

Second Chances: The Courtship Wars

Chapter 1

Carter Damron strolled casually about the conference room, speaking briefly to colleagues, as well as to strangers. Damron's popularity as a relationship psychologist had blossomed, and his career appeared on the brink of skyrocketing. His good looks made him a hit with the women, and more than one female stopped her conversation to take in his features. With the body of a thoroughbred, Damron moved with an easiness, not found in many men his size. Tall and broad shouldered with slim hips, he made women "swoon" just by looking at him.

"Carter, dear," Charlotte Blakeley acknowledged him as he joined her circle of friends. She gave him an "air kiss" on each cheek before clutching Carter's hand in hers and pulling him closer to her group. "Everyone, this is Carter Damron."

A round of introductions filled the next few minutes before Carter disengaged himself from Charlotte's hold. "I will see you later, Charlotte. I need to speak to my agent before the next session begins." He pulled away, nonchalantly distancing himself from the clinging woman.

"Jackson," Carter extended his hand as he maneuvered the man out of earshot of other attendees. "Any news?"

Jackson Ryder knew what Carter wanted to hear. "We've made progress." Jackson dropped his voice. "Starline is developing a new reality show, and they want you as one of its medical consultants. If this one goes the way we think, they'll pick up the talk show format for the fall season."

"You're not kidding me, are you, Ryder?"

"We'll meet after your session, and I'll give you all the details." Jackson Ryder lived for such moments – teasing his clients, dangling the proverbial carrot in front of them. "One of my other regulars could also be picked up by the reality show. Maybe we can speak together."

Praying she was not late, Gillian Cornell rushed into the civic arena's conference room only to find clusters of people standing around in conversation. Out of breath from running through the concourse, Gillian stood, chest heaving, as she prepared to make her way to the stage. She wondered if she made a mistake in accepting Jackson Ryder's proposal to be part of this conference round table. Her *science* was not the science of the rest of this crowd. Gillian believed in what most of these people called "New Age," although Gillian certainly did not call it that. In fact, that term was passé. A sex therapist and relationship counselor, Gillian, as a consultant, hoped to release her first book soon. If she could land the new Starline reality show, she could launch her book to a national audience.

As he settled into his place at the presenters' table, Carter Damron's eyes surveyed the room before settling on the still open doorway. Riveted to the portal, he could not curtail his natural appraisal of a striking beauty rushing through the entrance: a bit disheveled in her appearance, but oh so breath-taking, he noted how a moment of inse-

curity played across her face; and, unexpectedly, he found himself starting to rise to help her. Realizing how foolish that would seem to everyone, he forced himself to remain seated, but he could not erase the unexplainable deep rush in his body. A lift of his brow accentuated the pleasure he took in watching the slender woman nearly march towards the stage. Her weaving between the conference participants blocked part of Carter's sightlines, but he managed to find her immediately each time she reappeared. He enjoyed this perverted pleasure of watching an unknown, but very attractive woman, zigzag her way through the crowd – almost an adult hide and seek. Then, she began to ascend the steps to the stage itself. *So, she's part of the program*, Carter thought.

As she settled her belongings under the table, he took a sensual delight in watching the woman's perfection – her thin, aquiline nose and lush lips. When she narrowed her eyes to return Carter's stare, he turned his head quickly, looking the other way for several minutes; yet, those same magnificent eyes drew him back to the woman's face. It was a very long time – if ever – for Carter to be so instantly taken with someone, but, this auburn-haired beauty left him rattled.

“Are you telling me – telling this audience – you seriously believe we choose our mates by how they smell?” Just a slight shift of her position made Carter think Gillian Cornell would challenge him. Perhaps she found him as interesting as he did her.

“Why not? Attraction must be based on something – an intangible.” Although infuriated by her impertinence, a crooked, boyish smile played across Carter Damron's face, and Gillian felt a tingling rush invade her extremities, as well as her inner core.

“Maybe it's something as tangible as a person's looks.” Carter's eyes didn't leave her face.

Gillian quipped. “Or their body odor.” A snicker crisscrossed the room as Carter felt a twinge of indignation.

His voice rose with the embarrassment he felt: No one spoke to him with such bravado, especially not a woman. “Then explain to me, Miss Cornell, why there are so many divorces if all we must do is sniff people to find our perfect mate. Maybe we need to act more like dogs.”

Incredulously, Gillian flushed before saying, “Some women already think men act like dogs.” Again, came the snickers of laughter. “In reality, it is not as *simple* as all that.”

Carter leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms across his chest, symbolically closing off the discourse and denying her ideas any validity. “It never is.” A amused look overspread his face, and the laughter accorded him lasted longer than what his opponent engendered.

She demanded, “Dr. Damron, do you challenge the existence of Nerve ‘O’?”

“I'm a scientist, Miss Cornell; I'm willing to accept the possibility of what you purport.” He thought he saw her eyes flash, and Carter smiled at her as if they were lovers already.

Gillian Cornell brushed off his overtures; she meant to spend her time discussing her research and getting her agenda on the table. “Reproductively speaking, MHC may determine how healthy our offspring might be, and as far as our susceptibility to another person, it does appear, Sir, next to our brain, our nose is a powerful sex organ.” The crowd responded as perverted images of her words drifted among the attendees.

"Women in my research groups report a connection between a satisfying sex life and their guy's scent."

"Oh, God, save us from scent aphrodisiacs!" Carter protested.

"A study by the Berlinger Foundation discovered which smells increase a man's arousal by increasing the blood flow to the penis. Would you be interested in knowing what those might be, Dr. Damron?" Gillian's voice held its own taste of sarcasm.

"Of course, Miss Cornell, enlighten me. I may need to know what odors to avoid in the future." Smugness crept into Carter's face.

Gillian half laughed; Carter Damron irritated her, but his obstinacy played into her plans. "Turn up your attraction," she smirked, "by having your mate indulge in pumpkin pie or black licorice or a donut or lavender."

"You were magnificent," Charlotte purred into his ear as she laced her arms around Carter's neck. "You had the entire audience hanging on your every word." She kissed him intimately behind the ear.

Carter smiled, but his attention lay elsewhere. His eyes searched the room for the likes of Gillian Cornell. He watched her move from one group to another, relishing in the attention but not dwelling with any one person too long. Carter found he liked that idea. Charlotte moved closer and allowed her hand to caress his hip. A casual sexual relationship existed between Carter and Charlotte Blakeley. The casual part existed on Carter's side, although Charlotte held hopes of something more important. "You certainly put that Cornell woman in her place," Charlotte intoned in her best socialite attitude.

"That was never my intention." Carter began to extract himself from Charlotte's hold while he searched the crowd again for another glimpse of Gillian Cornell.

Charlotte's jealousy crept into her opinion. "You do not possibly believe the woman could have any merit?"

"Of course, I do not give her opinions any merit." Carter's voice carried a little too far. "The woman is a sex therapist for Christ's sake," he protested.

"Actually, I am a sexologist." Carter turned to face a furious Gillian Cornell. "That means I have a psychology degree—the same as you, Dr. Damron."

Carter flushed at being caught trying to call forth his maleness before his friends. "I stand corrected, Miss Cornell." He made her a slight bow before stepping away from the contriteness of Gillian's face. "Your advanced education is duly noted." Carter slid Charlotte's hand into the crook of his arm as he walked away.

"Pompous ass!" Gillian cursed under her breath. "*A daft prick.*" She thought that a better description of the insipid, know-it-all Carter Damron!