

Part I

Chapter 1 (Now)

(Wednesday, May 23)

"Do physicists have superiority complexes? If they do, it's sure not going to be easy for you to find a girl who'll want to marry you."

Dr. Randall Carrington leaned back in his chair with his hands clasped behind his head. He was alone in his office in Faraday Hall, the home of the physics department at Northern Illinois University.

His analytical mind reflected on that statement. It had come from none other than his mother earlier that day. She hadn't actually said he had a superiority complex. However, since she frequently made her concern quite clear that he was now twenty-seven years old with no wife, there was little doubt that her latest comment was intended as a motherly admonition to consider his ways.

His reverie was interrupted when his friend, Dr. Wesley Tanner, the next youngest member of the physics faculty, stuck his head in Randy's office.

"Hi, Randy. Kathy wants to know if you're going to the dinner Saturday night."

He looked up at Wes and groaned. The annual end-of-year faculty dinner and dance given by the university provost was to be this Saturday evening, and he really was not looking forward to it.

"Yeah, I thought I probably would. What about you?"

"We're going. Kathy said if you're bringing someone, she wants you to sit with us."

"Oh, I see. She's interested in my love life again. But if I'm not bringing anyone, that means she doesn't want me sitting with you guys?"

Wes was used to Randy's brand of humor and smiled. "Let me rephrase that: if you're going, we'd like to invite you to sit with us. For some reason, quite unknown to me, Kathy seems to have an interest in your well-being."

Randy returned the smile. "I think she just enjoys goading me. But tell her I'd be happy to join you. You might also tell her that I'm coming alone. That ought to sufficiently disappoint her."

At that moment a post doc named Tahir Aziz walked by. Randy motioned Wes into the office and pointed to the door. Wes closed it.

Aziz was a foreign national who had been hired a year ago by Dr. Joseph Baker, a full professor. Baker had received a National Science Foundation grant to work on the problem of cold fusion. Aziz, a new Ph.D. from some university in Saudi Arabia, was to do postdoctoral research on the problem under Baker's direction.

"Have you heard anything from Baker on how his new post doc worked out this year?" Randy had never liked Aziz and considered him an obsequious fop with only mediocre ability in physics. That smooth manner of his had obviously misled the old man when he'd hired Aziz. What did Baker think of Aziz now?

"I don't know," Wes answered. "He's coming back next year, so he must have done something right."

"You mean he's leaving for the summer?" Post docs normally worked year-round, and it would be quite unusual to get the summer off.

"Yeah, he swung it somehow, at least for part of the summer. I heard he's going back to Saudi Arabia."

"You suppose he's coming to the dinner on Saturday?"

"Probably. It would certainly be to his advantage. But don't let that stop you from coming. Kathy'd be very disappointed."

Randy laughed. "I'll be there." He tried to make his tone reassuring and give the impression that he was looking forward to it after all.

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Terri Lockhart entered the dress shop in the mall with some hesitation. Was this dinner worth the expense, and what kind of dress was she looking for anyway? She had been invited to NIU's annual end-of-year dinner and dance by Dr. Gary Russell, an assistant professor in the English department. She was to be his date for the evening, but they certainly were not dating. They simply attended the same church, and Russell, who said he felt obligated to attend the provost's dinner, apparently didn't want to go alone. So he'd invited Terri, and she graciously accepted, but the thought of going out with Gary stirred few romantic images.

Didn't she already have a number of dresses that were formal enough for the occasion? Why was she looking for a new one? Certainly not to attract any romantic attention from Dr. Russell. But at such formal affairs, women often were invited to dance by men other than their escorts. It would be nice, she thought, to meet someone new.

"Why, Terri, I didn't expect to see you in my store. Fraternizing with the enemy?"

Marge Newton was the owner of the dress shop and had been a close friend of Terri's mother for many years. Terri smiled and shook her finger at Marge in a jovial way. "Now Marge, you know we don't carry dresses in our boutique."

"I know, but you're just so much fun to tease. Anyway, someone who sells what you do in that boutique should expect some ribbing."

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that before. You know, you ought to add lingerie to your store. It's a big seller."

"And you'll add dresses to your line?"

Terri laughed. "No, and that's a promise."

"Well, I'll think about the lingerie. So what brings you in here anyway?"

"I've been invited to NIU's end-of-term dinner and dance, so I'm looking for a nice evening dress."

Marge smiled conspiratorially. "Oh? Somebody really special? You want something risqué, maybe? Make his eyes pop out?"

"No Marge, he's just a friend from church who didn't want to go alone. We're not dating. But I do want something nice. You never know who you'll meet at a dance like this."

Marge's tone changed. It became soft, even motherly. "That's a good thought, Terri. I'll be praying that the man for you will be at that dance. Now, come with me. I'll show you some dresses that'll be just right."

Terri graduated from NIU this year with a B.A. in business administration. With the increased pressures and responsibilities during her senior year, she'd not had much time for dating, not that she'd been asked that often. She was also twenty-four years old, not the usual twenty-two for a college graduate. She had needed to help her mother, Betty Lockhart, run the boutique during her first two years after high school and so had started two years late at NIU.

Yes, now with nothing but the boutique to run once again, it would definitely be nice to meet someone new.

Was that why she was in this store looking at glamorous cocktail dresses? Well, maybe so. What's wrong with that? Who knows? Maybe the illusive "Mr. Right" would be there and, she thought wistfully, ask her to dance. Yes, it was exciting to contemplate that possibility.

Marge left Terri to look through several racks of dresses.

Suddenly she realized, with wry humor, that she was repeating a now familiar pattern. What was the line from that old song? *Looking for love in all the wrong places*, and she was doing that again...maybe. Where was she hoping to meet someone new? At a university faculty function!

During her four years at NIU, she'd become fascinated with academia. She'd grown to love the aura that surrounded the university as an institution of higher learning. She'd thoroughly enjoyed the courses she took, specifically the classroom environment where she learned from world-class scholars. Her courses in business administration the last couple of years had helped tremendously in running the boutique. Under her management, it had become much more organized and was beginning to make a significant profit. Her mother was amazed at how she'd turned the business around.

But her attraction to the university milieu went much deeper than this. Terri was thrilled with her access to professors who were expanding the frontiers of

knowledge. With them she could have fascinating discussions about the many subjects that interested her: literature, history, politics, philosophy, and science. She also loved simply sitting in the library in quiet solitude, surrounded by books in which she could pursue any subject she wanted.

However, she loved the university most of all because it was the source of most of her romantic fantasies. Sure, she liked good-looking men as much as the next woman, but she was hopelessly attracted to the intellectual types that could be found on a university campus. Her daydreams and fantasies often involved a young, unmarried professor. No one specific; she called him her "generic" professor: a professor who took a romantic interest in her and sought to romance her not only for what feminine qualities she might possess, as important as that was to her, but also because he found in her a real soul mate in the love and pursuit of knowledge. A man with whom she not only could make love, after they were married, but with whom she could share a union of the minds as they discussed a multitude of deep questions. Well, she thought, maybe that was carrying her fantasy too far.

But there was an even more fundamental flaw in this fantasy: it seemed doomed to failure. As a matter of fact, she had dated both a graduate student in economics and even a professor in the philosophy department. The problem with her fantasy was that men of this type were much more committed to their studies and their careers than to her. The two men in her case had simply not been interested in a deep, loving relationship. Terri thought she was in love both times, and it had hurt.

Now here she was again: hoping to meet the man of her dreams at the faculty dinner and dance. This was her tragic flaw as a romantic heroine: her hopeless attraction to a class of men who could never give her first place in their lives. "Tragic flaw," she mused ruefully. Even when analyzing her problem, her appreciation of higher learning came out: she was describing herself as if she were the lead character in a Shakespearean tragedy!

Despite it all, Terri was determined not to give up her dream and turned her attention back to the business at hand.

As she looked at the various dresses in her size, one soon caught her attention. Though she continued to look at others, her eyes always went back to it. Finally grabbing it, she went into the fitting room.

Terri tried the dress on and looked at herself in the full-length mirror. The thought of wearing this dress to the dinner made her heart beat just a bit faster, and she noticed a slight blush in her cheeks. It was black velvet with a tight-fitting bodice. That, together with the cut of the skirt around her hips, molded all her curves in just the right places. Yes, quite snug, but not distasteful. The hem was several inches above the knees, but not overly revealing. The neckline was scooped, but not indecently low. She liked the sleeves as well. They were short and slightly puffed at the shoulders. With Terri's petite figure, this dress projected a soft but confident sexuality. Clearly it was designed to attract a man's attention and to disrupt any pretense of dispassion on his part.

The blush gave way to a mischievous smile. Yes, a subtle allure would not hurt. Like she'd said to Marge, you never know who you might meet. Terri took the dress up to Marge and bought it.

Marge gave her a wink. "Excellent choice, Terri. An excellent choice indeed."

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(Friday, May 25)

By Friday morning, the day before the provost's dinner, final exams had been given, and all grades had been turned in. Randy was in his office organizing and filing lecture notes, overheads, and other materials from the two courses he'd taught during the semester.

He thought back over the school year that had just ended. His first year as assistant professor of physics had been a lonely one. It was one year ago this June that he and Eileen had broken off their relationship. She had just completed a B.A. in elementary education, and he had successfully defended his dissertation and received a Ph.D. in physics, finally ending four years as a graduate student at NIU.

Then a singular opportunity came his way. He knew that to avoid academic inbreeding, Ph.D.-granting institutions rarely hired their own graduates. However, the physics department apparently considered him a special case. Those professors who'd worked with him most must have been impressed with his abilities in theoretical physics. Dr. Hugh Cooper, head of the department, had told Randy that he'd done some rather significant research for his dissertation, and the department wanted him to continue that research at NIU. No doubt he had visions of publications in prestigious journals and, even more important, of grant money flowing into the university. So upon receiving his Ph.D. a year ago, the department offered Randy a position as assistant professor of physics. He accepted and stayed at NIU.

Eileen, on the other hand, had taken a teaching job in Evergreen Park, a suburb of Chicago. However, they had already been drifting apart for at least a month prior to graduation. After she left DeKalb, they'd talked a few times by phone but never dated again.

For Randy, that meant a lot of ghosts at NIU this past year. Memories are odd things, he reflected philosophically. Sometimes they can make you warm and happy. Other times, they bring only sadness. As he thought about Eileen, he remembered the words of that old rock-n-roll song from the Classics IV:

*Faded photographs,
Covered now with lines and creases;
Tickets torn in half,
Memories in bits and pieces.
Traces of love long ago
That didn't work out right.
Traces of love
With me tonight.*

"Traces of love." Is that what he felt now? Had it been love? A difficult question for the logical mind. Love was an emotion hard to define with any precision. He certainly had liked Eileen and enjoyed being with her. They seemed to

need each other that last year before graduation, but toward the end, they both realized it wasn't working. He realized his commitment to physics and his career was considerably stronger than any commitment to Eileen and marriage. No doubt she sensed that.

He thought once more about the question his mother had asked him. Did he have a superiority complex? Grabbing his dictionary, he looked up the word. It defined a superiority complex as an exaggerated feeling of being superior to others. No, that was not his attitude. He simply had an accurate assessment of his own intellectual capacity for mathematics and physics. He believed in himself and in his future. He wanted to do great things in physics, and most Nobel laureates had done their spectacular work when they were young. Therefore, the real problem that got in the way of romance was his career, not a superiority complex. He loved physics, he was good at it, and he was ambitious. Yes, that was it precisely: his commitment to his career is what held him back from making a commitment to love, to marriage...to a girl.

But that conclusion didn't comfort him much. Randy was conscious of a serious emotional conflict, because he wanted a romantic relationship. He wanted to love and be loved, and he believed that the logical end of such a relationship should be marriage. But how could he make such a commitment without compromising his career? Nobel-quality research took single-minded dedication and a tremendous commitment of both time and energy. Therefore, if he could not do both, he must make a choice. His mind told him there was only one logical decision; his emotions must simply be kept under control. For now, at least, if he met a new girl at all, he must keep the relationship casual. Apparently, he had succeeded in this with Eileen, he thought ruefully, and that's why they drifted apart. She needed whole-hearted commitment, and he couldn't give it. Could he find a girl who'd be satisfied with a casual relationship? He didn't think it likely. Perhaps he should resign himself to a few more years of loneliness.

This line of thought brought his mind back to the immediate future, the dinner and dance. Was it likely he'd meet someone there? The odds were not in his favor, but he'd attend the sumptuous affair nevertheless. What was a veritable certainty was that he'd be attending alone.

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(Saturday, May 26)

Early Saturday evening, Terri Lockhart stood in front of the mirror in her bedroom. Her feeling of excitement seemed to make the air crackle with electricity.

When she tried on her new dress in the store, she'd simply walked in off the street. There were none of the necessary accessories needed to make the dress truly stunning. She stood here now with nylons, dress shoes, and makeup. Her short brunette hair had turned out just right. Coming only to the bottom of her neck, she had it parted on the left, with the right side falling casually over half her forehead.

Terri smiled and was quite pleased with the overall effect. Of course, she knew that she'd probably not be described as beautiful by the fashion magazines, but she thought most men would probably consider her cute, maybe even pretty.

She continued looking at the dress in the mirror. Yes, it certainly did compliment her figure nicely. It seemed to project an aura of desirability. Would this be an "enchanted evening" for her when she would "see a stranger across a crowded room"? As she contemplated that thought, vague images flashed before her mind. Images of being held in the arms of a tall, dark stranger on the dance floor. No: a tall, dark professor.

But Terri Lockhart was also a realist. With a sigh of resignation, she knew most of her dances, if she had any at all, would be with Gary Russell. Yet other men might invite her to dance, and something very special could happen. What was that expression she'd read on the back of a romance novel once? Yes, that was it: "Dare to dream."

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The provost's dinner was held in the ballroom of the University Center, which had been elegantly decorated. Each table had white linen tablecloths and napkins folded in napkin rings, a single rose, and a candle. Overhead lighting was subdued, and the center of the room had been kept open for dancing following the dinner. Instruments belonging to the small orchestra were already on the stage at the far end of the room.

Terri and Dr. Gary Russell had been among the first to arrive. They joined another couple, English professor Dr. Thomas Grant and his wife Dolores, at a table not far from the entrance. The introductions were gracious but formal. Terri knew that Russell's specialty was Elizabethan literature, and it turned out that Grant's field of interest was nineteenth century Russian literature. Terri especially enjoyed Shakespeare's comedies, so if literature came up for discussion at all, she hoped to steer it in that direction and away from those ponderous Russian tomes.

"What do you do, dear?" asked Mrs. Grant.

The Grants were a middle-aged couple, but addressing Terri as "dear" nevertheless struck her as a bit condescending. As much as she liked the university atmosphere, she recognized that some within its sphere handled their status better than others. Although most were eminently cordial, Terri had to acknowledge that a haughty attitude was not unknown in academic circles.

"Right now I've pretty much taken over running my mother's boutique, Creative Fantasies. Perhaps you've visited us?"

"Creative Fantasies? No, I don't believe I have." Her attempt at displaying genuine interest was a definite failure. "What do you sell there?"

"Well, mostly fancy lingerie. But we also carry a large selection of specialty gift items. Imported perfumes, scented candles, some jewelry, things like that."

"I see." Terri thought she detected a touch of pity in her voice and held out no hope of Dolores Grant ever visiting her boutique.

"And what is your association with the university? Are you working on your

masters or doctors degree?" The intonation implied that Dolores considered these two options the only possibilities.

Terri did her best to smile. "No, nothing so grand and glorious. I just finished my B.A. in business administration. The courses have really helped me in running the boutique."

"I see." The same tone of voice.

It might be a long evening after all.

While Dolores and the two men were discussing last year's dinner, Terri was looking around the room at the other tables. No food had been served yet, and members of the faculty were still arriving.

Terri casually glanced at the door. It took but a moment for her casual attitude to vanish. A lone man entering the ballroom attracted her undivided attention.

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