

Chapter 2

(Saturday, May 26)

The man was impeccably dressed in a gray, double-breasted, pinstriped suit. The crease in the trousers looked as if you could cut your finger on it. Terri didn't sell men's clothing in her boutique, but she recognized quality when she saw it.

He was handsome in the classical sense: on the tallish side, with sculptured cheek bones, a straight nose, and an overall dark complexion. However, it was his bearing that really attracted her attention. Though quite young, he projected a proud, professorial dignity and emanated intellectual prowess.

Dr. Randall Carrington didn't notice her intense stare as he walked over to a nearby table where another couple was seated.

By sheer force of will, Terri diverted her eyes and refocused on the Grants sitting across from her. Her heart was beating faster than it should be, and she was surprised how strongly she had been attracted to this man. But she made an effort to bring her emotions back under control. No point in getting all excited about something that might never happen. Chances of meeting him were slim; chances that he would ask her to dance were slimmer yet.

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"Hi, Randy," Kathy said with a bright smile as he joined them. "I see you've remained true to form of late and didn't ask anyone out tonight."

Randy gave her a warm smile. "Kathy, you're just not going to be satisfied until you get me married."

"Well, yeah, I'd love to see you married! You're well established with a brilliant career ahead of you, but you've got no one to share it with."

"My career is exactly the problem. Right now could be my most productive time, and I just don't think I can maintain a commitment to my research and make a commitment to love and marriage at the same time."

"Balderdash. A good woman would inspire you and encourage you." She took a moment to ponder. "But, for the time being, at least, I'd be satisfied just to see you dating again."

"I'd liked to find someone to date--I'll admit that. But I need to find someone who'll be satisfied with a casual relationship. What do you think my chances are?"

"Well, it's possible, I guess." She left unspoken that she really thought it quite unlikely.

He smiled maliciously. "And I'm sure you'll keep trying to find someone for me!"

Kathy scowled. "I'm just trying to help, Randy."

His smile became warm. "I know. You're sweet. And I guess two sets of eyes are better than one."

As she watched that warm smile beam forth, Kathy couldn't help noting the mesmerizing effect it had. Any girl on the receiving end would find it hard to resist.

"And, Randy," she added with a sly lilt in her voice, "if you find the right girl, you might not want to keep it so casual."

Kathy casually scanned the tables but kept looking over to one in particular. She prided herself on being a keen observer of people, especially in matters of the heart. A roguish smile appeared on her face as she brought her eyes back to Randy.

"Don't look now, but you seem to have made quite an impression on someone."

"What do you mean?" he asked in surprise.

"I mean that girl a few tables to your right who can't take her eyes off you."

Randy waited a few seconds, then casually turned to look. Kathy watched the maneuver intently.

When he saw who Kathy meant, his eyes narrowed subtly, and his expression made a sudden change from mild curiosity to keen interest. She was very pretty, of course, but there was something about her whole demeanor that obviously charmed him.

The girl had been looking at him, and for a brief moment their eyes met. She quickly diverted her eyes, perhaps with more speed than seemed normal.

Randy turned back toward Kathy. He chuckled and shook his head, as if amazed. Obviously, he had been attracted to this girl.

"Ah, I see you're interested. I think she's pretty, don't you?" Kathy asked, hoping to influence him in the right direction. To her surprise, Randy responded rather playfully.

"Yeah, just like in that old rock-n-roll song by Gary Lewis and the Playboys: she's just my style. What do you think, Wes?"

Kathy wiggled her finger back and forth at Randy in a disapproving manner. "Oh, no. Wes is not allowed to make such judgments."

"I see," Randy said. "I didn't realize you were a henpecked husband, Wes."

Wes assumed a highly offended expression. "I am not a henpecked husband! If I want to look at a girl, I look at her! And, yes, Randy, I think she's quite pretty."

Kathy was already laughing. She gently placed her hand on her husband's arm. "I'm only teasing, dear. If you didn't think she was pretty, I'd wonder if there was something wrong with you."

"Now, Randy," Kathy continued, "if this girl is smart, she'll be planning for the dance later this evening. She'll periodically look over at you during the remainder of the dinner. You need to watch for this. When your eyes meet, if she knows what she's doing, this time she'll maintain eye contact and maybe even smile. That's your cue that she'd like you to ask her to dance. Smile back."

Wes was shaking his head in embarrassed disbelief.

"Kathy," Randy replied, "I really appreciate your help with my love life, and of course it's highly instructive to have the female perspective on all this. But, difficult as it might be to believe, I have managed, with a certain amount of stumbling around, I admit, to obtain dates all on my own."

Kathy's eyes widened, and for a moment she wondered whether she'd gone too far and offended Randy. But then he started to laugh and touched her arm in an affectionate manner. He was not upset but just having some fun with her.

"Yeah, okay. I get the point." She smiled sheepishly. "But I think there's some real magnetism here between you two."

"You might be right. I would like to meet her. We'll see."

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A few tables over, Terri had again been looking at the disturbingly attractive stranger. She had a good view of his profile, as well as that of the lady he was talking with. Terri was astonished at the transformation that had taken place in the image he projected. His manner was no longer so stately, so formal. He was more relaxed, and his easy smile radiated genuine warmth. It certainly had a warming effect on her emotions. If she'd been attracted to his austere image when he first arrived, she was now thoroughly entranced with this new persona. She wondered what it would be like to be on the receiving end of that smile.

In the midst of her reverie, he turned and look at her. It startled her, and she quickly dropped her eyes and began studying the silverware on the table. Her emotions all of a sudden were in turmoil. She'd kept staring at this man because she was thoroughly captivated by him. What made her think she could just sit there and study him without getting caught?

But she'd broken eye contact too quickly. It probably had looked unnatural to him, maybe even as if she had something to hide. But then another thought struck her. Extended eye contact between two strangers could easily be interpreted as a sign that she'd like to meet him, perhaps even dance with him later. Yes, she'd been foolish; she should have maintained eye contact, maybe even smiled. She wouldn't repeat that mistake.

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Most had finished eating when the provost, Dr. Ray Sanderson, walked out onto

the stage.

"Thank you all for coming this evening. I hope you enjoyed your dinner. We owe our gratitude to the fine folks at Contemporary Catering for a truly sumptuous feast. Now, as we've done the last couple of years, we're going to enjoy some dancing. We have a fine orchestra here tonight. But as you know, provosts are by tradition supposed to be old stick-in-the-mud fuddy-duddies. Therefore, in keeping with this image, I've secured an orchestra that specializes in waltzes and fox trots. Please, make it a memorable evening and enjoy yourselves."

There was a dignified round of applause, and while the orchestra took its place, Dr. Sanderson left the stage. The music soon began.

Gary looked over at Terri and waved his hand toward the open floor in the center of the room. "Would you care to dance, Terri?"

She smiled. "Sure, Gary, I'd love to." Her manner was friendly and gracious, but in her heart there was a total lack of any romantic excitement. She chanced a quick glance at the handsome stranger a few tables over. He was still seated and talking with his two friends. She turned back to face Gary, and they made their way to the dance floor.

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Kathy missed none of this. "Well, Randy, you've already blown the first dance. Her date's got her."

"Did you really think I had a chance of getting her for the first dance? Don't worry, I'll keep a close eye on her."

Randy did just that. He enjoyed watching her graceful movements in response to her date's lead. She looked absolutely stunning in the evening dress she was wearing. It certainly displayed her figure to its fullest advantage. The dress seemed to possess some mysterious power to draw the eye, at least the male eye, to those sensual feminine curves. He felt the stirring of an old emotion he hadn't felt for some time now: romantic attraction.

During the next musical selection, she danced with the man from the other couple at her table. Randy found that he had difficulty taking his eyes off of her. Kathy had said the girl had been watching him just as intently. Could he hope that she felt some attraction to him also? He was determined to ask her to dance and find out.

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The orchestra took a small break.

Terri and Dr. Grant arrived at their table just ahead of Gary and Mrs. Grant. The first thing Terri did after they were all seated was to look over to that mysterious professor that had so unsettling an effect on her.

Her heart skipped a beat when suddenly his eyes again met hers. This time she didn't turn away. She felt her pulse increase alarmingly and hoped her face

wouldn't blush noticeably. Images of being swept across the dance floor in his arms flashed through her mind. If she could read his expression at all, it certainly seemed that he had a definite interest in her.

She smiled sweetly.

He returned her smile. The orchestra soon returned to the stage, and he got up and walked toward her. Terri found it hard to breathe.

"Hello, I'm Randy Carrington. Would you give me the honor of the next dance?"

Terri looked briefly at Gary. "Go right ahead," he said enthusiastically. "We're here to enjoy ourselves. Dance with the young man."

She turned back to Randy. "Thank you. I'd be delighted."

The orchestra started to play a waltz as Randy extended his hand. When they touched, she seemed to feel an electric charge coursing madly through her body. This time she knew that she blushed, but there was nothing she could do about it. Her skin tingled as he held her hand, and her heart pounded madly.

This was the moment Terri had visualized the entire evening: being drawn into his arms on the dance floor. They came together with extraordinary grace, as if they had done it a thousand times before. Randy wrapped his arm around her narrow waist as she slipped her hand into his. When she placed her arm on his shoulder and felt his arm around her, she sensed the thrill of excitement flow over her. What was that phrase from *Sleepless in Seattle*? Yeah: *It was like magic*.

Her emotions were highly agitated, but the rational part of her mind was again surprised at how strongly she was attracted to this man. It also told her she needed to regain some semblance of composure and introduce herself.

"I'm Terri Lockhart."

"Very pleased to meet you, Terri." She noticed that although he was still quite formal, there was warmth behind his smile. "I've always liked the name *Terri* for a girl. It has such a cute ring to it."

She responded with a bright smile of her own. "Why, thank you. What a nice thing to say!" After a brief pause, she continued. "So are you a teacher here?"

"Yes. Actually, this was my first year as a faculty member. I finished up my Ph.D. a year ago, and the department offered me a position as an assistant professor."

"Wow, that was quite a vote of confidence. What's your field--what department are you in?"

"Physics. How about you?"

"Well, actually I'm a student, or at least I was. I just finished my bachelors in business administration, and right now I'm pretty much running my mother's boutique here in town, Creative Fantasies."

"Creative Fantasies. Sure, I've seen the store. You sell lingerie. It's hard to walk by without noticing the window displays," he said, smiling.

There should have been no surprise in hearing that a man is attracted to sexy lingerie. Yet somehow it was exciting to hear this man say it--and say it to her.

"Yeah, we have some really pretty lingerie, but we also have lots of other nice gift items like candles, perfumes, fancy knickknacks, things like that. Say, I had a friend who took a physics course. She said it was really hard."

"Most people do find it difficult. Physics describes the world around us, but it uses the language of mathematics. You've got to be good in math to do well in physics."

As they danced, Terri felt the magic of the moment, and she wanted to learn more about Randy Carrington.

"I know that researchers at your level specialize. What's your area of physics?"

He didn't answer immediately. She thought from his expression that he was trying to focus his mind on her question. Could it be that she was having a similar effect on him? Hmmm, this could be a good sign.

"I'm in theoretical physics. It's mostly mathematics."

"But what area? I know there's nuclear physics, electronics, you know, things like that. What do you do?"

"Actually, electronics is more a branch of engineering. Most people haven't heard of the field I'm in."

"Oh, come on, try me." Terri smiled up at him. Her tone expressed light-hearted excitement.

"Well, all right." His tone sounded as if he thought his answer would scare her away, but he seemed pleased that she wanted to know. "I work in the area called grand unified theories. Specifically, I try to merge the lesser understood laws of quantum gravity and quantum fields of curved spacetime with the better-known laws that govern the other three fundamental forces."

Terri studied his face. Did she detect pride? She definitely sensed the enthusiasm he had for his subject.

"Wow, that was a mouthful!" Terri giggled nervously. "You're right. I haven't the slightest idea what you're talking about. Can you give me a little clue what some of those terms mean?"

"I can try," he answered, still sounding pleased at her interest. "There are four fundamental forces in the universe: the electromagnetic force, the weak force, the strong force, and gravity, the force everybody knows about. The first two have

already been merged into a single force, or unified field. The strong force is well on its way to being integrated with the electroweak force to form a larger theoretical structure called a 'grand unified field.' But the real problem is gravity. Einstein labored unsuccessfully for the last twenty-five years of his life to unify gravity with just the electromagnetic force. Even today, gravity has so far resisted all attempts to integrate it into a grand scheme. That's what I work on. The holy grail of theoretical physics is to develop a 'theory of everything' that unifies all four forces."

As she listened, Terri's eyes began to glow. What amazing concepts! She had never heard of any of this. But there was more going on inside her. She was absolutely in awe of this man who could work in such a field. And this man, Dr. Randy Carrington, was holding her in his arms! She felt a romantic attraction to him that was as strong as any of those forces he had just described.

Was her long-time fantasy coming true? Maybe, just maybe, she thought. After all, Randy seemed to have an interest in her as well. But she needed to be careful. He hadn't said or done anything explicit that indicated he felt any romantic attraction to her. In the past, she'd learned some hard lessons about setting her hopes on something that doesn't exist.

"What first got you interested in physics?"

"It happened during my senior year in high school. I was taking physics, and several of the students in my class had read some non-technical books on Einstein's theory of relativity. You know, length contraction, time slowing down, and all that. I was absolutely fascinated, so I decided to major in physics."

Terri knew the dance was nearing its end. As she looked up at his handsome face, she decided to throw out a rather reckless, almost shameless, question to see how he'd respond. If she was lucky, he might interpret it as a hint that she'd like him to ask her for a date.

"Do you only date physics majors?"

Randy seemed surprised at the question. "Why no. Actually, I've never dated a physics major. For one thing, very few girls go into physics. The last girl I dated was an elementary education major."

The orchestra had stopped; the dance was over.

Terri smiled as he gave a quick, formal nod of his head. "Thank you, Terri. I really enjoyed our dance and conversation. May I stop by your boutique? I'd like to see you again."

"You're welcome for the dance, Randy, and please do stop by." With her excitement bubbling over, she hoped her smile was inviting.

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As Randy walked back to his table, he felt elated. She must like him, at least a little. She'd blushed, and her eyes had sparkled as she watched him.

For his part, he was surprised how much he'd enjoyed holding her hand. There was always something very special in that first physical contact. The scent of her hair, so near to him, was still vivid in his memory. As fragrant as the flowers of Spring, it had filled the air around her. As they danced, he'd been acutely aware of the lithe, feminine figure gliding across the dance floor in his arms and realized just how profoundly her nearness had affected him.

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