
Close Collaboration

by **Leigh Michaels**

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CHAPTER ONE

THE smell of chalk dust and dry, overheated air hung in the big classroom, mixed with the pungent aroma of burnt toast and overcooked sausage. Mallory Mitchell watched patiently as her students scrambled to clean up their mess before the buzzer released them to go to their next class. While the remains of their experiment in cooking breakfast looked impossible at the moment, two years of experience in the home economics classroom had taught Mallory that it could indeed be cleaned up in less than ten minutes.

“Depending, of course,” she muttered under her breath, “on your definition of clean!”

A tiny blonde girl, up to her elbows in a sink full of detergent suds, looked up enquiringly. “Did you say something, Miss Mitchell?”

“Nothing important, Jill.” She raised her voice. “Don’t forget that your menu plans are due on Monday, and that there will be a test over the breakfast unit next Friday.” The buzzer sounded, cutting off groans from a couple students.

“A test next week? Already?” one of them moaned as he flung his dish towel towards the rack and rushed to pick up his books from the far end of the classroom.

“That’s what I said, David.”

“Come on, Miss Mitchell. What could you possibly ask us on a test? How to boil an egg, for crying out loud? Everybody knows that.”

“Think positive, David,” Mallory recommended crisply. “Since you’re certain that you already know everything there is to know about breakfasts, it should be a very easy test. I’m sure you’ll get an excellent grade.”

David groaned again, but he didn’t pursue the subject. It was just as well, Mallory thought, since sarcasm in the classroom was officially frowned upon. David was, at the moment, in danger of failing cooking class.

The classroom was empty in a matter of seconds, leaving only Mallory and the slim blonde who was rinsing the sink with painstaking care. “Thanks, Jill,” Mallory said. “But don’t be late to your next class.”

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A tall, dark-haired boy in jeans and a striped sweater poked his head in the door. “Hi, Mallory.”

Mallory looked at her younger brother in surprise. “What are you doing here, Matt? You normally avoid this room like the plague during school hours, unless you- forgot your lunch money.”

Matt Mitchell grinned. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I remembered it today. Ready, Jill?”

The girl seemed to glow, as if a flame had been turned up in her eyes. *Well, Mallory thought. So she thinks my little brother is something special!*

“Don’t forget you’ll be on your own for dinner tonight,” she reminded Matt. “I’m going to that faculty-student council dinner with Dad.”

Matt made a face. “I suppose I’m having leftovers again?”

“Unless you want to cook, yes. And if you make any more fuss about it, next time I’ll suggest that Dad ask you to go with him instead of me,” Mallory threatened.

“He wouldn’t. You fit much more nicely into the college community than I do. See you later, Mallory.” The two students went off down the hall, with Matt carrying Jill’s books. It was the first time Mallory had seen that happen, too, and she made a mental note to keep a closer eye on Matt. Those two kids, at sixteen, were barely more than babies.

She stopped in the office, and was looking through the contents of her mailbox when the principal’s secretary said, “I’m afraid Mr. Craig is tied up with a luncheon meeting today, Miss Mitchell.”

Mallory was startled. She hadn’t realized that she and Randy Craig had been having lunch together often enough to excite comment, but obviously someone had noticed.

And what of it? she asked herself. They weren’t trying to keep anything secret. She and Randy had dated occasionally in the last year, since his divorce had become final. It certainly didn’t interfere with their jobs. Sometimes it was almost a part of the job—as when they chaperoned the school dances. They’d gotten into the habit

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of going together, because it made a boring job much more pleasant. If that bothered anyone...

Mallory shrugged and dismissed the thought.

There was a slim envelope in her mailbox, with a return address that sent shivers down her spine. McDaniel Publishing House, it read in block letters.

“On your way to the cafeteria, Mallory?” a cheerful voice asked behind her.

“Hi, Melinda.” Mallory stuffed the letter down into the side pocket of her handbag. There would be plenty of time to look at it later, without an audience. Not that Melinda wouldn’t be delighted if the news was good, but just in case it wasn’t, Mallory was determined not to make it public. She had gone to great lengths to make sure no one at the high school knew what she was up to, and she wasn’t about to let the secret out now. “Want to sit with me?”

“Of course. Pleasant company makes even cafeteria food taste better.” Melinda Anderson handed a packet across the counter to the secretary. “I’ll need thirty copies of that next week.” She held the door for Mallory. “Though I’m amazed that you eat in the cafeteria, Mallory. With all that real food right in your classroom...”

“Believe me, by the time my cooking students get done with it, it usually doesn’t look very appetizing.”

“Well, it certainly smelled good this morning. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to pound algebraic equations into the heads of a bunch of freshmen when the smell of sausage is wafting through the air?”

Mallory smiled. “I’ll keep that in mind when I make up my next menu.”

“I have an even better idea. For your final exam, why don’t you have a beef Stroganoff contest? I’ll judge.”

“That’s an idea.”

Melinda looked doubtfully at the taco on her tray. “Do you know, every time in the last few days that I’ve tried to eat, I find myself remembering the wonderful taste of your Stroganoff last weekend.”

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“Would you like the recipe?”

“Of course, but I doubt I could pull it off as well as you do.”

“There’s really nothing to it.” Mallory bit into her taco.

“Right. Every expert says that, and then looks astounded when the average person can’t do it.”

“Well, I must admit to some frustration with beginning cooks these days,” Mallory admitted.

“Getting disillusioned with the job already?” Melinda commiserated. “You’ve only been at it for two years. Walt till you’ve been here seven, as I have.”

“But cooking and sewing are so easy, Melinda, and yet these kids botch it up. They just don’t seem to have any common sense.”

Melinda said wisely, “If you expected common sense, you shouldn’t be teaching in high school. But I don’t think it’s teaching that’s the problem, Mallory. I think you’d be happier if you had a husband and a home of your own.”

Mallory stared at her friend in astonishment. “And you call yourself a liberated woman!”

“I just meant that you’ve got all the responsibilities of an old married lady, with none of the fun.”

“Do you mean Matt?”

“Who else would I be talking about? You don’t have any other little brothers locked in cupboards, do you?”

Mallory smiled. “Sometimes I’d like to lock him up, that’s sure. Well, two more years and Matt will graduate and be out on his own. I’ll just have to hold out till then.”

“You could at least look around. There are a few eligible men in this town.”

“Yes, and I dated them all while I was in high school. Do you know how hard it is to feel romantic about someone that you remember as a teenager with braces and acne?”

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“I see your point,” grimaced Melinda.

“In the meantime, my senior living class will keep me sane.”

“Your experiment is going well, then?”

Mallory glanced around the room, and lowered her voice. “So well that I don’t want to tell the people in the social studies wing about it, or they might take the kids away from me.”

“And why should they want to? They’re the ones who told Randy Craig that the whole idea of a class to teach kids how to live on their own was a waste of time.”

“But if it’s a success, Melinda, it will draw attention. And then...”

“I see what you mean. The social studies people will want to take the credit, and they can’t do that if you’re teaching the course.”

“Right.”

“Faculty in-fighting,” Melinda said with disgust. She pushed the remains of her taco aside. “Why can’t we all just remember the simple fact that our goal is to educate kids here, not to climb all over each other’s egos?”

“Find the answer to that and they’ll make you the boss.”

“Heaven forbid!” Melinda hurried across the cafeteria to hand her tray back into the kitchen.

Mallory glanced around the room. The noise level had dropped as the crowd thinned. Spring was coming near, and it was warm enough today that many of the students had stepped outside for a breath of fresh air before going back to class. Another five minutes and the next group would flood the cafeteria with noise and high spirits for their short break.

But in the meantime, it was safe enough. No one was paying any attention to her. She casually pulled the crumpled envelope from her handbag and slid her fingernail under the flap. Her hair spilled forward over her face as she read the letter.

It was only one page, brief and to the point. The editors had found her proposal a fascinating one; to the best of their knowledge no one had yet written a textbook

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for a course intended to assist high school students to make the transition from teenage family member to independent adult. Her outline, they felt, was quite comprehensive, covering as it did everything from renting an apartment to buying car insurance to coping with loneliness, and they thought such a book would have a large possible market.

But—Mallory’s heart sank—the editors must express a doubt as to whether a book of this sort, written by an unknown high school home economics teacher, would have the credibility necessary to sell it on a wide scale. And, of course, unless a great many schools used the book, it would be impractical to produce it. Of course, she must realize that such a textbook involved more sociology than anything else, and that it did not properly belong in the home economics division at all.

Perhaps a qualified sociologist would agree to co-author the book, the editors went on. Without such an authority, they very much regretted having to say that the book would probably not be worth her time to complete...

“Damn,” Mallory muttered. The buzzer sounded, and she crumpled the sheet of stationery back into her bag without bothering to read the rest of the letter. She struggled down the hall towards her classroom, against the wave of hungry teenagers headed for the cafeteria.

“A co-author,” she muttered. “I don’t *want* anyone else messing about with my book. It isn’t fair, anyway. I’m the one who developed the course. I wrote the teaching plans. I did the research. But just because I’m not a sociologist with an advanced degree, they won’t even talk to me. Not worth my time to finish.”

Of course, what the editors hadn’t known was that the book was already nearly complete. Since she had never tackled a project quite that large before, Mallory had hesitated to promise something she wasn’t certain she could deliver. So she had written the book first, and then sent the outline. There was a three-inch-thick stack of neatly typed manuscript in her desk drawer at home, just waiting for a positive reply. And now this, telling her that all her work had been wasted.

She taught her advanced sewing class, and wrote the test on breakfasts for her beginning cooks. But not even the last hour of the day, when her prize seniors burst into the room to share what they had learned about life insurance from talking to an agent, perked up her spirits.

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Not worth your time to finish. The refrain ran through her mind throughout the afternoon.

Well, Mallory thought, we will certainly see about that! It's a good book, and it shouldn't matter whose name is on the title page.

Matt was playing ball in front of the garage when she pulled her little car into the driveway beside the steep-roofed red-brick house. Mallory tapped the horn and waited till he'd retrieved his ball and gotten out of her way. She parked the car and lifted a briefcase full of papers from the back seat. "I thought you were working on the play after school," she said.

"They had plenty of help. Didn't need me." His shot bounced off the wall, and he chased it. "Besides, Jill felt sorry for me and invited me over to her house for dinner."

"Scavenger," Mallory said, and went into the house.

Her father was in his little study at the back of the house, the small hideaway that had once been a maid's bedroom. Now it was paneled in fine wood and lined with shelves loaded with books and pamphlets. A desk lamp cast a pool of brilliance over the blotter, where a book lay open. Professor Mitchell was taking notes. He was so absorbed in his task that he didn't hear Mallory come in.

She watched him for a minute, his thinning silver hair shining in the glow of the lamp as he bent over his task. "Did you find a new resource?" she asked, finally.

He looked up, startled, his eyes bright over the half-lenses of his reading glasses. "Mallory! You're home early."

"Sorry, Dad, but you can't have looked at a clock lately."

The professor pulled a gold pocket watch out. "Oh! And we have a dinner date tonight, don't we?"

Mallory nodded. "That's why I came in to check on you—I suspected you might forget all about dinner. It must be a fascinating book."

"Yes, it is." His voice was as eager as a boy's. "Another of those amateur scholars who insists that Shakespeare couldn't possibly have written all those plays, and who thinks that his half-baked beliefs constitute proof! I waste half of my time at

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lectures, you know, refuting all of these unfounded theories that masquerade as fact. It's beyond me to know why so many people believe that Shakespeare must have been some kind of fraud—"

"I know, Dad. He was simply a genius who wrote for the popular taste and had no idea at the time that he was writing classics."

The professor smiled. "I've bored you with my views before, is that what you're telling me?"

"I'm not exactly bored, Dad." She picked up the book and flipped through the pages. "This isn't even commercially printed, is it?"

"No. He had to publish it himself." Professor Mitchell sounded triumphant. "Nobody would back up his ideas with money to distribute them."

"Well, it isn't only amateur Shakespearean scholars who can't find a publisher." Her tone was distant.

The professor's eyes were suddenly sharp. "What happened, Mallory? Was your book turned down?"

"Not exactly. Here—read this." She handed her letter over and perched on the window-seat while he read it. She rested her forehead against the leaded windowpanes and looked out across the wooded ravine behind the house. Here and there a haze of green was beginning to show on the trees, and the grass was already showing a promise of spring. A few more days of this warmth, she thought, and the tender new leaves would burst forth. It would be an early spring, after a cold and harsh winter. How she longed to get out into the woods, to pack a picnic lunch and go biking, to walk through the grass and feel the blades tickling against her toes, made tender by a winter protected by shoes—

It's too early to get spring fever, she reminded herself. There are still two months of school before you can call your time your own.

The professor put the letter down on his desk blotter and looked up, pulling his glasses off. "Well, I don't quite see why they want a sociologist; That would never have occurred to me."

"Me neither," Mallory muttered.

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“But on the whole, I’d say it’s a very positive answer.”

She shrugged. “I suppose so, if I agree to collaborate with some so-called expert. Dad, it’s my book! I’ve done all the work. Why should I have to turn it all over to someone else? I feel like a child being told that I’m not smart enough to finish this project by myself.”

“Would you rather have it not published at all?”

Mallory stared out of the window. “No,” she said softly. “I think there’s a need for it.”

“So do I, dear. Don’t worry, we’ll solve the problem. All you need, actually, is the name. It’s done all the time. If you saw the list of books some professors’ names appear on, you’d think they never had time to teach a class. The truth is, they didn’t have anything to do with writing the books.” He smiled reassuringly at her. “All you need is somebody who sees the value of what you’ve done, and who has the credentials you lack.”

“You make it sound so easy.”

“It may be. There’s one man in particular I’m thinking of. With his name on the cover...”

“You know someone? You’re a genius, Dad, the answer to a maiden’s prayer.” Mallory jumped up, new enthusiasm welling up in her. “Give me his address, and I’ll write to him this minute.”

The professor’s brow wrinkled. “Why bother?”

“You aren’t suggesting that I do anything without asking his permission, are you?”

“Of course not!” The professor sounded horrified. “That would be unethical. I merely meant that you could ask him at the dinner tonight.

“He’ll be there?” Mallory was startled.

“Of course. He’s the head of the sociology department at Chandler College, and that automatically puts him on the faculty-student council.”

“What incredible luck,” Mallory murmured. She kissed her father’s cheek. “Have I ever told you what a wonderful pal you are, Dad?”

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“I know I am,” the professor said modestly. His eyes strayed to his book, open on the blotter. “Do you suppose I have time to read one more chapter before I get ready for dinner?” His tone was wistful.

Mallory laughed. “I’ll drag you out of here fifteen minutes before we’re due to leave,” she promised, and went up to her own room with a lighter heart. For the first time in her life, she was actually looking forward to attending a college function with her father.

It took Professor Mitchell a bit more than fifteen minutes to dress, so they were late when they reached the student center where the faculty-student council held its meetings and dinners. The professor took the stairs two at a time on his way to the dining room, but on the landing Mallory stopped and tugged at the sleeve of his sports jacket. “Would you slow down?” she asked breathlessly. “You’re making me look bad. And you didn’t even tell me his name.”

“Whose name?” He looked confused.

For a moment she was furious. *This is no time to be the absent-minded professor, Dad*, she was thinking. “Your friend who is going to help with my book,” she reminded crisply.

“Oh!” The professor’s brow cleared. “Adams. C. Duncan Adams.”

Sounds like a stuck-up scholar, Mallory thought. Anyone who used an initial instead of a first name impressed her as a snob. “What does the C stand for?”

Her father grunted “I’m not sure. *Conspicuous* perhaps—he’s certainly well-known.”

Mallory decided it didn’t make any difference what the man called himself. Perhaps his mother had named him Clyde, and he was trying to assume an image a bit more attractive to his young students. Her own father’s given name was Harold; many of the men of his generation had been christened with names that their children now considered to be hilarious.

“I don’t see him, though,” Professor Mitchell said. He craned his neck to see who was on the far side of the room. “Perhaps he’s just late.”

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“We’re the ones who are late,” Mallory pointed out. “They’re already setting up the buffet line. Anyone who’s later than we are is simply not coming.”

“Well, that’s possible, too,” the professor conceded. “I know he hates these things. Would you like a drink?”

“A glass of wine. Dad?” She caught him as he started to turn away. “Would you tell me what he looks like, at least? Then I could be looking for him.”

“Oh. He’s taller than I am,” the professor offered helpfully.

“Dad, half the men here are taller than you are. Come to that, a good dozen of the women are taller—”

“Mallory, there is no need to be insulting about my lack of height. Duncan’s kind of loose-limbed, too.” His attention was distracted by a colleague. “Jim! Good to see you, pal. How’s that project your grad students are doing?”

The two men moved away, and Mallory sighed. *I don’t know why I bother to come to these things, she thought. As soon as we’re inside the door, he forgets I’m here, and spends the rest of the evening wandering from one old friend to the next. I’m left to look out for myself, and nine times out of ten I have to remind him I’m here when it’s time to go home.*

In the three years since her mother had died, Mallory had decided at least a dozen times that she would never again accompany her father to an official college function. Yet, every time he asked her to go, it was with an air that implied he’d be a lost puppy if she didn’t come with him. And so she went.

“Next time it’s Matt’s turn,” she muttered under her breath. She surveyed the crowd. A tall, loose-limbed man, hmm? Well, there were several who qualified, but she could hardly walk up to each in turn and ask if he was the brilliant sociologist she wanted to ask a favor of. Now if there had been one dressed in a safari-type jacket, as if he’d just come back from studying the aborigines...

Dad could at least have told me what color the man’s hair is, she thought irritably. She decided to get herself a glass of wine. If the event ran according to past pattern, the professor would already have forgotten his offer to get her one. In fact,

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sometimes he even forgot to eat at these affairs and arrived home absolutely famished and not quite sure why he should be hungry.

Tonight there was a huge tray of tiny meatballs in a spicy barbecue sauce at one end of the table. They looked good, and Mallory put her wine-glass between two fingers so she could hold a paper plate as well, freeing her other hand to serve herself. It was a skill learned long ago at buffet dinners.

She placed several tiny meatballs on to the edge of her plate and covered them with a spoonful of sauce. Usually, if she had enough of a taste, she could deduce how the sauce had been concocted. She could have the recipe, of course, by merely calling the student center tomorrow and asking the cooks, but it was more of a challenge to figure it out herself. Besides, she had found that analyzing the food helped to fill up a long evening, if there was no one interesting to talk to.

On the other side of the table, a dozen feet from Mallory, a man gestured with his plastic glass and said, “On the contrary, my dear man. The research in Samoa has been shown to be faulty, but it was hardly a fraud! The natives showed a disturbing tendency to do what the researchers seemed to want them to do, but after all, that’s only human! It’s one of the things we are always fighting in sociological research.”

Mallory stood up a little straighter. *That’s him*, she thought. *That’s got to be him. How many men in this crowd are going to be talking about the problems of sociological research in Samoa?*

She tried not to stare at him. She stole glances from under her dark lashes as she spooned food on to her plate at random. C. Duncan Adams was certainly tall. Loose-limbed— well, she supposed that was a matter of judgment. She would have called him awkward, instead. Now, she just had to figure out how to approach him.

“Excuse me,” a polite voice said at her elbow. “I was just wondering if you’re serving yourself, or planning to take up residence here?”

“Oh,” she said. “Sorry.” She put a forkful of macaroni salad on her plate and glanced at the next bowl. Minced cucumbers, she thought, with some kind of sour cream dressing. Absently, she reached for the spoon, and stole another look at C. Duncan Adams across the table.

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He was swinging his arms around as he talked; that must be what the professor had meant by loose-limbed. He looked like a pelican flapping its wings. He was also slightly red-faced, and his tweed jacket was baggy at the elbows. The home economics teacher part of her longed to take it away from him and press it.

“At any rate,” the man was continuing, “researchers are just going to have to be more careful in the future. There aren’t any isolated groups to study any more, as there were at the turn of the century.” He pulled up his sleeve and looked at his wristwatch. “But I’ve got to be going. Nice to see you.”

He can’t leave now! Mallory thought. I have to catch him. I can’t let him get away.

She broke out of the serving line at the table, determined to catch C. Duncan Adams before he escaped. Her paper plate, never intended to hold up under the load of food she had absentmindedly piled on it, buckled, and the wine-glass slipped from between her fingers. White wine, macaroni salad, meatballs with sauce and cucumbers in sour cream cascaded in a stream down the front of the neatly tailored wool jacket of the man beside her.

He glanced at the mess, which dripped from the jacket down his crisply creased trousers and to the floor, and then looked coldly at Mallory.

“I am sorry,” she whispered. “It will have to be cleaned. I’ll pay for it, of course.”

“Oh, here you are,” her father’s cheerful voice broke in. “Here’s your wine, Mallory. My boy, what happened to your jacket?”

If he can’t see, Mallory thought, I’m not going to try to explain.

But the cheerfulness was back in the professor’s voice. “I see you’ve met,” he said.

“Met?” the macaroni salad man said. The word was chopped off as if he didn’t trust himself to say more.

“Yes,” Professor Mitchell went on. “Or shall I make it formal? Mallory, this is Duncan Adams. Duncan, my daughter Mallory.” Then a note of concern crept in. “Mallory?” he said, “Are you all right, dear?”