
NICK'S LESSONS
COLLECTION

ASHLYNN KENZIE



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Nick's Lessons

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or
the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Foreword by Maggie Ryan

I met Ashlynn Kenzie when she was looking for a beta-reader for her first book. I immediately fell in love with her storyline. Being a romantic, how could I not when her characters were so loving and so perfect for one another even though it took them a while to realize it.

Reading Her Heart is the first book in the series so aptly named *Nick's Lessons*. It is in this book that you meet Andee who is a sassy young woman who must come to grips with what might become a very harsh reality. Your heart aches for her on many levels as she struggles to cope with an infection that is threatening her eyesight. When her best friend, Leila, informs her that she owes it to herself to hire a 'tutor' who can read her the material in order for her to pass her last college course, it isn't with a very good attitude that Andee agrees.

Nick Benjamin is a very successful author of erotica who writes under the pen name Tracy Topping but is also a man who offers his services as a 'reader'. It is with a bit of trepidation that he accepts the position of reader in order to help this young student. It doesn't take long before he realizes that helping her understand Shakespeare is not all that this brash

young woman needs. Her condition makes her vulnerable but it's apparent that the temporary loss of her eyesight is not her only problem. She's stubborn and sassy, but he sees beneath her coarse language and tantrums to find a young woman dealing with feelings of not being good enough: not as a student, not as a friend, and not even as a daughter to an absent father.

Andee discovers that he doesn't put up with her sassiness nor her refusal to follow the doctor's instructions the first time he pulls her over his knees. Her secret desires come to life with a vengeance as she learns that forgiveness is a wonderful gift. She falls in love without ever setting eyes on the man who proves he is patient and loving as well as not allowing her to fall into despair. He helps her understand her deep seated feelings of abandonment as he learns to read her heart even as he heats her bottom. His age keeps him from admitting his growing feelings until he can no longer hide his love for her. Before he can let her know his heart, he misinterprets a conversation between Andee and Leila and quietly fades away to allow the beautiful young woman a chance to find someone closer to her own age as he retreats to his mountain cabin and his writing.

I was incredibly happy when the second book, *Leading Her Home*, was released and we discover that Andee's eyesight is returned and yet sad to learn that she still feels abandoned—this time by her Mr. Benjamin. Though she's graduated from college and enjoys her job, her life is a void without the man who'd stolen her heart. Her search for him is fruitless until she makes a decision to send an email to him, revealing her true feelings. Sparks fly the moment he appears in the library where she works and the two finally put aside their fears and reveal that they feel empty without the other. The second book finds the couple discovering more about each other and how they both need a domestic discipline dynamic in order to feel

truly fulfilled. Nick helps Andee begin to heal her hurt with her father and to learn her own self-worth.

Exceeding Her Hopes brings it all together as we watch the two settle into life together. Leila returns to explore her own relationship with a man much like Nick and we are happy to find that Andee's father has reentered her life and they are healing each other's hurts. Andee has grown up quite a bit but still has a tendency to try to get away with little things. Nick is right there to take her in hand and to keep her world balanced as they begin their own family.

Ashlynn Kenzie creates a world in which true fears are explored and feelings that we all experience are discussed. Her characters could be you or me and their lives often offer the same problems. She introduces Granny who is a woman who has no hesitation in saying exactly what she means and offers sound advice, great food, or even her own stories of how a wooden spoon or a switch can help love grow. Her scenes are well written where you can smell the flowers or the smoke from a fire, see the beauty in the mountains or that razor strap hanging on the wall of the woodshed. Ashlynn's books let you laugh, cry, feel your bottom clench, and tug at your heart.

I am pleased to have watched Ashlynn grow as an author and recommend this entire series to anyone who likes to read books about how fears can be conquered and how love can guide you through the troubled times in your life. Her alpha males are loving and kind while being strong enough to offer the discipline her heroines not only crave but need in their lives. This is a great series and I hope you allow yourself to get lost for a while in reading the three books in *Nick's Lessons*. You won't be sorry you did.

Happy Reading,

Maggie Ryan

Reading Her Heart
NICK'S LESSONS, PART ONE

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Reading Her Heart

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Chapter 1

Andee's initial reaction was panic. Blind panic. As she surfaced from a dreamless sleep, the petite brunette with the big green eyes, who tended to view the world as a place designed for her benefit, found herself in a blacker-than-black void. Her other senses told her there was something wrong with the picture. It could not possibly be deepest midnight.

The hints were less than subtle. She could hear a lawn mower in the background and, somewhere close by, a robin trilled. The scent of an outdoor barbecue filled the air. She tasted a bitter tang on her lips when she licked them nervously, and the impression reminded her she had downed a bottle of beer, alternating it with hearty sucks on a lemon, sometime recently. That was, in fact, her last memory, and she recalled she had indulged after refusing to eat the meal her best friend, Leila, had urged on her as they arrived back at her small student apartment just before noon.

But arrived from where, and how long ago, she wondered frantically.

And then it all came together—the darkness that refused

to lift or shift, the reason for the liquid lunch, the sense of deep sadness that had hovered ever since she opened her eyes.

Although, in fact, she hadn't opened her eyes. Couldn't open her eyes. That was the problem. Her eyes were shut behind two black patches the ophthalmologist had fitted snugly over the closed lids. They would stay closed for at least two weeks, except for the time it took to do the treatments the doctor had ordered. Leila would stop by to squeeze drops onto the green orbs in a darkened room twice a day. Hers would be the only face Andee would see, and that only briefly.

At the end of the treatment regimen, Dr. Wilson would evaluate her sight again and determine if the infection that threatened her vision permanently had been arrested by the medication and the rest the patches guaranteed to her eyes.

Desperate to finish the last remaining class that would complete her bachelor's degree, Andee had ignored the pain and her blurred vision for weeks, until Leila finally convinced her to see a doctor. The grim warning he issued, along with a description of the necessary treatment, meant all her work had been for nothing. There was no way she could manage the required reading and then take the final exam in the British Literature course.

If only she hadn't partied her way through her freshman year, the class would be a thing of the past, the twenty-six-year-old thought bitterly. But, then, that's why she was still a college student when she should have been immersed in a career. She'd frolicked away more than one opportunity to graduate in four or five, or even six or seven, years.

And Daddy—dear, absent Daddy, who had been vacationing somewhere on the other side of the world with his most recent girlfriend—had finally had enough. He told her the funds would run out at the end of fall semester, and she would be on her own, in or out of school.

When Andee discovered, rather to her surprise, that she

actually lacked only the Brit Lit class as a repeat to nail down a diploma and enter the job market, she had begged for financing through one last semester. She promised Daddy she would devote herself completely to passing the course with flying colors the second time around, and to beginning a real job search.

Although he had finally agreed, Richmond Carlisle had done so only after delivering a long overdue and blistering lecture on responsibility that convinced the party girl it was time to get serious.

She had tried—at least according to Andee-standards. Although it wasn't a stellar performance, she was going into the home stretch with a low C average in the class, making the final exam a deal-breaker. So, she had spent night after night trying to read her way through *Hamlet* in preparation for the test. Attempting to keep the characters straight and understand the plot was another issue altogether. She had hoped that once she finished reading, she could rely on Internet study guides and notes an old boyfriend of Leila's had taken in the same class to get her through.

Now, all the effort was for nothing. Reading was a forbidden activity. Even if she could find an audio copy of the Shakespeare classic, she wouldn't be able to utilize the extra help she needed. She also wouldn't be able to see to read the questions on the final exam.

Tears dampened the gauze pads beneath the eye patches. They slipped down her cheeks and trailed off her chin as she sat up on the side of the futon where Leila had apparently helped her stretch out after she insisted on the beer and lemon lunch.

Where Leila was now remained a mystery, but Andee was certain she was no longer in the apartment. The space was so small she could easily have heard even the soft sound of a breath exhaled in sleep if her best friend had been napping.

No, two things were quite clear: she was all alone, and she needed to get to the bathroom—urgently.

With hands outstretched, she stood, surprised that she was so lightheaded and tried to get her bearings before slip-sliding her way toward the place her closet-sized shower-sink-commode combination should be.

It was going to be a very long two weeks, and who knew what lay on the other side of it, she thought miserably. Flipping burgers in a mall food court might be her only option if she got her vision back well enough to do that.

Scrubbing angrily at the tears that traced down her face, she finally found her way into the bathroom, just in time to lose her liquid lunch in the sink.

"I thought of you right away, Nick. It's the perfect gig for someone like you," Beverly Coatsworth said. Her perpetually cheerful voice did little to convince him.

The case manager found fascination in every job opportunity that came across her desk, after all. But Buckley Resources' best reader did admit to a certain curiosity as to the kind of job assignment Mrs. Coatsworth thought he should be elated to receive.

"Look, you know I was planning to take the next few weeks off," he said. "I'm at a really intense place in my book. I need to concentrate on that."

"Of course, sweetheart, but that's the beauty of this job, don't you see? It's only for two weeks and only for a couple hours a day. You'll have plenty of time to work on your little ol' book."

Nick Benjamin massaged the bridge of his nose and counted to ten before responding through the phone he was palming with his left hand. No point in being offended over

her dismissive attitude. No way to explain he had already proved himself as an author. Not a chance in a million his supervisor would ever have read one of his books or solved the mystery of his pen name. Not a chance he wanted her to.

"Yes, well, what is it, then?" he finally asked, reluctantly.

"You'll be reading *Hamlet*," she said, as though she were presenting him with a valuable gift she had selected personally for his pleasure.

He did experience a certain surprise and a reluctant interest. It was, after all, the first time the retired Coast Guard officer with an affinity for Shakespeare had been given the opportunity to indulge himself while carrying out an assignment for Buckley Resources. Most of the reading jobs for which he was tapped dealt with technical topics or business or research in which he had little interest. A few of his experiences had aroused his curiosity and caused him to delve deeper into some subject once the assignment was over. And the knowledge he gained in such circumstances had, on at least two occasions, later figured in a plot in one of his books.

That possibility, coupled with the opportunity to accept or turn down jobs on a schedule that made it possible for him to devote his best hours to the spanking romance novels he published at a steady rate, made his job a perfect fit.

Not all the dozen or so readers who worked for Buckley could name their own terms. His clear and pleasing diction and his ability to engage the listener's interest with his subtle shifts in tenor and volume were highly valued. That, coupled with his devotion to homework that enabled him to avoid stumbling over technical terms and unfamiliar jargon and even foreign phrases, made him a favorite. Clients who needed someone to read material—particularly challenging material—tended to ask for him again and again.

"Well, that's a switch. Who needs *Hamlet*?" he asked, cautiously.

"My goodness, Nicholas, I thought you'd say everyone needs *Hamlet*," Mrs. Coatsworth tittered.

Nick could not forego a quick eye-roll, but then he composed his features to help support the appropriate tone for his voice and responded. "Yes, indeed. My sentiments exactly. But precisely who requires me to read the Bard's best?"

"Let me see here. Yes, there's the note. A Miss Leila Tremelow came by right after lunch. She's looking for someone who can read it to a college student friend. Oh, and she said there may be some CliffsNotes kinds of things, as well. And then the young lady will need you to go with her to the final exam at the university and recite the questions for her. Miss Tremelow said she's already gotten approval from the professor for her friend to take the exam in a reading room at the campus library, with you posing the questions and her answering verbally. It will be videoed, of course, to guarantee the integrity of the exam. Just two weeks. That's all. And just two hours a day, because, really now, Nicholas, even you have to agree no one can take more than two hours of Shakespeare at a time."

"What's the client's name? And what else do you know about her?" he asked, patiently.

There was a small huff on the other end of the line, and Nick thought he could make out a scrambling of papers.

"All right. Well, now, here it is. A Miss Andee Carlisle. As I said, she's a student, and I gather she's had an accident or an illness of some sort that makes it hard for her to see. Miss Tremelow seemed very concerned about her. Said she had just gotten the bad news that she absolutely could not use her eyes for several days, but she's got to finish this course, or she can't graduate."

"When does she want to begin?"

"Well, that's another odd thing. I don't believe Miss Carlisle even knows about all these arrangements. Of course,

she may by now, but I got the impression her friend was trying to get it all lined up for her as quickly as possible. That way she could just tell her it was a done deal, you know."

"So, this young lady could very well say no?"

"Hmmm, yes, since you mention it, I suppose she could. But why in the world would she?"

"No! No, no, no, no, no!" Andee said. "I'm not doing it. There's no way ..."

Leila planted her fists on her narrow hips and observed her curvier friend, curled into a pitiful fetal position in the far corner of the futon.

"Yes! Yes, yes, yes, yes—you are doing it. He'll be here tomorrow morning. The lady at the office promised me when I called her back to see if she had made arrangements. She says he loves Shakespeare, and he jumped at the chance to read it to you. Now where's your textbook? I brought Caleb's notes, and Dr. Haynesworth is going to record his comments from class every day. I'll bring those by for you, plus I already found three different online sites with study guides. I've written them down for the reader to look up and recite for you. And here's your tape recorder. Ask him—what's his name? Oh, yeah, Mr. Benjamin—ask him to use it, and then you can play it back after he leaves every day, along with the class notes. It'll stick in your mind that way."

"But he'll see me," Andee said, and there was a distinct whine in her voice.

Leila was stumped for a moment. "Oh, for heaven's sake. It's not like he's a date. He's going to do a job for you. But I'll help you get dressed and brush your hair before I leave for class. Put a little blush and lip gloss on for you, if you want."

Andee slapped her hands against her jean-clad thighs. "I

don't care about that. It's—I just—I mean..." Her voice caught on a sob. "I don't want anyone to see me like this. With these horrible patches on. I don't want him to f-f-feel s-sorry for me."

"Oh, sweetie," Leila said, dropping down beside her sniffling friend and trying to gather her into a comforting hug. "You don't even know him. Why should you care one way or the other? Besides, it's temporary. And he'll probably be the grandfatherly type. I mean, he's retired and all."

"Great, he'll probably smell like cough drops or moth balls and expect a cup of tea."

"Look, just give it a try, will you? Unless you've got a better idea."

She didn't, of course. She had no ideas at all. Not that she had tried to come up with too many in the last few hours since she had been so rudely forced to face facts. It had required all her energy and mental focus to simply assimilate the information Dr. Wilson had provided. If she didn't follow his instructions to the letter, she might lose her sight completely. That dire warning was virtually all she could concentrate on.

"What good will Shakespeare do me if I'm blind?" she muttered.

Leila's shoulders slumped, in spite of herself, but she forced confidence into her voice. "You're not going to be blind. You're going to do exactly what the doctor said, and you're going to be fine. I'm just a couple of blocks over, and I'll run by and fix your meals and help you dress and do your drops and take you wherever you need to go. And studying with Mr. Benjamin will help pass the time until you can take the patches off. Then, by this time next month, you'll be seeing perfectly. And you'll have your degree."

Andee's only response was a small sob.

Leila blinked back a few sympathy tears of her own.

By sundown, Nick had made a decision. He could at least phone Miss Carlisle and get a better idea what would be involved with the job. No matter what Mrs. Coatsworth might have promised—and he knew her well enough to realize she might well have already guaranteed his services—the final choice was still his.

The phone rang ten times before a small, sullen voice answered it.

"What!"

"I beg your pardon?" he said, taking the phone away from his ear and staring at it as though he couldn't quite believe the effrontery of the response and was checking to make sure the instrument was not defective.

There was a long-suffering sigh on the other end. He caught the final sound of it as he put the phone back in place.

"So, who is this, and what do you want? I can't see... I mean I'm not in a place where I can look at the phone very well."

"I'm not a time-share salesman, if that's what you're worried about," he said, and then realized if she were a college student, she probably had no idea what a time-share salesman was. "Never mind. My name is Nick Benjamin. I'm a reader for Buckley Resources. A Miss Tremelow contacted the agency requesting someone to assist a college student with *Hamlet*."

"Oh, yeah. Leila said you might call. Look, I'm sorry, but I don't think this will work out very well. I don't—I mean, I'm not—look, just forget it. I don't need your help. I don't want it."

The connection was broken abruptly, but not before he caught the sound of a sob.

And Nicholas Benjamin, who could never turn aside from

a damsel in distress, particularly one who was so obviously blind to her own need, was hooked.

Leila drew the curtains, turned off the lights, except for a dim glow sneaking out the bathroom door and eased the patches and gauze pads off Andee's eyes. She felt slightly more confident this morning than she had last night. There was nothing visually distressing about her friend's condition, other than a slight pinkness of the sclera, but Andee squinted pitifully and insisted she could not open her eye enough to get the drops in.

Leila, properly disinfected for the task and ready to get the procedure over with so she could be on her way to her own 8:00 a.m. geography class, refused to be dissuaded. "I know it doesn't feel good, honey, but we've got to do it. Now just lie still and look up toward the ceiling and let me get this out of the way."

Andee did try to cooperate, but she drew in a sharp breath as the liquid bathed her left eye and left a sting in its wake. "It hurts more than last night," she said. "That means I'm worse."

"No, you silly. It means you've been crying since then, and you've irritated your eyes more, so of course it feels worse. Come on, now. I've got to get your breakfast ready and get to school. I'll be back on my lunch break, and you can call me if you need anything. Then I'll be home for good as soon as my afternoon classes are over, so you can call me anytime. Just try to rest and think good stuff," she said, easing the lid of Andee's right eye back and squirting the liquid in. "Good girl. Now come sit at the table while I get your Pop Tart and Diet Coke. Strawberry or chocolate?" Leila asked as she covered each eye with a clean gauze pad and repositioned the patches. Then she turned toward the tiny kitchen.

Andee declined to answer but trailed after her with

slumped shoulders and dragging steps, holding on to the hem of Leila's shirt.

"But what will I do all day? This is so not fair. I can't go anywhere or do anything."

"I know. I know, but it's already one day closer to being over and—"

"I hate when you do that. Don't go all Little Miss Mary Sunshine on me."

Leila bit back the four-letter-word laced retort she would normally have utilized and reminded herself of Andee's condition. "Why don't I call the agency back and tell them you've changed your mind. They can probably still send the Benjamin dude over. At least you'd have something to do for a couple hours. There'd be someone here for you to talk to."

"Yeah, someone's grandpa. Thanks, but no thanks."

"Andee, I can't stay here with you. I've got to get to class and work, but I can call Brittney or Alex and ask them to come by sometime during the day."

"No! Don't you dare tell them. Don't tell anybody."

"All right. All right. Calm down. Here, I fixed one chocolate and one strawberry. Chocolate's on the right side of the plate," Leila said as she set the dish down in front of her.

Andee snorted disdainfully and swept her hand across the tabletop until it came up against the plate. "Yeah, give the blind girl clues. I'm not hungry any more, anyway."

But she seized the icy cold can her fingers encountered beside the plate and gulped down mouthfuls of the caffeine-laced soft drink. As soon as Leila hurriedly gathered her backpack and stopped just short of slamming the door behind her in frustration over her friend's increasing self-pity, Andee reached for the plate again and crammed her mouth full of chocolate-infused cardboard.