

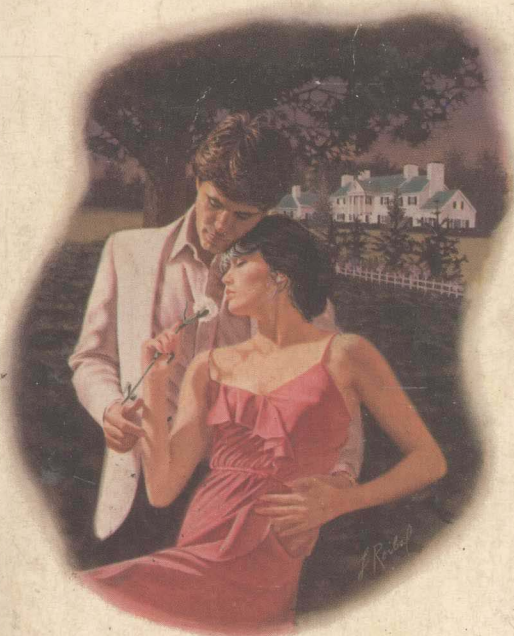
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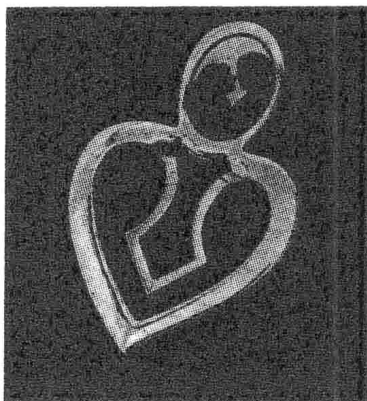
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"You're Provoking Me, Polly,"

he warned in a silken voice.

"It's a good thing for me you're too much of a gentleman to do anything about it," she answered pertly.

First Ben stopped walking, then he tightened his hold on her hand. Before Polly realized what he was going to do, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her fully and passionately on the lips.

She was reluctant to push him away, but as headlight beams picked out their silhouette, she withdrew her hands from his neck. She had no memory of having put them there.

"Someone's coming," she said.

He looked into her eyes and laughed. "Fancy *your* caring about that,"

JOAN SMITH

has written many Regency romances, but likes working with the greater freedom of contemporaries. She also enjoys mysteries and Gothics, collects Japanese porcelain and is a passionate gardener. A native of Canada, she is the mother of three.

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Next Year's Blonde (ROM #234)

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Map by Ray Lundgren

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From Now On

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Chapter One

It was hot in New York. For two weeks the sun had baked the pavements till heat bounced off them, striking pedestrians in the face as they trudged wearily homeward.

"Look at the funny little waves coming up from the street," Laurie Winters said to her half sister.

"Striations," Polly replied, frowning at them.

"Huh?"

"They're called striations. Caused by the heat from the sidewalks moving the air," Polly said.

"Gee, it's nice to have a smart sister."

"It would be even nicer to get out of this sun. Honestly, if this heat wave doesn't break soon, I'm going back to California," Polly complained, as they straggled towards the door of their apartment building. "California was cold compared to this. Everybody warned us about the snow here. I'd like to get a look at it. Thank God it's Friday. I'm going to get into a

bathing suit and not budge from the pool till Monday morning."

"Not this weekend," Lauri reminded her. "Iggie has invited us to his cottage in Massachusetts, remember?"

"Invited *you*, you mean. I'll be a third wheel, probably drawing water from some well by hand, and washing dishes, while you two gad about in a leaky canoe. Let's face it, any cottage owned by Iggie Chisholm's family is going to be a slum. His apartment is a shambles. He doesn't own a shirt and tie. His car—well, if you want to call that twisted bit of rusty metal a car, you can call me the Queen of Sheba," Polly said, entering, with a sigh of relief, the air-conditioned building on Park Avenue where the girls lived.

It was a handsome building for two girls whose combined salaries would hardly rent a room in the Bronx. Polly was employed as a proofreader by a lurid pulp scandal sheet that called itself a magazine. It was her hope to enter the legitimate field of publishing, but as that appeared to be the desire of several thousands of other graduates of English literature courses as well, she took what she could get and blushed every time she had to acknowledge her employer's name. The paper was called *Fact*, but published mainly fiction based on rumors of dubious authenticity about the great and near great. Their circulation was large, but their profit was small due to the number of libel cases in which they were found guilty.

Her younger half sister, Laurie, was much more respectably employed as receptionist at the Stracham Endowment Agency, which the prestigious Stracham family had set up to help it disburse its embarrassingly large surplus of funds. Laurie, being a very pretty blonde with green eyes, had some vague ambition of going on the stage one day, but as her real desire was certainly marriage, she did not pursue this nebulous goal with the required determination.

"Whose turn is it to cook?" Polly asked, breathing deeply of the cool, clean air in the apartment as she wilted onto a cream plush sofa.

"My turn." Laurie sighed. "Do you want me to order a pizza, or shall I put something frozen into the oven?"

"What's in the refrigerator?" Polly asked, without much interest. It was really too hot to eat.

Laurie went to the kitchen and called back the unlikely choices. "Salami, some Camembert cheese, frozen lobster, salad stuff, eggs, bacon, steaks . . . frozen solid as rocks."

"Any avocados in the kitchen?" Polly called back.

"Yes, two turned brown and one black, with wet marks on it. You shouldn't have bought so many. They smell funny. Shall I throw them out?"

"Might as well. I'll order a pizza," Polly said, and picked up the phone.

The phone was white and gold. The table on which it rested was French Provincial. The carpet was Persian, and on the largest wall hung an original painting whose price, if anyone had been rude enough to inquire, could have been quoted in thousands. Polly hated it. It was a nineteenth-century landscape of a derelict farmhouse and a cow. She regularly threatened to incinerate it and hang a poster, and refrained only because it was a going-away present from Luke, her father. He had had the apartment done by an interior decorator when his daughters had expressed a desire to move to New York and work for a living.

He had not really liked the idea of his daughters leaving California, especially since he had just parted company with his latest wife a month before. But, after all, Polly thought, his business interests kept him too busy to spend much time with Polly and Laurie anyway. Knowing nothing about chemistry, he owned a chemical company; ignorant about electronics, he owned an electronics company. What he knew a good deal about