

Chapter 2

That night on the radio, Kristie was having trouble concentrating. For some inexplicable reason, the thought that Joel Taylor was out there somewhere listening to her made her nervous. But that was simply ridiculous. She was never nervous on the air.

"This next song, called 'Hair,' has some interesting history, but I've gotten a few emails recently that indicate there's some confusion about it. It's not from the rock opera 'Tommy.' More about 'Tommy' later. The song 'Hair' actually came from a rock musical by the same name that played off-Broadway, opening in 1967. The play was about hippies, the drug culture, and the peace movement of the late Sixties. In 1969, the Cowsills released their version of the title song. Listen for my favorite lines: *Oh say can you see my eyes?/If you can, then my hair's too short.* Remember, the song's about long hair on guys. Here then are the Cowsills with 'Hair.'"

She breathed a sigh of relief as she started the song. She had managed to get that whole introduction out without losing her train of thought. *Was Joel married?* Aargh! That was the sort of distraction that kept popping into her head all during the show.

'Hair' was finishing up.

"Did you notice how the opening lines were accompanied only by a soft, melodic guitar? Then suddenly the drums kick in and the guitar volume is revved up to begin one of the best driving beats in rock-n-roll. I just love that song. What a classic from the psychedelic era! Now back to 'Tommy.' It was the first musical work called a rock opera. It came out in 1969 and was written by Pete Townshend, guitarist for the British rock group called The Who. The libretto told the story of a deaf, dumb, and blind kid who could play pinball better than anybody else. Think about that now. He can't hear, speak, or see. How can he even play pinball, much less win? Listen for the answer in the song."

She decided to listen to the song herself as it was playing. Perhaps that would help her keep her mind on the job. It would do her good to hear that one line: "...ain't got no distractions." *Did she really have a sweet voice?* Good grief! She was doing it again!

"That was 'Pinball Wizard' by The Who," she said after the song ended. "They were actually quite an interesting group. One of their other big hits was 'I Can See for Miles,' released in 1967. It was rumored that Pete Townshend wrote it shortly after meeting his future wife, Karen. It has a great beat, but it's not all that romantic. He apparently was giving her a subtle reminder that he could keep an eye on her even while he was on tour miles away. In the song, the girl is cheating on her boyfriend. A word to the wise out there, girls--here it is, 'I Can See for Miles.'"

When she finally left the station about half past midnight, she thought back over the last three hours and considered it one of her worst performances. And it was quite easily explained: she kept thinking about Joel Taylor. Why couldn't she get him out of her mind?

It was after one o'clock when she got back to her apartment. Late as it was, she always checked her email and her inbox at MyForever.com. Suddenly, her excitement level spiked. Already there was a response to her new persona that she and Joel had created just that morning. It was from a Reginald Van Velkenburg III.

Kristie stared at the name, not knowing quite what to make of it. Well, she thought, at least anyone named Reginald the Third, would conduct himself in an entirely proper and reserved manner on a date. Maybe too reserved. She recalled reading somewhere that in certain high-society circles, the first kiss did not occur until the couple was engaged to be married. Nevertheless, she was excited over this new contact from an apparently very dignified man.

She read his email again and chuckled at his wording:

Dear Miss Rydell:

I should be delighted to make your acquaintance if you would be so gracious as to accept this invitation to correspond via MyForever.com."

Awaiting your reply, I am,

*Yours very truly,
Reginald Van Velkenburg III*

This guy was certainly Mr. Polite-and-Proper personified. She clicked the link to get his personality profile. His picture left no doubt that he was quite a handsome man, almost regal in appearance. She began reading his profile with heightened interest.

Reginald Van Velkenburg III, 33 years old. Investment banker for large Chicago firm. I enjoy opera, symphonic music, the Broadway stage, and reading Russian literature such as Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Looking for intelligent girl, 25-35 years old, non-smoker, and interested in sharing Chicago's cultural environment.

Again she sat there staring at the screen. Perhaps she and Joel had made too many changes to her profile. What would possess this man to contact her? After all, they had left the line about enjoying rock-n-roll music in her profile.

Kristie finally decided that perhaps she could use a little culture in her life. Enjoying a few very formal and proper dates might be a refreshing change after the previous four disasters. Smiling, she composed a response:

Dear Mr. Van Velkenburg:

I too would be delighted to make your acquaintance. Is Chicago your home town where you were born and raised? It is mine. I too enjoy what Chicago has to offer. I like going to the museums, ethnic restaurants, and fancy shopping centers like Water Tower Plaza.

Looking forward to hearing from you again,

Kathleen Rydell

She got a response the very next day in language just as formal as his original email. Indeed, he had been born and raised in Chicago. They exchanged two or three additional emails covering various topics such as family, schools, etc.

In his fourth email, he invited her to dinner and a stage play afterward.

The next morning, Kristie sent a return email with her acceptance and phone number, asking him to call any day before eight o'clock in the evening. Reginald called that same evening around seven. As she had expected, his manner was quite refined. The date was made for the following Saturday. She was not familiar with the restaurant he mentioned and had never been to a stage play, so she asked him how to dress for the occasion.

"Oh, nothing formal. We're not going to the symphony or opera. Just casual evening wear."

"Fine." She gave him her address. "What time would you like me to be ready?"

"I'll make the restaurant reservations for seven o'clock, and the play starts at 8:30. Is 6:30 satisfactory?"

She smiled at his formality. "Yes, I'll be ready. Thank you for the invitation. I'm looking forward to meeting you."

"As I, too, look forward to the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

The days went by rather slowly. She found herself thinking about that name over and over again: Reginald Van Velkenburg III. What would he really be like?

When Saturday afternoon finally arrived, she began a very painstaking process of preparation. She wanted everything about her to be perfect.

Naturally, it all began with a shower and washing her hair. Kristie wore her light brown hair in a short, mopy style, parted on the left. The short hair on top to the right of the part flopped over her forehead, covering most of it. The layered, asymmetrical cut covered her ears and formed cute points just above her chin. The problem, of course, was to give the style some body. After her shower, she put her hair in rollers and let it dry on its own.

She gave considerable thought to what she should wear. He had said nothing formal, just casual evening attire. Well, that naturally called for pantyhose. But what outfit? Standing in front of her closet, she scanned every piece of clothing she owned, finally deciding on a light-blue blouse and white, pullover sweater with a thin navy-blue skirt about knee length. Yes, this outfit would do nicely: both fairly conservative and elegant enough for dinner and a play.

After she took the rollers out of her hair, she was quite pleased with the result. She had had it cut only two weeks earlier, and it looked just the way she wanted it. When she finished dressing and stood in front of the full-length mirror, she believed that she had achieved her goal: everything was perfect.

Of course, she told herself, there was no such thing as a perfect date. However, she had built up pretty high hopes for this one. She was going out with a

dignified, cultured man and wanted to make a good impression. Who knows what might grow out of this first date?

She was finished and ready to leave by six o'clock. For the next half hour, she thought about what those first special moments might hold in store. Various greetings kept going through her head. "Miss Rydell? I am Reginald Van Velkenburg." "Hello, Mr. Van Velkenburg. I'm very pleased to meet you." "And I you. Please forgive me, but I must say that your picture on MyForever.com does you an injustice." "Why thank you. You look quite dashing yourself. Please call me Kathy." "Thank you. Indeed, I shall. And my friends call me Reggie." And so on and so forth.

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Reginald Van Velkenburg III was at her apartment at precisely 6:30. When Kristie opened the door, she got her first shock of the evening. He certainly did appear dashing, even regal--considerably more regal than she had anticipated. There he stood in an obviously tailored, three-piece, double-breasted, pinstriped suit. The sleeves of his long-sleeved, white, silk shirt extended the proper three-quarters of an inch beyond his suit-coat sleeves and were adorned with jeweled cuff links. His slacks looked as if she could cut her finger on the crease.

Despite her utter surprise, she tried to keep her expression neutral but obviously failed completely.

"There is something about me you find distasteful?" His tone definitely implied that he was worried about making a poor impression on her.

Recovering quickly, she said, "Oh, no. You look absolutely...very debonair." She smiled shyly. "No, I was concerned about me. Evidently, I misunderstood. I thought you said casual dress. I'm afraid I'm not properly dressed compared to you."

It was clear that he was not delighted with her attire, but he responded cordially. "Think nothing of it, my dear, I'm sure I was entirely at fault. I should have been much more precise. I meant casual evening dress as opposed to formal evening dress."

Did she hear him correctly? Did he say, "My dear"? Somehow, her visions of a romantic date had not included that mode of address. But then his name was Reginald Van Velkenburg III. She could certainly accept a few formal mannerisms. For future reference, she made a mental note of his explanation. In his vocabulary, "casual" meant simply the next step down from a tuxedo for him and a flowing, floor-length gown for her. However, she did have clothes that were a bit more formal than what she had on.

"I can change. Come on in and..."

His smile was sincere. "I fear time will not permit. No, we must be on our way."

Disaster number one.

On the way out of the apartment complex, he held every door open for her. When they got outside, two things happened pretty much at once. First, she realized how humid it had become. A sense of impending doom swept over her. She had learned that there were certain laws of nature, and one of them was that weather of this type would wreck havoc with her hair. Why did it have to be so humid tonight?

Second, he offered her his arm. Such a totally unexpected gesture had the effect of ending her current anxiety attack. However, not being used to this type of treatment, it took a few seconds for it to dawn on her how she was supposed to respond. Working her hand under his arm, she laid it on his forearm.

He drove a black Mercedes Benz. When they reached the car, he actually reached over and lifted her hand gently off his arm, as if handing it back to her, apparently sparing her the indignity of it dropping down lifeless at her side. He opened the door and stood beside it as she got in the car.

As they made their way through the traffic, Reginald asked, "Miss Rydell, may I call you Kathleen?"

"Why, of course. Better yet, call me Kathy."

"Really? Somehow Kathleen seems, shall we say, more cultured, even regal."

"Regal! Wow! Well, sure, call me Kathleen. How about you? I take it, then, that your friends don't call you Reggie?"

"Ah, no, actually they do not. They call me Reginald."

"Fine, no problem. To me you'll always be Reginald."

He turned toward her and smiled. "You're most gracious."

During the drive, Kristie wondered what her hair looked like now. She tried to steal a furtive glance at the passenger window to see how bad the damage was, but the car was too dark for her to get a descent reflection. However, she had little difficulty imagining the body she had worked so hard to achieve gradually disappearing. Then with a sense of exasperation, she realized that there was no need for her to imagine anything: she felt the limpness along her face and over her forehead. Without any puffiness in her bangs, they came down almost to her eyes. With disgust, she reached up and pushed her hair a little to the side.

Disaster number two. Good grief! What else could go wrong?

However, as they pulled into the restaurant parking lot, Reginald's manners boosted her morale considerably. He got out and walked around to open the door for her. With much gallantry, he held out his hand to help her out of the car. After taking his arm again, they started to walk toward the entrance. She certainly was not used to all this courteous attention and was enjoying it. In fact, it tended to make her feel, well, quite the proper lady.

It was at that precise moment that a contrary wind flipped up her wispy

skirt and managed to start it swirling around her waist. With a gasp, Kristie withdrew her hand from Reginald's arm and began slapping it back down. However, the wind did not give up easily and seemed to possess a pernicious mind of its own with the uncanny ability to locate every piece of material not directly held in place by her hands. Fortunately, Reginald had the door already open, and she rushed inside.

She knew that her face must have gone beet-red with embarrassment, but when she looked up at Reginald, she got another shock. Odd, she never thought that a man would blush as a result of seeing what happened to her. In fact, most of the guys she had known would have considered themselves singularly fortunate to have been in the right place at the right time. However, Reginald Van Velkenburg III was certainly blushing and appeared to be very ill at ease. He clearly wanted to pretend it had never happened. Well, she thought, that would be consistent with the way he'd been raised.

Disaster number three.

As the host seated them, she tried to fluff up her hair. Perhaps with sufficient mental discipline, she could convince herself that it had done some good. Then something else caught her attention. She looked around at the other women in the restaurant, desperately wishing she had worn her straight-skirted, teal suit. She had almost selected it. What had made her reject the idea? Yes, that was the reason: it was the dressiest item she owned and thought it would be too formal. Reginald had said "casual." Had she worn it, however, not only would she have been spared the indignity of having her skirt blown almost up to her waist, but she would have fit in much better with the female guests at this restaurant. In point of fact, she would still have been underdressed but would not have stood out like a teenager among high-society women. A number of them actually turned to look at her as they followed the host to their table.

The restaurant was quite elegant. Yes, that was the word: not so much romantic, but richly elegant. She found many of the menu items were unfamiliar. However, she remembered from the movies that often in formal settings, the gentleman ordered for the lady. She was about to suggest that to Reginald but caught herself just in time. After what had already gone wrong tonight, that would be living very dangerously. Who knows what she might end up with and have to eat? In an obscure corner of the menu, she found some pasta dishes and ordered spaghetti. Reginald ordered something only he and the waiter could pronounce.

While they were waiting for their food, she tried to regain some measure of her normal exuberance. Reginald had not said much since the incident at the door, and she wanted to restore his festive mood as well.

"Well, Reginald, tell me something about yourself. Your personality profile mentioned that you're an investment banker. Just what does an investment banker do?"

His eyes brightened, and it was evident that he was only too pleased to answer the question.

"Why, thank you for asking. I would be delighted to explain that. Investment banks work with companies to raise money by issuing and selling securities in the

primary market. They also provide strategic advice to their client companies on mergers, acquisitions, and various other types of financial transactions. It's very gratifying work, although I must say that the hours are rather long. I average sixty to seventy hours per week. It doesn't leave much time for a social life, I'm afraid."

That didn't sound promising, she thought, but it would be wise to keep an open mind. Here was a man who clearly held more promise than most of the others she had dated recently. He was handsome, polite, a thoroughgoing gentleman, and had a good career. It was certainly within the realm of possibility that a mutual attraction might develop. Once again she tried to fluff up her hair and pushed it a little to the side.

"And you, Kathleen--your profile did not mention a job. Do you work?"

"Yes, I work for WKLS." Normally, she would have said, "Oldies 107," but with Reginald Van Velkenburg III, perhaps just the call-letters would be less incriminating.

"Hmm, WKLS...I assume that's an FM radio station, but I'm not familiar with it. What is your program format?"

"It's 107.4 on the dial. We play oldies."

"Oldies? You mean music from the Big Band Era, like Glen Miller?"

She hesitated. So much for her strategy against self-incrimination. Well, it would have to come out sooner or later, right? "Ah, no...we play rock-n-roll from the Fifties and Sixties."

"Rock-n-roll...I see." There was definite disappointment in his voice.

It might be best to broach this subject only a little at a time. Right now it seemed like a good strategy to shift the focus in a somewhat different direction. "Your profile indicated that you like classical music. What's your favorite type?"

Again, he was quite delighted with the question. "I believe opera is my favorite. It's sublime music that can truly become part of your very soul. It moves you intellectually and emotionally. I suppose a man shouldn't admit this, at least not on a first date," he chuckled a little at what he evidently thought would be a most humorous admission, "but I often find myself in tears during an opera."

Kristie tried to picture this scene in her mind, making it difficult to think of a response. "Yes, I can understand that it might have that effect."

"Oh, then you also like opera?"

"I'm afraid I'm not that familiar with it, but I heard a few friends make similar comments." Actually, she couldn't think of anyone she knew that had even heard an entire opera, including herself. Well, with the exception of "Tommy," which she thought would be better left unmentioned.

His expression registered disappointment again, but he rallied his emotions and continued to probe for something they actually had in common.

"You mentioned that you work for the radio station WKLS. What do you actually do there? Bookkeeper, perhaps? Public relations officer? Liaison to advertisers?" The unexpressed assumption, of course, was that her job could certainly have nothing whatsoever to do with the awful music they played.

"No, not a bookkeeper..." As she looked around, stalling for time, she was grateful to see the waiter finally approaching the table with their food. "Ah, here comes our food," she said with a bright smile.

They ate in silence for a few minutes before Reginald spoke again. Apparently, he had forgotten about her job at WKLS, for he asked a question on an entirely different subject.

"What do you like to do for recreation? Where do you like to go on vacations?"

With much relief, Kristie started to explain her immense enjoyment of the winter and winter sports. "Oh, I really love the north woods of Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, especially in the winter. I like cross-country skiing, and I've done a lot of snowmobiling. What a thrill to go racing along the trails in the moonlight with the wind rushing past you!"

As she was speaking, she watched his expression change again. Clearly, he could not imagine the thrill, and none of this resonated with him. He actually appeared to shiver. "That just makes me cold to think about it. I find even Chicago to be much too cold in the winter. My goal is eventually to relocate to Dallas or Phoenix."

So much for pursuing a conversation about the north woods.

Once more silence prevailed. Kristie pushed her fork into the spaghetti and rotated it in the usual manner. As she lifted it, she looked up at Reginald to see if she could discern anything about his mood or what he was thinking. With her attention thus divided, one of the longer noodles, generously coated with sauce, slowly slid off her fork. She looked down just in time to see it land in the middle of her white sweater.

With a look of disgust, she grabbed the offensive noodle and stuffed it under the edge of her plate. Then she took her napkin, dipped it into her water glass, and began wiping her sweater, all to no avail. The stain would be there for the remainder of the evening, perhaps forever, the reddish color an appropriate symbol of her wounded dignity.

She looked up again at Reginald. It looked like he was feeling some sympathy for this most recent humiliation.

"Try not to worry about it, my dear. It's a very small stain, hardly noticeable."

Disaster number four.

She smiled sheepishly. "Thanks for trying to make me feel better. It just seems like nothing is going right for me tonight." She continued dabbing water on the stain for a few minutes, but finally gave up all hope of making it disappear.

They finished their meal without much additional conversation. Upon leaving the restaurant, she again took the arm he offered. As they neared the car, however, she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her foot. Crying out, she gripped his arm tightly to maintain her balance.

While she held one foot off the ground, they looked down to see what had happened. To the astonishment of both of them, Kristie had stepped on a nail sticking up from a piece of scrap wood.

"Where in the world did that come from?" Reginald asked, with obvious panic in his voice.

She was still wincing in pain but managed a reply. "I don't know, but I haven't had a tetanus shot for years. And it really hurts. Can you help me back to the car?"

Reginald Van Velkenburg III was clearly uncertain about what course of action a gentleman should pursue in such a crisis as this. Before she knew what was happening, he put one arm around her, put his other arm under her knees, and swept her up into his arms. He actually started carrying her to the car.

She knew what was wrong almost immediately--at the very same moment that she spotted a young, very well-dressed couple walking toward them to enter the restaurant.

Her skirt was dangling freely, which provided an excellent view of her derriere hanging down between his arms, adorned with sheer-to-waist pantyhose over very bright, very white panties. Why hadn't she put on that pair of opaque, black tights! She'd actually had them in her hand before rejecting the idea!

As the couple approaching them drew nearer, the girl tried to suppress a giggle as her boyfriend's eyes practically popped out of his head. But she put her hand up to his face and gently turned his head away from the spectacular display that had just unfolded before them.

Kristie was absolutely mortified. With ill-concealed anger, she whispered, "Reginald! You're supposed to catch my skirt when you pick me up this way. Haven't you ever seen this done in the movies?"

The color drained completely from his face, and he found it difficult to put together a coherent sentence as he realized what had happened. "Movies? No, I don't...Kathleen, I'm so sorry...Let me put you down and..."

"Never mind now. There's no one else coming, and we're almost there."

"Very well. I shall hurry."

When he got her to the passenger side of his Mercedes, he set her down gently on her feet but kept a supporting arm around her. After unlocking the car with his remote, he managed to get the door open with one hand. He was still very nervous but gently helped her get into the car. Then he walked around to the driver's side and got in.

They sat there for a few minutes without speaking. Kristie was still fuming, but the pain in her foot started to reassert itself. She looked over at Reginald and noticed that he was practically shaking. Her anger subsided as she started to feel sorry for him. Obviously, he was in over his head. She reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. "It's okay, Reginald. But I think we should do something now. I need to see a doctor."

He snapped back to attention. "Of course, Kathleen. I'll take you to the emergency room immediately. Let's see, which is the nearest hospital? Northwestern Memorial, I believe."

"No, no. That's not necessary. There's an all-night, walk-in clinic on Addison. Come on, I'll direct you."

On the way to the clinic, she clenched her fists and took several deep breaths. This was beyond a disaster. Of course, none of this was really Reginald's fault. Nor hers either for that matter. It had just been an ill-fated date from the beginning. His Regalness, yes that was a good title for Reginald, was simply not designed to handle such events.

At the clinic, he helped her into the exam room and onto the table. The nurse followed, closing the door behind her.

"So you stepped on a nail, and it's been many years since you've had a tetanus shot. Well, you definitely need a booster." The nurse felt her arm. "Dear, you're very petite, and a certain amount of muscle-mass is recommended for this shot. It'll be best to give it to you in your bottom. You'll need to take your hose off anyway for me to clean and bandage your foot."

She closed her eyes and groaned inwardly. Then she suddenly realized that His Regalness was still in the room. She almost started giggling as she thought of the effect it would have on him if she nonchalantly did all this before his very prim and proper eyes. He would have apoplexy. However, he evidently was not thinking clearly enough to realize what was about to take place. She gingerly stepped down from the exam table and looked up at him with a quizzical expression on her face.

"Well, are you gonna stay and watch?"

His face reddened immediately. "Oh, Kathleen, please forgive me. Of course not. I seem to have lost my presence of mind." With that he left the room in haste and pulled the door shut behind him.

When Kristie emerged from the exam room, she presented a most regal image indeed: bare-legs, flat droopy hair, a spaghetti-stained sweater, and a pronounced limp.

As Reginald looked up from his chair and saw her, he appeared startled. But then she saw something else. He was embarrassed. Not for himself, as if embarrassed to be seen in public with her. No, she really believed he felt empathy for her in her sorry condition. His heart was in the right place, but they were just so utterly mismatched!

"Kathleen, you have endured a lot tonight," he said as he stood up. "Perhaps it would be best if I take you home."

He had a real gift for understatement, that's for sure. "Yes, Reginald, I'd really appreciate that."

They said nothing on the drive back to her apartment. After he walked her to the door, she said, "Reginald, I'm so sorry I spoiled your whole evening."

He smiled graciously, having regained most of his original composure. "It is I who should apologize. I had meant for you to have a very pleasant time tonight."

"None of this was your fault." She gave him a weak but sincere smile. "I'm glad to have met you, Reginald. You've been a perfect gentleman."

That clearly lifted his spirits somewhat. "Well, goodnight, then, Kathleen."

"Goodnight."

Sitting down on the sofa, she let out a long sigh. She thought back at how excited she'd been while preparing for this date. It was difficult to fight off a feeling of...well, sadness. Her eyes began to tear.

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Kristie was still limping a little when she got to the station Monday afternoon. As she walked down the hall, she saw Tom and his friend Jack approaching her and had a pretty good idea what was coming.

"Kristie, you're limping. Rough date last night?" Jack asked.

"An erotic foot massage gone bad?" Tom suggested.

"Aw, come on guys, give me a break today. I don't feel so good."

"So it was an erotic foot massage!" Tom announced triumphantly.

Well, there was no avoiding it. She assumed a scholarly pose, her elbow in one hand and holding her chin with the other. "How is it you know so much about erotic foot massages, Tom? Oh, yeah, I see. That's the only part of a girl's anatomy she'll let you get anywhere near."

Both guys started laughing, but then Tom's expression softened noticeably. "You know," he said, "that's what I like about you. You're witty, and you've got a great sense of humor." He came over and put his arm around her. "If there's anything I can do for you, you let me know."

The hug really felt good. She liked all the guys at the station and had a feeling they thought of her as their kid sister. She looked up and smiled. "Thanks, Tom."

She continued in her halting gate toward her office to start her prep for that evening's show. As she looked down the corridor, she stopped dead in her tracks with a look of utter surprise on her face.

Joel Taylor was coming out of the business office.

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