

Chapter 4

(Thursday, June 7)

Not long after his date with Terri Lockhart, Tahir Aziz left for Saudi Arabia. No one in the department knew why he was going, with the possible exception of Dr. Joseph Baker. If Baker knew, he wasn't saying.

Randy was still trying to complete his NSF proposal, but he had a lot more work to do on it. He also continued his research on the idea he was describing in the proposal. If the funding was approved, he'd be able to hire a post doc and hopefully make better progress.

It was early Thursday afternoon as he sat in his office in Faraday Hall. He still had not asked Terri out to dinner, and his ability to concentrate had not improved. Thoughts of her continued to pop into his mind at odd intervals. The memory of holding her hand in his as they danced was particularly strong. And pleasant. He really would like to hold her hand again. Her soft, small hand in his--yes, the thought made him aware of that void in his heart Kathy talked about and the desire he had to fill it: a desire for romantic closeness, for affection, with a girl. Neither could he deny how much he was attracted to Terri. Wes and Kathy were right. He really should ask her out to dinner.

He left the office at two o'clock and drove to Creative Fantasies. The mannequins in the window were hard to ignore as he approached the entrance, and what they were wearing left little doubt what fantasies the name of the boutique referred to. Walking in, he scanned the shop hoping to see Terri. No one was in sight.

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Terri had been working in the boutique office and came back out when she heard the chime from the main entrance. It had been almost a week since her date with Aziz, and still Randy had not come by. At some point over the last few days, the excitement she'd felt every time the door opened had all but disappeared.

So when their eyes met, she abruptly stopped in utter surprise and felt her face flush.

"Hello, Terri." His smile again gave her that weak feeling in the knees.

"Good afternoon, Randy. This is an unexpected surprise."

"Of that I'm sure! I wanted to come by long before now. Just kept putting it off, I guess." He paused. "I couldn't stop thinking about you and needed to see you again."

He "needed" to see her again? Could she have heard him correctly? Did he

really feel that kind of attraction to her? Could she have been right about his interest in her? Her heart was fluttering like a schoolgirl's in his presence. As the days had rolled by without seeing him again, Terri seriously wondered whether she'd misread him. So many doubts had crept into her mind. After all, how could an intellectual whose life revolved around mathematical equations have the slightest interest in her? But she had seen it in his eyes, and now here he was in the flesh standing before her with a smile that rendered her virtually immobile.

"You couldn't stop thinking about me? I...I didn't think...I mean, you said you wanted to stop by, but you never did. I began to wonder whether..."

"I know. I should have come right away. I wanted to, but...I wasn't sure I should."

She was spared coming up with some kind of a response to this curious statement when a customer walked in the boutique. Looking up at Randy, she laid her hand gently on his arm and said, "Excuse me a minute, Randy."

That touch was special. Suddenly it occurred to her why. She remembered reading in some online article about dating that when a girl is interested in a guy, she'll find reasons to touch him--even before the first kiss. The casual touch builds trust and shows she cares. Well, Terri thought, I guess the article was right. She felt so happy that he'd finally come to see her and that he really did seem to like her, that the gentle touch was a natural way to express a new and special closeness between them. She hoped Randy took it that way.

The customer who had entered was an older lady. "Good afternoon, Ma'am." Terri's smile conveyed genuine welcome. "How can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a nightgown. This is actually the first time I've been in your shop, but I just thought you might have something pretty. I'm not as young as I used to be, and with my husband gone now, I don't need, well, any of your more...revealing items. But I wanted something soft...you know, pretty...something feminine." Her eyes seemed sad, and she appeared to be a little nervous.

Terri's expression became soft and her eyes warm. She took the lady's hand in hers. "I know just what you mean, and I think I have something just right."

Terri pulled a nightgown off the rack and held it out for the lady to see. It was a shiny pink satin gown that would come just below the knees. The delicate lace neckline was conservative in cut. Instead of straps, the gown had short sleeves that ended in a matching lace trim.

The woman's eyes lit up when she saw the nightgown. "That's lovely! I was hoping to find something just like that. You know those big stores have such little choice in style. Either you have to buy some old flannel granny-

gown, or something so...well, at the opposite extreme. I'll take it."

Terri also took considerable time helping her pick out just the right gifts for several birthdays: perfume, some beautiful scented candles, and a snow globe. She gift-wrapped each item separately. The elderly lady was smiling brightly as she paid for all the items.

"Here, let me help you carry these out to your car," Terri said.

"Why, that's very kind of you!"

As Randy watched Terri walk out the front door carrying several packages, a gust of wind blew the light skirt she was wearing against her legs, outlining a very shapely backside. The temperature of his blood registered a marked increase. Terri clearly had many delightful aspects.

"That warmed my heart, the way you treated that lady," he said, as Terri rejoined him.

"I could tell she needed some understanding and encouragement. It doesn't cost anything to treat people with kindness."

The door opened again and this time a vivacious, pretty young girl entered. She was wearing a halter top and a very tight, very short miniskirt. When she saw Randy Carrington, she did a double-take.

"Dr. Carrington!" She obviously was quite flustered but began recovering with remarkable speed. "You're just the man I've wanted to see. Dr. Camden told me I should look you up and discuss certain aspects of quantum mechanics as applied to several chemical bonds I've been studying. He said you're the resident expert on the subject."

Terri's eyes narrowed as she scanned the girl's attire. She also recognized feminine wiles when she saw them. Could she be feeling a touch of jealousy? Did she consider this girl competition? What a foolish notion! And after what she had just said to Randy! Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness, even this girl. But Terri couldn't get a word in edgewise.

"And did Dr. Camden tell you to meet me in a lingerie boutique?"

"Oh, no, Dr. Carrington," she giggled. "I had no idea you were in here. I just came by to pick up a few essentials." She paused and looked down. "Oooo, look at these! Just what I wanted." With that she bent down at the knees to reach one of the lower shelves, making sure that her miniskirt rose high enough to expose a considerable length of shapely thigh.

Terri was watching Randy's eyes intently. It was with much satisfaction that she saw his face assume a rather stern expression. So far, the girl's shameless antics had been entirely wasted.

When she stood up, she held out a bra in a bright floral print and matching bikini panties. "Aren't they adorably cute?" she purred.

If Randy thought they were adorably cute, he didn't show it. "Look, Miss..."

"Lorraine, Lorraine Anderson. I'm a first year grad student in chemistry."

"Well, Miss Anderson..."

"Oh, call me Lorraine, Dr. Carrington."

"As I was about to say, *Miss Anderson*, the part of quantum mechanics that I deal with is not closely related to chemical bonding. There are other professors, both in the physics and chemistry departments, who would be better able to help you. I prefer that you see them."

What a dignified, regal response, Terri thought. And how completely devoid of emotion! Inwardly, she felt a real sense of relief. Lorraine obviously had seen Randy around and gotten a crush on him, something not that difficult to understand.

Lorraine's smile slowly faded. "Oh, well, sure, okay." It was clear that she was making every effort to save face after his stern rebuff of her provocative come on. "I'll see who else Dr. Camden might recommend."

As Lorraine paid her, Terri actually felt a little sorry for her. She knew from personal experience the effect Randy can have a woman. She could also sense Lorraine's deflated mood after having been so excited to see Randy in the boutique.

Terri reached out and touched Lorraine's arm. With a warm smile and a sincere tone, she said, "Thanks for coming in, Lorraine. I really hope you enjoy these. Come back anytime. I'll be glad to help you find anything you want."

Lorraine brightened just a bit. "Yeah, you're welcome. You bet. I'd like to look around when I have more time." With that she left.

"Wow!" Terri said, almost giggling. "What a bubbly bundle of energy! She had a crush on you, you know. Does that happen often?"

Randy laughed. The regal presence was gone, and the warm smile had returned. "Actually, no. Not quite like that. Sometimes I wonder, though, when girls come up after class but don't seem to have any specific questions." He paused for effect. "Now, then, where were we before being so rudely interrupted? I believe you were about to show me which bra and panties you thought were adorably cute."

Terri stared at him, momentarily stunned. Then she burst out laughing. So Dr. Randall Carrington, quantum physicist, had a sense of humor!

"I would be glad to make a recommendation, Sir, if you're buying a gift for a girlfriend."

"Maybe someday I'll ask you for that recommendation," he said somewhat cryptically. "For now, I'll ask you what I came in here to ask. Would you like to have dinner with me tomorrow evening?"

Terri responded with a warm smile. "Yes, I would like that."

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(Friday, June 8)

Randy had been profoundly moved with the manner in which Terri helped the elderly woman pick out a nightgown yesterday. Terri was obviously very competent in running the boutique, but he was deeply impressed with the warmth and compassion she had shown this widow. Terri sensed that the woman was a little embarrassed to walk into a shop like that. She wanted something conservative. But Terri also understood that despite the sadness in her heart, she'd hoped to find something pretty so she could still feel feminine. For Randy, the whole scene was very touching. He'd also noticed how kind Terri had been to Lorraine and felt his attraction to Terri grow after seeing this new side of her personality.

For their date on Friday, Randy took her to The Barn, the same restaurant where he'd seen her with Aziz. He thought there was a certain logic to that. If there was going to be a future for them, even if just a casual one, he didn't want there to be a place she could identify exclusively with some romantic memory of Aziz. He wanted to give her new romantic memories of him in that restaurant. That is, if there would be any romantic memories stemming from tonight. One never knew how a first date would turn out.

He had always liked this restaurant anyway. It was not elegant in the traditional, formal way. No thick, exquisite, white linen for tablecloths and napkins. However, in his opinion, it was quite romantic in a quaint way. The tables had red-and-white checkered tablecloths. There were paper napkin dispensers, but each table had a candle, and the overhead lights were dim. The restaurant tended to be a favorite among young, dating couples.

When he picked her up, Terri was dressed in a cute pleated skirt with a plaid design and a green, light-weight, ribbed short-sleeve sweater. She, of course, had no way of knowing it, but that style skirt was one of his favorites. To top off her very feminine look, she was wearing pantyhose. Well, maybe. He smiled inwardly. Knowing what she sold in her boutique, his

male imagination couldn't help raising certain questions in his mind. What she might have on? The mystery excited him. He was often amazed at how easily that male imagination could be stirred, but he quickly put such thoughts out of his mind.

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At his request, the hostess led them to a secluded table in the corner. Randy pulled out a chair for Terri and then walked around the table and sat down opposite her.

"You look very pretty tonight, Terri."

She smiled graciously. "Why, thank you. You look pretty good yourself."

The waitress came and they ordered. After she left, Randy opened up the conversation.

"Well, tell me a little about yourself. You said your mother owns the boutique but that you now run it. Is your father still living?"

"No, he died suddenly a little over six years ago. That's why I worked with Mom at the boutique for my first two years after high school. I also stayed with her at the house. Otherwise she'd be all alone."

Most girls Terri's age, Randy thought, would get an apartment without a moment's hesitation so they could be on their own. It said a lot about Terri that she wanted to stay at home so her mother would not be alone.

"So now she's in semi-retirement?"

"Oh, she's plenty active yet, but yeah, she doesn't play a very active role in the boutique anymore."

"Do you enjoy running the boutique...enjoy selling lingerie?"

She felt her face flush. It was foolish really. Why was she embarrassed? She had never been embarrassed when she helped hundreds of men pick out very sexy gifts. However, as with Aziz, this was different. She was now talking with a man to whom she was romantically drawn.

"Yes, I do. I like helping people and making them happy. I enjoy helping them pick out just the right gift to make someone they love happy. I enjoy helping them pick out just the right item for themselves. When it comes specifically to lingerie, I suppose you could say that I...well, I believe in the role it can play in the life of a couple in love. It makes me happy."

Randy chuckled. "You have a really nice outlook on life, and you definitely are a romantic at heart." Hearing that he thought her romantic sent a ripple of excitement through her.

There generally was some logical reason or strategy to everything Dr. Randall Carrington did. The direction of this conversation had been no accident. He had wanted to find out whether there was anything serious between Terri and Aziz.

"Are you dating anyone right now?"

She gave him a wry smile. "No, at the moment I find myself foot loose and fancy free."

"Not Tahir Aziz?"

Terri's eyes widened at the mention of Tahir's name. Then she remembered: he had seen her here at this restaurant with Tahir. Funny, she had never even thought of Tahir as they entered the restaurant tonight. Was Randy interested in whether he had any competition? The thought pleased her. But that did not quite explain everything. He had called Tahir by name.

"You know Tahir?"

"Of course I know him. He's a post doc in my department."

The statement astonished her. She had not taken Aziz for a physicist at all. He did not seem to fit the mold. "The physics department? He's a physicist?"

"Yes. He's got a Ph.D. from some university in Saudi Arabia."

Terri was becoming emotionally confused. Too many revelations were hitting her at once. First, she had gotten the impression that Randy was concerned about competition. Then she discovered that Randy knew Tahir. Now she felt definitely chagrined that she had not known Aziz was in physics. How could she not have asked him, either at the boutique or on their date, what he did at the university?

"You didn't know Aziz was in physics?"

Still trying to absorb it all, Terri did not answer immediately. "No, I didn't. I wonder why it never came out, why he never told me."

"I don't know." And he really did not know. He could think of no logical reason why Aziz would not have brought it up, at least in casual conversation with Terri. But of one thing he was sure: it would not be wise to give her his personal opinion of Aziz. Since she had dated Aziz, she likely would become defensive of him, and that could drive her back to him.

Terri managed to bring her mind back into some semblance of order. "Getting back to your original question, no, I'm not dating Aziz or anyone else regularly. How about you?" It was a simple question, but because of her

growing romantic interest in him, an important one. Little did she know what would result from his answer.

"No, I haven't dated at all for about a year." Terri noticed that his tone and expression changed in a subtle way. He seemed to become somewhat pensive. "The last time was during the final year of my research for the Ph.D. Her name was Eileen. We seemed to drift apart that last month or so before graduation."

"She was the elementary education major you told me about?"

"Yes. When she graduated, she moved back to the Chicago area and took a teaching job in one of the suburbs. We haven't seen each other since. I stayed here and accepted the department's offer of an assistant professorship."

Now there was definite sadness in his eyes. Before she could stop herself, Terri asked, "Did you love her?" As soon as she asked it, though, she wondered whether she had stepped way out of line. However, Randy did not seem to be upset or offended. He seemed to be giving the question serious thought.

Yes, that was the question he had asked himself a hundred times. He had never told Eileen that he loved her. Maybe that was one reason they had drifted apart. Of course, the other reason was surely that he was just too absorbed in physics.

"I don't know. Maybe...in a way. That whole episode has made me reconsider a number of things. Sometimes in my more philosophical moods, I wonder whether I have the emotional apparatus necessary for true love. I think I do, but I also try to approach every area of life by logic rather than emotion. That seems to create a quality of reserve in me. With such an approach to life, it's difficult to make an unreserved commitment or declaration of love. Then in my more practical moods, I simply wonder whether it's possible to maintain the commitment I have to my research and also make a commitment of love to someone. It seems to me that a girl when looking for love needs and deserves that kind of commitment. Logically, marriage would also seem to need that kind of whole-hearted commitment, at least if one expects it to last. I have to remember that; I have to be careful."

Terri sensed that he was pulling back from her. At the boutique and so far tonight, Randy had seemed animated and excited, as if really enjoying being with her. However, now a subtle change had taken place. "What do you mean 'be careful'?"

"I have to be careful not to get involved in a serious relationship. I just don't see how it can possibly work, at least for the next couple of years. I'm heavily involved in research, and I think these years represent the best chance I have to really make a contribution in my field. I guess I'm looking for someone...I mean, I'm looking for a casual relationship, dating

for fun but nothing really serious."

Boy, he could not have thrown a heavier wet rag on her growing excitement, nor could he have been more successful in dashing her hopeful expectations to pieces. What was he trying to tell her? That he does not want to begin a relationship with her? No, that was not quite what he had said. He wanted to date her, or maybe he wants to date her, but only in a casual way, not letting the relationship grow into anything serious...not letting any love for her develop. Terri felt her high spirits, her excitement, begin a rapid decline.

"So you're not looking for a serious relationship?"

Randy could tell by her tone that he had really hurt her feelings tried to brighten the mood. "Well, I do enjoy dating. I'm enjoying your company tonight."

That was not quite what she had always imagined the man of her dreams would say to her. So despite her earlier unruly emotions in Randy's presence, this surely could not be that man.

With very little enthusiasm left in her voice and with a weak smile, Terri said, "Thanks, Randy. I'm enjoying our date too."

They talked very little on the way back to her house. She had no expectations of any goodnight kiss, nor was she in a quandary about whether to invite him in, as she had been with Tahir. At the house, Randy was polite but rather formal. He had been really upbeat, humorous, and exciting at the boutique and earlier this evening. She knew he was now purposely holding his emotions under strict control.

Then the first halfway positive thought struck her since his ardor-damping announcement: she wondered whether this obvious self-restraint meant that he was feeling conflicting emotions. Maybe she had been right about him all along: he had been attracted to her. That was why he had to force himself to become so aloof. He could not let himself follow his emotions where they might lead. Perhaps not all hope was lost.

Then another interesting thought struck her: if he was holding himself back, what would he really like to do here at the front door? The question made her heart skip a beat.

Whatever he might have wanted to do right now, what he actually did do was quite prim and proper: he opened the car door for her but neither held her hand on the way to the front door nor kissed her goodnight.

She remained on the porch and watched him drive off. All in all, the date had really dashed her high expectations.

After dropping Terri at her house, Randy was happy neither with himself

nor with how the evening had gone. She now thinks he wants only casual dates, that he has no interest in seriously pursuing a romantic relationship with her. But that was exactly what his feelings told him he wanted to do. Well, on second thought, it is a good thing that Terri does not know that. *That* was precisely what he cannot allow himself to do.

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(Saturday, June 9)

The following morning, Terri and her mother were in the kitchen having breakfast. "You seem a bit mopey this morning. I take it your date with Dr. Carrington didn't go that well?"

"Actually...no." Her expression became even more downcast. "You know, Mom, I was really excited about going out with him, and last night, we were having such a great time together--at first. Then, all of a sudden, he seemed to pull back. He said he only wanted a casual relationship. Not exactly the most romantic thing he could have said." She decided not to explain what he had given as his reason.

Mrs. Lockhart was watching Terri intently. "I wouldn't worry, honey," she said warmly. "Don't give up on him yet. Men are sometimes...well, sometimes afraid of a serious relationship, at least at first." She paused. "And anyway," she added with a smile, "today's your day at the shelter. That should brighten your mood."

Terri glanced up at the clock. "Look at the time! I've got to get going. See you later Mom...and thanks."

Two Saturdays a month she did volunteer work at Last Chance Animal Shelter. She loved dogs but could not have one at the house because of her mother's allergies. By working at the shelter, she could still be around dogs, playing with them, taking them for walks, and yes, cleaning and bathing them. She always wore her oldest clothes. There was no telling what they would look like when she got home.

"Hi Terri," Melissa said, as Terri walked into the shelter. Melissa, a middle-aged lady, was the manager. "Hope you're ready for a few challenges. We got three new dogs in yesterday. They're big, and they're not very friendly."

"Melissa!" Terri responded with feigned indignation. "Who's the 'dog whisperer' around here?"

"You are, of course. What was I ever thinking? Come on. I'll introduce you." They started walking back to the runs.

For people who love animals, especially dogs, few can walk through a shelter without their heart almost breaking. The dogs look at you with wide,

expressive eyes projecting various combinations of excitement, loneliness, longing, and just plain love. Last Chance Animal Shelter had a policy of putting a little sign on each pen designed not only to tug at your heart strings, but also to express what the dogs would like to say to you, if they only could speak: "I'm great with kids," "I'll be your best friend," "Pick me," and many more like these.

"We might as well start out with the worst one," Melissa said. "He needs some socializing. See what you think. Maybe spend some time in the cage with him. If you think you can handle it, try walking him." They arrived at pen number twenty-three. "Here he is. His name is Mogul."

Mogul was possibly a Shepherd/Malamute mix. He sat there watching them approach. His tail was not wagging, nor did he get up to greet them at the gate of the pen.

"What do we know about him?" Terri asked.

"A man surrendered him yesterday. All he said was that they were moving and could no longer keep him."

"Some people take such an appalling attitude toward their dogs. What a way to repay the devotion that a dog gives you."

She thought back to an article she had read in a magazine published by the Humane Society. Dogs, having descended from wolves, are pack animals. When a dog is brought into a family, he considers himself part of the pack. He gives his owner one hundred percent of himself. He is friend and defender. His owner is his life, his love, and his leader. He will be faithful and true to the last beat of his heart. After giving such devotion, to be dumped at a shelter is an act completely incomprehensible to him and for many dogs a devastating trauma.

"You're preaching to the choir, kid, you're preaching to the choir. Anyway, he said that Mogul was a loving dog but really a one-family dog, always wary of strangers. If he's going to become adoptable, you're going to have to work another of your miracles. Here's where I leave you. Good luck."

Terri stood there for several minutes just watching Mogul. He never took his eyes off of her. Then she stooped down in front of the gate and started talking to him in a soft, soothing tone.

"How are you, boy? You want to come over here and see me? Yeah, I know you don't understand any of this. You thought you were one of the family, and they brought you here and dumped you. Just left without taking you. Come here...smell my hand." She slipped her hand around the edge of the gate. "Come on, Mogul. Come here."

She kept eye contact with him, but was careful not to assume any posture or make any movement that could be interpreted as dominant.

"Come here, Mogul." Slowly the big dog got up. "That's it, boy. Come here, Mogul." There was something about Terri's voice and her general demeanor around dogs. It had the effect of winning their trust and usually their affection. Some took longer than others.

Mogul came over and smelled her hand. He had not assumed an aggressive posture, so she moved her hand to the side of his head and attempted some light petting. He tolerated it, but still his tail was not wagging.

Yes, Mogul would take a lot of work, but her heart went out to him. She would win him over, and eventually he would make some family a faithful and loyal companion.

There was much to do at the shelter, and Terri stayed until late afternoon, enjoying herself immensely. She got to take most of the dogs for walks on a leash and romped and played with many of them. During the course of the day, thoughts of her disappointing date last night faded and were replaced by a much brighter one: she wondered what Randy Carrington thought of dogs.