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# Let Me Count the Ways

by Leigh Michaels

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## CHAPTER ONE

SHE had skipped lunch and worked straight through, but by mid-afternoon Sara Prentiss was willing to admit that perhaps she had bitten off a little more work than she should have attempted. Chandler College's summer session classes would start the day after tomorrow, and the way it looked, she wasn't going to be able to find her way out of her office by then, much less have it back in order.

She sat down on a pile of books, because her chair was loaded with manila folders from the top drawer of her filing cabinet, and studied the mess.

The problem, she told herself, was that one task always led to another. She hadn't really intended to take every book off the shelves, for example. She was only going to sort out the ones that she no longer used on a regular basis and box them up for long-term storage or to send over to the library. But then she had realized that the whole office would be more efficient if the adjustable shelves were rearranged, and so, in a grand burst of enthusiasm, at eight o'clock this morning, when she had been fresh and energetic—

"Fresh, heck," Sara muttered. "I couldn't even comprehend what I was doing. I was still bleary-eyed at that hour."

And as a result it was now mid-afternoon and here she was with her office looking like a frontier fort, with textbooks instead of logs forming the palisade.

She wearily pushed herself up off the stack of books and wiped her damp palms on the seat of her jeans. It was hot, too. This end of the campus was almost deserted, and the air-conditioning wouldn't be turned on in the liberal arts building until the day classes started.

Sara looked longingly out the window and across the parking lot to the old building, where her office had been last summer. The floors weren't level and the stairs creaked and the radiators rattled, but there had been one good thing about the old liberal arts building—the window would open to let in the softness of a summer breeze flowing off the river.

But that's progress, Sara thought, and Chandler College had made plenty of progress in the last few years. It seemed that there wasn't an area of the campus that was safe to walk across because of all the construction that was going on, especially since the new president had take over. But it wasn't only new buildings

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that Dave Talbot had brought to the campus; his enthusiastic ideas sometimes threatened to shake Chandler to its conservative roots. Sara sighed at the thought of his latest brilliant idea...

She found a rubber band in her desk drawer and pulled her honey-colored hair up off her neck and into an untidy ponytail. Then, with dogged determination rather than enthusiasm, she went back to work.

Most of the books were dusted and back on the shelves, and she was starting to sort out the flotsam of an entire academic year from her files, when the sound of footsteps in the hall startled her. Strange that anyone would be coming in so late, she thought. It was almost five o'clock.

She was hearing more than one set of footsteps, she realized. Then a masculine voice said, "We've assigned you this office on a temporary basis. I'm sorry you'll have to share, but even with the new building, we're still short of space. But Professor Ryan is only teaching one class this summer, so he won't be around much. If there is anything you need..."

She recognized the voice; the head of the English department was just down the hall. Nothing short of emergency would take Hal Mitchell away from his research on a day when students weren't on campus to interrupt, and that could only mean that the man with him, the second set of footsteps, was the bigwig Dave Talbot had talked into spending the summer teaching at Chandler. The bigwig who wasn't supposed to arrive until tomorrow.

"Damn," Sara said under her breath. She took one comprehensive look at the mess and gave her office door a gentle push, hoping that it would slip shut silently enough so that Hal Mitchell wouldn't notice she was there. Instead, it stopped halfway.

Darned new buildings, she thought. Over in the old one, she'd had to keep a rock handy to prop her door open.

"I see Dr. Prentiss is in her office," Hal Mitchell said. "Let me introduce you."

An instant later two men appeared in the half-open door. Hal looked around vaguely and said, "Oh, good. I'm glad you've got everything in order, Sara, before classes start."

She could see, from the corner of her eye, the other man's eyebrows raise as if

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he wanted to say, *This is in order?*

She started to seethe. Hal Mitchell was a dear, she thought, and there was nothing he didn't know about the Shakespearean era, but when it came to modern living he always seemed to view things through a piece of gauze.

"I'm working on it, Hal," she said smoothly, and turned to the other man with her hand outstretched. "You must be Adam Merrill." *Carry it off like a professional, Sara, she ordered herself. Pretend it doesn't bother you to have a celebrity walk into your office when it looks like this, and it won't matter at all.*

And the man was a genuine celebrity, she had to admit. Even though Sara happened to think that his work was trash of the worst kind, lots of people disagreed—enough of them to put Adam Merrill's books on the *New York Times* bestseller list regularly, and for lengthy periods of time. Her house mate, Olivia, was one of them, and in the last year Sara had heard enough about Adam Merrill to make her thoroughly sick of the subject. But she respected Olivia's age, if not her taste in literature, and so she had developed the knack of appearing to listen attentively while thinking about something else.

The first good look Sara got jolted her. *He's far better-looking than the picture on his books, she thought.* His hair was almost black, and it was a little longer than most men were wearing it this year. He had a classical nose, and a strong chin with a tiny cleft in it. But it was his eyes that really startled Sara. They were the most unusual shade of violet-blue that she had ever seen, and she found herself staring, thinking, *Olivia is going to be knocked off her feet. One look at him and she's going to swoon.*

"Sara is the assistant head of the department," Hal Mitchell was explaining. "As I started to say before, Adam, if there is anything you need, Sara is the one to ask about it."

"You're very young for that position, Sara," Adam Merrill observed.

"I'm old enough, I assure you..." Sara hesitated, then said firmly, "Adam." If he could use first names, so could she; she was certainly no awestruck member of his fan club. She realized belatedly that he was looking a bit amused, and he was still holding her hand. She retrieved it and told herself firmly that the strange color of his eyes was probably due to contact lenses rather than nature, anyway, and so there was no point in drooling about it.

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“Sara will also be supervising your creative-writing class,” Hal Mitchell went on.

The amusement in Adam Merrill’s eyes vanished. “I understood that I was to be independent in the classroom,” he said. “Dave Talbot assured me that what I did was completely—”

Hal Mitchell nodded. “Of course, of course,” he said reassuringly. “It’s just a formality, really. You have all the expertise in the field that anyone could ask for, but you don’t have the academic qualifications that our board of regents insists on. So officially it’s listed as Dr Prentiss’s class, with you assisting.”

“I see.” But Adam Merrill didn’t sound very happy about it, Sara thought. His dark eyebrows had drawn together, and he was staring at her warily.

It irritated her. Who did he think he was, anyway? she wondered. “Actually,” she pointed out, “it was scheduled to be *my* creative-writing class, long before you and President Talbot decided you were coming here this summer.”

“And you’re offended that I’ve taken it away from you?”

“You haven’t,” she said crisply. “Remember? I’m still supervising.”

“She’s glad to get rid of it,” Hal Mitchell said. “Be honest, Sara—you hate early-morning classes, no matter what they are.” He pulled out his gold pocket watch. “Goodness, talking of President Talbot reminds me that we need to be getting back to his office. Sara, is there anything else Adam should know?”

Sara reached under a stack of folders on the corner of her desk and unearthed a dark red book with a title stamped on it in gold. “Here’s the textbook we use. I’m sure you’d like to familiarize yourself with it before the first class.”

“The textbook,” Adam Merrill said. It wasn’t a question. He took the book, looked down at it quizzically, and added, “And it’s called *Creative Writing*. What a very—*creative* name.”

Sara found herself flushing in resentment at the irony in his tone. “It’s an excellent book. I’m sure if you’ll take the trouble to look at it...”

“Oh, I will.”

“And here is the outline for the course,” she said. “The times for the class

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meetings, the reading assignments, the exam schedule...”

He looked at her oddly, but he took the sheet of paper meekly and without a word followed Hal Mitchell down the hall.

She sank back in her chair and started sorting again. Paper could build up so fast, she thought. It was incredible the amount of it that could collect in a single year.

But she found her mind drifting away from the old essays she was discarding, back to the look in Adam Merrill’s eyes as he had examined the outline of the course.

*He ought to appreciate all the work I’ve gone to, Sara thought. If he’s never taught a class like that before, he’s got no idea how much organization it takes.*

Well, he soon would, she thought. Twenty-five of Chandler’s best and most challenging students had signed up for that seminar. Before the five-week summer session was over, Adam Merrill would know what it was like to drown in paper.

*If Mr Merrill thinks teaching is so easy, she thought, he’ll soon find out what it’s really like.*

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IT HAD BEEN such a beautiful morning that Sara had walked the few blocks to her office, rather than take her car out. As she walked back home, she regretted that decision, because she was tired out and depressed about the mess that still remained on her desk. It would take most of tomorrow to get it cleared up, and even that might be too optimistic an estimate if she had a lot of students dropping in to talk about their problems.

Then Phillip Reynolds called to her from the sheltered front entrance of the main administration building, and Sara regretted even more her decision to walk. If there was one thing she was simply not up to coping with this afternoon, it was Phillip.

She waved and kept walking, but he galloped across the center of a freshly seeded patch of lawn and pulled up beside her, out of breath, with his hair standing on end and his tie flying over one shoulder.

“Lucky for you the lawns-and-gardens people didn’t see you,” Sara said.

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“They’re a little touchy about the new grass.”

“It’s the wrong time of the year to plant grass seed, anyway.” He patted himself back together. “I need to talk to you about Olivia.”

Sara sighed. “Is there anything new in this discussion, or is this just a reprise of the previous four hundred and twelve times you’ve talked to me about Olivia?”

“You know she can’t keep living in that mausoleum of a house by herself.”

Sara didn’t stop walking. “She’s not,” she said crisply. “I’m living there with her.”

“But how much of the time are you there? She could fall and break a bone and lie there for hours.”

“Phillip, the housekeeper is there all day; I’m there all night. There are a few hours when she’s alone, but she is an adult in excellent health for her age, after all.”

“The woman’s got to be at least seventy-eight, Sara, and she could get sick any minute.”

Sara bit her tongue. She happened to know that Olivia had turned eighty-two on her last birthday, but she thought that if Olivia wanted Phillip to know that, she would have told him herself. “What are you suggesting, Phillip?”

“That she do the sensible thing. Move into one of the new apartments in that supervised-living complex across town, where there are nurses on call every minute.”

“And give up her independence? Worse yet, give up Ashton Court? Be reasonable, Phillip—it’s her home. It’s been her home for fifty-odd years. She’s not an invalid, and she won’t thank you for trying to make her into one.”

“Well, then, she should be more reasonable about letting me help her.”

Sara stopped in the middle of the pavement and stared up at him, all six feet of rangy blondness. “I see,” she said softly. “You’re still angling for an invitation to move into Ashton Court, aren’t you, Phillip?”

He flushed a little and shifted from one foot to the other. “It makes sense,” he said defensively. “There’s plenty of room, heaven knows, and I could help keep

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her company and entertain her.”

“Having you around would drive her crazy in a week.”

“I don’t see why it should. She’s got you there, feeding you and taking care of all your expenses and...”

“I pay rent,” Sara snapped and turned on her heel.

He followed her down the sidewalk. “That’s a joke. I’ll bet you couldn’t live in a cheap boardinghouse for what you pay Olivia.”

That was true enough. Sara didn’t think it was worth trying to explain to Phillip that it had been a battle to get Olivia to take any money at all.

“And you’re not even related. I’m her family,” Phillip said. “Ashton Court will come to me when she’s dead. It has to, because I’m the only heir.”

At that moment, Sara would have said nearly anything to burst his balloon. “Are you certain of that?” she murmured sweetly.

Phillip’s hand closed on her arm and jerked her around to face him. “What the devil does that mean?” he accused. “Have you convinced her to leave it to you?”

“If you’ll take your hand off me, Phillip...” She stared at him until he released her. “Of course I’m not working on Olivia to leave Ashton Court to me. What on earth could I do with it, anyway—turn it into condominiums? I just meant that Olivia might have some family of her own.”

“Just Pamela. And she’s been gone for years.”

“I mean, besides her daughter. Do you know for certain that she doesn’t have any cousins, for instance?”

“No,” Philip said slowly. “But she’s never mentioned any.”

“That doesn’t mean there couldn’t be some. And you’re only a great-nephew on her husband’s side—not really blood relation to Olivia at all.”

He thought that over for a bit, and shook his head. “But it was Otto who made the money,” he pointed out. “Strictly speaking, he should have left part of it to me when he died.”

“But he left it to his wife instead. Can’t you see, Phillip? It’s Olivia’s house

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and Olivia's money, and she can do with it whatever she wants. You shouldn't count on getting anything."

"Are you certain you're not taking unfair advantage of her, and influencing her against me?"

"You can do that well enough all by yourself," Sara muttered. "Phillip, I think the place is a mausoleum, too—it's grand and wonderful and all that, but it would take all the efforts of twelve people to keep it running in style, and nobody can afford that kind of living any more. What on earth would I do with it, on a college professor's salary?"

He didn't answer, but he continued to look at her suspiciously.

"As far as that goes, why do you want it?" Sara asked finally. "You're not even married, so you certainly don't need an eight-bedroom house. And insurance agents aren't known for having the sort of income that allows for that style of living. I'm not even sure that Olivia still does. She's been cutting back a bit lately."

"It's only right that I should live there," Philip repeated stubbornly. "She shouldn't treat me like a poor relation."

They had left the campus behind, and just a block ahead, down a pleasantly busy street, lay the wrought-iron and brick wall that surrounded Ashton Court.

"Damn it!" There was a note of hard disillusionment in Phillip's voice. "It's not fair. I can't even go inside the gate unless I've got an engraved invitation. And yet I'm the only family she's got. When Otto was alive, I was at least accepted there, and included in the parties. He told me the place would come to me. Olivia's obsessed, you know. She refuses to believe that Pamela's dead, and that's why she just won't admit that I'm the only possible heir."

Sara looked up at him thoughtfully, and then ahead at the closed wrought-iron gates. Obsessed... It was an unusual word to be applied to Olivia. Fluffy, charming, tiny Olivia—obsessed?

"Pamela was her only child," she said absently. "I'm sure it was very hard for Olivia to accept that she's really gone. But surely you don't think she believes that Pamela might turn up some day?"

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“Well, they never found a body,” Phillip said bluntly. “But it’s been close to forty years. Any sensible woman would have admitted the facts long ago, but Olivia hasn’t. She still pays the premiums on Pamela’s life insurance policies, year after year.”

And where insurance was concerned, Phillip would know, Sara thought. She had never realized that, herself. It did seem a little strange for Olivia to do that. Was it possible that, after two years of living at Ashton Court, Sara didn’t know Olivia as well as she had thought?

And what about Phillip? She looked up at him through narrowed eyes. If Olivia’s late husband had told him he was the heir, had treated him as such, and then instead left everything to Olivia, who wanted nothing to do with the young man...

For the first time, Sara felt a twinge of sympathy for Phillip Reynolds. Only a twinge, she reminded herself. But she could understand why he was so upset.

“Just being invited to dinner once in a while would help,” Phillip grumbled. “You’ve got no idea what a laughingstock it makes me in this town, to be Olivia Reynolds’ nephew and have less contact with her than the hairdressers on Main Street do.”

Sara pulled open the small wrought-iron gate next to the big driveway ones. “All right, Phillip, I’ll tell her about our talk. But it’s up to Olivia, you know.”

“That’s the problem,” Phillip called after her. “Everything is up to Olivia—and Olivia’s out of touch with reality!” He turned away from the wall and strode off toward the campus without looking back.

Sara watched him out of sight, and then she walked slowly up the driveway towards Ashton Court. The grounds were so large that it was hard for a guest to realize how big the house really was; the wall enclosed more than half of a city block. A border of pink and blue flowers—a carefully calculated mixture of plants that ended up looking as if they had accidentally grown together—stretched invitingly along the drive. Beyond it, the rosy pink brick of the sprawling house seemed to glow in the summer sun, and the light rippled over the multitude of tiny panes in the casement windows, which stood open to the gentle breeze.

The front door was also open, a dark blur beneath the gothic arch of the

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entrance. Sara paused for a moment in the dimness of the oak-beamed hall. She might as well tell Olivia right now about her talk with Phillip.

She found the woman curled up on the velvet fainting couch in the small pink and silver morning-room, a crystal cocktail-glass on a table nearby and a box of chocolates balanced beside her. She was engrossed in a book, and Sara stood in the doorway for a long moment, looking at the tiny, white-haired old lady in the frilly, china-blue dress.

*Was* Olivia obsessed by the loss of her only daughter? Sara wondered. Sara had never suspected such a thing; Olivia seldom mentioned her dead husband or her daughter, and she didn't talk about the past. She enjoyed every moment of living, and there was never a hint of the clouds of grief that Phillip seemed to think were hanging over Ashton Court. And yet, that business about her still paying for insurance on the life of Pamela Reynolds, forty years after the girl—woman, Sara corrected herself—was gone...

"Hello," Sara said, at the same instant that Olivia reached for a chocolate. Olivia's hand jerked, and the box went over the side of the fainting couch.

"Goodness, how you startled me, dear." She sounded faintly reproachful.

"You're jumpy because you read all this junk," Sara said. She rescued the box of chocolates and picked up the book. The cover was a surrealistic wonder featuring a shadowy figure drenched in gore, staggering down what she supposed was an alley. In big letters was the name of the author—Adam C. Merrill – and on the back was his photograph.

*I was right, Sara thought. In person, he's much better-looking than that. Too much so, perhaps, to be credible as an author of this kind of stuff. I wonder if his publisher deliberately chose a picture that makes him look tough.*

She turned the book over and looked at the cover again. *Four Fingers From Death*. Where, she wondered, did the man come up with these titles? The last one had been called *Die A Bachelor*.

She sighed and put the book down. It worried her sometimes that Olivia read this kind of nonsense. "It's a wonder you sleep at all, Olivia, with Adam Merrill's murders running through your head."

"Well, we can't all comprehend Chaucer and James Joyce," Olivia said,

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without resentment. “They’re only stories, and they entertain me.” She tucked the book behind a needlepoint pillow. “There, you don’t have to look at it. How was school today?”

*As if I was five, and coming home from kindergarten,* Sara thought wryly. “I ran into Phillip this afternoon.”

“Oh? And how is dear Phillip?” Olivia asked brightly.

Sara poked through the box of chocolates till she found a raspberry center. “How long has it been since you’ve seen ‘dear Phillip’, Olivia?” she countered.

“Weeks, I should think.” Obviously it didn’t disturb her.

“Well, that’s what’s bothering him.” Sara summed up what Phillip had said to her, leaving out a few of his choicer phrases; telling Olivia that Phillip thought she was out of touch with reality was probably not going to gain him any points.

“Oh, goodness,” Olivia said. “I really don’t...” She looked at Sara helplessly. “But if you want him to come, Sara, dear, then of course I’ll invite him to dinner now and then.”

“I didn’t say I wanted...” Sara stopped abruptly. *What does it matter?* she thought. *I don’t think she should keep him locked out of Ashton Court, and if it makes it easier for her to think that I’m in favor of inviting him, what harm can that do?*

“On Thursday, perhaps,” Olivia mused. “Annabelle can do her chicken tourangelle, and I’ll invite—oh, we’ll have a few people. Twelve or so.”

“I don’t think that’s precisely what Phillip had in mind,” Sara said dryly.

Olivia gave her a brilliant smile. “Well, if he expects to have you all to himself, perhaps he should ask you out, instead. Surely he can’t expect Annabelle to go to all that work for just him? Now that we’ve got that settled, don’t you think you’d best be freshening up? I don’t like to shoo you off, dear, but I do so want to finish Mr. Merrill’s book before dinner.”

“So you have time to let the ghastliest parts of it slip your mind before bedtime?”

“Of course not. So I can talk about it intelligently this evening.” She pulled the

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book from behind the cushion. “It’s one of his earlier ones—it’s just been re-released in paperback. I can’t think how I missed it when it first came out.” She opened the book and looked up. “Besides, you shouldn’t say nasty things about his work, Sara, unless you’ve read it. Which I happen to know you haven’t.”

“And won’t. Wait a minute,” Sara said. “What’s going on this evening? It isn’t the night for your bridge club, and I can’t think of anything on my calendar.”

“We’re going to the Talbots’ for dessert and coffee, to meet Mr. Merrill. Cynthia apologized for the short notice, of course, but she wasn’t expecting him till tomorrow.”

“I know.”

So she’s invited a few friends to greet him informally. I said I knew you’d be delighted, and as for me, I wouldn’t dream of missing the opportunity to meet one of my favorite authors.”

“Right,” Sara said.

“So I simply must finish this before we go. You understand, don’t you, dear? Why don’t you wear that lovely wild-rose dress of yours? It makes you look so pretty. Oh, and perhaps you will take your hair down out of the ponytail before dinner?”

It was very gentle. Olivia always was, but her delicate hints could sometimes feel like sandpaper, Sara thought. And yet, she really did love Olivia Reynolds, and as for living at Ashton Court...

Was it really just two years ago that Olivia had invited her to move into the house? Sometimes it seemed to Sara as if she had always lived here. She almost said something of the sort, but Olivia had already put her nose back into her book.

Sara ran up the wide walnut staircase. The evening sun pouring through the enormous stained-glass window on the landing smeared jeweled colors over the pale carpet runner, the carved banister, and the housekeeper, complete with black uniform, who was dusting the carved paneling.

“Hello, Annabelle,” Sara told her cheerfully. “I might as well warn you; it’s chicken tourangelle and Phillip for dinner on Thursday.”

The housekeeper sniffed. Annabelle had never troubled to keep her opinion of

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Phillip Reynolds to herself. Sara laughed and went on up to her room.

Olivia had insisted that she have the master suite. “You’re giving up so much already by coming to live with an old lady,” she had said on that long-ago afternoon when Sara had agreed to move to Ashton Court. “You’ll need your privacy, and a place to work sometimes—and a lady’s desk should not be in her bedroom.” So Sara had moved into the master suite. She slept in the carved canopy bed of Jacobean oak, and lounged on a loveseat that had graced a French chateau, and occasionally watched the television set that was artfully concealed in the huge sixteenth-century wardrobe. And, when she brought her students’ papers home to read, she marked them in the adjoining sitting-room, on a desk that had once been owned by an emperor.

Not that Olivia had made a serious sacrifice in giving up the master suite; her bedroom next door was quite as elaborate, its bathroom even more sinfully luxurious, and its furnishings, she had once told Sara, all Marie Antoinette. Sara wasn’t quite sure whether Olivia had meant the period or the person herself. With Olivia, one never quite knew.

“Personally,” she said to the quiet sitting-room, “I believe Phillip’s a fool. In my opinion, the lady isn’t out of touch with anything. She may sound dizzy, but she’s as sharp as the average laser scalpel, and I wouldn’t care to try to outsmart her.”

She went to shower off the dust of her office. What she would really like to do tonight was put on a comfortable old terry robe and curl up with a good book. She had a new collection of prize-winning poetry that she’d been dying to sample. But years of experience in the academic community had taught her that a mere assistant head of the English department did not insult the president of the college by refusing an invitation to dessert to greet his newest shining star.

Though precisely why Dave Talbot had picked up Adam Merrill and talked him into coming to Chandler this summer was beyond her. Of course, it was a feather in the college’s cap to have a best-selling author on campus for a few weeks, but normally Dave didn’t dictate things like that. A month ago, however, Dave had come back from his alma mater’s graduation ceremonies bubbling with enthusiasm about the commencement speaker, and how wonderful it was of Adam Merrill to spend a summer sharing his talents with Chandler’s students .

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His talents, and his ego as well, Sara was willing to bet, after just the few minutes Adam Merrill had been in her office. He probably thought he was a natural teacher—most amateurs did, she had found. And he no doubt expected his students to gather at his feet and listen open-mouthed to his pearls of wisdom...

Well, she could cope with anything for five weeks if she had to—even if Adam Merrill turned out to be the worst.

She brushed her hair till it shone like dark honey, and put on the wild-rose dress. Olivia was right; it was the prettiest thing she owned. The delicate shade of pink and the slim lines of the dress with its plunging back showed off the glorious color of her summer-darkened skin. Not even the guest of honor could turn up his nose at her in that dress, she thought.

Not that she was doing it for his sake, she told herself. Adam Merrill would be a mere shooting star at Chandler College. After the five-week summer session, he'd be gone, and the regular faculty could get back to their ordinary work. And not a bit too soon, she told herself.