And that was all he wore.

Heather got in one really excellent look before she suffered minor cardiac arrest and slid beneath the satin sheet again. "Nicholas, look at yourself."

"What?" He looked down and laughed. "Oh, I completely forgot." He grabbed a short velour robe from the closet and threw it on. "Okay, you silly goose," he said as he pulled the black sash tight. "I'm covered now. Better than you."

Heather pulled herself into a sitting position after his last statement and glared at him. "You don't have to rub it in, Nicholas," she said. But he wasn't even listening.

Barefoot, he stalked back and forth across the deep pile gray carpet. Obviously, he was thinking about something important, making plans of some kind because he kept mumbling as he walked. Heather watched him for exactly one minute and then she could stand the suspense no longer.

"Well," she said, "are you going to tell me?"

Nicholas stopped pacing and smiled at her. "Only part of it," he said. "I've got an idea about getting you back in school. I have to make some inquiries first."

"What? Nicholas, you mean you found a scholarship? Tell me."

But he only shook his head. "Nope, don't even ask me about it because I'm not telling." His smile widened when he caught the spark of challenge in her eyes. "No, you can't make me, so don't try," he said. "Not even your hot little mouth could pull the information from my lips."

"Want to put that to the test, Professor?"

Heather's words wiggled across the room and slithered straight up Nicholas's bare legs to his loins. He expelled a low growl and covered the space to his bed and her body in one record pounce. When he kissed her, he thrust against her in a very suggestive manner. Heather was unable to stop her body from thrusting right back. Thank goodness, her fantasy man now had substance, she thought. He had substance to spare!

"Hey, baby," Nicholas crooned. "Want to come out and play with me next weekend?" His manhood swelled dramatically. "Better yet," he qualified, "we'll stay in and play."

"So long as we don't go near a pool."

"Spoilsport." He pinched her seat and jumped off the bed.

"Stop that," she exclaimed. When she tried to hit him with her pillow, she fell and landed halfway off the mattress. Yelping, she grabbed for the covers.

"If I keep you naked, my lovely wench," said Nicholas as he stroked his bearded chin, "I can have you in my bed forever."

Heather threw another pillow. "Will you clear out?" she said. "I have to put on my clothes."

"Sure thing." Grinning, he turned and strode toward the door.

"Nicholas?" Heather's sweet voice beguiled. "Where are my clothes?"

Nicholas stopped, but didn't turn. He knew he wore a smug grin. "It'll cost you a kiss."

"Very well." Sighing with resignation, she shut her eyes tight and puckered. "But just one." Heather wasn't prepared for the intensity of his kiss or for her breathless response so it was several minutes before the interlude ended.

"Your clothes are clean and hanging in my bathroom," he said, somewhat breathlessly. Then he threw her another kiss and strolled out the door. "Get a move on."

Heather sat in the middle of the bed, listening. When she heard the dishwasher begin its cycle, she threw back the sheet and made a mad dash for the bathroom door.

Just then, Nicholas peeked around the corner. "Gotcha!"

Heather froze for an instant, then continued her flight. "Not yet, you don't, Professor McCord, you cad." Then she slammed the door on his hearty laughter and locked it for good measure.

Later, when she strolled into the kitchen, Nicholas glanced up from his chores, did a double take, then folded his arms across his broad chest, and sighed melodramatically. "Now what did you do?"

"I just borrowed a shirt from you." She rolled up the sleeves and adjusted the shoulder seams, and made full use of her big blue eyes to prove her innocence.

"I can see that," he said. "But why?"

"This is not a daytime dress, Nicholas."

"Do you enjoy making me miserable?"

"Better you than me, Professor."

"Let's dance, I want to hold you."

"You've done quite a lot of that already today." When he came toward her anyway, she stamped her bare foot and

looked down at her toes. "By the way, do you know what I did with my shoes?"

"I think you left them in the living room. By the fireplace."

Heather didn't notice the golden lights dancing in Nicholas's eyes.

"You'd better check to be sure," he said. "Go on."

Heather padded obediently into the living room, now filled with sunlight instead of candle glow. Nicholas followed her. On the hearth, next to his shoes, sat hers.

Wide-eyed, Heather covered her mouth with her hands.

"Oh, my goodness!"

"What is it?"

"My shoes," she cried, pointing. "Look at my shoes."

"Well, well, well." He infused his words with an extra measure of wonder. "It appears old St. Nick made an unexpected visit to the McCord castle."

Heather turned to him, tears glistened in her eyes. Then she stood on tiptoe and placed a shy kiss on his lips. "Thank you, Nicholas." Her voice broke with emotion. "I never knew a man so dear."

"Those goodies are obviously from St. Nicholas," he said. "You should thank him."

"I just did," she whispered before she spun around again.

"No one better mistake me for a saint," he grumbled as he watched her dump the contents of her shoes right into her lap as she sat cross-legged on the floor.

"You're at least an angel," she declared. "Only a living, breathing angel of a man would do this for me."

He stood silently as she picked up a fresh miniature red rose, plucked at dawn from his garden. She touched the soft petals to her lips and kissed them as she breathed their sweet fragrance.

"A red rose."

"For someone very special."

Carefully she set it aside, then laughed as she sorted chocolates from gum. "I love sweet things."

"I guess that's why you like me."

She smiled up at him. "Think so?" Then her attention was drawn to a small package on the hearth. She looked back at Nicholas. "For me?"

He nodded. "Careful, honey, it's fragile."

When she removed the tissue paper and opened the lid, a cry of pure joy leaped from her breast. Instantly, she glanced at the mantel, then back to the gift in her hands. Tears blurred her vision as she got up and walked slowly toward Nicholas, holding the box like an offering.

"It's the Jenny Denton," she said. "Look."

"So it is." He continued to watch her face.

"But ... but it's yours, Nicholas," she said. "It belongs to you."

"No, Heather, now it belongs to you." He bent to kiss her. "Please accept it as a sign of my deep affection and regard for you."

Heather was aware that a special stillness pervaded the room. It seemed to add significance to his words. "Thank you, Nicholas." Solemnly she returned his kiss. "I shall treasure it."

"As I shall treasure you, sweetheart." He smoothed a curl from her cheek. "Come, breakfast is ready."

Heather turned back to the hearth to fetch the rose bud. "St. Nick didn't leave anything for you."

"Sure, he did," Nicholas called from the kitchen.

She followed his voice to the breakfast nook and sat down. After she placed the rose in her water glass, she sipped orange juice from a crystal tumbler. "What did he bring you, Nicholas?"

"You."

Heather spewed juice down the front of her borrowed white shirt.

Nicholas put his hands on his hips in mock consternation. "Child, I'm going to have to put you in a bib."

"Yes, Papa." She batted innocent blue eyes.

"I'm not that old!" he thundered, giving her a dark look.

"Act like a parent, get treated like one," she sang.

His scowl vanished instantly. "Ah, then," he said, "it follows ... if I act like a lover, I'll get treated like one."

She hiccupped. "Before breakfast?"

"Must you think of food at a time like this?"

"Yup."

"If you don't have your way with me soon," he said, "I'll throw myself into Lake Honor." He looked so pathetic. "Do you want me to be frozen and blue?"

"But one kiss from my dewy lips will melt you."

"Don't remind me," said Nicholas, moaning. Without another word, he brought two plates of scrambled eggs and

crisp bacon to the table and sat down to eat. "Am I to understand, you don't want to make love with me?"

Heather lowered her lashes over a suddenly embarrassed gaze. "I'm not ready yet, Nicholas," she said. "Please understand."

"I'm a patient man, sweetheart." He gazed into her eyes as he turned the pepper shaker over his food and added copious amounts to his eggs. "I want you to need me as much as I need you."

He was hit with a sneezing fit that lasted for several moments. After the siege, he sighed weakly and wiped tears from his eyes with his napkin. His face was very, very red.

"See?" he said. "I'm already coming down with pneumonia. Are you sure you don't want to reconsider?"

"Please don't push, Nicholas."

"I'll do my best, Heather." He sniffed loudly. "I just want you to know I may not last."

"You'll last," she said. "You're a tough old bird. Just like Ebon."

"Ha, Ebon's been alone so long he's forgotten what it's all about." Then Nicholas scowled again. "Ebon's traded his sexuality for tyranny," he said. "Is that what you want? A tyrant?"

"Certainly not," said Heather. She tried not to laugh at him. "I want a tender companion, a lover. But not just yet."

"Is it me?" he asked. "Or do you always feel this way when you're with a man?"

"That's just it, Nicholas," she finally admitted. "I've never been with a man. Ever."

Nicholas looked like he'd been pole axed. Then he opened his mouth to speak, but Heather held up her hand to stop him.

"Don't say anything," she said. "Let me try to explain." She looked into his eyes, feeling shy and out of her depth. "I've never before experienced the feelings I had with you last night and again this morning, and I have an idea they're just the beginning," she said. "It took all the willpower in me to stop myself from going on. You see, Nicholas, I'm old fashioned about making love." She gazed into his eyes. "Can you understand?"

She stroked his soft beard. "Right now, I feel as if I'm still living one of my fantasies," she continued. "I want it to last more than a few moments. Oh, I hope and pray it will last," she added fervently. "But until I know for sure and you know how you feel, I can't fight it alone. You'll have to be strong for both of us."

She laughed softly. "I'll probably never have a defense against you when you take me in your arms and hold me and kiss me the way you do," she admitted. "I've waited and dreamed so long, you see, that I don't want to fight my feelings."

She gave him a shy smile. "I crave your kisses, Nicholas," she said. "And I'm learning new things every sublime second I'm with you. You're so experienced."

She stopped and blushed furiously. "I've said too much. I'm sorry."

Without a word, Nicholas reached for her hand and lifted it to his lips, kissing her palm. The kiss sent ecstatic shock

waves along Heather's spine. She shivered, then laughed at herself.

"See?" she said. "I go all silly even when you touch me."

Nicholas's features softened at her words. "You're asking for super human control, my friend, after what you've revealed to me," he said. "Whoever told you I was strong where you were concerned?"

"You are strong, Nicholas," she said fiercely. "I always thought you were."

"You do bring out some of my better qualities, I'll give you that," he said. And that's not all she brings out! added his libido. "But I have a question for you."

"Yes?"

"How would you know I'm experienced?"

"I may be a novice," she said grandly, "but a woman can tell these things."

He rose and drew Heather into his arms. "I did witness a miracle last night," he said. "With one kiss, you became a woman, my woman."

"It happens in fairy tales all the time."

A hearty chuckle erupted from Nicholas's chest. "But, my darling woman, you never were a frog."

Heather buried her face in the front of his robe and hugged him with all her might. Then she croaked a tiny "brubbit."

Nicholas thrust her from him. "Next you'll have me believe, if I don't keep myself on a tight tether, you'll give me warts."

"It may be my only defense against your many charms, my Prince."

"Enough!" he bellowed. "We've got to get busy cleaning or Mrs. Johnson will have my head. She's a very moral woman. And I am a professor, after all."

"You certainly are," murmured Heather in a dreamy voice.

Instantly, Nicholas pulled Heather back into his arms. "One kiss, Princess?" he begged. "One taste of your dewy lips?"

"Only if you're strong enough for both of us."

"I promise to be very strong."

That was all Heather needed to hear. She surrendered as she leaned into him, lifted her arms to encircle his neck, and buried her fingers in his thick curls. When she melted in his arms, her lips parted and she brushed the tip of her tongue along the soft lining of Nicholas's mouth.

Nicholas's hands feverishly molded her body against his manhood. He groaned as he deepened the kiss. His assault on Heather's senses pushed them both toward oblivion. She did nothing to stop him, and without knowing it, tempted Nicholas far more than she was aware. She was experimenting. She was experiencing. She was learning.

And somewhere in Nicholas's brain, words flooded his consciousness. She trusts you. Don't abuse her trust.

He continued to kiss her, stroke her. She returned his kisses, savoring each like one of her chocolates from St. Nick.

When he finally released her, Heather could have swooned. "Mmm, you're so-o-o good."

"Too damn good," Nicholas muttered. "You weren't kidding, were you?"

"About what?"

"Trusting me to take care of you."

"I'd never kid about a thing like that, Nicholas." She snuggled closer.

Gently, he pulled her arms from around his neck and let her sink to a chair. Then he strode out the kitchen, through the living room and slid open the patio door.

Heather jumped up to follow. "Where are you going, Nicholas?"

"I'm going swimming," he yelled. "I may swim a hundred laps. And I'm going to be swimming nude so don't you dare come traipsing out here for a little chat," he said. "Understand?"

He dropped his robe on the ground and made a clean dive into the sparkling blue water. When he came up for air, he continued his tirade. "Start cleaning, woman," he said. "I'll be back shortly, and I'm going to be mean. So move it."

Finally the full impact of the situation hit Heather full force. She gasped as realization flooded her trembling body. Then she smiled. "He cares enough about me to protect me," she whispered. Her heart sang for joy as she set the kitchen in order. Professor Nicholas McCord, her fantasy man, not only had substance, he was honorable.

She laughed softly to herself when another thought occurred to her. Nicholas McCord had the most substantive, sexy body she'd ever been privileged to see. Never mind, that his was the last in a long line of one! She believed any other man's frame would leave her cold anyway. Now, Nicholas's body, on the other hand...

"Are you keeping busy?" Nicholas yelled from the pool.

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

"Yes, Nicholas," she called as she moistened her dry lips and wiped her fevered brow. "I'm working myself into a tizzy."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 5

After Nicholas finished his swim, it was time for Heather to leave. But, first, as if by plan, they kissed again. It was a kiss of hope. A kiss beyond passion, beyond physical boundaries. It signified a sense of wonder and a mutual spirituality. When it ended, she felt utterly content and put her head on his shoulder again.

Nicholas was the first to break the silence. "Lord, I hate for you to have to go. This was such a short weekend. One lousy day." He sighed. "Well, I'd better get dressed."

Heather gathered her presents. "Thank you again for my gifts." Her voice was soft and low. "I love surprises."

Nicholas gave her a big hug before he eased her away. "We're going to have to move, honey ... before you get the surprise of your life!"

* * * *

When they arrived back on campus, he took Heather's hand as they walked into the guest quarters. She tried to pull away, but he refused to let go.

"We're being stared at, Professor McCord."

"We'll set a good example for the kids." He smiled warmly. "Rule number one: If two people are exploring a relationship, trying to find its values, its worth, they don't always relate behind closed doors."

"Funny you should say that," Heather said as she unlocked her door. "Welcome."

Nicholas closed the door, then glanced around the room. His eyes lit up and he grinned when his gaze settled on the king sized bed.

Heather saw his look and decided to tease him. "If we flaunt our friendship," she said, "you'll have to cope with a hundred coed's broken hearts."

"That's why I made my rule in the first place," he said. "Absolutely no fraternizing with coeds."

"Afraid one will accuse you of unrequited love?"

"One already did."

Heather inhaled sharply, then took his hand. "What are you saying, Nicholas?"

"It was a long time ago, Heather. Too long ago to make a good story." He gave her a fierce hug. "Man, I don't know how I'm going to get along without you," he said. "Alone for a week."

"Remember, it's only five days," she said with a smile, though she continued to be puzzled by Nicholas's refusal to tell her about that other coed. "You've been getting along quite nicely for almost thirty-six years."

"Yes," he said, and then moaned. "But that was before I knew you."

She had to try to make him smile, she decided. "Hey, mister," she said, low and sexy. "You don't know me. Not yet, you don't."

His smile was totally confident. "But I will!"

Quietly, they left the room.

"I have to say good-bye to Ebon," she said when they finished stowing her luggage. "I may not get back here for a while."

"It may not be as long as you think."

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Why won't it be?"

Nicholas leaned over and whispered in her ear. "It's a big secret."

At Lake Honor, Heather's call brought Ebon churning through the water to her outstretched hand. "Good bye, old friend." She stroked his smooth feathered crown. "Take good care of yourself."

Ebon trumpeted his farewell.

"Do you mind if I use your secret whistle for Ebon?" asked Nicholas. "He ought to get used to the idea that we might belong together someday."

Heather rose and faced Nicholas. A look of wonder filled her blue-sky eyes. "You really mean that, don't you?" When he nodded, tears filled her eyes. "Of course, Nicholas," she said. "Share and share alike."

"We'd better go back, Princess." His voice was suddenly hoarse. He took her hand and headed for the parking lot. "In a minute, I won't be able to share you with anyone."

At her car, Heather put the box of precious gifts in the middle of the front seat. When she turned back to Nicholas, she still held the rose. The pair gazed at each other and their mutual need was an ache between them. Neither wanted Heather to leave.

Nicholas realized he had to break the spell. "Say, Princess," he said casually, "you'd better whistle that secret tune one more time so I'm sure to have the right melody."

Heather smiled, then pursed her lips. But the notes never surfaced because Nicholas leaned down and captured her in a wild embrace. He kissed her with such molten passion, it stole her breath away. All the while, his hard length trapped Heather against the inside of the opened car door. She moaned, and her body curved into his. She forgot where they were, remembered only that she craved his warmth. Her need overwhelmed her good sense, and her body melted with desire.

Then the air was rent by wolf calls and wolf whistles and shouts of "Way to go, Professor," and "Always leave 'em wantin' more, Teach!"

Heather's entire body went rigid and her skin burned with embarrassment. But when she looked into Nicholas's face, expecting to see an angry scowl, she saw, instead, a wide grin and laughing eyes.

"Nicholas, stop." She tried to ease away. "We've drawn a crowd."

"Yeah." But he refused to release her. "Ain't love grand?"

"I wouldn't know, but for an English Professor," she wryly declared, "you'd make a darn good Aggie. Come on now, turn me loose." When he reluctantly released her, she slid behind the wheel. "Gotta get going."

"I'll call you tonight," he said. "Drive carefully, honey."

"I will. I hope Sheriff Eagle finds the man threatening you, Nicholas." She traced his knuckles with her fingertip. "I don't

know what I'd do if you were hurt," she told him. Or worse, added her heart. "I couldn't survive losing another special person in my life."

"Don't you worry about me. I'll be all right," he said. "It's you I'm concerned about." He caught her fingers with his hand. "I'll tell Gary about Baxter. But if that bastard makes one threatening move, you call me and I'll have my attorney slap a restraining order on him so fast, it'll make his head spin."

"If Kitty called him," she said, "he'll be in Nashville."

Nicholas added a few choice expletives under his breath. "Good riddance, I hope he stays there." He leaned against the car door, his face very close to hers. Then he glanced at the ground and abruptly bent over. "Your rose," he said as he straightened. He brought the flower, now opened to full bloom, to his lips. "You must have had something else on your mind when you dropped it."

Heather blushed again. "You know perfectly well what happened to me, Nicholas." She gave him an embarrassed smile. "I went all silly when you touched me."

Nicholas chuckled and rubbed the back of his neck. "My feet don't necessarily stay on the ground either, honey."

He contemplated the rose again and pressed it softly to his lips where he outlined its shape with the tip of his tongue. The petals trembled beneath his kiss, and Heather felt shock waves of longing surge through her body as she watched. Then he handed her the rose.

"Till Friday, baby."

He leaned inside the car window and gave Heather a hard passionate kiss that thrilled her to her toes. In fact, an involuntary reflex in her foot accelerated her idling car, and the purring engine roared into a high pitched squeal.

"Hey, Prof, you got her motor runnin'," yelled one of his students, standing with a group of interested upperclassmen.

"I certainly hope so," Nicholas murmured erotically.

"I'm leaving," said Heather. She threw the car into gear and pulled away.

"I don't know how I'll last till Friday evening," he called.

"You can always go jump in the lake," she hollered. "'Bye, Nicholas."

"Be careful." He waved farewell. "'Bye, Princess."

Heather was sure her face glowed crimson when she drove up the long hill toward the gates. Echoes of Nicholas's final words were supplied by dozens of wildly waving students who lined the road. "'Bye, Princess. 'Bye, Princess, 'bye."

* * * *

At midnight Heather stumbled into her apartment. The phone was ringing off the hook. She staggered to the couch and fell upon it as she reached for the receiver.

"'Lo?"

"Heather, where the hell have you been?" Nicholas's demanding voice boomed into the room. "I've been calling every fifteen minutes since eight o'clock and I'm almost out of my mind with worry."

He stopped for a moment, listening. "Heather? Heather?" Worry was still evident in his voice. "Are you there?"

"I'm here," she said, sighing. "But I'm exhausted, Nicholas. I'm simply exhausted."

"You had car trouble." It was a statement, not a question.

"A flat tire," she said. "I had a blowout on that god forsaken stretch between Rolla and St. Louis. And I had to change the damn thing myself."

"What?" he exclaimed. "You changed a flat tire?"

"Well, what the hell did you expect me to do?" she screamed as the last of her patience evaporated. "Wait for the damn Flat Tire Fairy? I may not be a master mechanic, Professor, but I learned how to change a tire a long time ago." She had to take several deep breaths. "I suppose you'd have had me stay in the damn car all damn night."

"No, no, Heather, you misunderstand me." He rushed his words. "I didn't mean that at all. I'm just hating myself because I wasn't there to take care of it." He cradled the phone with both hands. "You could have been hurt. Or worse." He exhaled through his teeth. "How did you manage it by yourself? You're so little."

"Not very well," Heather admitted. "The batteries in my flashlight went dead in the middle of the job. Thank goodness, there was a full moon," she added as her speech went into high gear. "Then I couldn't get the jack to work, and I couldn't get the lug nuts off for a long time." Suddenly she began to wail. "And I broke all ... my ... fingernails."

"Oh, sweet baby," Nicholas crooned across the miles. "I wish I could hold you."

"So do I, Nicholas. I'm so tired." She moaned and tears coursed down her pale, dirt smudged cheeks. "So tired."

"I know, baby, I know," he said. "But you handled the situation. I'm proud of you. And I'm so grateful you got home in one piece."

"Not quite."

"What do you mean?" Concern colored every word.

"Oh, don't get upset," she said with a fatigued chuckle. "I just meant that, after my adventure, I don't think my powder blue jumpsuit will ever be the same. But I think my big toe will be fine."

"And what happened to your big toe?"

"I dropped the jack base on it." Her mouth curved into a sheepish grin. "It's probably only bruised. I think. My toe, I mean."

"Just the same, you ought to get x-rays. Your toe, I mean."

"I'll see how it is in the morning," she replied. "Now I have to get some sleep."

"Dream of me, Princess."

"I can't promise," she said. "I'm very tired, you see. Anyway, I can't let you invade my slumber by long distance, too."

Nicholas wanted to talk to her about her nightmares, but he decided against it. Maybe the less said about those heart-wrenching dreams, the better.

"It's only fair for you to dream of me," he argued. He inhaled, then released a long, moaning sigh. "I'm lying in my bed right now, sweetheart, and I can still smell your perfume on my pillow." He sighed again. "I probably won't sleep a wink tonight."

"Think you'd better swim?"

"Alone? Are you out of your mind? That's dangerous."

"No," she murmured in an unconsciously sensuous voice.

"Just sleepy. So sleepy."

"Oh, honey, don't use that tone of voice. Not when I can't reach you."

"What voice?" she said, purring again.

"My students are going to hate me in the morning."

"Why?"

"Because, my dear Ms. Warren, I shan't have slept a second all night and will be exhausted from swimming lap after lap after bloody damn lap in my pool. That's why." His words nearly exploded in her ear. "In other words, lady, I'm gonna be damn mean!"

"Don't forget your water wings, Nicholas," she said. Although she was exhausted, her teasing laughter was musical and lighthearted. "Remember, it's dangerous to swim alone at night."

"As I remember," he said in a sensuous whisper, "it isn't terribly safe to swim at night with a beautiful sea nymph either."

Heather swallowed the rising tide of emotion that threatened to flood her tired body. "Good night, Professor, dear," she said in a soft, low voice. "I miss you already."

Nicholas sighed longingly. "Good night, my sweet," he murmured. "I miss you, too."

* * * *

Monday after work Heather received eleven red roses. The card said: "To go with the one you got from St. Nick. Hugs and kisses later."

On Tuesday a small box came, special delivery. She was delighted to find inside, a giant chocolate kiss and a slim volume of poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The bold inscription on the cover leaf charmed Heather's romantic spirit. "The second pass'd in height the first," wrote Nicholas, quoting Browning's Sonnet From The Portuguese.

No special gift waited for Heather when she arrived home from work on Wednesday. She couldn't deny her disappointment. The day had been a particularly grueling one and she'd kept her spirits up by guessing what Nicholas might send her. When she received nothing, she told herself it had probably gotten lost in the mail.

The phone rang at ten that evening. Nicholas was right on time, Heather thought as she hurried to pick up the receiver. But just as she did, the doorbell rang.

"Hello?" she said over the persistent bell.

"Better get the door, honey. It might be something important."

"Okay, hold on a minute."

"I'll be right here."

Heather ran to the door and looked out. She recognized the delivery man.

"Got a box, Ms. Warren," he said with a big grin. "A special delivery, just for you." He glanced to the ceiling, thinking. "You're to take your surprise back to the phone." He met her gaze. "Does that make sense?"

"It certainly does. Thank you."

Heather carried the huge box to the sofa and set it on the floor, then she picked up the phone. "What's in here, Nicholas?" she asked. "It's light."

"Why don't you open it and find out, you silly imp," he said. Then he laughed darkly. "But be careful."

"What could it be?" She pulled a streamer of the gigantic pink bow. Then she giggled. "It could be filled with nothing."

"Or it might contain my weightless spirit," he countered wickedly, "sent to weaken your defenses."

"You already do that quite nicely by phone."

"But it's exhausting from this distance."

Heather shouted for joy when she opened the lid. Eight metallic helium-filled balloons popped out and floated serenely to the ceiling. Each was tailed by bright ribbon with a message attached. She carried the phone with her as she walked from one ribbon to the next, reading aloud.

"Kisses, kisses, kisses, kisses, kisses, kisses, and kisses," she said. "And you accuse me of redundancy?"

"I'm not redundant. Just emphatic," he said. "There should be one more balloon in the box, taped down."

Heather looked inside and, sure enough, there was the last balloon. But this one was heart-shaped and painted with rainbows. After she released it and watched it float high above her head, she read the note attached to the string.

"This gift is for the child in you," she said. "Can you come out and play? Love, Nicholas."

Heather laughed softly. "Oh, Nicholas," she whispered, "this is the most wonderful surprise of my whole entire life."

"The child speaks," he replied, chuckling. "I wish I were there so I could see your saucer round blue-sky eyes, shining with tears."

"You're right," she said as his magic captured her heart. "I'm crying, but just a little. How did you know?"

"I remember how you looked after your visit from St. Nick," he said. Then he sighed miserably. "Two more days, sweetheart."

"I know," she said, smiling. Then she remembered her daily question and the smile faded. "Has your friend, Sheriff Eagle, come up with any new leads?"

"No, but I got another letter this morning," he replied. "This time from Los Angeles."

"What did it say?"

"About the same thing," he said. "It's nothing to worry about."

"Then read it to me."

"Honey, he's just some crackpot."

"Please, Nicholas, read it."

"All right," he said. "'Stop taking what's mine or I'll take what's yours.'"

"What does he mean, Nicholas? Is he threatening to rob your house?"

"No, I think he'd referring to something quite a bit more valuable and precious to me."

"What then?"

"You."

"But I'm not yours."

"Obviously, he seems to think you are."

"I wouldn't mind, mind you," she added, "but he must be after something else."

Nicholas knew the conversation would go no further so he chuckled darkly. "I wouldn't have flunked this guy. He's got pretty good style."

Heather decided to ignore his black humor. "Do you see any pattern to the postmarks?"

"None," he said. "This makes an even dozen different locations. Either the guy's a traveler or he's got lots of friends helping him in his little practical joke."

"Shouldn't the FBI be notified?" she asked. "You can't just sit there and wait for something else to happen to you."

"You've read my mind, lovely Ms. Marpel," he said. "The Feds were informed this afternoon."

"Well, it's about time."

"Has Baxter given you any trouble?"

"No, Kitty's been calling him every night. She won't tell him where she's staying because he won't get help for his temper." Then she sighed. "Can't I see you tomorrow evening? You'll be in town."

Nicholas's sigh turned into an outright groan. "Don't even suggest it, honey."

When his voice broke with desire, Heather pictured Nicholas, absent-mindedly rubbing the back of his neck, and she smiled.

"My day won't be finished until eleven at night." He paused, considering every angle. "If I came to see you then, we'd be worthless on Friday," he said. "We've both got to work."

"I know," said Heather. "It wouldn't be right."

Nicholas laughed disparagingly. "It's hell to be so damned ethical, isn't it?"

"We seem to agree on a number of things," said Heather in her most scintillating voice.

"You're damned brave with four hours separating me from thee, Princess." His ragged voice vibrated with desire. "We'll see how well you play the game Friday, when I'm in the same room, shall we?"

Heather decided to throw caution to the winds. "Why, Nicholas, dear," she said, "whatever do you mean?"

"You know damn well what I mean," he shot back. Then his belligerent tone vanished. "Let me put it this way," he continued. "My students are planning a lynching because I've been in a foul mood since you drove out of my sight last Sunday."

He paused and Heather pictured him rubbing his neck yet again. He had a habit of doing that when he was worried or frustrated or embarrassed, she'd discovered.

"Besides," he added, "I'm getting waterlogged. Have a heart, will you?"

"I'm sorry, Nicholas." She was instantly contrite. "I've behaved badly. Will you forgive me?"

"There isn't much I wouldn't forgive you."

"I feel the same way."

"Another good quality we share, huh?"

"Can you still smell my perfume on your pillow?"

"Our minds vibrate on the same wave length." Then he moaned softly. "I'm holding your pillow in my arms right now."

I can't seem to stop my hands from caressing and fondling the soft fullness," he said. "It lies here pressed to my body, shaping itself to me as I explore its smooth surface with my trembling fingers."

Nicholas heaved a sigh because his own words were arousing his body. Heather sighed because she was experiencing the same excitement.

"As I touch my lips to its silken integument," he continued. "Yes, oh, yes, there's a faint suggestion of my lady's favorite perfume. It titillates the senses, it arouses memories. Ah," he lamented, "this is a tragic scene, for here am I, a grown man, filled with amour, with nothing but a fragrant pillow to console my heart."

"It's a good thing you aren't here with me," she declared, breathlessly.

"Why is that, honey?" His voice sounded smoky, sensuous.

"Four hours makes you pretty damned intrepid yourself, Professor."

"This wordsmith had but one intent."

"What's that?"

"To make sure your night is as sleepless as mine."

"Good night, Nicholas."

"Wait, don't hang up," he said. "Tell me the name of this stuff that's driving me to distraction."

Heather laughed aloud. "You'd never believe it."

"Tell me."

"*Child's Play.*"

* * * *

Thursday was a terrible day for Heather. A thousand last minute pre-publication details were driving her crazy. After three stormy meetings and seventeen phone calls, she believed she'd completed the job. But she still hadn't cooled down when she got to her apartment.

"Rotten traffic," she grumbled as she tossed her purse in a chair and stomped to the kitchen for a bottle of soda. "For two cents I'd leave this rat race and go live on a mountain."

Heather grinned suddenly because she knew which mountain she'd choose. She also knew Nicholas was in town now, not more than ten minutes away. It didn't help her black mood one bit. He was giving a wonderful lecture. "And he's not thinking of me."

She took a long swallow of her icy drink and told herself she wasn't neglected. The phone made her jump. She marched over and grabbed the receiver.

"Hello?"

"That bad, huh?"

"Nicholas!" Heather cradled the phone on her shoulder. "You're here."

"I'm here where I have to be, not here where I want to be. But I had to hear your voice," he said. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," she answered glumly. "I'm fine."

"I gave up dessert and a second cup of coffee for you," he said, trying to make her laugh. "Don't you feel special?"

"I miss you," said Heather and she gave a little cry. "I miss you terribly."

"Those are just about the sweetest words I've ever heard."

"Twenty-four hours from this moment."

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

"I'll be waiting on your doorstep," he said. "I wonder if my hammering heart and aging body can handle the wait?"

"Aw, Nicholas, you didn't look old that first night, poolside," she said. "I memorized you, you know."

"Yes, I know," he replied, wryly.

Then he drew in a mighty breath and exhaled loudly. "God help any man, woman or child who asks a question after tomorrow's final lecture!"

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 6

Friday was definitely not a TGIF for Heather. It was more like a fast forward commemoration of Murphy's Law. If things didn't go better soon, she thought she'd be ready to change to the new job Nicholas kept hinting about to her.

Today, whatever could go wrong at work, did. The prototype book cover was botched, and now, the production schedule would be thrown off once again. She hadn't really been surprised. It was the cheapest bid they'd received, not the best. And there wasn't a thing she could do about it because the boss had insisted she cut costs any way she could. Therefore, she was bowled over when he came storming from his office, blaming her.

"I told you not to buy with that guy," he hollered. "What the hell do you think I pay you for anyway? I wanted the best in town."

Heather met his angry glare with one of her own. "You chose the printer, sir."

"Just exacting what are you implying?"

"You said something about an economic crunch, Mr. Woods."

Her boss glared at the other workers seated at their desks around the room, then shifted his beady eyes back to Heather. "This is the last damn mistake you'll make on my time," he shouted as he pointed a stubby finger in her face. "You're fired."

But Heather didn't even flinch. Instead she picked up her phone and dialed. "Hello, Mr. Kline? Heather Warren, here. Does your offer for production manager still stand? Good, I'll be there at eight on Monday. You're welcome, Bill."

When she hung up, she ignored Mr. Wood's red face and looked straight into his faded eyes. "I'll expect my check before I leave," she said. "Will you speak to payroll, or shall I?"

Suddenly the man's fierce countenance crumbled. His shoulders slumped and he nodded. "I'll see to it."

"Thank you." She bit off each word.

Later, when Heather got into her car and drove away, she never looked back. Silently she vowed that Mr. Woods had made her unhappy for the last time. "He's nothing but a frightened little man. I pity him."

That said, she put a great big smile on her face and warbled her favorite tune.

"Nicholas," she sang in giddy voice. "Nicholas, Nicholas." Her excited heart doubled its beat. "I mustn't keep him waiting."

When she parked on her block, she saw him sitting on her front steps. When he spotted her car he jumped to his feet and ran toward her. Heather thought he'd never looked so magnificently handsome in his dark blue business suit and crimson tie. Then he caught her in a wild embrace, kissing her with abandon in the middle of the narrow brick street. A honking horn interrupted their passionate greeting, but Nicholas never released Heather as they turned to walk arm in arm to her apartment.

"I got fired today," she said in a casual voice as they began to climb the stairs.

"That's good." He answered as if in a dream.

She smiled, believing he wasn't aware of what she'd said.

"I start my new job on Monday."

"That's bad."

His response completely baffled Heather. "Don't you have that a little backwards?"

"Nope."

"Are you sure?"

"Yup."

She became more perplexed with each passing moment. "I have to work, Nicholas," she said. "What's the matter with you?" She sniffed his breath. "Have you been drinking?"

"Nope."

"Nicholas!"

He took her key and unlocked her door. "You're going back to school."

"What!" she exclaimed as he led her through the doorway. "You're mad, Nicholas. I can't go back to school. I can't afford it. Unless..."

Nicholas calmly took her purse and tossed it on the coffee table, then fused her to the spot with one smoldering look while he took off his suit coat. His smoky eyes never left hers as they revealed his torrid intentions. Slowly he pushed her jacket from her shoulders and dropped it on a chair.

"Hello, my darling." His greeting was husky and low. "It's been the longest five days of my life."

He took her in his arms and kissed her, and Heather felt gentleness and devotion beyond her fondest dreams. He cares for me, she thought. Me, a half-educated dummy with no job. Then thinking became impossible when his lips moved over her mouth with rising passion.

His tongue glided teasingly across her lips and she parted them willingly. Their kiss released wave upon wave of erotic desire between them. His fiery kiss continued as he lifted her to the couch. Somehow he lay them both down without releasing her lips and, as he pressed against her soft body, they became lost in a world of tactile pleasure.

Later, he lay beside her, and his warm espresso eyes wandered caressingly over her face. "How's your big toe?"

"Just great, I guess." Heather smiled drunkenly at her terrible pun. "Right now, I'm not quite sure about anything," she said dreamily. "I missed you so much."

"I'm glad to see you, too, honey."

"School!" Heather bolted upright, tumbling Nicholas onto the floor. "What crazy idea have you hatched so I can get back to Omsee? Did you find a grant, a job? What?"

Nicholas crawled laboriously back to her side. "You're lucky I didn't break something important," he said darkly. "Like my back."

"I'm going to break your head." She picked up a pillow and took aim. "Tell me."

"You are a wonder."

He leaned forward to press another kiss on her lips. Heather's heart fluttered and a tiny moan escaped her parted lips. The pillow dropped unheeded to the floor as she wrapped

her arms around his neck and gently pulled him on top of her, molding herself to his body, as she slid to the cushions.

"That's not fair, Nicholas," she said when the kiss ended and they sat up again. Her large eyes had turned a deep blue. "Please..."

Nicholas buried his face in her thick fragrant hair. "You'll never find out if you keep talking and looking like that, baby."

"It's all your fault."

"Yes, I know." He sighed dramatically. "I make you go all silly whenever I touch you."

"Well, it's true." Then her face turned a becoming pink. "Now tell me."

"First, let me say I firmly believe we should spend as much time as possible together," he said. "Do you agree?"

Heather nodded. "How else will we get to really know one another?"

"Quite!"

"That's not quite what I meant, Nicholas."

But Nicholas ignored her remark. "We could kill two birds with one stone if you finished your undergraduate work at the same time we were together. And I've found a way."

He shook his head when it looked as if Heather was going to spout questions again.

"When I checked with Dean Cummings in counseling, he pulled your records and found you need only two lit courses, not three, to meet your degree requirements for graduation."

He took a moment to kiss the tip of her nose, then he grinned mysteriously. "By a great stroke of good fortune, the two classes you need will be offered during the summer

session. Great American Authors is being taught by your old friend, Professor Hagers, and Poets of the Romance Era will be conducted by your new friend, me."

Nicholas lifted Heather's chin with his fingertip. "Close your mouth, sweetheart," he said tenderly. "You look a little like a fish out of water."

Then her eyes started shooting sparks.

"Wait!" he said as he patted her shoulder. "Just listen to my plan, okay?"

Heather drew in a deep steadying breath and nodded. "Okay."

"You'll live in Mrs. Johnson's home," he continued. "My housekeeper rents rooms to students and she'll have one available this summer." He gave her a sizzling kiss before he went on. "After this summer you might want to come live with me," he said. "And it's only fifty dollars a week and that includes kitchen privileges."

"Is that fifty a week for your place or hers."

"Hers. You can't afford my place. Not yet, baby."

There he goes again, she thought. Pushing! "A heck of a lot of good any of this does me," interjected Heather. "I don't have a job to pay for it. I got fired today, remember?"

"And a good thing, too," he replied. "You couldn't work here and go to school there anyway." Then he traced Heather's features and kissed her gently. "I thought I could help you," he murmured. "We could call it an investment in the future."

"Nicholas McCord, if you think I'd take your money before we decide anything," she countered in disdainful voice as she

tried to get to her feet, "you certainly don't know me well enough yet."

"That's what I guessed you'd answer," he said with a sly grin as he continued to hold her close. "Now, will you keep your promise so I can finish?"

"Okay."

"I got you a job?"

"You did?" When he nodded, she gave him a suspicious look. "One that pays money?"

"Oh, ye of little faith!"

Nonplused Heather refused to back down. "It might help if you'd explain."

"I've made arrangements for you to work for several of my colleagues and me in the English department," he said. "We need your skills because we're constantly publishing papers for literary journals worldwide." He smoothed a curl behind Heather's ear. "We'll pay you ten dollars an hour with a guaranteed minimum of twenty hours a week."

"That's two hundred dollars a week."

"Yeah, we think you'll save us hundreds more." Nicholas gazed into her wide disbelieving blue eyes. "What do you think now, my darling?"

Heather stared back. "I think you've gone completely bonkers, my darling." She glanced around her furnished apartment. "My clothes, my books."

"We leave Sunday morning," he said calmly. "Jimmy and Steve, the fearless duo you met that first weekend, and Skip Johnson, my housekeeper's son, will be here bright and early

with a truck. We'll load everything, then they'll drive it back and we'll take your car home."

Heather realized there was no use arguing with the man so she decided to enjoy him instead. "Don't you think you're smart?"

"I am smart. I'm a professor."

"And a good professor," she whispered, leaning closer. Her sparkling gaze fastened onto Nicholas's supple mouth. "Very good, indeed."

"You're not thinking about school anymore."

"Perhaps a little homework." Unconsciously she licked her lips as if she were famished.

"Well, baby, you're looking at the best tutor around." His husky voice vibrated with leashed passion as he pulled off his tie and released the first three buttons on his shirt. "Come here."

Heather's hands crept around his neck, her fingers played with the thick dark curls at the edge of his collar. And as his lips covered hers, her body relaxed and moved against him. It became difficult for her to breathe when Nicholas increased the pressure of his embrace. He pulled her close. His hand stroked her leg, massaged her firm bottom, then caressed the rounded fullness of her breast. When he touched one aroused, pebbly hard nipple, a fevered moan escaped her lips.

"Oh, Nicholas," she whispered in a voice fraught with churning desire.

Nicholas's hot kisses wandered to her throat where he tongued and sucked the sensitive cord at the side. His

breathing pattern matched Heather's, and when he raised his head to gaze into her smoky eyes, her smoldering passion was mirrored in his own. "We're getting carried away." He continued to stroke her breasts.

"I know." Her fingers drifted over his springy chest hair.

"I promised, when you go all silly, as you so aptly put it, I'd be strong."

"Oh, you're very strong, Nicholas." She rubbed her fingertips across his flat, hard nipples.

He gulped noisily. "And getting weaker by the second, sweetheart."

"Could you be strong for one more kiss?" She lifted her lips to his. "Please?"

He groaned as he slanted his kiss over her warm mouth. At the same time his hand gently squeezed her breast and his thumb rolled quickly across its hard thrusting tip. A moment later Heather's trembling fingers fumbled at the rest of the buttons on his pale blue shirt.

Instantly Nicholas stopped his lovemaking. He sat straight and eased her hands from their work. With closed eyes, he kissed each palm. When he gazed into Heather's blue eyes, she saw desire and control warring furiously.

"You really do expect me to control everything, don't you?" Wonder crept into his voice.

"Of course." Heather gave him a sappy grin. "You've had experience doing that, while I'm just learning to let go. I haven't even begun to think about holding back."

He cleared his throat, then pursed his lips. "That's fairly obvious."

"But I'm learning very fast, don't you think?"

"You're an exceptionally gifted student, Ms. Warren."

"Thank you, Professor." A wicked gleam danced in her eyes as she massaged his neck. "When shall we begin the graduate course?"

"Sooner than you might expect," he shot back. "Stop looking at me like that."

Heather's grin slid from her face, replaced by a look of contrition. "I didn't mean to tease," she said. "It's just that I'm happier than I've ever been in my life." She met his gaze and smiled. "First, I find you again. And now, I'm going to finish college. It's what I always wanted, but it's more than I ever expected." Tears glistened in her eyes. "I owe everything to you, Nicholas. Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Then Heather pulled herself up to a kneeling position next to him. The silly grin was back in place. "Will you let me see the final exam so I'll get a good grade?"

An old memory stabbed at his brain, but he chose to ignore it and keep the conversation light. "Sure, I'll just scan a copy for you."

Her mouth gaped. "You can't be serious."

"About as serious as you."

Heather laughed nervously and looked relieved. "Whew, I'm glad to hear that because I was only teasing."

And Nicholas's old memory slid back into its sheath.

"If I had some wine," she said, "we could toast the summer."

"Ah, fair maiden," he said with a wink as he strode toward the door. "Give me two minutes."

"Where are you going?"

"I left a couple of packages with your landlady." He gave her a roguish grin. "I wanted my hands free when you got home."

When he returned, the pair sat back on the couch.

"I owe you a surprise from last night." He held up a bottle of wine and two plastic stemmed glasses. "This is it." Then he dropped a small package into Heather's lap. "That's your surprise for tonight."

He filled their glasses. "To you, my sweet," he said as his warm dark gaze locked with hers. "And to a glorious summer. Together."

"Together," echoed Heather. She touched her glass to his, took a sip, then laughed as she rubbed her nose. "Mmm, it's good."

"It's like you. Good and sparkling and bubbly."

"But not quite aged to maturity?"

"You'll do just fine, honey." He noticed the little box lying in Heather's lap. "Open your other surprise."

"Your beautiful self is almost more gift than I can handle right now," she said as she pulled the bright pink and blue ribbons from the silvery package. "It's beautifully wrapped."

"It's for the most beautiful woman in the world."

When she lifted the lid, she smiled radiantly. "You found *Child's Play*. Thank you, Nicholas."

"You're welcome, honey." He refilled her glass. "Enjoy. Tonight we celebrate."

* * * *

Heather put the finishing touches on her hair and makeup. She gazed at herself in the large bathroom mirror. Her white halter dress, bare in back and low in front, was belted wide above a flared skirt. "Just right for dancing," she said as she gave herself a wink. While she was slipping into her high-heeled sandals, Nicholas called through the door.

"I've been browsing over your library, Heather. You have almost all the books you'll need for classes. I'll lend you the rest. Have you really kept up with your studies?" he asked. "Or have these volumes just gathered dust?"

"I certainly have read them all. What a thing to say."

His laughter sounded carefree. "Just teasing, baby," he said. "Hey, aren't you about ready?"

At that moment, Heather swept into the room, and smiled. "Ready."

Nicholas became transfixed by her captivating beauty. Twice, his gaze roamed over her body, from head to toe, then back to her sparkling eyes. "Will you please turn?"

When Heather did as he asked, Nicholas coughed, then inhaled sharply. "I knew it! That damn thing has no back." He inhaled again. "Come here, honey," he ordered in a ragged tone. "I promise not to muss your hair, but I just gotta kiss you."

He held her as if she were a fragile piece of Dresden china. Heather thought he'd never kissed her more tenderly.

"Mmm, you smell so good," he said as he nuzzled her neck. "I'd better call a cab right away."

"We can go in Baby," she said. "I'm sure she won't mind the touch of a masterful male." She laughed softly. "It kinda runs in the family, I guess."

"Out!" He opened the front door. "Out, before I attack you."

Heather scurried down the steps.

"Impossible!" he muttered as he put her into her car. "You're absolutely impossible."

Heather's musical laughter filtered through the night.

When Nicholas pulled expertly from the curb, the car responded quickly, and Heather leaned forward and patted the dash.

"See, Baby?" she whispered. "I told you it's not so bad."

"Don't be impertinent, love," said Nicholas, good-naturedly. "I think we'll dine at Bevo Mill tonight. It's established, dignified, and gives excellent service," he said. "All right with you?"

Heather tried not to chuckle. "It would suit you."

"You've got a picture in your head," he said. "Something funny." He frowned, thinking, while Heather waited with a smile. "I'll have to figure this out alone since I see you're not going to be any help. I said Bevo Mill was established. And dignified. And gave good service."

He glared at Heather and shook his finger at her. "That little observation," he said darkly, menacingly. "That one you're going to pay for."

After Nicholas parked the car, he and Heather walked to the restaurant. They paused for a moment to watch the giant windmill turn.

"Look." Heather pointed to the roof. "On top of the chimney. A stork's nest. See? They bring good luck, you know."

"They also bring babies." Nicholas grinned when she blushed crimson. If they ever married and had babies, would they look like Heather? he wondered. Oh, he dearly hoped so. If they ever married.

The maitre d' escorted them to a secluded table for two. "The wine steward will be with you shortly. Enjoy your meal."

Heather looked around her. "It's really beautiful, isn't it?"

"You certainly are," said Nicholas. His gaze was warmed by her beauty.

Heather laughed softly. "Now who's being silly?" she asked. "Look at the far wall. It's all stained glass."

"Are those banners of German nobility?"

"How can one man be so smart?"

"It takes years," he replied with a smug grin. "Years."

"The Anheuser-Busch family built Bevo Mill," she explained. "It was the halfway point between their first home down by the brewery and their country place, Grant's Farm. They'd stop here for lunch when they went horseback riding," she said. "Later Mr. Busch opened it to the public."

"Very enterprising," said Nicholas. "One more way to sell his delicious brew." He picked up his menu. "Do they cook special dishes?"

"Weiner Schneitzel is one of their traditional dishes."

"Too heavy," he said. "Remember, we're going dancing later."

"Steak and lobster?"

He raised a knowing brow. "I'd want to go to sleep far earlier than I intend."

"How about rainbow trout?" She licked her lips. "Does that sound good?"

"Excellent," he replied, "if we can share a bottle of Golden October Liebfraumilch."

They found out they could.

After dinner, when they were having a second cup of coffee, soft music filled the room.

"Oh, the wandering minstrels." Heather's smile made her face glow. "Isn't their music lovely?"

"Yes, it's enchanting." Nicholas caught the eye of the violinist as they came toward their table. When the number ended, the musicians stood at his side. He handed one of them a crisp bill, and the man leaned forward to hear Nicholas's whispered request.

"For your beautiful lady," said the man with a warm smile.

After three notes, Heather recognized the song. She sat, spellbound by the romantic melody, her starry eyes locked with Nicholas's dark gaze. He spoke volumes with his smoldering expressive eyes, leaving nothing unsaid. Heather's cheeks grew rosy as she recalled the lyrics.

"Moonlight becomes you..."

Nicholas chuckled softly as if he could read her thoughts. When the musicians strolled away, he took her hand, lifted it to his lips and kissed her fingertips. His eyes sought communion with hers.

"You are beautiful," he murmured. "So very beautiful."

"I feel beautiful," she replied with a dazzling smile.

"Shall we go dancing now? I want to hold you."

"Yes. Do you have someplace in mind?"

"You choose." He paid the check and they returned to the car.

"How would you like to take a step back in time?" Lights danced in Heather's eyes. "Back to the Thirties?"

"I can see you'd like to go so it's fine with me," he said. "What's it like?"

"It's living history," she said. "It's called the Casa Loma. And it's on a street called Cherokee."

"And do they do the rain dance there, too?" he asked, chuckling. "In which case, I am without my umbrella."

"No rain dance," she said, laughing. "It's a fantastic ballroom that's played every major big band since it was built in 1935."

"Long before you were even a twinkle in your Daddy's eye."

"Even before you were a twinkle in your Daddy's eye!" Nicholas smiled at her touche'.

"Anyway, it's one of the few places in town that offers ballroom dancing," she said. "I'm so tired of disco and reggae."

"Then it's the Casa Loma." He started the engine and pulled away. "Direct me."

Fifteen minutes later, when they entered the lobby, music floated down the staircase. Nicholas held her hand and they strolled into the dimly lit ballroom. In the center of the two story tall ceiling, hung a gigantic mirrored ball, slowly

revolving, reflecting a dazzling, multicolored parade of lights on the walls.

"I can almost hear the spirits of dancers past," whispered Nicholas. "It really is a page from the Thirties. Look up there."

"I didn't mention the mirrored ball on purpose." Her voice held a childlike breathlessness. "It's all I had to give to you as a surprise tonight, Nicholas."

"It's a great surprise." He chose a table near the dance floor. After they were seated, he looked at the hardwood expanse. "Lord, it's a huge floor."

"Fifty-six hundred square feet."

"I've said it before and I'll surely say it again, sweetheart, you are a wonder." When the music started, he rose and offered his arm. "Shall we trip the light fantastic on a few square feet?"

The song was a slow fox trot, and Heather easily followed Nicholas's perfect lead. She loved being held in his strong arms, enjoyed the movement as they glided across the floor. An hour later, after finding they could waltz and samba with equal ease, they even tried the jitterbug, and were delighted with their dancing prowess.

A fanfare from the twenty-two piece orchestra trumpeted the announcer at the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen. It's time for our waltz contest. So find a partner and join the fun," he said. "Remember, the winning couple will receive one hundred dollars cash money and the famous Casa Loma Loving Cup." He smiled at the sea of upturned faces. "Good luck to you all." The music started, and soon the dance floor was filled with twirling, smiling couples.

"Shall we?"

"Why not?" Heather placed her hand in his. She smiled like one in a dream. "Even though we probably won't win, it doesn't matter. I've won the first prize already," she whispered. "You!"

"Sweetheart," murmured Nicholas as he kissed her tenderly. Then he took her in his arms and they began to dance. They waltzed like two people floating on a personal cloud of happiness. Heather's sparkling eyes never left the warm loving gaze of her partner's.

The pair were oblivious to other dancers around them, so complete was their own little world. It came as a surprise then, when the music stopped and they discovered they were the last couple on the floor. Scores of smiling, clapping people surrounded them.

Heather couldn't believe they'd won until Nicholas spoke in her ear. "I think we've just danced for our supper."

The announcer called them to the stage and ceremoniously congratulated them, then presented a hundred dollar bill to Nicholas and the bright loving cup to Heather.

Later, driving back to her apartment, she sat content at his side, holding the loving cup and humming softly. "What a perfect evening."

"Yes, it is." He sent her a warm smile. "I hadn't realized I was exploring a meaningful relationship with the best dancing partner in the world."

"Nor did I," she replied, returning his smile.

When they stepped into her apartment and closed the door, Heather paused a moment, hesitating. "I think I'll slip into something more comfortable."

"Whew, I'm glad you said it." Nicholas chuckled as he carefully set the loving cup on the coffee table. "It would sound pretty silly coming from me."

"I won't be long," she said as she took a blue silk caftan from the closet. "Will you open the sofa bed?"

Nicholas glanced over to the love seat and nodded. "I'll pour the rest of the wine, too."

When she returned, Nicholas was leaning against the refrigerator, watching her as she approached. "You've taken down your silken curls," he said. "I'm glad. I love to bury my face in your hair."

"And I love for you to do it."

Smiling, she glided into his open arms. His kiss was soft, gentle. He sucked tenderly on her lower lip. Fountains of desire cascaded over her body. She held his head with both hands and shyly dueled with the tip of his tongue. Her hesitant gesture was like lighting a stick of erotic dynamite. At once, his body grew stiff and bold against her femininity. His response set her on fire. She felt alive, daring anything.

"Love me," she murmured, repeating a request she'd made a week before. "Oh, love me, Nicholas. Please."

Nicholas moaned softly. "Oh, baby." His kiss deepened and he lifted her in his arms.

She clung to him, whimpering softly. "Love me, Nicholas. Love me, love me."

He laid Heather upon her bed, then smoothed her long hair into a silken fan around her serene face. "Will you lie there for a moment alone?" he asked in a low hypnotic voice. "I want to slip out of something so I can be more comfortable."

Heather's breath quickened at his suggestion, and she nodded.

He walked silently about the small apartment, turning off all the lights. Then he moved to the window and opened the drapes. A silver light from the waning moon shone through the pane, and the glow from the street light outlined his strong profile.

Heather watched, mesmerized, as he slowly removed his tie and tossed it over the back of a chair. It was like watching a movie in a darkened theater. When he removed his jacket and then his shirt, Heather drew in a sharp breath. His chest with its thick matted dark curls was clearly visible in the silver light.

He stepped away from the window and Heather could hear one shoe and then the other drop to the floor as, almost simultaneously, she heard the faint metallic sound of his belt buckle, then his zipper.

Though she was unable to see, her mind conjured a vivid image of his nearly nude body standing by his pool, and her heart beat a hammering staccato of desire. She inhaled deeply and was almost overcome by the combination of his personal scent and his expensive cologne wafting through the still, dark room.

"Nicholas?"

"A moment, my darling," he replied. "One moment and I'll be there."

She heard the tinkle of glass and knew he was bringing their wine.

"Hold out your hand. We'll have a final toast."

She sat up and he carefully wrapped her fingers around the stem of her glass. She felt, rather than saw, Nicholas sit on the bed.

"To our enchanted evening, sweetheart." He touched her glass with his. "May we be friends and more, forever."

"Forevermore," said Heather, then she sipped the wine.

They sat in the silent shadows, holding hands, sipping their drinks. Then Nicholas took her glass and put it with his on the table.

"Scoot over, baby." He lay down beside her. "I want to hold you."

He gathered her to his warm hair-roughed length. She melted into his embrace, and surrendered to his overpowering virility. He savored her exotic perfume. Then he feathered her face, her earlobes, her throat, with dozens of tantalizing kisses while his fingertips explored the classic planes of her face.

Heather sensed a frantic fluttering deep inside her body as Nicholas's palm cupped her chin and his lips touched hers in a quiet kiss. But when his hand crept up to caress her silky hair and then roamed slowly, finding its way to the edge of her gown, his kiss burned her lips. Gradually, the fire caught between them, building into a roaring blaze.

Moments later, without Heather's conscious knowledge, his experienced hands had stripped her of her gown and she lay warm and vital and naked against his body. Their flesh seemed to spark off each other like flint and steel as Nicholas raised Heather to a crescendo of desire.

He lay beside her and, like a concert pianist, he played her body as his instrument of love. His selection? A sonata of passion. His first movements were an allegro of quick light strokes as he gently, almost shyly, explored her pliant form to sensitize her skin, make her constantly aware of his touch.

Having enthralled her body, he moved to the second movement of his personal composition, the andante. His slow firm massage continued at a moderate tempo, yet it flowed easily over and into Heather's trembling body. She breathed rapidly and she listened to Nicholas's ragged breath as he dragged cool air into his hot body. He exhibited superhuman control when he moved against her arching hips, giving pleasure, rather than taking it.

Boldly, Nicholas advanced to the third movement, the scherzo. With rapid animated rhythm he brought Heather to the moment where flesh took precedence over mind, when desperate urgency threw aside the obstacles of control, and she was flung off the fiery pinnacle of her passion.

Moaning and crying out and surging against Nicholas's attentiveness, Heather felt reborn when, for the first time in her life, wave upon wave of ecstasy washed over her writhing body as her throbbing need was released.

The maelstrom of her passion broke over her again and again until finally she was satiated with pleasure. Then,

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

Nicholas, her maestro, slowly brought her back, with tender caresses and kisses, from his concert of love.

Somewhere, faraway, she heard the soft strains of a waltz as Nicholas held her close. Her body relaxed, she lay content in his arms. And when the song ended, she slept a deep dreamless sleep.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 7

In the morning Heather's consciousness surfaced gradually. She first became aware of birds singing, then she heard a barking dog. Stretching, she smiled as cloud-pieces of the night before drifted through her mind, and she turned quietly to gaze at the sleeping form of her life mate—she was almost absolutely sure now—as he lay beside her.

She lay her hand upon his warm back and felt the steady rise and fall of his respiration. Then, careful not to waken him, she raised on one elbow and delicately stroked his ear with a strand of her hair. She didn't notice Nicholas's stealthy move until he grasped her neck and held her while he rolled under her body. They kissed tenderly, both just glad to be together.

"Good morning, Baby bear," he murmured in a sleepy voice.

"What are you doing in my bed?" Her voice sounded soft, relaxed.

"At last, you've finally got the right line." He chuckled as he kissed the tip of her nose. "Oh, you even taste sweet. Kiss me."

And she did.

After the kiss, she said, "You snore." When Nicholas looked surprised and slightly hurt, she added, "But not very loud."

And the sunshine of his smile shone again.

"I'd never snore," he said as he played with one of her curls, "if I could be as relaxed and content as you were last night. You're one fiery little vixen."

Heather lowered her gaze to his bare chest and shyly drew circles in the thick dark curls with her fingertip. "But we didn't make love last night." Her words were almost inaudible.

"My dear woman!" he exclaimed with a voice strained by weariness. "I don't know what else you'd call it."

If it were possible, her cheeks became rosier still. "You know what I mean."

Gently, Nicholas lay her back on her pillow and shifted so he towered above her sad little face. "You mean we didn't consummate our love."

Heather nodded.

Then he gathered her in his arms. "Darling, let's just say we joined our spirits last night." He stroked her hair. "We joined in a union of desire."

"But I wanted you." Her lips mouthed the words softly against his chest.

"I know."

"And you wanted me," she declared with newfound knowledge.

"That's true," he conceded with a deep sigh.

"Then why, Nicholas?"

"You got carried away in my arms, honey," he said. "And I made a promise to you that we'd wait until you were absolutely ready." He laughed harshly. "I'll admit, last night I thought it was the most stupid promise of my life." Then he

smiled into her wide, innocent eyes. "But this morning, by the clear light of day, I know I did the right thing.

Heather kissed his chest and he trembled. "Nicholas, you're the finest, strongest man I've ever known," she said. "Thank you."

"Forget the thanks, you wonderful woman, you," he replied with a sly grin. "I wasn't exactly a disinterested observer last night." Then he chuckled. "You certainly do get physical, honey." He groaned very loud and tried to stretch. "Wow, I feel as if I've been tackled by all the Dallas Cowboys."

"Oh, you!"

Heather threw her pillow which he neatly dodged as he again rolled on top of her and kissed her hard and long. Heather sighed as she relaxed beneath his length. Then his gaze shimmered with suppressed laughter as he peered into her eyes.

"I probably should have compared my experience with the Dallas Cow girls." Then he kissed her again before she could pummel his head. "Now, although I think it's absolutely ludicrous, but because I know you'll insist," he said, "I'm going to dive under the covers while you race to the bathroom to get dressed." He pulled the sheet over his head. "We've got a lot of work to do today," he said. "Tomorrow we go home."

The thought of returning to the beautiful Ozark Mountains and to the college with Nicholas struck Heather with its overpowering implications. "Home," she said. "Tomorrow?" She fell back against the pillows. "We'll never be ready in time."

"We will," said Nicholas. His voice, muffled by the blanket, sounded far away, but his creeping fingers soon found their mark. "Now, move it."

Ten minutes after Heather dashed into the bathroom, she was ready to go to work, but she called through the door first. "Are you decent?"

"Always!"

She came dancing out the door, her bare feet skipping across the thick carpet. But when she gazed around the room, she stopped in her tracks. "Oh," she cried as she mentally counted the boxes she'd need for her library alone. "We're never going to make it."

Nicholas grasped her sagging shoulders and kissed her pouting lips. She felt strength return as he willed her to take heart.

"We will make it," he declared, "even if we have to work all day and all night." He gave her a rueful grin. "It'd probably be good therapy to save us from a repeat of last night."

When she tipped her head to one side and smiled, he rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. "Listen to me, Heather. I want to be, I intend to be, always, the man you believe me to be," he said. "But you're no help." He laughed and shook his head, then kissed her again. "No damn help at all."

After breakfast Nicholas went back to his hotel room to change before he went to the grocery store for boxes. When he was gone, a telegram was delivered for him. Heather hoped it wasn't bad news about his mother. She'd been under the weather last week, he'd told her.

When Nicholas returned, he had boxes galore and a roll of crisp bills which he gave to Heather. She looked at the money and then at him, dumbfounded.

"I paid a little visit to your landlady."

"You got money from my landlady?" Heather looked again at the money clutched in her fist, then gave Nicholas a measured look. "What did you have to do for this money, Nicholas McCord? That woman has the first dollar she's ever earned. She's a tightwad."

"Oh, I don't know," he replied with a whimsical smile. "I found her to be a very romantic lady."

Her gaze narrowed. "You sweet-talked her."

"More than that," he confessed with a smug grin. "I held her hand and ended up kissing her on the cheek."

"And she went all silly, right?"

"Well, I've been known to have a certain charm..."

Heather pulled Nicholas down on the couch. "Tell me all."

"I broke your lease," he said. "And I got your deposit back and the balance of this month's rent."

"But my lease clearly states..."

"You've been made an exception to her rules," he said. "She wants us to be happy."

"I'm happy," she said. "Are you happy?"

"Yes," he replied. "I'm very happy."

Then Heather kissed Nicholas, deep and long. She curved her body and moved against him with her new sensual knowledge. After the kiss ended, he swayed weakly and wore a sappy grin when she gazed at him. Her smoldering eyes affected him more than he realized.

"Thank you, my brave and handsome Prince." Her voice was low, breathless.

"Whew!" Nicholas was definitely rocked by her power. "Where's the next dragon?"

Heather laughed and pointed to the piles of books stacked on the floor. "Right over there." She gave him a gentle push. "Oh, I forgot." She pulled the telegram from her pocket. "This came while you were out. I hope your mother is all right."

Nicholas tore open the envelope. His eyes blazed as he read, his mouth was a terrible slash through his sable beard. Then he crumbled the telegram in his fist. "That dirty sonova..." He sucked in air and hurled the paper across the room. "How the hell did he find me here?"

Heather caught his arm and held on. "Who, Nicholas? The man who's after you?"

"The bastard's threatening you again," he hissed. "I'll kill him. I swear I'll kill him if he tries to hurt you."

"Don't say that, Nicholas," she cried. She ran over and picked up the balled up paper. "'Leave alone what's mine alone,'" she read, "'or I'll destroy you and your lady.'"

"Didn't I tell you the guy had style," said Nicholas with a scornful laugh. "The bastard's sick, but he's got talent."

Heather folded the telegram and put it back in her pocket. Then she hugged and kissed Nicholas. "Nothing's going to happen," she said. "Don't worry. As soon as we get back, we'll call Gary Eagle."

Nicholas drew in a long breath. "Yes, I guess you're right. We can't do anything now. We'll just have to be careful." He walked over to the mountain of books. "So, don't you leave

my sight." He looked at the stacks surrounding him and groaned. "Come on, baby, let's get busy."

They worked all day, stopping only to fetch more cartons and bring in White Castle hamburgers and fries for lunch. By evening, the job was completed, and they collapsed on the sofa.

Heather sighed wearily. "I'm certainly glad I gave all the family furniture to Kitty when she got married. Think what we'd have to move if this wasn't a furnished apartment?"

"I'd rather not, honey." He groaned. "With the boxes we already have, your steps are going to reach the height of Mt. Everest before we're finished tomorrow." His vivid imagination made dozens of mental trips. "I don't know how I'll repay Skip," he said, "but I swear I'll give Jimmy and Steve top marks when they take my course. They're going to deserve every grade point."

Heather clucked her tongue. "Now, now, remember your ethics."

"Not at all," said Nicholas. "It would simply be payment for a job well done. Besides," he said, chuckling, "they're honor students."

"Goodness!" She patted her heart. "For a moment there, I thought my need might be corrupting your sterling values."

"Your need, as you so brazenly put it, has already done enough damage to me," he muttered. "Just leave my values alone."

Heather pressed a warm kiss to his bearded cheek. Then she rose and strolled into the kitchen. "Poor guy," she

crooned. "You rest your weary bones and I'll make musgoes for supper."

"Musgoes?"

"Sure," she said. "Tomorrow I'm moving, so tonight we clean out the refrigerator and everything must go!"

After dinner, Nicholas tried to decide if he should leave Heather and return to his hotel room for the night. But the threatening telegram continued to worry him.

"Don't you want to stay with me?" A wisp of Heather's hair fell into her eyes. "I think you should."

Nicholas brushed the curl aside and put his hands on her hips. "Yes, I want to stay." Silently he cursed his late, great sainthood. "And, no, I haven't decided yet if I should."

Heather looked up at him with innocent blue eyes. "I won't bother you, if that's what you're worried about," she said in a breathy whisper. She toyed with the top button of his shirt until it opened, then played with the hair on his chest. "I promise, Nicholas."

Nicholas sucked in breath, and shook her, gently but firmly, by the shoulders. "Honey, you bother me even when you're not around," he confessed in a husky voice. Then he took her hand away from his shirt and branded her palm with a hot moist kiss.

"And, baby...?" He kissed her palm again before meeting her blue-sky eyes, now smoky with desire. "I want you to know that I know that you know exactly what you're doing to me." He shook his head, trying to clear his confused mind, then gave up and laughed harshly. "Hell, I can't even talk anymore."

"That's bad."

"But I care for you." And he kissed her.

"Mmm, that's good," she murmured. "So good."

"I've decided to go back to the hotel, Heather. Good night," he whispered. "Sleep tight. I'll be back at seven o'clock sharp, and I'll bring breakfast."

She cuddled in his arms and kissed his neck. "Just so you come back."

"You're never going to be rid of me if you don't stop that stuff."

"I understand your dilemma, Nicholas." Then she kissed his neck again.

"Aw, what the hell," he exclaimed. "I'll stay, but don't you dare come over on my side of the bed."

* * * *

At seven a.m. Heather answered the door to find Nicholas, laden with bags from the Golden Arches. "Did you go back to the hotel after I went to sleep?" she asked as she stuffed her shirt into her jeans. "If you did, you're a sneak."

"Nope, I went back this morning." He planted a kiss on her mouth as he walked past in polo shirt and jeans. "I'm a country boy, darlin'. I rise with the chickens."

"Sure, you do," said Heather, snagging another kiss.

At seven-fifteen, Jimmy and Steve trooped in. They took one look at the piles of boxes scattered across the room and panicked.

"We have to be in class first thing tomorrow morning," said Steve.

"Yeah, we're having a big test," added Jimmy. He wore a look of horror. "See you guys later."

"Get your butts back in there," thundered Skip Johnson. His roared order froze them in their tracks. "We'll be back by dinner tonight."

"And we have your breakfast," crooned Heather.

"Food!" cried the pair in unison. And they dove into the bags and began demolishing the contents.

While the boys ate, Nicholas introduced Skip to Heather. "Didn't I tell you Skip was built a little like The Refrigerator? Only he's much nicer looking, even though he wears those fatigues everywhere." Then he turned to the man in question. "Man, it's good to see you, buddy."

"Same here, Nick," said Skip, shaking Nicholas's hand. "Like to never found this place." He looked at the mountain of boxes. "Got our work cut out for us, I see," he said. Then he looked out the window. "I hate the city, so let's get movin'."

"You could give Nicholas a run for his money on negative judgments. You share the same observation about both my home and my hometown," said Heather with a grin.

"Someday I'll get you both for such blasphemy."

Skip at first gave her a wary look, as if gauging her threat. Heather noticed it, but when it passed, she put it out of her mind.

"I got nothin' against Nick, here," replied Skip. "Why would I run him for money?"

Heather gave Nicholas a perplexed look. "Is your friend for real?"

"Yup, he puns on accident," said Nicholas. "And he's now your friend, too." He exchanged grins with Skip. "Right?"

"I'd like nothin' better, Nick." Skip turned his attention to Steve and Jimmy. "All right, boys, chow time is over." He started out the door with the first cartons. "Start truckin' these containers before I box you both."

"He did it again," Heather softly exclaimed. "Are you sure he doesn't plan them?"

Nicholas shook his head. "It's just a little gift he's received." For a moment, his eyes clouded and his smile disappeared. "Lord knows, it cost him enough. He keeps going through the hell of Gulf War I. He was a tank crewman and fought in several battles."

"Flashbacks?"

Nicholas nodded. "And a terrible nervous condition. They think he was exposed to nerve gas."

"Why does he still wear his fatigues?"

"He says they're comfortable, but I think he likes them because all his closest buddies wear them."

"Buddies from the military?"

"Yes, they're all veterans who were wounded, one way or the other," he explained. "The local boys started an organization they call 'Survivors.' Within a year, the group expanded to other areas of the country."

Just then, the three helpers marched in and stood with arms folded across their chests as they glared at the pair.

"We came to help Caesar, not to bury him," said Skip. "But, by damn, it can be arranged if you don't start hauling a ... I mean, butt! Can you dig it?"

* * * *

It was late when the five weary travelers collapsed on the steps of the Johnson front porch. They gasped for breath after the last load had been carried upstairs to Heather's quarters.

"Whew!" Heather flexed her shoulders. "I'm going to sleep for a week."

"You'll be up first thing to register," Nicholas informed her.

"Tyrant!"

The pair's three helpers looked from one to the other, not sure, for the moment, if Heather was serious. Then they relaxed when she grinned.

"What classes are you taking, Heather?" asked Steve.

"I only need two Lit courses to graduate," she said. "One with Professor Hagers, and one with your friend and mine, Nicholas McCord."

"Boy, talk about pull," exclaimed Jimmy. "And what about your rule against fraternizing with the coeds now, Professor?"

"The rule still stands."

Jimmy and Steve and Heather stared at him in shock. Skipper grinned wryly.

Nicholas tried to suppress his grin, but failed. "However, I've made one exception," he said. "And that exception is Ms. Warren."

Heather's relieved sigh was heard by all.

"Why were you so upset, Heather?" asked Jimmy. "You'd just have more time to study."

Heather grinned and winked. "Right, Jimmy. I'll have to work for at least one of my classes."

Nicholas joined in the laughter, but the lights in his eyes momentarily dimmed.

"Gosh, for a minute there," exclaimed Steve, "I thought we'd have to pack all that stuff back in the truck."

In control again, pushing aside the niggling doubt that kept trying to overshadow his honest relationship with Heather, Nicholas eased himself off the steps. He looked from one face to the next as he scanned the four upturned faces before him. "Heather Warren leaves here over my dead body, people," he said firmly. "Over my dead body."

"Why do you want to talk like that, Nick?" asked Skipper. "Nobody would want to waste you because of Heather."

"Or for anything else," added his mother, who held open the screen door.

"How are you doing, Mrs. Johnson?"

"Just fine and dandy, Nicholas, except I need a little help in here."

"Well, why didn't you say so right away?" He started up the steps. "I'll be glad to help you."

"No, no," exclaimed his housekeeper. "Someone as important as you shouldn't be hauling stuff around."

Nicholas chuckled and glanced at the truck. "My dear Mrs. Johnson, how I wish you'd been present at the other end of this trip. I would have been saved many a step."

"If you'da picked up your size eleven's, you wouldn't have tripped so much." Skip stared at his combat boots. "I move like a ballet dancer," he added, "even in my gunboats."

Heather glanced worriedly between the two men. "Are you having an argument?"

"Us?" Nicholas was obviously surprised by her question. "Why, heck, no, honey. We're friends." He turned to Skip. "Right, Skip?"

"You got it, Nick." Skip gave him a high five.

"All right, Mrs. Johnson," said Nicholas, "lead the way."

"Land's sake, I'm not gonna tell you again now." She turned her attention to her son. "Skipper, honey, could you please give me a hand?"

"Sure thing, Ma."

Heather felt sorry for Skip when he pulled himself up off the steps to do his mother's bidding. Without realizing it, she feared Mrs. Johnson had dealt a blow to her son's ego. And if Nicholas's explanation about Skip's nervous condition and inability to fit back into civilian society was correct, she doubted his ego could take many knocks.

"See you, Heather."

"Take care, Skip."

"Yes, ma'am, I will. See you, Nick."

"Don't take any wooden nickels, Skip."

"Hell's bells, Nick, I wooden do a thing like that." He gave Nicholas a broad wink before he followed his mother inside.

"He just did it again," said Heather.

"Yes, he did."

Nicholas walked the boys back to the truck. Heather saw him hand them something. Then the pair climbed into the cab to wait for him.

"I gave them our prize money," said Nicholas when he sat next to her again and took her hand. "I think they earned every penny."

She leaned her head against his shoulder. "But that leaves no payment for you."

"You'll think of something." He kissed the top of her head.

"Go home, Professor." She stood. "Go home and let me get to work."

"I'll go, Ms. Warren," he said, rising, too. "But I'll see you on campus, bright and early tomorrow."

Heather put her hands on her hips and scowled at him.

"You are a tyrant, Nicholas. You know that, don't you?"

"You ain't seen nothin' yet." Then he kissed her, right in front of the world and everybody, until she was senseless.

For a moment, Heather had difficulty catching her breath. "For a tenured teacher you make a t-terrific lover," she stammered as she clung to him until she could stand alone.

"I told you..."

"I know, I know," she cried. "You're good."

"I'm damn good." He threw her a kiss, then turned and jogged to the truck. He threw her one last kiss before he climbed in and slammed the door.

Heather watched until the truck disappeared over the hill. Then she ascended the stairs to her room and started unpacking everything she'd packed yesterday.

Her room was light and airy and very large. The view was splendid. Verdant hills, smoky valleys, and the sparkling lake lay before her. "It's good to be back, Omsee," she whispered.

"I'm sure glad you're here, too," boomed a friendly voice from her opened door. It was Mrs. Johnson. "Professor McCord's kinda like another son to me," she said. "He's been

lonely for as many years as I've known him so I say welcome."

"Thank you, Mrs. Johnson." Heather smiled. "I know I'll be happy here." She glanced at the far wall. "I'm so grateful for the bookshelves."

"Skipper built them after he came home. He's real good with his hands," she said. "If you can fill them shelves, you'll be some student."

"I think I can already!" She laughed when she pointed to all the boxes at her feet.

"Then you're a real smart girl," said Mrs. Johnson. "That's good because Nicholas is mighty intelligent. You'll have to keep studying real hard, honey, if you're gonna keep up with him."

"I'll do my very best," said Heather. But she was thinking now of a different kind of education.

"See that you do, honey." Mrs. Johnson shook her finger at Heather. Then she smiled. "Oh, he might get a little cocky once in a while," she said. "But you just got to humor him, that's all. I can tell you this though," she added warmly. "He's a good man and if he loves you, he'll never do anything to hurt you. Not Nicholas McCord. He's an honorable man. Just like my Skipper. Why, Nickie is almost like another son to me."

Heather smiled at Mrs. Johnson, but silently she wondered what Skipper might think about such an idea. "Nicholas told me you were a wonderful person," she said. "I can see why he loves you so much." Tears misted her vision when the woman hugged her against her ample bosom.

"I think you just might be the one for that dear boy." She brushed a tear from her eye. "Come on now. I've made some good beef stew for your supper."

* * * *

That night the nightmare came again. Perspiration beaded on Heather's flushed face as she slept. Her head rocked from side to side. Then, just as she began running after her parents, screaming to them, she was wakened in the dark by a strong shake.

"What...? Oh, God, who is it?" she cried. "Nicholas? Nicholas, is it you?"

"No, Heather, it's Skip."

"Skip?" She shook her head, trying to clear her mind.

"What are you doing in my room in the middle of the night?"

"You had a bad dream," he said. "When you screamed I came to help you."

Heather collapsed in his arms. "Oh," she whimpered, "will it never leave me?"

"You dream often?"

She nodded, gasping.

"The same dream?"

She swallowed hard and nodded again.

"Me, too." His whispered words sounded harsh. "It's hell." He continued to hold her tight. "Tell me about it."

Heather lifted her head and gazed up at him in the dawn light. "I dream of my parents," she whispered. "They're both dead."

"I dream about dead people, too," he said. "They're always different ones, though."

"It sounds like a terrible dream."

"Yeah, it's not pretty." He cradled her in his arms, gently swaying back and forth. "I been dreaming that dream for a long time now. Some nights are worse than others." His jaw tightened. "Where I was, it wasn't clean, it wasn't pretty, and it wasn't precise. We killed a lot of people."

Heather realized Skip must have psychological problems stemming from the time he served in the military. The chemical warfare changed everybody. The label was Gulf War Syndrome. "I seem to dream more when I'm upset about something," she said. "Or if I'm in a new experience." She laughed softly and patted his arm. "I suppose starting college again, after being away for eight years, could be considered a new challenge."

"For me, it would be sheer terror," he replied. "A trauma, sure. I'd be out of my class."

"I think you're very intelligent, Skip," said Heather as she silently told herself that he'd done it again.

"Think so?" he asked as he adjusted her body more comfortably against him. "I dream more when I'm worried about something." He stroked her hair like one would to quiet a child. "And if I get mad, then I dream real bad."

"Do you get mad often?"

"Lately I've been learnin' from the docs in Springfield, how to control my temper," he said. "I try to be as gentle as can be so I won't hurt people anymore." His steady hand hesitated on Heather's shoulder. "I've hurt a lot a folks,

Heather. Ain't no way I can ever undo all that hurt. But it's easier when I can forget things."

He eased her away and lay her back on her pillows. "I got a whole lot of things I need to forget."

"Perhaps, I can help you."

"Yeah, I'd like that," he said. "And if you got things to forget, I'll help you, too. It just takes time." He tucked the sheet under her chin. "Better get back to sleep now."

"Yes," said Heather as she covered a yawn. "Thank you for waking me."

"Any time, pretty lady," whispered Skip. "You won't dream no more tonight. It's almost dawn." He gazed out the window, then back at Heather. "Light time chases night crime."

"Thank you, again," murmured Heather. "I'm sorry to have troubled you."

Skip patted her shoulder, then smiled tenderly. "No trouble, ma'am," he said. "You sleep now, hear?" Everything's gonna be all right. Your ole buddy, Skipper, will keep guard over you."

But after he left, closing the door quietly behind him, Heather lay with her eyes opened wide. She was still frightened and she longed to have Nicholas's arms around her. Was coming here a mistake? she wondered. Would the nightmares increase to punish her for making a new life for herself?

"Oh, please," she prayed. "Make the dream go away."

* * * *

During the days Heather pushed worries about her occasional nightmares aside, and she didn't tell Nicholas. He had enough to concern him. Two days ago, he'd received another communication from his unknown assailant. This time it was a box. Inside, Nicholas found a noose and a note. "Don't hang on to what's mine. It'll kill you."

Sheriff Gary Eagle sent the materials to a federal laboratory in Kansas City. The technicians found nothing. No fingerprints, no fibers, no clues. The strain was beginning to tell on Nicholas, and Heather did whatever she could to keep his mind off the threats. He seemed more relaxed when she was near.

Meanwhile she thrived in the regulated tempo of two classes a day combined with her work schedule. When Nicholas introduced her to the other five professors, they'd welcomed her with open arms.

"You will be our blessing," proclaimed, Professor Williams, the group's spokesman. He was a charming, silver haired gentleman, who had a perpetual twinkle in his clear blue eyes.

"He's gone on you," whispered Nicholas.

Heather thanked the men for their confidence, but she aimed her remarks directly at Nicholas, her professor, as he stood in the back, throwing kisses at her.

"There isn't anywhere else I'd rather be. I'll get lots of hands-on experience," she said. "So, gentlemen, it is I who thank you."

One Friday afternoon, Nicholas strolled into her office and closed the door. "You've got them all in the palm of your

hand, honey," he said. "My colleagues tell me you're the answer to their prayers."

"I only want to be the answer to one professor's prayers."

Nicholas walked up behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist and held her against his body. When he kissed the side of her neck, Heather's knees went weak.

"Listen to me, I'm going to tell you a story." He kissed her ear. "My first prayer was answered the day I found you, Heather, my love." The touch of his warm lips against her ear made her tremble. "My second prayer was answered when you came back to Omsee." He continued to nuzzle the sensitive cord along her neck and inhale her special scent. "I wanted to help you finish your education. But I also wanted you. With me."

He turned her in his arms so he could look into Heather's blue-sky eyes. When she met his gaze, she could read the proof of his words there.

"My last prayer will be answered when I make you mine." His breath flowed across her face. "Soon, my darling, you'll feel the full power of my desire. Soon."

Heather kissed him with a passion she was unable to hide. Instantly he crushed her in a wild embrace, his strong arms and hot wet kisses made her fully aware of his erection pressed against the throbbing ache in her loins. When, finally, he released her love-swollen lips, he rocked her in his arms.

"I don't think I want to wait anymore, Nicholas," she said. "I don't know if I can."

"When you're truly sure, sweetheart, you won't think anymore. And that's when we'll make love," he said. "Until

that happens, we wait." He held her away from him and winked. "But if it's much longer, I'll have to take that plunge into icy Lake Honor."

How could Nicholas continue to control his emotions? wondered Heather. She was less sure of her ability to constrain herself every day. In fact, it was beginning to feel rather childish to do so. What was she afraid of anyway? she asked herself. Nicholas cared for her. He would never hurt her.

"I'll see you tonight, honey," said Nicholas as he walked out of the office. "You've got two midterms on Monday, and I have to line edit my manuscript."

She made a face. "Slave driver!"

Nicholas sent her a wicked grin. "The possible mother of my possible children cannot flunk college."

"Children?" Heather blinked. "How many do you want?"

"That subject has nothing to do with this weekend's homework," he told her. "That's for possibly later, and we'll discuss it ... in bed. Absolutely." He dodged the eraser she threw, then closed the door softly behind him.

The Professor was in for the shock of his life, thought Heather as she walked over to pick up the eraser. If she could possibly arrange it, she wanted at least three babies. With him. Absolutely!

An hour later, she heard muffled voices in the hall. Then, suddenly, her assistant burst in.

"There's a woman to see Professor McCord." Her flushed face reflected her agitation. "I told her he's teaching, but she won't believe me."

"It's all right, Beth," replied Heather. "I'll see her."

The woman swept in, looking, for all the world, like a member of royalty. The old school. Nothing, it seemed, would stop her Grande dame entrance. Chic and statuesque, she oozed self-confidence. Her raven hair framed a perfect oval face, and her pencil slim figure was encased in a tailored suit of white. Heather rose from her chair. She wished to meet this formidable person on equal footing. Was that even possible? she wondered, fleetingly.

"Did your little secretary tell you I wanted to see Nicky?"

Heather took a steadying breath. "I'm very sorry you missed him. He's conducting a class, you see." She held out her hand. "I'm Heather Warren, Professor McCord's assistant." She smiled graciously. "I'd be glad to take a message, Ms...?"

"Benita Whitehall." Her voice dripped ice water. Her aloft glare seemed to censor any peasant who failed to recognize the great Whitehall, lead author for Web Publications, Inc.

Would one call this a faux pas? Heather wondered. Well, make the best of it, she told herself. "Forgive me for not recognizing you, Miss Whitehall. I know your work." She nodded toward a chair. "Won't you have a seat?"

The woman acted as if she hadn't heard the invitation. Instead she critiqued Heather's figure. "How long have you been with Nicky?" she asked without preamble. "And what exactly do you do for him?"

Heather was unable to cover her shock at the woman's insinuating questions. "I beg your pardon?"

"Don't bother. Just answer the questions?"

Angry sparks blazed in Heather's eyes. The unmitigated gall of the woman. "I don't think that's any of your damn business."

Miss Whitehall's eyes narrowed. "You're not as sweet as you look." She peered at Heather's face. "How old are you anyway?"

"Why should that interest you?"

The woman laughed scornfully. "Because you don't look old enough to know the score." Her narrowed gaze swept along Heather's body again. "Has Nicky added you to his list of conquests yet?" she asked. "No? Well, don't worry, you'll be rewarded for your patience, believe me." She closed her eyes and kissed her fingertips. "He's the best there is."

Heather had had enough of this conversation. She wanted the woman to leave. Now. "You look so drained, Miss Whitehall," she purred. "If you do all your own research, it's a wonder you have time or the energy to write those sizzling bestsellers."

Miss Whitehall met Heather's cool gaze. "Just tell Nicky I'm back," she ordered. "I'll wait for him at the house. Tell him to hurry."

She swept from the room, just as Heather picked up a glass paperweight from her desk and gingerly hefted it in her hand before she replaced it. At first, her fury could not be denied. She raced to the door and slammed it with a resounding crash.

"Who the hell does she think she is?" she seethed. Then the full impact of the woman's outrageous behavior hit her. Miss Whitehall was jealous of Heather, she realized. And, if

Heather was going to be honest with herself, she was jealous of Miss Whitehall.

Heather staggered back to the desk and sank into her chair. Benita Whitehall must have had an affair of some heated duration with Nicholas, she deduced. Now, she was back, ready to pick up where they'd left off. But that was insane, Heather told herself.

"Nicholas cares for me now."

Heather decided she had to take some time to think, so she hurried out of her office, telling Beth she was going to finish some research. Outside, she strode toward the lake with the firm intention of circling it, at least once. Her stride increased in length and speed. She even walked past Ebon's trumpeted greeting. But halfway around the lake she heard her name called from a distance, so she slowed her pace and turned. It was Skip Johnson. He jogged toward her in his camouflage fatigues, seemingly his only mode of dress.

"Hey, Heather. How you doin', little lady?"

"Don't ask, Skip. I'm walking off a mad-on."

He placed his hand on her shoulder and looked into her angry eyes, "You've got to settle down," he said. "If you get all upset, you'll be setting yourself up to dream tonight."

"I know." She dropped her chin on her chest. "I know."

"What's got you so riled?"

"Oh, nothing much," replied Heather in a sarcastic tone. "I just met one of Nicholas's old flames." She snorted in an unladylike manner. "I'm talking about her age, not necessarily her status. And she's also a bitch!" She rolled her

eyes. "Lord, listen to me. I sound like one of those screeching mountain cats you hunt."

A muscle twitched in Skip's right eyelid. "Nick invited a woman to visit him?" His voice was low. "While you're here?"

"No, she just showed up this afternoon ... I think."

"That blockhead's takin' you for granite, little lady," he said. "And I sure as hell don't like a chiseling two-timer like that. Maybe I should hammer a little sense into him."

"Now, Skipper, don't you get yourself upset," she cautioned, laying a hand on his thick forearm, "or you'll be up all night, too."

"I can take care of both of us, Heather." A fierce light came into his eyes when he glared in the direction of Nicholas's office. Then the look vanished and he gave Heather a conspiring grin. "Let's go drown your sorrow in the middle of a pepperoni pizza and a pitcher of beer. What do you say?"

"I say yes! But I can't go yet, Skipper. I have a class. Can we eat afterwards?"

"I'd rather have cheese," he said. When she laughed he looked proud. "I'll pick you up outside the Lit building in two hours."

Then he kissed her on the cheek and waved when they parted to go their separate ways. Neither was aware of the tall, tense figure leaning against one of the tulip trees across the lake, watching their exchange.

* * * *

"Ah, Ms. Warren, you honor us with your presence."

"I've never missed a class yet, Professor McCord."

Many of her peers gasped.

"After all, sir, you're considered an expert on Romance literature," she added, batting her lashes. "And I have so much to learn."

"I hope you've been studying because you'll get no special help from me."

"And I wouldn't dream of asking you."

Their stormy eyes locked and, for that instant, they were the only two in the room. Heather refused to be the first to break the glaring fusion of their eyes. Finally, Nicholas looked away.

"Today we'll study the dialectic of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," said Nicholas. "It warns a man of thirty-three that, although his life has been heavenly since his birth, he is destined to serve time in Hell because he's getting married." He glared at Heather. "Poor fellow."

"It could be a warning of a different kind," she replied. "Perhaps it warns any person of any age about the perils of a marital agreement."

"Perhaps Blake realized a man of this age is at a vulnerable crossroads in his life," countered Nicholas. "Even experienced men can be led astray by unscrupulous females."

"Or they just wear out!"

The heated debate continued and others in the classroom grew deadly still. No one coughed, not a person moved. Eventually all the students realized something more than a discussion of Blake's work was taking place.

When the bell rang, Nicholas dismissed the class. "Ms. Warren, would you stay for a moment?" His voice, though

pleasant enough, left no doubt that his request was actually a command.

When they were alone, Heather rose from her desk. "You wanted to speak to me, Nicholas?"

"Yes, be sure to bring a copy of my last published paper with you this evening," he said. "I need some of the footnotes for another article."

"I won't be studying with you tonight." She became suddenly wary when his head snapped to attention. "I have research to do at the library."

"If you don't mind my saying so, you seem to be always at the library. We never seem to be able to find time to be together." His mouth was grim. "Wasn't that supposed to be part of the bargain? I was to help you get back in school so we could spend time together. Get to know each other."

Heather could feel herself weakening, but she held out. "I have other plans," she said. "And, although you don't know it, you have, too."

"What's that supposed to mean?" he snapped. "I have work to complete tonight."

"Depends on what you call work," she said scathingly. Jealousy almost destroyed her ability to speak. "Miss Benita Whitehall left a message for you this afternoon. She said you should hurry home because she's waiting for you."

Heather started trembling so she turned away. She didn't want Nicholas to see the tears she was furiously blinking back. Then she jumped when she heard Nicholas's fist hit his desk, following by a long string of expletives ending with the word "bitch." At least they agreed on something, she thought.

"And that's not all she said ... or inferred, is it?" Nicholas spun Heather around to face him. His fingers bit into her upper arms. "Is it?"

"No," she whispered. "As a matter of fact, she inferred quite a lot, Nicholas."

"Damn her." He pulled Heather against him and held her fiercely in his arms. "Oh, honey, there was never anything serious between Nita and me," he said. "I swear it."

He wore a grim expression when he met Heather's glistening eyes. "I never denied there had been other women," he continued. "But Nita is like a starving piranha, always on the lookout for her next sexual meal. She comes around when she's got no place else to go," he said. "I haven't seen her in years."

"Well, you'd better guard your backside tonight," she said as she pulled from his arms, "because there's a starving piranha cruising your pool, waiting for her supper."

Suddenly a dumbfounded expression flickered across Nicholas's face. "Are you jealous, Heather?"

"Yes, dammit," she burst out. "How would you like it if I were visited by some drop-dead, good looking older stud, who was my lover?"

"I'd probably want to kill him."

"You've got the picture."

"But the key word is was," said Nicholas. "'Was your lover.'" Hesitantly he touched her shoulder, but she pulled away. "Trust me, sweetheart. I've got to talk to her."

"And I've got to get out of here." Heather ran out the door and down the hall. At the exit, she collided with Skip. He caught her in his arms while she drew ragged breaths.

"Easy, little lady. Where's the fire?"

"No fire, Skipper," she said with a brittle smile. "I'm just so hungry I could eat a whole pizza myself."

Skip laughed, but his piercing green eyes tried to gauge her emotional turmoil. Then he grabbed her hand and they ran to his pickup truck and sped away. Once again, the pair overlooked the watchful figure in the shadows.

Heather was silent as Skip maneuvered his truck along the main drag of Branson. With an expert's skill, he dodged tourist's cars along the road as they signaled to turn into the parking lot of a country music show or a souvenir shop. When they arrived at the Hut, Heather was in control again. She put on a big smile.

"I'm glad we came here, Skip."

"Yes, ma'am, I'm glad, too," he said as he matched her smile. "Let's order the Hulk-sized pizza."

After they ate, Heather patted Skip's hand. "I'm glad we're good friends."

He placed his huge hand gently over hers. "I hope we can always be good friends," he said. "You're a wonderful woman, Heather."

"And you're a very nice man," she replied as she finally relaxed. "Want some dessert?"

"I don't know," he said. "Do you?"

Heather pursed her lips and blew out her cheeks. But lights danced in her eyes again. "One more bite of anything," she declared, "and I'll explode."

"Snap to," he ordered. "We're blowing this joint before you do." He sounded like he was still in the Army. "A' right, front'n cent'r. For'd harch."

Heather and Skip spent a peaceful hour driving the hill roads, then they parked by the dam to watch the sunset. It was dark when Skip pulled up in front of the house. Only a small light in the entrance hall shone through the front window.

"Your mom's at a church meeting tonight," said Heather.

"Want me to stay till she gets back? My meeting can wait."

"No, Skip, you go on. I'll be all right." She exhaled on a long sigh. "Let's say good night now, and hope we don't meet again during the night." She yawned and leaned her head against the seat. "I'll be so glad when this summer is over."

"Didn't turn out like you planned?"

Heather shook her head. "Right now, I just don't know where I stand."

"Then sit for a spell." When Heather chuckled, Skip smiled. "I really had a good time with you tonight," he said. "I always have a good time with you."

"Me, too, Skipper." She closed her eyes.

"Heather?"

"Mmmm?"

"Could I give you a kiss good night?" he asked softly. "Just a friendly kiss?"

"Sure, Skip." She lifted her face to his. "I'd like that, too."

The kiss was a gentle one. Heather found nothing repulsive about it and, in fact, sighed with contentment as she relaxed in his arms. But it was obvious, they were in the midst of an experiment, testing for sparks that weren't there. When the kiss ended, they both knew the answer.

"Well, ma'am," he said. "It looks to me like you're stuck with a friend for life."

"And I consider myself a fortunate woman."

"Nick better realize how lucky he is," said Skip with a dark scowl.

Heather laughed softly. "If he doesn't, I'll send him to you."

"You do that," he said. "I'll see he shapes up."

"Thanks for a lovely evening."

"Any time, Heather." He patted her on her shoulder. "What the world needs is more friendships and less love affairs."

"Amen to that."

He stroked her cheek. "Want me to walk you to the door?"

"No, that's okay," she said. "What could happen to me here?" She opened the door and climbed down. "Go on to your meeting now," she whispered. "I'll see you in the morning."

"Promise to call if you need me during the night?"

"Promise."

She watched the red tail lights as his truck rolled down the road and disappeared, then she turned toward the house. But her reverie was instantly shattered when she came face to face with Nicholas.

He placed his hands on her upper arms. "Very touching."

"Nicholas! You scared the life out of me."

"Don't tempt me, Heather," he said. "You don't know the first thing about trust and faith, do you? You just cut and run, right?" His words sounded harsh. "And what the hell were you doing with Skip Johnson?" he shouted. "I've been waiting here for hours."

Heather lost her temper, then. "That's none of your damn business. And stop acting like one of your damn Peter Roan macho men," she hollered as, simultaneously, she pushed his hands away. "Furthermore, I might ask the same question of you?" she added. "I was perfectly safe with a perfect gentleman all evening, which is more than I can say for you with your two legged man-eater."

"I saw him kiss you, Heather," he seethed. "What was that all about?"

Heather lowered her lashes to conceal her sudden embarrassment, and then she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "That was a ... a sort of ... an experiment," she stammered. "A test."

"And what did you find out?" His whole manner changed with his question.

Heather stepped forward and hugged Nicholas with all her might. She buried her face against his broad hard chest. "I found out something very important," she said. "You're the only man who makes me go all silly when he kisses me."

Nicholas kissed her hair and his body relaxed as he laughed softly. "You silly imp," he said in a caressing murmur. "You scared me to death when you rushed from the classroom this evening. I thought I'd lost you," he whispered.

"And all because I doubted your sincerity with me. I thought you were playing me for a sucker. Like Jaymee."

"Who's Jaymee?"

"She's the coed who forced me to make my rule in the first place."

"What'd she do, steal the final?"

"No," he said in a quiet, forlorn voice. "As a matter of face, she killed herself."

Heather tried to peer through the darkness. "Are you saying you knew a girl who killed herself?"

"Yes, it happened," he said. "A coed killed herself because of my stupidity."

Heather led him to the foot of the porch and they sat down. "Tell me," she whispered.

"It happened the first year I was teaching." His weary tone aged him ten years. "I worked at Andre College up in Springfield. Freshman Comp and Rhetoric." He chuckled humorlessly. "I was so damned serious."

Heather nodded and smiled. She remembered him well.

"Most of the girls on campus teased me or flirted," he continued. "They did it because I was so terribly naive. Lord, most of them were more experienced than me, so they just kidded around a lot." He drew in a long breath and shuddered. "They'd tell me they couldn't be serious with me because I was serious enough for the entire student body."

"All, except one girl?"

"Yes," he said, nodding. "One of my students used any excuse to get me alone." He paused, reliving the painful

memory. "I was completely fooled." His gaze locked with Heather's. "I swear to you, I never suspected a thing."

"You were young, Nicholas," she said. "Now what happened?"

"One evening the girl came to my apartment and pleaded with me to help her with an assignment," he continued. "I'd helped her with several previous papers so I thought nothing of it. I just wanted her to do well in school. We worked together for three hours and I told her I thought she'd do fine."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "When she threw herself into my arms and started kissing me and tearing at my clothes, I was flabbergasted. She kept saying she was in love with me." He shook his head and sighed. "That's a hot one. A coed thought she was in love with Professor Nicholas McCord."

Heather didn't think it was so hard to believe.

He laughed harshly. "Lord, I was so stupid, Heather," he said. "I've gone over it a million times in my mind. What might I have done differently?" he wondered aloud as he turned to gaze into the hills. "I tried to be gentle. I said I had all I could handle with my teaching assignments, that there was no room left for an affair."

Heather waited a moment, stroking his hand. "Tell me the rest."

"Jaymee refused to listen. That was when the big trouble began."

"Bigger than this?"

Nicholas nodded again. "The next morning she lodged a complaint with the Faculty Grievance Committee. She accused me of toying with her affections." He paused and swallowed hard. "She also claimed I was the father of the child she was carrying."

"Oh, Nicholas, how terrible!"

"The terrible part was that the damn committee almost believed her." He snorted harshly. "It seemed her mother was a very popular alumna and her father, a major contributor."

"What did you do?"

"I fought for my professional life."

"Obviously, you won."

"But at what price?"

"What happened next?"

"Two weeks later the girl again came to my door. She begged to speak to me, said she wanted to apologize for the trouble she'd caused me." Nicholas heaved a sigh and gazed at the stars. "And, I, like a damn fool, let her in. When she realized, for a second time, that she wasn't going to get anywhere with me, she called me every name in the book," he said. "She accused me of being an unfeeling beast, just like her father. Then she ran from my apartment and rushed blindly down the middle of the street."

Nicholas suddenly inhaled sharply and threw back his head as if he'd been struck. His distorted features revealed the pain in his heart. "In the morning I found out she'd been killed instantly when she threw herself in front of an eighteen-wheeler."

His voice trembled, revealing his grief. "Oh, God, Heather," he cried. "I should have gone after her." He dropped his chin on his chest. "She'd be alive if only I'd had more sense," he said. "I've never been able to forgive myself."

Heather took Nicholas in her arms. "Oh, my dear." She rocked him gently. "You mustn't blame yourself. She could have picked any teacher."

"But she picked me," he replied hoarsely. "Me!"

Heather's heart ached for him. "Had she ever done anything like this before?"

He nodded. "She had a history of drug dependency," he said. "That poison turned her into a manic-depressive." He buried his face in Heather's hair. "Knowing never made it easier for me," he said. "I failed another human being."

"Who helped you through this ordeal, Nicholas?" she asked as she stroked his head. "Surely, you talked to someone?"

Nicholas raised his head, his face ashen. Heather could read the pain and remorse in his dull, lifeless eyes. "The committee's report was sealed. I never told anyone, Heather," he whispered. "You're the first person I ever thought might understand."

"Like the story about Ebon's mate?"

"Yes."

"Then tell it all, Nicholas."

He hugged her so hard she could barely breath. "I've kept this inside my gut for thirteen long years," he said.

"Sometimes I thought I'd go crazy. My conscience never lets me forget, but I never shared my secret." He blinked and

tried to smile. "I couldn't tell. Not until now," he said. "And you."

Heather held Nicholas, willing her body to absorb his pain and his undeserved shame. "I think you were very young, Nicholas," she began. "I think you were working hard to show your dedication toward your profession. You think you made a grave mistake in judgment," she continued. "But I believe you were taken advantage of. I think you were only very young."

Her tender voice caressed his senses. "It's true, another young life was lost that night," she said. "But, darling, you can't sacrifice the rest of your life for hers." She held his face and kissed him. "I'm so grateful you trusted me with your secret," she said. "Now let's never discuss it again. You've got to put it behind you, Nicholas."

Nicholas hugged her tight. "Thank you, my love," he said. His voice was still touched by sorrow. "I'll probably never be able to put this tragedy completely behind me. I still don't completely trust my students who ask for or seem to expect extra favors. But now that you've shared my pain, I feel as if a terrible weight has been lifted from my shoulders."

Heather gave him a tearful smile. "I'm glad, Nicholas," she said. "I think thirteen years is sufficient penance." She kissed him again. "Release it," she whispered. "Let it go. Now. Torturing yourself won't bring her back."

She saw a crystal tear inch its way toward Nicholas's bearded cheek so she kissed it away. The salty taste reminded her of his suffering. His unspoken, secret pain.

"The girl must have been a tortured soul," she said. "Her tragic end could have come in a hundred different ways. I'm just sorry you were involved."

Heather paused for a moment as she searched her memory for words she'd once read and memorized. "Maturity is the art of living in peace with that which we cannot change," she recited. "Don't you think it's time you took that final step?"

Nicholas kissed her tenderly. When he gazed into her upturned face, Heather could see that the light had returned to his tormented eyes. "You learned that lesson when you lost your parents, didn't you?"

Heather nodded.

"Thank you, sweetheart," he said. "Thank you with all my heart." He held her in his arms. "At this moment," he whispered, "I love you more than I ever thought it possible to love another human being."

When they kissed, it was a blending of their spirits. They belonged together. In the yesterday of last month, they'd been two lone beings, seeking fulfillment. Today, their search had ended. They had found one another.

A calmness pervaded their bodies. They both felt it. And when their kiss ended, Nicholas spoke. "This is right."

"Yes," said Heather. "Oh, yes."

"I love you so much, baby. So much." He tried to show with his kiss, how much he did care.

Heather melted against him, unexpectedly short of breath and weak with delight over his declaration of love. "I love

you, too, Nicholas," she said. "But I just got so darned jealous after locking horns with that woman."

"You've got nothing on me, honey," he admitted with a gruff laugh. "I could have shot Johnson when I saw him across the lake this afternoon, hugging and kissing you."

"So that's why you were so angry in class."

"And now tonight! I sure as hell hope Skip realizes that was his first and last kiss."

"I'm sure he does." She sensed continued tension in his body. "Are you all right?"

"Sure," he said, chuckling darkly. "I'll just murder him off in my next book." He laughed again, then hugged her. "How about you? Are you okay?"

Heather nodded. She was afraid to ask the obvious question.

"Benita's gone."

And Heather could breathe again. "Did she like your pool?"

"She never got near it, sweetheart," he said. "Ten minutes after I got home, I straightened her out and sent her on her way."

"Was she terribly disappointed, Nicholas?" Heather knew she'd be heartbroken if he turned away from her.

"Not so you'd notice," he replied with a deprecating chuckle. Then he gave Heather a quick hug. "After all, to a hungry piranha, we guys all look pretty much alike."

"Oh, there's a difference," she said. "I learned that tonight."

Nicholas gazed at her and smiled in complete relief. "Ah, but my darling woman, you're comparing love with sex, and therein, lies the real difference."

"You're right, darling."

Nicholas kissed her again. Then he lifted his head and gazed into her starry eyes. "What did Skip mean, when he told you to call him tonight if you needed him?"

Heather exhaled on a long sigh. "I didn't want you to know."

Nicholas had to force his body to remained relaxed, though his heart pounded. "Know what?"

"The dream came back."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you with my problems," she said. "You've got enough of your own."

"But, Heather, you should have told me."

"It's hard to understand if you've never experienced them."

"And Skip has?"

"And Skip still does."

"When did he tell you this?"

"The first night I was here," she said. "He woke me because I was screaming."

"And did he help you?"

"Yes, he's my friend."

"I thought I was, too."

"You are, Nicholas, but you also love me."

"I think Skip might love you, too."

"No, Nicholas," she replied. "You're wrong about him. He's just my friend. He wants to protect me."

"I'll protect you, sweetheart."

"That's what I told Skipper."

Nicholas led Heather down the road to his car, parked in the shadows of the maple trees. Then they rode in complete silence to his house. Both seemed content, just to hold hands and experience their peaceful togetherness after the stormy day's events.

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 8

When Heather and Nicholas arrived on his mountain top, they linked arms and walked slowly into the house, closing the door behind them. Then, he kissed her, tracing her parted lips with the tip of his tongue before he slid inside to explore her warmth.

"I love you, sweetheart." He hugged her fiercely to his body. "But, aside from loving you, I still like you, despite all you put me through today.

He kissed her again and Heather returned his kiss, not yet catching his critical words. But when she did, she bristled in his arms, wiggling until she was free. Then she stood in front of him with her hands on hips.

"All I put you through?" she exclaimed. "You've got some nerve. Really, Nicholas, you're going to make me crazy again. I might even hit you."

She became completely disconcerted when Nicholas broke into loud laughter.

"What's so damn funny?" she demanded. Her tense body was spoiling for a fight. "I will too hit you," she threatened, raising her fist. "Stop it!"

Nicholas pulled her back into his arms, dodging her light blows easily. "Hit me with your best kiss," he ordered, still chuckling. "The fighting is over, baby. All over."

He kissed Heather with such force and expertise that she could barely remember her name, much less why the silly row had started in the first place. Her hands crept around his neck

and fastened in his thick unruly curls as she pushed against him, trying to get inside his skin. Moaning, she surrendered to his deepening kiss. Desire burned in her mind as his tongue plunged into the sweetness of her mouth.

Nicholas should never have made such an insane vow to her about not making love any time soon, she thought. And she wished she'd never accepted his promise. All she really wanted now was all his love!

Nicholas sensed the change in her response and tenderly ended the passionate kiss. "Five more minutes of this kind of stuff and I'll be swimming laps again, honey." His breathing continued in soft ragged gasps. "Whew, it's hot. How about a cool drink?"

He had to change the subject fast, he decided. "We can relax by the pool for a little while before we hit the books. I've turned on the new alarm system so we're safe from intruders. What do you say, honey?"

"Sounds good to me," she replied as she silently hatched a secret plan which had everything to do with Nicholas's personal security system. She'd take matters into her own hands now, though she knew he'd really be alarmed if he discovered her daring scheme. But, even if he did, he wouldn't stand a chance of escaping her clutches, Heather decided, because she was about to make like a siren to set him off! "Do you want me to help you, Nicholas?"

"The best way you can help me is to wait on the patio." Unaware of her private conversation with herself, he turned her around and gave her a little pat on her bottom. "With you

in the kitchen, the ice cubes melt before I get them into the glasses," he said. "I'll be along in a minute."

Heather flipped on the pool lights and turned them low before she slid open the patio door and wandered outside. Nicholas was right, she thought, it was an exceptionally warm night. But she suspected the heat erupting from her aroused senses and thoughts of her secret plan, rather than the temperature of the air, caused her overheated condition.

She stood, gazing into the clear blue water, and the final piece of her electrifying project arced into place. It was a brilliant idea, she thought with a foxy smile. In a little while, Nicholas would be in for the shock of his life, when his shining promise got short circuited in his own pool.

Heather's soft laughter wafted across the pool. "He'll probably blow a fuse!"

In less than thirty seconds she stripped and ran on tiptoe back to the pool, and slid into its inviting depth. Trembling with excitement, she swam underwater to the far side, then turned over and floated motionless upon her back. When she began to relax, she closed her eyes, wanting nothing more than the opportunity to rest in complete solitude.

Five tranquil minutes passed while Heather drifted upon the surface. But her heightened sense of awareness signaled Nicholas's arrival. Even with her eyes closed, she knew he was watching her. Then, a tinkle of ice against crystal, demanded that she open her smoky eyes. She gave him a beguiling smile.

"You're staring, Professor, darling."

Nicholas continued to stare at her. His hungry eyes absorbed the beauty of her creamy translucent skin. Her body seemed surrounded by a glowing aura that ever-changed as her arms moved to keep her afloat. Gentle eddies rippled against her breasts, causing them to move and to change shape in their weightless state.

His smoldering gaze drifted to her narrow waist and slightly rounded belly. Then some aspect of his whirling brain noted the tiny drops of luminescent liquid pooled in the hollow of her navel. But the view that repeatedly stole his breath, in one audible gasp after another, was Heather's slowly scissoring legs as they opened and closed. Her limbs moved in perfect time to some pagan rhythm, while they provided Nicholas with shadowy glimpses of her intimate hidden treasure.

"You're so beautiful, Heather." His voice was a mere whisper on the still night air. "But, dammit, you're killing me, honey. You shouldn't be in there." His voice broke with emotion. "Not like that."

Heather's childish pout directly contrasted her woman's body, writhing beneath Nicholas's watchful eyes.

"But I'm hot, Nicholas."

Nicholas suddenly felt so feverish he suspected there wasn't a thermometer available that could take his temperature and remain whole long enough to record it. When Heather's eyes moved caressingly along his rigid frame, he seemed unable to escape her erotic visual touch. His arousal was apparent, he knew, but he could not turn away. She had captivated him.

"The water looked so inviting," she said in a breathy whisper. "I just couldn't resist." She hesitated for a moment as she raised her smoldering eyes to lock with his. "Why don't you join me for just a little while? It feels delicious."

She watched as fleeting expressions crossed Nicholas's rugged features. He stroked his beard, then rubbed the back of his neck, as he fought a losing battle with himself. Silently he put down the tray holding the frosty glasses of gin and tonic at the edge of the pool, and walked to a chair where, methodically, like a man in a trance, he removed his clothing. His eyes never left hers until he reached the deep end of the pool where he dove cleanly into the water. He swam underwater for a few yards, then broke the surface as quietly as he had entered.

"Now, float, Nicholas," she said. "Just float. And rest."

She closed her eyes again. All was still as the pair released the day's tensions into the heat of the night.

Nicholas was the first to break the silence, and he could only whisper. "I love you, my friend."

Heather responded from the depths of her soul. "And I love you." She could hear Nicholas gliding through the water, too content to open her eyes. But, as he drew near, she finally surrendered to her curiosity.

"Wouldn't you like a cool drink now?" He held the tall glass for her.

Heather smiled her acceptance and stood to take the glass. After a sip or two, she sighed. "Mmm, that feels so good going down. I was thirsty."

She felt unaccountably shy when she looked down at her aura-illuminated form in the blue waters. Some feminine instinct told her to be proud of her womanly body, but still, she felt a little uncomfortable under his steady, penetrating gaze. Without a word, he took the glass from her lifeless fingers and replaced it on the tray, next to his.

"Let's swim for awhile, honey," he said. "You're starting to tremble."

After several laps, Heather could feel the blood pounding through her veins. The exercise brought her back to life. And listening to Nicholas's measured breathing as he swam by her side excited her even more. She decided to try the Australian crawl, but when she opened her eyes under water, she was surprised by Nicholas.

There, beneath her twisting sleek form, swam the man she loved. His eyes, bright with passion, feasted on the sensuous movement of her nude body. She tried to stand, but before she could bring her legs down, Nicholas rose to the surface where he floated, face up, to mold her sleek body against his hard length.

"Let me hold you, Sea Nymph," he pleaded, throatily. "Just let me hold you."

Heather's mind whirled with a thousand chaotic thoughts. But when his arms enfolded her they both floated free in the caressing comforting waters.

One thought came to her mind with exhilarating frequency. I love this man, she thought. In my mind, I belong to him. There was nothing more in life that she wanted than to spend the rest of it with Nicholas, she decided. Therefore, her heart

concluded, there was no valid reason to wait for a final commitment because no more doubt surfaced in her interior debate.

Nicholas was unaware of Heather's inner turmoil as he floated beneath her slender, yet voluptuous, body, holding her gently in his arms. But, in the next instant, his relaxed demeanor was shattered. He groaned aloud when Heather moved their bodies toward the side of the pool. Then he wanted to drown in her warmth when she held herself afloat at the rail while she kissed him as she'd never kissed him before.

"I love you, Nicholas McCord." Heather repeatedly covered his handsome face and springy wet beard with tiny passionate kisses. It was as if she were discovering his features for the first time. She released one hand and drew circles of pleasure in the tight curls on his heaving chest. She played with his flat hard nipples, then wandered to his shoulder, where her nails scraped erotically to his nape.

On a mutual sigh, they surrendered to a kiss of furious passion which thrilled Heather so, that her toes curled, before they wiggled along his tense legs. Their lovemaking spiraled steadily to a level of such desire and arousal that Heather whimpered and pleaded for more kisses.

Abruptly Nicholas froze and slowly extricated himself from her embrace. "I've got to get out, Heather," he said, hoarsely, as he turned away from her. "I'm so close that in a second I won't be able to stop."

He glanced over his shoulder, then shut his eyes tight. "I don't think you realize what you do to me, baby." His voice

was ragged with emotion. "I'm not made of ice, Sea Nymph. You make my blood boil." He shook his head and reached for the ladder. "Lord, do you make my blood boil."

"Don't leave me, Nicholas," she begged across the distance. "Not tonight."

"I made you a promise." He sounded in pain. "And, dammit, I mean to keep it."

Heather moved to his side and tenderly put her hands on his shoulders. He flinched against her touch, but she turned him to face her in the warm waters. When she looked into his eyes, stormy and tortured, she smiled mysteriously. "I release you from your promise, my love."

His hands fastened on her waist, in a grip so tight, it sent little darts of pain into her body. He peered into her eyes, as if to read her answer there. "You want to take the next step, Heather?" The uncertainty of the moment was evident on his strained features. "God knows, I'm almost crazy from wanting you, but be very sure. I won't be able to stop again."

"I'm sure, Nicholas," she said. "I don't want you to stop. I need you. Tonight, and always. I love you."

"And I love you, my sweet."

Heather moved into his arms again. "I've never been more sure of wanting anything in my whole entire life."

Nicholas chuckled softly and she knew he was laughing at her redundancy again. It always happened when she was happiest. And he knew it.

"Come with me, my love," he whispered with a sensuous smile. "I want to make you my woman."

She hugged him then, burying her face in his neck. "Oh, yes, Nicholas," she said. "I want to be your woman. Only yours."

Nicholas helped her out of the pool, then he pulled the cover from the chaise lounge and wrapped her securely in its folds. "So you'll stay warm, honey," he said as he lifted her high in his arms.

"I'm on fire already," she exclaimed in a passionate voice.

Nicholas chuckled at her honest response, and walked toward the bedroom. At the doorway, Heather unexpectedly wrapped her arms around his neck, so tight he could barely breathe.

"What is it, sweetheart?" He watched as two great tears trembled on her lashes. "Are you afraid?"

Heather nodded.

"Of me, my darling?"

She hesitated, then finally, she shook her head.

And it was then that he realized he'd been holding his breath. "You aren't worried about getting pregnant, are you?"

At once, her head began to bob up and down.

"You don't have to worry about anything, honey." He felt her relax in his arms. "I'll take care of you."

"I should have known," she said on a sigh. "But I just had to tell you, Nicholas."

"That's what friends are for, honey." His smile warmed his words. "Friends are for talking things out."

"And lovers are for loving," she added, nibbling on his ear.

"You're a gifted pupil," he said as he helped her slide under the covers of his huge bed.

Heather made room for him. Then she moved into his arms with the trust and faith of a woman in love. "I'm good, only because you are."

"Hush now, my sweet," he ordered, softly. "And I shall try to be very, very good."

All talking ceased as they started their ascent to the heights of ecstasy. With a gentle touch, Nicholas once again composed a symphony of love upon Heather's supple body. But, this time, he knew the concert's climax would be one they'd share.

Slowly, slowly, with infinite patience, he brought her higher and higher into her passion until she begged for release. Her heart sang the age-old melody of love. Her spirit craved a complete union with her partner, Nicholas. When her writhing body could stand no more of his erotic torment, Nicholas moved over her.

His hands, his mouth, his entire body worshipped her with a torture, so sweet, Heather felt it in every throbbing cell of her body. Her heart nearly burst with love when she sensed his iron control as he pushed her upward to the precipice.

"Now, darling." Control was already lost in his ragged voice. "It's time," he said. "Open for me, my love."

He drew her legs apart and gently entered her moist, pulsating heat. For an instant, she froze. He stopped moving at once, not leaving her, but cradling her in his protective embrace.

"This is a first for both of us, Princess," he murmured, softly, against her ear. "You've never given yourself to any man. And I have never in my life received such a gift." He

kissed her tenderly. "It's a special moment for us, sweetheart, and I love you more than I can say," he said.

"Let me help you."

He felt her body relax. "I love you. I love you. I love you," he repeated rhythmically, each time he thrust against her.

"Say it with me, baby."

She floated above his spellbinding command. "I love you. I love you. I love you," she chanted, in unison with his words. Her voice grew steadily stronger as each driving force penetrated her secret bud of sensuality.

Higher and higher, his words and his body carried her until she matched his pace. His hands slid under her buttocks to lift her tight against him. His lips moved over her mouth as they chanted.

"I love you. I love you."

Heather stiffened in his arms. "I love ... I love..." she cried. But her words were swallowed by Nicholas's passionate kiss.

Then, finally, irrevocably, he entered her. Completely.

Movement ceased as Nicholas waited for Heather's body to absorb his strength. When he felt her muscles relax once again, when he heard her start to breathe regularly, he resumed his murmured words of love. All the while, his body slid into her tight hot core.

"You feel so good inside me, Nicholas." Heather spoke in a far off voice. "So good, my darling."

A knot of sexual tension coiled in her loins and, she knew, beyond a doubt, that her decision had been the right one. But she was not yet to have her heart's desire, for Nicholas rolled

to his back, brought her on top of him, and never broke their erotic connection.

"Nicholas," she cried. "Why?" Her mind whirled so, with unleashed desire, she couldn't think clearly.

Nicholas gazed up at her, straddled securely across his narrow hips, and smiled devilishly. "Now that we have that step out of the way, my darling," he said, "I turn the option back to you."

His hands rubbed hard over her hips, stroked her shapely thighs, then explored her firm belly. "Your teacher believes in hands-on learning," he said as his hands rose along Heather's body to tease and toy with her nipples until they were erect and hard. "Show me what you've learned, woman." He trailed his fingers in fiery paths down her sides and into the nest of her femininity. "You were born to be loved."

Heather felt his manhood pulsate inside her body. When he rapidly massaged the hard hot bud of her arousal, she raced toward the crest of paradise once more. She gazed into his smiling face and knew her love was not misplaced. Nicholas had enough self-esteem, enough confidence in himself, to turn the reins over to her so she could share in their first act of love. His surrender was for her, she realized. Even their first time together would be a partnership.

She watched his facial expression change when she rocked harder and faster against him. Everything about his features fascinated Heather. His smoldering, glazed, half-closed eyes, his flared nostrils, the intense grimace of his wet, parted lips. And she knew his face mirrored hers. Then she sensed again the tight coil of desire burning deep inside her.

Nicholas's fingers dug into her hips as he helped her pound his flesh. He sucked breath in ragged gasps. "Soon, my love," he exclaimed. "Soon."

"I'm losing my mind," cried Heather, moaning. She clutched his chest convulsively, trying to get a better hold. "I'm ... I'm falling." She threw back her head, unable to focus on his passionate features any longer. "Oh, Nicholas, I can't stand it."

With one swift move, Heather found herself beneath Nicholas's strong thrusting frame.

"Honey, I have to take over," he whispered, raggedly. "You need a little help over the top. And I want us to go over the edge together, sweetheart."

The last conscious thought Heather had was that she was glad Nicholas was an experienced lover. When he expertly positioned her body to receive the full impact of his manhood each time he thrust into her, she became completely immersed in loving him. She wound her legs tightly around his trim powerful torso, and held him with arms grown strong with her need.

"Soon, sweet one," he crooned in her ear. "We're almost there. I can feel it in your beautiful body."

Heather felt faint with the effort of the climb. Suddenly, her body arched off the bed. "Nicholas, something's happening to me," she cried. "Can't breathe. Hard. Ooooh, it's ... it's ... Oh, oh, oh!"

Her body convulsed with exploding passion. An instant later, Nicholas strained against her. He held her as if his life depended on it and, together, they were thrown into the

abyss of love. Sighing and crying out, their joyful release was complete and they collapsed in each other's arms.

Neither one gave thought to anonymous threatening letter writers or angry brother-in-laws, for Heather and Nicholas were the only two people in their world.

Later, Heather nestled in Nicholas's warm embrace. He held her like she was a precious treasured jewel. Their mutual contentment was a revelation to her. When she looked up into his face, he smiled and cradled her closer, to show, with his body, what pleasure she'd given him.

"The French named it well, didn't they?" she shyly observed.

Nicholas chuckled softly. His breath feathered her love-tangled hair. "You mean 'the little death'?"

Heather could only nod. So filled with love for Nicholas was she, that she thought she'd burst into tears if she tried to speak again. They lay together for a long time, each involved in his and her thoughts.

Finally she felt in control again and could speak coherently. "You certainly have made a liar out of me, Nicholas McCord."

His sleepy eyes gave her a measured look. "I thought I'd made a woman out of you, my love."

"You did that, too." Her eyes told him just how much of a woman she'd become. "I was thinking about the first night I swam in your pool. Do you remember?"

He hugged her close. "How could I forget, sweetheart?"

"Well, that night I called you a stodgy old professor," she said with an embarrassed giggle. "You aren't anything like that."

Nicholas propped himself up on one elbow and scowled at her. "One look at me almost naked should have convinced you of that."

"Yes, I couldn't believe my eyes," she replied. "You're at least a size thirteen. Maybe fourteen."

"Since when do they size a man's virility like that?"

"Oh," she exclaimed as she batted her wide, innocent eyes at Nicholas. "I was referring to your feet."

"Come here, you juvenile delinquent, you." Then he growled and buried his face in her neck, nibbling her skin greedily.

"Stop, Nicholas," she begged as she writhed and wiggled under his attack. She tried to get away from his tickling tongue and fingers. "Please, I was only teasing you." He stopped at once and Heather was instantly aware that he'd changed his tactics completely.

"Well, I was serious, little Sea Nymph," he murmured, sensuously. "Dead serious." His tongue outlined the curved edge of her ear, then darted into the orifice in quick erotic thrusts. "Rest time's over, honey," he said. "The rocket's recharged."

"My goodness, so soon?"

"Forget about your goodness, baby." He talked out of the side of his mouth like a gangster. "I'm after all your badness."

This time, when he led the way, his gentle manner vanished as he introduced her to another exciting side of love.

All through the night, Nicholas turned to Heather again and again. His need for her loving sweet response seemed

insatiable. Sometimes, Heather initiated the next adventure herself, for she was eager to learn more avenues of delight for Nicholas's pleasure. When dawn came, the first sunbeam found the exhausted pair entwined in a love knot of sleep.

And then the nightmare returned.

"Please, please don't leave me," whimpered Heather in her sleep. "Please, come back."

The dark side of her mind revealed, by mental sorcery, the images of her beloved mother and father. Then her parents' figures merged, blended, faded, to reappear as one body. Subconsciously Heather squinted, trying to focus on the new image.

"Oh, no!" She identified the figure. It was Nicholas. And he was walking away from her, too. "Nicholas," she screamed. "Nicholas, please, come back. You can't leave me, too. Oh, God help me if you leave. I'll be all alone again," she cried. "Nicholas!"

Through the heavy curtain of her terror, she heard a gentle, insistent voice repeat a phrase again and again. "I'll never leave you, Heather. I'll never leave you, Heather. Believe me, darling. I'll never leave you alone."

The repetitious words finally calmed Heather. She felt warm lips kiss away her tears. Sighing tremulously, she dared to peer inside her mind, at the cause of her night horror. Even in her sleep, she realized terror no longer lurked in the shadows. It was gone. Banished. Somehow, the gentle voice had dispelled her fears. For the last time. Forever.

Her parents were gone. She could finally accept their passing. But their love for her had been replaced by

someone's just as dear. By her Nicholas. Sighing again, a smile lifted the corners of her relaxed mouth. The worried frown disappeared, and she slept, knowing, yet not fully realizing, that she was being held safe within the protective embrace of her shining knight. Safe in the arms of Nicholas, her lover. Her love.

* * * *

Heather didn't want to wake up. She slapped at the air around her head, then scratched an itch on the tip of her nose. Groaning and moaning her displeasure, she finally rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the pillow. When the pesky fly settled on her bare shoulder, she made a valiant effort to whisk the insect away. But her hand caught in someone's thick unruly hair instead.

Memories of her night's unexpected adventure delighted her senses. She turned her head and smiled beguilingly. "Good morning, my darling."

Nicholas lifted her on top of his body and covered her face with tiny butterfly kisses. "Good morning, my love." He mouthed the words against her lips. "Are you all right?"

She stretched luxuriantly along his body. "Mmm, I'm purrrfect." Then she laughed softly.

"What's so funny, little kitten?" he asked as he ran his hands over her smooth skin.

"I was just thinking." She laughed again. "This morning we don't have to ask what I was doing in your bed?"

He nibbled enticingly at her earlobe and chuckled against her neck. "We certainly don't, honey." He nibbled lower. "And I think, after last night, we can safely call this our bed."

Heather's eyes were bright with her love for Nicholas. Her angelic face revealed her inner happiness. "Our bed," she repeated. "Oh, Nicholas, I never thought making love could be so grand." She appeared awestruck by her emotions. "And you were such a gentle teacher, darling." She kissed him tenderly. Her voice trembled as she thought about the night's events. "I feel so free."

"You had a bad dream during the night," he said. "Do you remember?"

Heather nodded. "I remember. But, last night it was different."

"You called my name."

"I know. My parents vanished and, suddenly, it was you, walking out of my life."

"Sweetheart," crooned Nicholas. "I'll never leave you alone. I promise you."

"That's what the gentle voice in my dream kept repeating." She looked at Nicholas and saw he was smiling tenderly. "It was you."

He nodded. "I didn't know if I was reaching you or not," he said. "Not until you relaxed and calmed down."

"I suppose I dreamed because your love for me seemed too good to be true," she explained. "But, I'm going to be okay now. I don't think I'll dream again."

"Lord, baby," he whispered, pulling her close. "I hope not. I'll never give you cause to be upset. I promise."

Heather smiled bemusedly. "My brain was churning when I fell asleep last night," she said. "I bet it's because I learned so much from you when we made love."

"Making love with the one you love is the reason, my sweet," he replied. "And I learned quite a little about you, too." He adjusted her body over his. "For instance, I found out you like this ... and this ... and, especially, this."

Not to be outdone, and experiencing renewed confidence in her abilities, she returned the favor. "And I know you like this ... and this." She smiled secretly when she slid down his body, and he moved against her. "And, especially, this."

"Oh, baby, especially when you do that," he gasped as he sank deeper in the mattress. Moaning, he rolled on top of her, effectively stopping her sensuous attack. "I've got something a little more concrete to contribute to this pretty scene, my love."

Heather raised an arched brow, but she couldn't wait for his explanation. She started to shake with suppressed laughter. "I see," she said. Great tears of mirth rolled down her cheeks. "You're going to cement our relationship, is that it?"

"Not like you're imagining." Nicholas exhaled noisily. "Damn, you never did respect your teachers."

"I'll be good," she said. When he glared at her, she raised her hand. "Promise."

"Yesterday I paid a visit to Branson's Jewelry Emporium," he said. "I had to pick up your gift." Heather's squeals of delight made Nicholas laugh.

"A gift?" she exclaimed. "You got a gift for me? Let me see it. Where is it?" She jiggled around on top of him. "Is it here?"

Nicholas slid her to the side and leaped from the bed. He walked to the closet, his stride proud and unfettered. Heather lay watching as he pulled a pair of faded jeans from a hook and drew them over his naked body. Fastening the zipper, but leaving the top snap open, he moved to his dresser where he stood with his back to Heather.

He opened the top drawer, extracted a tiny velvet box, opened the lid, removed a ring, then snapped it closed again. He slipped the ring into the watch pocket of his jeans. Turning, he smiled at her as she sat waiting on the bed.

"This is as formal as I'm going to get this mornin', little love," he told her. "Now, if you don't want to listen to my speech in your all-together, I suggest you wrap something around you and get up."

Quickly, Heather draped herself in a sheet, tossing the tail, nonchalantly, over one shoulder. Nicholas led her to the cushioned window seat, helping her as if she were a real princess. She was oblivious to the splendid view from the window, of rolling hills and sparkling clear water below. She only had eyes for her beloved.

When Nicholas lowered himself on one knee, he caught the gentle laughter in Heather's eyes. "Don't laugh, sweetheart," he said. "I only intend to do this once in my life and, by God, I'm going to do it right."

Love light chased laughter from Heather's blue-sky eyes. Then he took her hands in his.

"Heather Warren, I've been searching for you all my life," he began. "I love you beyond words. Far more than any poet's pen or minstrel's song could tell. You sharpen my thirst for life. You give me happiness, you give me hope."

His dark eyes glistened. "Last night," he continued, emotionally, "you gave me your love. Using an old-fashioned term, you pleasure me, my darling, with your very existence. I promise you all my love for all our lives together. I promise to protect you and treasure you always." A tear caught on his thick lashes. "Please say you'll marry me and make my life complete."

Shimmering tears of gladness gathered in Heather's eyes, so moved was she by his tender, heartfelt words. Holding his hands to her heart, she gave him her reply.

"Nicholas McCord, I never thought life could hold such happiness," she said. "My heart is fair bursting with love for you. I thank God you love me, too, and I promise to guard the love we share, nurturing its tender growth, for all our life together. You are my friend," she continued. "You are my love, you are my life. I accept your proposal with my whole entire heart and soul."

Nicholas's loving smile of gratitude broadened momentarily at her last words. Happy redundancy again. Then he reached into his pocket for Heather's ring. He placed it on her finger and sealed their pact by kissing the ring.

"Thank you, my sweet." He gazed into her eyes, and brushed a tear from her rosy cheek. "I've been waiting a long, long time to give my heart away," he said. "To you."

He rose and embraced her. Then they shared a kiss of such exquisite tenderness and love, Heather thought her heart would break. When the kiss ended, she looked at the ring Nicholas had designed for her.

"My ring is a rose."

"A rose signifies love," he said, softly. "I hope you like it. My jeweler friend informed me that he very nearly lost his mind, perfecting the individual petal allusion."

Heather gave him a shy kiss on his bearded cheek. "I love it."

The ring's band was yellow gold. The rose petals were fashioned from pink gold with delicate edgings of white gold to give the illusion of dew. There were two delicate, green gold leaves. A large yellow diamond nestled in the rose's center. The fiery gem winked and glittered in the sunlight.

But it was Nicholas's great love that warmed Heather's heart. "Oh, and I do love you, Nicholas." She threw herself into his arms and showered his face with kisses. "I love you so much."

Nicholas returned her carefree kisses. "I think we should be married as soon as you graduate, don't you? Last night's events speeded up our schedule." He began a sensuous massage on her smooth back. "Mmm, and soon it'll be moving faster than the speed of light, sweetheart." His tone was heavy with sexual innuendo.

Heather pulled gently back from his embrace. "That's only four weeks away," she said. "Can we take a long, restful honeymoon?"

"Long, yes. But definitely not restful." He gave her bottom a little pinch. "In fact, you may get tired of me attacking you."

Heather wiggled from his arms. "I'll never get tired of your amorous attacks." Her bold eyes danced. "You're not the only one who likes to make love around here."

Nicholas stood with hands on hips and laughed at her antics.

"I'm going to take a shower," she informed him. "Will you start breakfast?" She gave him a beguiling smile that she hoped would assure her of a hearty meal. She was famished.

"Hey, that's something we should discuss," he said. "I think we should share all the chores. And all the pleasures," he added with a wanton leer.

"Just this once, Nicholas," she purred, already closing the door. "I'm so hungry."

Ten minutes later, a gust of cool air announced Nicholas's arrival in the bathroom. He joined Heather under the spray with a big smile of appreciation on his ruggedly handsome face.

"Hi, beautiful," he said. "Mind if I come in?"

"Not at all. I'm just about finished." She failed to catch the lusty gleam in his dark smoldering gaze.

"To continue our discussion..." He took her into his arms. "I think we should share everything. Don't you agree?" When Nicholas used that low erotic tone of voice, it always brought shivers of pleasure to Heather's body. "Besides, I need my back scrubbed."

He turned and rounded his broad shoulders so Heather could reach. She massaged his muscles with her soapy hands and smiled when she heard his throaty sigh. He turned around again, and just stood beneath the spray, watching her with narrowed eyes while she continued to rub his hair matted chest.

His lips pursed, his brows knit together, and he inhaled sharply when she fondled his nipples. The ensuing waves of pleasure brought his body to attention. Her fingers drifted to his tight buttocks and the taut muscles in his thighs.

"Rub me all over, baby." Then he moaned gruffly and grabbed her waist with both hands when her fingers began a light tattoo on his manhood.

Power surged in her own loins as his magnificent body shuddered and lunged into her hands. I can do this for him, she thought in wonder. And she loved doing it, she mused as she concentrated on his ragged breathing.

With trembling hands, Nicholas took the soap from Heather's fingers. "My turn, Sea Nymph. You've got to stop working on me for awhile." He began stroking her breasts with slow caresses. "You sure do exciting things to me," he exclaimed, softly. "Especially when you're around water."

He continued to feel the affects of her erotic ministering when he lowered himself to one knee to rhythmically stroke her legs. He moved along her thighs to her knees and calves and ankles. Then, his strong fingers rose again to her hips. One hand curved around her trim bottom while the other hand slipped between her legs, entering her most secret heat.

Slowly, steadily, he seduced her until she was almost mad with passion. Her breathing was shallow and came in little gasps now. She leaned against him, her nails dug into his slick shoulders. Her knees wobbled. She'd fall if he didn't stop, she thought. But the seduction continued.

He massaged and fondled her, increased the pressure, adjusted the tempo of his pulsating, plunging fingers until she could deny him nothing. Rising, he rinsed their bodies, then turned off the water. When he leaned over to reach the faucets, he took that moment to suckle and tug at her swollen nipples. His unexpected action brought a cry to her trembling, wet lips.

In one smooth motion, Nicholas wrapped Heather in a bath blanket and carried her to their bed. Without pause, he continued his loving caresses to her writhing body. He was solely intent on driving Heather to the edge and over.

Suddenly, Heather went absolutely still.

"What's wrong, honey?"

"It's Saturday." She tried to sit up. "Mrs. Johnson will be here any minute, Nicholas."

He took up where he had left off, completely ignoring her warning.

"Oh, please, Nicholas," she begged, unable to deny him herself. "Oh, stop, please."

"She won't be here today, my love," he said, without breaking his rhythm. "I called her while you were taking your shower." He chuckled softly and kissed her long. "She figured she wouldn't be needed anyway because you didn't come home last night."

Heather blushed crimson. "What must she think of me?"

Nicholas gazed at her face and smiled, lovingly. "She thinks you're going to make me a very good wife, honey," he said. "Now, is there anything else on your mind?"

Heather shook her head because no words would come.

"Good." He sighed mightily. "It's pleasure time!"

It was hours later before they ate breakfast. They'd spent most of the day savoring each other's delicacies instead. They kissed and made love through Saturday evening and into Sunday, never leaving their bed except for secretive forays into the pool. Then they'd return immediately after a refreshing dip, to continue making love, as carefree and as naked as the original couple in the first paradise. Sunday evening found them still in their bed.

"It's time to put the lid on our Pandora's Box, Heather." Nicholas sighed as he pulled little strands of Heather's tousled hair between his fingers. He sighed again. "It's the only way."

Heather sat up. The dumbfounded expression on her face brought a grim smile to Nicholas's lips.

"What's going on in that educated, and I use the word loosely, mind of yours?" she demanded. "Now that I know you—in the complete Biblical sense, I might add—how can you expect me to stay away from you?" She grinned wickedly. "And how will you keep your hot little hands off my sexy bod?"

Nicholas exhaled and shook his head. "It won't be easy."

She looked at him in disbelief. "Do you really mean for us to be celibate until we get married?"

He nodded, sadly. "At least until after you finish your exams."

She lay down again. "Well, I just won't let you." She cuddled and moved against him, smiling sensuously.

"And I just won't let you get to me." He gently pushed her away and sat up. "Let's be serious for a moment, honey," he cajoled. "I'm your best friend, remember? And I have your best interests at heart." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Just hear me out and I'm sure you'll agree I'm right, okay?"

Heather pouted, but she nodded anyway.

"You have two finals in less than three weeks," he began. "You also have two term papers due. I have a little over two weeks till deadline on my novel, plus I have to prepare and then correct thirty-eight copies of my test," he continued. "If we don't keep our noses to the grindstone, we'll never make it, Heather." He brushed a curl from her forehead. "You can see that, can't you, sweetheart?"

Heather grudgingly accepted the logic of his argument, but it didn't make her feel any better. "You're saying we can't do both, is that right?"

Baby, you know we can't do both."

"Wanna bet?"

He felt the heat in her smoldering eyes spill over into his body. "It'll take years before we find all the ways we can pleasure each other. No," he concluded, shaking his head. "It's just too new for us to even try. You've got to understand."

Heather laughed, deprecatingly. "Yes, my mind understands what you're saying," she said, "but my body is raising all kinds of hell about this crazy decision."

"That gives you a small idea of what my body is saying to me right now," he said, hoarsely. "I never realized what a hot little number you were going to be." He rubbed his neck again. "I simply had no idea."

Heather gazed at Nicholas and smiled sensuously. Her eyes spoke words that brought a discomfiting frown to his bearded face. She watched blood pound in the veins at his temples. "Surely, Professor, you had some idea," she drawled, enticingly. "After all, you're a very smart man." She rolled against him and nibbled on his ear with wanton intent. "Didn't you know we were flint and steel?"

Nicholas actually trembled under her erotic advances. "I should have known, lover," he said. "Because it's you who keeps lighting my fire." He scorched her lips with one of his flaming kisses, then he moved on top of her. "Since we've made this striking match," he mused, "I'd better cover you. Just to be safe."

He reached for protection, then settled over her and grinned when she parted her legs so he could enter. She pulled his face to hers and gave him a kiss so hot, he nearly combusted and sent off sparks.

"Hey," he whispered, "what do you think you're doing?"

"Playing with fire."

"Careful, you might get burned."

"Then we'll both go up in smoke."

"But it'll all come out in the wash."

Ebon's Mate
by Joan Bramsch

"You're mixing your metaphors again, Professor."

"Shh, I'm making like a Boy Scout."

[\[Back to Table of Contents\]](#)

Chapter 9

During the following days, Nicholas and Heather bit the bullet, trying to keep their pact. They were not always successful. Especially because they saw each other every day and, for a short time, each evening. It was the evenings that provided the most temptation. Yet they continued to persevere in keeping their relationship cooled down.

After dinner on weekdays, Heather studied. She usually worked at the library on her term papers or on research for a special report. Nicholas continued revising his manuscript at home.

On weekends, Heather would proofread papers for her employers, seated at an extra desk in Nicholas's den. Across the room, Nicholas would withdraw into himself as he typed furiously on his lucky, but decrepit, Smith-Corona. His book was almost completed. Heather had read each chapter as he finished it, and she found it very exciting material.

"When can I read the rest?"

"When I'm through writing it, when else?"

And Heather, with a secret smile, wondered if all writers were so testy when they worked, or if her author might be a bit on edge because he kept remembering what was in Pandora's Box? Heather had to admit that she did!

On Friday afternoon, two weeks before their wedding, Nicholas came through the connecting door from his office into Heather's.

"Hi, Ms. Warren."

Heather smiled at his playacting. Did he really think he was fooling her assistant, Beth? she wondered. "Hello, Professor McCord," she said as she watched him close the door. "How nice to see you."

"Is it true what I hear?"

"Depends on what you've heard."

"I hear you have to work late tonight."

"All English professors are slave drivers," she informed him. She held the back of her hand to her forehead as if she were faint. "Professor Baker's deadline is Monday morning, so I have to work this evening to finish proofing the blue book. There's no other solution," she added. "Did you have plans for us tonight?"

"Nope, I just wanted to know when you'd be finished."

"About nine, I think. What are you going to do with yourself while I'm working?"

"It's a secret." He gave her a mysterious smile. "Will you meet me down at Lake Honor precisely at nine o'clock?"

"Sure, I'll be there as soon as I can make it."

"No, honey," he said. "Don't come one second before nine. Wait till the chapel bells ring, okay?"

"Say, Professor..." She tipped her head to the side and gave him a suspicious look. "If you have any idea about jumping out of the bushes and dunking me, may I remind you, I've already been initiated." She paused for dramatic effect. "Several times."

"That's true," said Nicholas with a wicked chuckle. "And we'll continue the practice, my little Sea Nymph. But only in our heated pool."

"Promises, promises."

"That's enough of your sassy talk, brat."

Then he gave her a sizzling kiss as punishment. She thought she could probably heat seven igloos with the thermal BTU's in one of Nicholas's kisses.

"Now promise you'll come at nine sharp," he said.

"I promise." She gave him a dazzling smile and threw him a kiss as he strolled back into his own office.

* * * *

At six o'clock, Heather walked to the Student Union for supper. On her way back, she stopped by Lake Honor to pet Ebon and have a little visit.

"Hi, little lady."

"Skip, how are you?" said Heather. "I haven't seen you for several days."

"I've been up in the hills with my buddies," he said. "Doin' some tracking and hunting."

"Your mom told me you might be gone for a month," said Heather. "I'm glad you're back. I think she misses you."

"Yeah, I think she'll always need me to take care of her," said Skip. "But I had to have some time to think."

"Are the dreams worse?" she asked in a soft voice.

"They always are, after I've had a disappointment."

"What disappointment? Skip, what happened?"

Skip chuckled harshly. "Ah, nothin' much," he declared. "Some filly got under my skin, then turned me out for another guy."

Heather reached over and patted his arm. He flinched, as if her hand burned him. "I'm sorry, Skipper," she said. "Sometimes life's not very fair. I know how you must feel. I've had disappointments, too."

Heather was always surprised when she touched Skip. His muscles seemed coiled, ready to spring into action at an instant's warning. Nicholas had explained that Skip's nervous condition had a lot to do with the residual effect of his combat experiences. Since that time, he was always on alert, ready on the offensive. Even in his sleep.

Nicholas had also told her that Skip's mother worried constantly. She'd even asked Nicholas for advice about her son. "It's a special thing," she'd said. "My 'adopted' son helps me with my needful son." Nicholas had contacted several doctors and finally found one experienced in such cases. The doctor believed he could help Skip, and was willing to try. But Skip had refused to see him. He'd claimed he'd had doctors and their stupid questions up to his eyeballs.

Skip interrupted her thoughts when he took her hand and it got lost inside his large palm. "I know you've had lots of unhappiness, Heather," he said. "That's why we're good for each other. We know what the other's going through, how we've suffered." He gazed at Ebon, swimming by the fountain. "How have the nights been for you?"

Heather was momentarily startled by Skip's question. She could have told him how heavenly they'd been, until they'd come to a screeching halt. But that wasn't what he was asking about, she realized. "I haven't dreamed in two weeks," she said. "I'm hoping, this time I'm cured for life."

"I hope so, too, little lady," replied Skip. "I'm glad Nick could help you."

"What are you talking about, Skipper?" exclaimed Heather. "I'd never have made it through the first six weeks if it hadn't been for you, and you know it." She grinned self-consciously when she saw how her little performance had made her friend smile again. "Heck, Skipper, I wouldn't have made it through the first night."

"I could help because I knew what you were feeling."

"And that's why I could help you when you had your nightmares," said Heather. "I knew what you were feeling, too."

"Yeah, but I couldn't tell you everything," said Skip. "It would be too hard for you to hear it. You'd end up hating me." He gazed off in the distance again, lost in his thoughts for a long moment. Then he gave his head a sharp shake and looked into Heather's blue eyes. "Don't look so worried, honey," he said. "I'll be all right."

"Of course, you will," Heather replied stoutly. "You're a tough old bird."

Skip chuckled darkly. "You mean, like that swan dinner cruisin' around out there?"

Heather knew Skip was teasing her, but she had to do her little skit. It was one of his favorites. "Listen, buster," she exclaimed. She shook her finger in his grinning face. "If you even think about harming one feather on Ebon's proud head, I'll cook your goose."

"That's my little Heather," said Skip as he reached down and swung her around in an oversized bear hug. "Lord, you

ain't half a minute big, are you?" He set her gently on her feet. "Don't I scare you?"

"Scare me?" she repeated. Then she had a good laugh. "You wouldn't hurt me. We're friends."

"For life," he added, unexpectedly solemn. "I'll always be around if you should need me, Heather."

"I know." She gave him a heartfelt smile. "I've needed you a lot, Skip. I hope you know I'm here for you, too, if you should ever need me."

"I always suspected you'd rise to the occasion," he said as silver lights began to dance in his weary eyes. "You're well-bred."

"You did that one on purpose," accused Heather with a lighthearted laugh.

"Yup, I did," he admitted. "But only because I know you'll keep my secret." He glanced over his shoulder, then took her arm and guided her along the path back to her office. "I'm really Poet Laureate of Skunk Holler Phew ... I mean, U!"

After she'd said good-bye to Skip, Heather returned to her desk. She'd hardly sat down when the phone rang.

"English Department. May I help you?"

"Sissy? Is that you?"

"Kitty?" exclaimed Heather.

"Yes, it's me."

"Are you all right? Where are you? You aren't hurt, are you?"

Kitty's laughter cut Heather's questions short. "I'm fine, Sissy," she said. "I'm still in Nashville, but I've made a

decision. I'm divorcing Baxter. We're not good for each other."

"Are you sure this is what you want, baby?" asked Heather. "Will he leave you alone?"

"Yes, it's going to be all right," said Kitty. "Baxter promised to stay out of my life. He's going to go to counseling. He finally realizes he needs help. I need some counseling, too."

"You do?"

"As if you didn't know it," said Kitty. "I have to do some growing up." She paused and sniffed delicately. "You see, Sissy, it was pretty childish of me to set out to make Baxter jealous."

"You did that?"

"Yes," she said. "I know now what I did was wrong. But I also know I have to learn how to build better relationships. I have to look for a stronger partner. A man I can't push around."

"I'm glad you're getting some help, Kitty," replied Heather. "You never heard me when I tried," she added. "As a good friend of mine might say, 'Don't be a blockhead and take a man for granite.'"

Kitty giggled hysterically. "That's absolutely awful."

"Yes, I know," she said. "But it'll all come out in the wash."

"What?"

"Just another old Omsee saying, my dear."

"How's school?"

"Two weeks left."

"Great, you'll graduate, and I'll still be looking for a producer for *Heather In The Morning*."

"Ooh, honey, I think I'm going to cry."

"Don't cry, Sissy," said Kitty. "I'll find a recording company who loves my song. And when it goes to Gold, that will be my way to thank you for all your sacrifices for your spoiled rotten kid sister."

"You knew?"

"Gosh, I must be growing up, huh?"

Each sister could tell the other was laughing through her tears.

"How's the greatest professor in all fifty states?"

"I'm going to marry him."

"It's a good thing, too. I was about to come over there and insist that Nicholas make an honest woman of you."

"Kitty, I'm surprised at you."

"Not half as surprised as I was at you, Heather Anne Warren, soon to be, McCord," said Kitty. "Neat new name, Sissy."

Heather heard someone call Kitty's name.

"Gotta scoot. Fame and fortune call. Love you."

"Good luck, honey. I love you, too."

It took Heather a few moments to pull herself together after she hung up the receiver. Her baby sister had made a couple of major decisions in her life. All by herself. On top of that, Heather had a sneaking suspicion little Kitty would eventually take Nashville by storm.

Stranger things had happened, Heather told herself. For starters, she'd fallen in love with her professor. Even more unbelievable ... he loved her back.

* * * *

The proofing was less demanding than she'd anticipated. It was only eight-thirty when she boxed the blue book for the publisher. Subconsciously, Nicholas's promise of a surprise had stayed tucked in her mind, but now, with her work completed, she tried to guess what it might be.

If Nicholas tossed her into Lake Honor and screamed "Surprise!" she'd crown him, she decided. Then she chuckled softly because she knew he'd never dunk her now. She gazed at her engagement ring. He loved her. Her watch showed fifteen minutes more to wait. She wandered around the room to straighten a few books on a shelf and pinch some dried leaves from her Swedish Ivy hanging in the corner.

"I'll bet Nicholas's office could use a quick cleanup," she murmured to herself as she walked through the side door and flipped on the light. She went immediately to his desk to stack piles of manila folders that were scattered across the surface. Then her gaze fastened on a file labeled: *Last Chapter, Sea Nymph*.

"So that's what he's called it," she mused. A tiny frown creased her brow as a crazy idea took root in her brain. "No," she said to herself. "He wouldn't do that. He loves me."

She checked her watch again. There were still ten minutes left before she had to leave so she curled up in Nicholas's leather chair to skim the remaining pages of his new book.

"Oh, he can't do this!" she suddenly cried when she saw her worst fears materialize before her glistening eyes. She brushed away her tears and continued to read.

The woman floated free and unfettered in the undulating crystal pool, shimmering like an erotic tropical flower, opening above the heated lagoon, primed for entry, pulsating with passion.

When Otto came toward her, she moved in the moon glow. Her pale face wore a blank stare and a painted smile. He perused her voluptuous body, and licked his lips salaciously when he fondled her firm breasts. Suddenly he jerked apart her long legs and plunged his swollen member into her hot core. He growled again and again.

"Sea Nymph, Sea Nymph, Sea Nymph." Finally, he let loose a wild, guttural scream and a long string of foul words before he shuddered in a series of violent convulsions, then collapsed, spent.

Heather threw the folder across the room and watched, wild-eyed, when the sheaf of papers fluttered through the air. Then she wrapped her arms around her middle. The pain in her stomach made her ill.

"He swore it was our secret." Fury overtook her despair. "He promised me." She drew in breath. "I'll kill him," she swore, venom in every word. "I'll murder him dead."

Heather ran from the building just as the tower bell tolled. The somber knell followed her as she hurried down the hill. Then she slowed her pace when she spotted Nicholas, kneeling at Lake Honor's shore. Her eyes caught movement near the water's edge and, for a moment, she thought she was seeing double. Upon the water, swam two black swans. The female glided serenely, while Ebon, seemed wary. He

circled around her, gabbling excitedly, as he tested the temperament of this new creature.

Heather stood less than three feet away from Nicholas. She overheard his encouragement to the male swan.

"Come on, Ebon, old man. Stop swimming around in circles. It's time to get serious," he whispered. "She's yours, buddy." He chuckled when he saw Ebon take his advice.

Nicholas must have brought Ebon a new mate, thought Heather. But his sweet concern for Ebon's happiness was of no concern to her. In fact, she had no interest in anyone's troubles or happiness right now. Nor would she care to listen to his vapid explanations. It was as if something had snapped inside Heather's head, and she knew she must have satisfaction.

When Nicholas sensed Heather's presence he rose to greet her. He was unable to see her furious expression because her face was hidden in the shadows of the tulip trees.

"What do you think of my surprise?" he asked. "I thought it was time Ebon had a new mate. It seemed fitting somehow, that I should provide it."

Then the dam burst.

"You despicable monster!" hissed Heather. She balled her fist and hit Nicholas square on the chest. "I could kill you."

Nicholas stepped back from her unexpected venomous threats. And dropped right over the side, straight into the frigid depths of Lake Honor! When he came up, gasping from the shock of the cold water, Heather stood on the concrete ledge, calmly removing her shoes.

"What the hell's gotten into you, Heather?" He paddled toward shore. "What's wrong?"

"Use me for your damn pulp books, will you, you son of a sea monster?" She held up her shoe, squinted one eye, and took aim. "I'll teach you a lesson you'd never learn in any of your damn classrooms."

She threw her shoe at his head and hit him. He dived away and tried to climb out, but she pushed him again and he fell back into the icy water.

"You love water so damn much," she seethed, unmindful of the crowd she was drawing. "Just stay in there."

She didn't notice the young man, a member of the student security force, standing in the woods, holding a walkie-talkie. When she started her attack, he'd started talking into the speaker.

"Stop it, Heather." Now Nicholas's anger overrode good sense, too. "Just, damn it all to hell, stop!" His pride withered when he realized he and Heather were the center of attention for a group of Omsee students and faculty members. Not to mention, several interested tourists.

"You worm, I wish I'd never met you," she declared. "You used me. Me!" She beat her chest. "In your lousy book. And I was going to marry you." Her voice rose hysterically. "Well, you can have your laugh now."

Nicholas swam down the lake hoping to be able to climb out before she noticed he was gone. But she was right there when he tried. Every step of the way.

"Laugh, you poor excuse for a man," she cried. Then she took aim with her other shoe, threw it and hit him on his

head. Again. "You're not laughing, Nicholas," she said. "Why aren't you chuckling? Seems to me, you've gotten exactly what you want."

Nicholas's lips were turning blue, in contrast to the flushed crimson of his face. The veins at his temples pulsated a throbbing staccato of suppressed rage. "Dammit, woman, have you taken leave of your senses?" he yelled. "Get the hell out of my way. I'm coming out."

"Like hell you are!" Out of nowhere roared Skip Johnson.

In the background the young man with the transmitter continued his rapid chatter.

Gently Skip picked up Heather around her waist and set her away from shore. As he did so, Nicholas scrambled out of the water and stood dripping on the cement ledge. And the crowd surged forward to get a better look. If there was going to be a fight, they wanted to be in ringside positions.

When Skip turned back to Nicholas, he reached into the side pocket of his oversized fatigue jacket and pulled out a semiautomatic handgun. With unhurried motion, he removed the safety and calmly looked down the barrel, straight into Nicholas's wide, surprised eyes. And the crowd dispersed like a cumulus cloud on a windy day.

"I've had about all I'm going to take of you, McCord." Skip's voice rumbled across the water. "Where I been, we learned ways to make guys like you pay for making little ladies cry." Then he closed one steely eye and took aim. "Get ready to meet your maker."

Every vestige of anger evaporated from Heather's body when she saw the gun. It was pointed at the heart of the man

she loved. "Skipper, please don't," she pleaded. "Please don't hurt Nicholas. I need him."

"Heather, stay back," shouted Nicholas. "His fight is with me. Stay away from us."

"See, Heather, he doesn't need you," said Skip. He never took his eyes from his prey. "Not like I do."

Heather dared to move a little closer. "But, Skipper, I promised I'd be here if you need me, remember?"

He nodded.

Nicholas tried to edge toward the grass. If he could draw Skip's fire. Anything. He'd do whatever he had to do to save Heather. His life would be worthless without her anyway.

"You move one more inch and you're dead," said Skip in a low, threatening voice.

Heather took another step. "Skipper, won't your mother be sad if you hurt Nicholas?" she asked. "She worries about you."

Skip's response to her question shocked Heather. "That bastard stole my mama," he declared in biting, hard tones. "He wants what's mine, so I'm taking what's his. His life." Skip glanced over at Heather. "And you."

Heather almost fell when she took the last step. "Skip, are you the one who's been sending those scary letters?"

"With the help of a few fine buddies around America," he said with an appreciative chuckle. "We all got shafted after Desert Storm so we formed a pact. We'd help one another with anything. No questions asked. Hell, we were all experts in clandestine operations." He chuckled again. "Yup, pretty

lady, I can count on every one of those men. And they can count on me."

"It sounds as if you had a good plan, Skipper. Were you the one who shot at us, too?"

Skip looked down at Heather with confused eyes, as if he couldn't quite figure out how she'd gotten so close. "I'm the one."

"Skipper, you could have killed us."

He gave her a kindly smile and patted her cheek. "Sweet one," he said, "if I'd planned to kill, you'da both been dead."

"But, why?" She eased her body between Skip and Nicholas. "Nicholas never meant you any harm."

"Heather," murmured Nicholas beneath his breath. "Move ... away ... from ... him."

Heather disobeyed his command.

"Sure, he meant me harm," Skip countered. "He took my place with my mama when I went away. And he's so damned smart."

Suddenly Skip threw his shaggy head back and gazed into the forbidding night. His sad eyes filled with tears and he pulled his lower lip between his teeth and bit down. But it did no good. His distraught sob evolved into an outraged mournful howl that echoed across the hills and rose like a forlorn lost star into the moonless heavens.

"I studied so hard, so hard, when I was in the hospital all those months," he whispered. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. "But it didn't count for beans when I got back. That bastard was already a full professor."

"You never ever spoke cleverly by accident, did you?" guessed Heather. "You just didn't want anyone to know you were smart."

Skip shifted his gaze to meet Heather's understanding eyes. "I told you, little lady," he said. "I trusted you with my secret."

Heather hadn't realized until this moment that Skip had been serious when he made his admission. He'd only covered it with humor, as he always did.

"Trust me now, Skipper," she pleaded as she awkwardly but steadily placed her hand upon the barrel of the gun. "You don't want to do this," she said. "Remember, you told me you try to be extra gentle with people so you won't hurt anyone anymore?"

"Nick took what was mine, Heather," he said. "I had to let him know he was in trouble. He did a bad thing."

"He tried to help you," she insisted. "I wouldn't lie to you, Skip. Your mother told me about it."

But Skip's eyes began to glaze. "Step aside, Heather." He spoke in a gentle monotone. "It's time I cleared things up for good."

But Heather held tight to his gun. "No, Skipper, I won't move aside," she said. "Shoot me instead."

"Shoot you?" cried Skip. "I couldn't hurt you, Heather." He drew in a deep tremulous breath and exhaled with another broken sob. "I love you."

Oh, God! thought Heather. Nicholas had been right all along. "If you love me, Skipper," she whispered. "Please,

please let me have the gun. You don't need it anymore, my friend."

"I don't know, Heather," he said, hesitating. "I think you'd better get out of the way."

"Heather, for God's sake, move aside," Nicholas pleaded. "Run away."

"No."

"For once, Nick is right, sweet thing. Move."

"No. You'll have to shoot through me to get Nicholas."

Just then, Ebon set up a torrent of screeches and squawks, so raucous, he could have wakened the dead. Fearlessly he waddled round and around Skip's legs, circling closer and closer. Finally he sniped at the back of Skip's camouflaged pants and pinched hard on his leg.

"Gawd damn your tough old hide, Ebon," roared Skip.

He swung around and aimed the gun at the swan's beady eyes. Fearless, Ebon glared at the barrel and continued squawking. Heather screamed. Nicholas pulled her away from Skip and handed her to two campus security officers for safekeeping. Just when he turned back to his executioner, a police car, with sirens and lights on, screeched to a halt near the crowd.

"Skip, don't kill Ebon," said Nicholas in a quiet tone. "You know Heather loves that old reprobate."

"Yeah," Skip agreed. "She'd cook my goose, sure, if I hurt him."

"Will you give me the gun?" Nicholas held out his hand. "Don't you think it should be put away?"

"I was going to give it to you," said Skip with a wicked gleam in his eyes. "If I had, we could have put you away."

"Give me the gun, Skipper. Please."

"Wait, I have to put on the safety," he said. "We can't have you getting hurt by some fool accident, can we?" He smiled and turned the gun over. "Do you think I could go somewhere and rest now? I'm suddenly very tired."

"I'm sure Gary will help you."

"Gary's our good fishin' buddy," said Skip. When he turned he saw the Sheriff standing nearby. Skip didn't seem to notice that the cover of Gary's holster was unfastened. "Hey, Eagle, what's happenin'?"

"Nothin' much, Skipper," said the Sheriff as he quietly took the gun from Nicholas's iron grip. "Let's take a little ride and get some fresh air, what do you say?"

"Sounds all right to me," he said. Silently Heather appeared at his side and took his hand. He looked down and grinned. "What a nice surprise. The woman who wiggled under my skin is holding my hand." When he saw the tears in Heather's eyes, he leaned over and kissed her cheek. "Don't cry, sweet thing. I really do need to get some rest. I haven't been happy for a long, long time."

Heather nodded and pressed her lips together to hold back the sobs. They'd both shed enough tears for a lifetime. "I hope the dreams stop, Skipper."

"I'm glad yours did. See ya, friend."

"See ya."

Heather and Nicholas watched as the police car slowly pulled away and drove out the gate. Then she collapsed into his arms.

"Oh, thank God, you're safe," she cried. "I thought Skip would kill you."

"How could he when my brave little Heather was standing between us?" He cradled her against him, mindless of his wet clothes. "I was so afraid for you, my love."

"Not nearly as frightened as I was for you." She hugged him with all her might and didn't care if she got soaked to the skin. Nicholas was the man she loved.

"Let's go home, baby," whispered Nicholas as he held her in his arms. "I need to be alone with you."

Heather nodded and they walked toward the milling people. Abruptly Heather stopped walking. When Nicholas looked at her eyes, he gulped audibly.

"Oh-oh!" he muttered as he braced himself.

"Don't you oh-oh me," cried Heather. She shook her finger in his face. "We have a discussion to finish."

"But we were almost killed fifteen minutes ago."

"One thing's got nothing to do with the other."

Nicholas decided to take the coward's way out. "I haven't the foggiest notion what you're talking about."

"I must have been mad to trust you," she said.

She pulled back her fist and swung.

She missed.

Nicholas grabbed her around the back of her waist and hung on for dear life. His! "You're getting hysterical, honey," he said. "This whole experience has been too much for you."

"You're damn right, I'm hysterical," she hollered. "And that's not all. I hate you, Nicholas McCord."

Nicholas's patience vanished with her last words. "That does it," he yelled. "That damn well all to hell does it!"

He lifted Heather under his arm and tried to field her flailing fists and dodge her kicking feet as he continued to walk. She fought like an Ozark mountain lion, screeching and scratching, fighting and tearing at his clothes, and finally, biting him on his thigh.

"Yow!" he hollered. He adjusted his grip on her and kept moving toward his car. The milling crowd parted like the Red Sea for him when they saw him coming.

"Out of my way. Clear the way. I have to get medication for this woman. Make way."

Some of his students smiled knowingly. Several of his colleagues shook their heads. It was obvious to them that Heather Warren was having a mental breakdown, right in the shank of a Friday evening, in front of the entire college population. What other reason could the woman have, to wiggle and fight against the man to whom she was betrothed?

Nicholas fell down twice before he made it to his car. Each time he'd hang onto Heather with brute strength as he rose from the grass and continued his tortuous journey. Finally he dumped her unceremoniously into his car and got in beside her. Heather never stopped her tirade against him. She shrieked over and over that she hated him, didn't trust him, wished she'd never met him again. When he started the engine, she tried to leap out.

"I won't go with you," she cried. "No!"

Whether Heather wanted to admit it to herself or not, whether she could admit it to herself or not, Nicholas knew she was hysterical. She'd been through severe trauma tonight. If she continued to cry as she was doing, and throw verbal and actual blows to Nicholas's mind and body, he'd truly have to call his doctor for medication. This was no longer a joke. Hell, it never was! he qualified. There was only one thing left to do, and he did it.

Afterward, Heather sat silently as great tears continued to course down her cheeks. But the hysteria was over. Yet Nicholas still worried, so he was more foolish than fearful when he careened out of the parking lot and drove like a madman to his home.

When Nicholas pulled into his drive he slammed on the brakes and parked. Then he dragged Heather from the car and heaved her across his shoulder. She struggled against him, but he carried her into the house. After he staggered to his room he threw her onto the bed. Then he towered over her and ordered himself to ignore the tears welling in her blue-sky eyes.

"Now just what the hell is going on?"

"I hate you, that's what's going on."

"I already know that." He leaned over and gave her shoulders a shake. "But why? Tell me why, dammit."

"You used me." Her voice was deathly quiet.

"I what?"

"You used me as the model in your new book," she said, refusing to back away from his screaming countenance.

"Don't try to deny it. I read the last chapter before I left my

office." She picked up a pillow and hurled it with all her might at Nicholas. She missed. "You and Peter Roan, your damned alter ego."

She looked away and failed to see the tiny sparks of mischief dancing in Nicholas's dark eyes.

"Did you read the entire last chapter? Could you find the time to read it all?" he asked again. "You were working."

"I finished early and so I straightened your desk and found it there."

"And then you read it all?"

"Certainly not, the first part was quite enough," she said. "It was all I needed to see how you blasphemed our beautiful experience in the pool and used it as fodder for your damned macho man mystery." She sniffled loudly. "I'll never forgive you, Nicholas. Never."

"Obviously, you didn't read the end," he observed tenderly. "Did you?"

But Heather wasn't listening. "You called the book *Sea Nymph*," she cried. "That's what you call me, dammit." She covered her face with her trembling hands. "Oh, Nicholas, how could you?"

Nicholas tried to sit beside her and take her in his arms. She jerked away from his grasp.

"Don't you dare touch me," she ordered. "Don't you ever touch me again."

Then Nicholas lost his temper again. He pulled her to her feet and pinned her arms against her body. He brought his flushed face to within two inches of her pale features. Fear

shadowed Heather's eyes. Nicholas's fiery gaze revealed his frustration.

"For your information, Ms. Warren," he said in a low, threatening voice, "The complete title of this book is The MURDER of The Sea Nymph. And that's what's going to happen to you if you don't calm down and listen to me. Understand?"

Heather nodded. She was afraid to speak up, but her flashing eyes told Nicholas everything. He cursed under his breath and sat her back down on the bed. Hard. Then he picked up his pillow and dashed it at her head. She ducked away.

"Can you see how angry I am?" He towered above her again. "Can you?"

Heather nodded again. Then the floodgates opened and great rivers of tears flowed down her flushed cheeks.

Nicholas squeezed shut his eyes momentarily and forced himself to continue. "Can you imagine what will happen to you if you decide to get off this bed?"

A terrible image of Heather's strangulation swam before her glistening eyes and she nodded again.

"Then stay there," he ordered in a low, grating voice. "And don't you move."

Nicholas turned on his heel and marched from the room. Heather lay down on the bed, hugging the pillows to her shivering body. She tried to be quiet so she could hear what Nicholas was doing in the den. She heard drawers slam and cabinets bang, and she wondered what he was looking for? Then he came barreling back into the bedroom with a manila

file in his fist. He dropped onto the corner of the bed and rifled through several sheets of typing paper. When his search ended, he pulled three pages from the stack and thrust them at Heather.

"Now, my misguided woman," he said. "You're going to read the end of the last chapter. You owe it to me."

"I won't," exclaimed Heather. "I won't read another ugly word of it." She buried her face in the pillow. When she inhaled, her outrageous subconscious noted the individual male scent of Nicholas on the smooth satin case.

"You'll read the last paragraph then." He took hold of her wrist and pulled her upright. "Come on now, open your eyes."

Heather defied his demand. Instead she stuck out her chin and her lower lip and squeezed shut her eyes. She might have regretted her hasty decision if she'd witnessed the fleeting expression on Nicholas's angry face. He could have added an excellent imitation of Ralph Cramdon from *The Honeymooners* to his repertoire. "One of these days ... pow!"

His right hand slid around her throat "O-pen them."

Heather's fearful eyes snapped wide. But she was thoroughly confused when she focused on Nicholas's face. It was wreathed with smiles.

He held out the paper to her. "For me, Princess," he murmured lovingly. "Read it, please."

Heather wiped her tear-streaked face on the sheet, then took the paper in her trembling fingers.

The next morning the police found the young prostitute. Her chalk white body floated, face down, in the pool. The water, once a sparkling blue and crystal clear, was now a

sickening, murky crimson. Sea Nymph's throat had been cut. Otto, her executioner, had disappeared, in search of his next victim.

Heather's stomach convulsed. "I feel sick." She moaned weakly. "He killed her."

"That's what Peter Roan writes," he said. "Murder mysteries. In this book, the killer is a psychopath who decides every prostitute in the world must die. But not before he gets his." He stroked Heather's long hair. "Can't you see, honey?" he pleaded. "You read the first part when you should have been reading the last page."

"But he calls her Sea Nymph," she countered. "What was I to think?"

Nicholas rose from the bed and began to pace. He rubbed the back of his neck, then ran his fingers through his damp hair. "Look, there's something you're going to have to understand about writers," he began. "When a writer writes, he becomes the characters. He starts thinking like them, and he writes what they say."

He looked at her and sighed. "Sometimes a character gets lazy and steals words that really belong to the writer," he continued. "But once the words are committed to paper, they become the character's. Often times, the writer isn't even aware that there may be a connection between the story and reality. If he does discover what's happened, it's usually too late," he added. "The story is complete. The writer can't change it."

Nicholas began to pace again. "This title didn't come to me until after the manuscript was finished," he said. "Then it

became obvious to me that the book must be called *The Murder of The Sea Nymph* because that's what the character, Otto, called the prostitute before he killed her." He sighed raggedly. "I didn't plan it that way. It just happened."

Nicholas stopped his rapid steps when he confronted Heather's body standing in his well-worn path. She was smiling now.

"Do you understand?" Pain shadowed his eyes. "Can you understand?"

"Yes, I can understand." Heather pushed the top button open on his wet shirt. "May I make a request?"

"Anything!" he replied. But a confused expression crept over his bearded features.

"In future, I'd like final edit on your work so none of your characters speak openly about the intimate details of our life." She gave him a smoldering look as the second and third buttons were released. "Agreed?"

"Agreed," he said. "You sound as if there're going to be quite a few."

"I suspect you're going to lose count, my love," she replied as she freed his shirttails from his jeans.

"Let me help you, honey." he said, but his fingers were all thumbs.

"Look at you!" She laughed softly. "You modern men can't do anything with your hands."

"You underestimate Modern Man, my love." Then he gulped nervously because the tables had just been neatly turned.

Heather kissed him gently on his cool lips and pushed his shirt off his shoulders. "There's just one other little thing."

"What's that, sweetheart?" He was warming up fast, now that her hot breath fanned across his bare chest.

"I don't want to wait to get married."

Her bombshell was softly spoken as she leaned down to kiss his rock hard chilled nipples. "I want to marry you tomorrow, Nicholas, my love."

Nicholas's flesh was ready to go up in flames, but he forced words from his mouth, incoherent as they were. "But we have two more weeks. Your finals. My book. It's impossible."

Heather silenced him with a torrid kiss that affected Nicholas's entire body. It was so hot, it melted his resistance and curled his toes.

"You sound just like Ebon swims," she declared. Her throaty laugh slithered down Nicholas's heaving chest, directly to his throbbing manhood.

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" he asked, wheezing.

But then her answer seemed unimportant when Heather's warm fingers unbuckled his jeans and slid them, along with his sexy red briefs, to his ankles. When she stood again, her fingernails traced a sorceress's path along his legs and beyond.

"You're talking just like Ebon swims," she repeated in a seductive voice. "In circles."

"Not true," countered Nicholas as he stepped out of his jeans. He swallowed noisily when Heather's fingers wrapped

around his desire and squeezed. "My whole entire life, I've spoken distinctly clear."

"Sorry to disagree, but you've caught my redundancy." She smiled, then traced his mouth with the tip of her tongue. "Come on, Professor. Get serious."

Their kiss was long and passionate. When Nicholas lifted his head, Heather's starry eyes were smoky and dark.

"I think we'd better elope tonight, my love," said Heather. "Late tonight."

"Naw, baby," replied Nicholas in his best Bogart voice. "Tonight, we have our honeymoon."

Heather stepped from Nicholas's embrace and slowly unbuttoned her shirtwaist dress. After she dropped it onto the floor, he surveyed her curves with an experienced eye while she removed her lacy undergarments. She returned his satisfied smile and stood proudly before him.

"I've said it before and I shall assuredly say it again," he declared in a husky voice. "You are a wonder."

"I love you, my husband to be," she whispered as she glided into his welcoming arms.

"And I love you, my heavenly beauty," he murmured. "For all our lives together."

A moment later, he gave her a devoted kiss. Then he lifted her to the bed and lay down beside her. When they turned to each other to celebrate their union, they heard in the distance, the joyous trumpeting of the special black swan, and they smiled.

For, just like Nicholas, Ebon had finally found his mate.

* * * *

About The Author

Joan Bramsch is a successful creative writing instructor, author, editor and publisher in both traditional print and electronic books—Ebooks. Her feature stories, interviews and articles appear in major international magazines and newspapers, both print and on the Internet.

Six of her best-selling adult novels—numbering near one million copies that placed fifth to first on the Waldenbook National Best-Sellers List—have been published in ten languages for worldwide distribution.

She continues to write exciting adult fiction, as well as stories for children, and how-to and parenting books.

A veteran parent and teacher, Bramsch also serves families in 88 countries from her www.EmpoweredParent.com web site and via her Empowered Parenting Journal.

If you are connected to the Internet, take a moment to rate this ebook by going back to your bookshelf: [Click Here](#)