

Chapter 3

(Saturday, May 26)

Randy joined Wes and Kathy, conscious that his face probably projected the excitement he felt. It was obvious Kathy had not missed a thing.

"Well, you certainly swept her off her feet!" she exclaimed.

"You think so? Things did go pretty well. I liked her."

"I can see that! What's her name?"

"Terri Lockhart."

"Well, go on. Tell us everything. What did you learn about her?"

"She was a student here, just graduated this semester with a bachelors in business administration. She's now running her mother's boutique, Creative Fantasies."

"Creative Fantasies! Randy, I'm liking this girl more and more!"

"Why?" Wes asked. "What kind of a store is Creative Fantasies? Have you ever been there?"

Kathy blushed. "Yes, I have. It's a lingerie shop." She sounded a little sheepish. Randy suspected that maybe she'd bought things there as surprises without telling Wes where she'd gotten them.

"But it's not just a lingerie shop," Randy added quickly. "She also carries a full line of other types of fancy gifts."

"I see. You did learn a lot about her. This is getting better and better."

"And the strangest thing happened," Randy continued. "She asked me what I did in physics and seemed really anxious to hear about it, as if she were asking me to tell her an exciting story. I gave her a pretty accurate summary using the usual technical jargon, and she seemed mesmerized as she listened. I'm not sure why she reacted that way."

As he paused, Randy casually looked out on the dance floor. His expression went from shock to disgust. "Wes, look at that. She's dancing with that slimeball, Aziz!"

Kathy whipped her head around to see. "Slimeball? Who's Aziz?"

"He's a post doc working for Baker," Wes explained.

"He's an ingratiating sleazeball who hoodwinked Baker into hiring him despite a highly questionable ability in physics." As Randy watched Aziz, he thought of that line from *My Fair Lady*: "He oiled himself onto the floor, oozing charm from every pore."

Kathy turned back toward Randy with a smirk on her face. "Well, you no sooner meet a new girl than you get competition." She paused, appraising Aziz more thoroughly. "And I can tell you one thing: this Aziz is quite a handsome man, and Terri doesn't seem immune to his charms."

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Tahir Aziz had walked up to Terri's table soon after her dance with Randy. She was still experiencing the excitement of this new possibility when she saw him. Astonishment seized her: another man impeccably dressed and quite handsome had come to her table!

"I would be charmed if you'd honor me with this dance, Mademoiselle."

He was distinctly suave and gracious in his manner, but Terri found herself in a perplexing quandary. Her mind was filled with Randy Carrington, but after a pause of a second or two, she was able to focus on this new request. Politeness finally asserted itself.

"Certainly."

It was like an instant replay. Aziz took her hand and helped her up. On the dance floor, he took her into his arms and proved to be an exceptional dancer. Terri was experiencing emotional overload. Two extremely handsome and charming men had sought her out and asked her to dance. Suddenly, she found it next to impossible to sort out her feelings. Was she more excited about one than the other? She had no idea. Tahir, like Randy, showed a keen interest in her, her studies, her boutique, and her plans for the future.

After the dance, Aziz held her arm as he walked her back to her table. "I enjoyed that dance very much, Terri," he said as he held out the chair for her. "And I enjoyed your company. I would very much like to see your boutique. May I call on you there in the near future?"

Terri was absolutely overwhelmed. That was just what Randy had asked. They both wanted to see her again. With her emotions tugging her in two different directions at once, it was difficult to answer immediately. But somehow she knew what she wanted to say.

"Why, yes, Tahir, please do. I'd be glad to show you around the boutique."

"Then I will see you very soon. Until then, I shall hold this radiant vision of you before my mind's eye until we meet again. Good night, Terri." Aziz turned and walked away.

After he left, Terri sat there, stunned by what he'd just said and thoroughly taken by his charming manner. Here was a cultured man, a refined man, a man with old-world values and ways. A real gentleman. Yes, she hoped he would come to the boutique.

"Well, Terri," Gary said, as he looked at the expression on her face, "that was certainly some farewell. He seems quite articulate and very mannerly."

Mrs. Grant chimed in. "Yes, and you, Terri, do seem quite smitten. I foresee real potential here."

Terri blushed, and as much as she hated to admit it, Dolores Grant was right on the mark. "Yes, he is definitely a distinguished gentleman. I'm looking forward to seeing him again."

It then occurred to her that because Tahir had shown such an interest in her, she'd gotten in very few questions about him. She knew his name, and she knew he was from Saudi Arabia. But was he a faculty member? What department? She hadn't gotten the chance to ask him. Oh, well, she could find out when he came to the boutique.

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Later that evening, Randy, Wes, and Kathy walked out to the parking lot together. Kathy didn't let this opportunity pass without some final words of encouragement to Randy. She'd made it clear that in her view, Terri was the best prospect to come his way in a long time.

"Randy, I know I'm going to incur your wrath for this, but I've just got to say it. You liked Terri, and don't try to deny it. There's also no doubt in my mind that she liked you. This is just what I've been hoping would happen since you broke up with Eileen. So don't blow it. This Aziz fellow is pretty good looking himself, and she was attracted to him. I could tell. Right now she's a little confused, not sure what she wants, what to hope for. Don't let the grass grow under your feet. Ask her out, or Aziz might steal her heart away."

"Don't worry," Randy said, "you're not stirring up any wrath. I know you mean well. You and Wes are happily married, and you want the same for me. I'm just not so sure I'm ready yet."

Kathy's tone softened as she touched his arm. "Give it a chance, Randy. You've been lonely this last year, and your heart has a big void in it. I could see it in your eyes many times. Here's a girl you've really hit it off with. Take her out and see how it goes. I think you need her. See if she needs you."

Randy didn't reply, but what Kathy said resonated with his own feelings. He knew she was right. The loneliness and ache he felt were never very far from him.

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Gary dropped Terri at her house, and she cordially thanked him for a nice evening. Naturally, nothing even remotely romantic occurred at the door.

When she walked into the house, she found her mother still up and sitting in the living room. Mrs. Lockhart had a tendency to avoid the den. Waiting up for Terri to return was not at all a question of worry or mistrust. She simply had an insatiable curiosity when it came to her daughter's romantic possibilities.

"I needn't ask how things went with Dr. Russell. You might as well have been escorted to the dance by your grandfather. But did you meet any promising young

men? Did anyone else ask you to dance? That dress you wiggled into surely must have caught a few male eyes."

"Mother, really! If you thought this dress was too...well, risque, you should've said something before I went out in it."

"No, I do not think the dress is too risque. And, Terri, let's dispense with the prim speech. We're not talking about whether the dress is too *risque* but whether it is too *sexy*. And it certainly is not. It's perfectly suited to the purpose for which it was designed. Now, did anyone else ask you to dance?"

Terri was not at all upset by this exchange with her mother. She knew her mother's personality, and this was certainly not the first time her mother encouraged her to appear attractive to the opposite sex. Anyway, she was simply dying to tell her mother all about Randy and Tahir. She sat down opposite her and leaned forward with excitement written all over her face at the news she was almost bursting to convey.

"Well, as a matter of fact, yes! By two absolutely gorgeous males. The first one was Dr. Randy Carrington, a physics professor. Incredibly handsome. From the moment I saw him walk into the room, I couldn't take my eyes off him. I guess I was sort of staring at him during dinner. He caught me at it, and then came over and asked me to dance. Mom, did you ever have the feeling of being swept off your feet?"

"Yes, dear. Difficult as it might be for you to picture, I was, after all, your age at one time."

"Well, that phrase certainly fits. He took me in his arms, and I just couldn't believe how I felt, and his smile made me go weak in the knees. When the dance was over, he asked if he could come by the boutique and see me again. I was so excited, I could hardly sit still after he left our table. But then the most incredible thing happened. Another absolutely heart-stopping man came over and asked me to dance. His name was Tahir Aziz, and he's from Saudi Arabia."

"Saudi Arabia?" her mother asked suspiciously.

"Now mother, he was a perfect gentleman and spoke perfect English. He also asked if he could stop by the boutique. He had a most eloquent way of speaking," she added dreamily. "I wonder who'll show up first."

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(Wednesday, May 30)

Creative Fantasies was located in the older, quaint part of DeKalb. It was not a large shop, but then boutiques were by definition small, specialty shops. On Wednesday of the week following the dance, Terri was busy unpacking a new shipment of dainty, lacy panties of various colors and designs that needed to be put on display. Many of her customers were women looking for something special for very special occasions. Quite a few men came in as well, although generally a bit nervous and self-conscious, looking for gifts for girlfriends and wives. She often showed them around and made suggestions. In choosing underwear for herself,

however, her selections were generally more practical. For now, at least.

She had been thinking quite a bit about both Randy and Tahir since the dance last Saturday. Aziz certainly was a handsome, debonair gentleman. Randy was equally good looking but projected a powerful image of professorial intellectualism. He was a physicist, apparently a highly gifted physicist. Those memories of being held in his arms brought back the same excitement she'd felt then. She was definitely attracted to this young professor. Was he the professor in her dreams? No, better not go thinking that after only one dance with him. That's a good way to get hurt again.

Still wondering who would call on her first, she would frequently catch herself looking out the display windows to see if either of them was coming. She was looking forward to seeing them both. Would either of them ask her for a date? Would both of them ask her for a date? Would she accept both offers? That was a question she hadn't sorted out yet. This was certainly a unique situation for her.

Despite her frequent glances at the windows, Tahir Aziz was already in the shop when she first looked up and saw him. She was startled but smiled brightly.

"Hello, Terri. You are indeed as charming here in the daylight as you were enchanting in those romantic evening hours."

Terri knew she blushed like a schoolgirl, and her bright smile turned quite shy. "Hello, Tahir. I'm sure you overstate the facts, but that was very sweet. Thank you."

He looked around the boutique. "This is a very interesting store. You would not see such an establishment in my country."

"Why is that?"

"Under Sharia law, women in Saudi Arabia are enjoined to behave modestly in public. A business such as this where clothing of this type is displayed for men to look at and women to buy would not be accepted."

At first, Terri wondered whether she should take this as a condemnation.

"However," Aziz continued, "after living a number of years in this country, I understand that cultures can differ markedly on such issues. I am not uncomfortable in Western society."

She relaxed again. "How do Saudi Arabian women dress in public?"

"Both men and women often wear the Thobe, a loose, long-sleeved, ankle-length garment. For women, the neck and front can be embroidered and decorated with beads. Of course, women also wear the Boshiya in public, a black veil, light in weight, worn across the lower part of the face."

"I see." She paused. "Well, would you like me to show you around the store?"

"Yes, I would like that."

They made the rounds. Terri first showed him an impressive collection of delicate knickknacks, scented candles, perfumes, and creams. Then she led him through the rows of exquisite lingerie. He devoted special attention to a sexy red bustier with snappy garters hanging from a black, ruffled hem. He also was quite interested in a rack of baby-doll nightgowns.

Terri had shown lingerie hundreds of times to other men buying gifts for their girlfriends and wives and had never been nervous, self-conscious, or embarrassed. This time, though, she was showing very intimate apparel to, well, a potential boyfriend, maybe, sort of. Was he picturing *her* in any of these sexy items? The thought made her face flush.

Tahir removed one of the baby-doll nightgowns from the rack and held it out in front of him to get a better look. As he replaced it, he said, "We have nothing like this in Saudi Arabia." He seemed amazed that such clothing existed.

For some reason, Terri was anxious to get the conversation off of sexy nightgowns. "Are you planning to go back for a visit this summer?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, and that brings up an important question. Before leaving, I would very much like to invite you to dinner. May I have the honor of your company this Friday evening?"

Terri could hardly contain her excitement. He had actually asked her out on a date! And what a formal, yet charming, way with words he had!

"I would like that very much, Tahir."

"Excellent. Where shall I call upon you?"

"My house would be fine." She gave him the address. "What time should I be ready?"

"Would seven o'clock be acceptable?"

"Seven o'clock is great."

"Then I will count the hours, Terri." With that he turned and left.

Terri stood there overwhelmed by Tahir's interest in her and the elegantly romantic way he treated her. She could hardly wait for Friday evening. Did that mean the time would fly by? Probably just the opposite, she thought, resigning herself to the inevitable.

Randy Carrington faded from her conscious thoughts.

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(Friday, June 1)

The academic summer had officially begun. For research faculty, that had very little impact on their daily routine, except that they didn't need to teach any courses. They could devote their full time to research.

Randy began the rather tedious task of putting together an NSF grant proposal. Reality can be harsh for nontenured professors. If he was to keep his position at the university, he must bring in grant money as well as publish research results in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals.

It was almost six o'clock Friday afternoon. Since he really had nowhere to go, he had just kept working. Besides, he wanted to finish the section of his proposal that he was writing. However, he was aware that his concentration was not up to its usual level. He stopped typing at his computer, and thought back to the dance a week ago. It was Terri Lockhart that was affecting his ability to concentrate. He would catch himself thinking about her, how pretty she was, her sweet smile, and how much he had enjoyed holding her as they danced. As a disciplined physicist, he should be able to control his thought processes. Nevertheless, his mind, with no apparent provocation, would jump to thoughts of her with alarming regularity. He looked back at the proposal on the monitor screen. He must get back to it. Handling distractions such as this one should be a simple matter of the intellect exercising control over the emotions. He continued typing.

He hadn't completed two sentences when, much to his surprise, Wes walked into the office.

"All right, Randy, enough is enough for one day. Kathy's away visiting her sister. Let's get out of here and get something to eat."

Randy leaned back in his chair. "You know? You're right. Let's get a nice dinner."

As they walked through the silent, deserted corridors of Faraday Hall, Randy noted again, and with a degree of pleasure, the sterile, somewhat antiseptic appearance that characterized this bastion of scientific research. Here intellect and logic reigned supreme, so different from the outside world, permeated as it was with emotion and illogic. Academia was a world unto itself, separate and lofty. It was the world Randy knew and understood best and the environment that brought him a definite measure of comfort and security. He would be well advised to remember that the next time he unintentionally thought of Terri Lockhart. At this point in his career, he could not afford a second commitment.

At the restaurant, they hadn't been eating long when Randy saw Aziz entering with Terri. It was not a pleasant surprise. Aziz didn't notice the two of them sitting there, but Terri did. When her eyes met his, an electric charge seemed to snap in the air. He felt that same attraction to her as he had last Saturday. All the pleasant memories flooded his mind, leaving no room whatsoever for thoughts of physics or his career. But seeing her with Aziz generated highly mixed emotions.

Wes Tanner caught his stare and turned casually to look. When he saw Terri with Aziz, his tone assumed that Randy would be upset.

"So Aziz and Terri are dating."

That statement caused Randy to break eye contact with her. He turned to his friend with anger on his face. "They are on a date. We don't know that they are 'dating.'"

"Actually," Wes responded dryly, "when two people are on a date, they are by definition 'dating.'"

"No, two people 'dating' implies an ongoing relationship," he responded sharply. Why was this distinction so important to him?

"Don't be so testy! Both meanings of 'dating' are acceptable colloquial usage. Randy, I'm your friend. It's obvious you like her. Kathy's right: you should ask her out yourself. You should've already done it before Aziz got the chance. Now you may be in for an uphill battle. So don't keep putting it off. Ask her out to dinner tomorrow! Monday, at the latest."

Randy scowled. "I'll give it some thought." He was again conscious of his career...and of the conflict he felt. He had to be careful. There was a real danger in pursuing a relationship with Terri when the mere sight of her could stir his emotions so strongly.

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When Terri first saw Randy as she walked into the restaurant, an unmistakable spark was ignited. All the excitement over this date with Tahir had caused Randy Carrington to fade into the background. But now she felt it again: that same attraction she'd felt so strongly when she first saw him last Saturday. Even in Tahir's presence, Randy seemed to be the real center of her thoughts.

She looked back at Tahir as he followed the hostess to a table for two, but her mind was focused on a different table. She thought about the way Randy had just looked at her. She felt certain she'd seen...yes, she'd seen interest in his eyes just as she had last Saturday. But this time there was more than mere interest. What else was there? She couldn't identify it, but tonight he certainly hadn't smiled. Yet she wondered: had he felt the same jolt at the sight of her as she did when she saw him?

The conversation with Tahir during their dinner was friendly and engaging. But with Randy in the same restaurant, she found it difficult to concentrate on Tahir. She wasn't feeling the degree of excitement at being with him that she'd expected, and she hoped he wouldn't notice it.

On the drive back to her house, Terri was getting more nervous by the minute. It had been almost a year since her last date. On top of that, her thoughts were still torn between Tahir and Randy. What should she do when Tahir walked her back to the front door? Should she invite him in? No, of course not. This was only their first date. First date? Did she want more dates with Tahir? Would he want to kiss her goodnight? Did she want him to kiss her goodnight? Before he had picked her up, she thought that, well, a goodnight kiss might be nice. It had been awhile. But now she had doubts. Did she want to encourage him? Or was she being foolish in setting her hopes on Randy Carrington? After all, she may have completely misread his feelings, even at the dance.

Terri realized that she was in an exceedingly difficult emotional quandary. But maybe she was worrying for nothing. Maybe Tahir had no intention of kissing her goodnight. So far, he hadn't so much as touched her, not even to hold her hand. Of

course, he was from Saudi Arabia. Terri knew nothing of dating practices in that country. Actually, now that she thought about it, they probably didn't "date" at all! Marriages were most likely arranged.

Tahir pulled into the driveway of her house, got out, and opened the door for her. As she stepped out, he took her hand. She enjoyed the feel of her hand in his and thought once more about a goodnight kiss. Before closing the car door, however, he released her hand.

At the door, she turned to face him as he spoke. "I found your company tonight captivating, Terri. Thank you so much for a very enjoyable evening."

"I enjoyed it too, Tahir. Thank you for inviting me out."

With that, he reached out and gently touched her cheek. Terri tensed in anticipation. In a quick, graceful movement, he leaned forward and kissed her lightly on her lips. No embrace. Then just as quickly, he turned and walked back to his car.

Terri stood there and watched him drive away. Odd, very odd. As Tahir had leaned forward to kiss her, an image of Randy Carrington flashed before her mind's eye. As she thought about that, some emotional clarity began to emerge. At that moment, she knew in her heart which of the two really stirred her passion.

But there was also something odd about Tahir's kiss. At first she couldn't put her finger on it. Then it came to her. There was a definite lack of emotion behind it on his part. No intensity and certainly no passion.

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