

Chapter 10

(Wednesday Evening, August 8)

Panic seized her, as her hair seemed to rise on the back of her neck. She turned and ran into the den and picked up the phone. For a moment of sheer terror, she thought the line was dead, but then the dial tone popped to life. She dialed Randy's apartment number.

One ring. Two rings. Three rings.

"This is Dr. Randall Carrington. At the tone, leave your name, number, and message. I'll return your call as soon as possible."

The answering machine!

"Randy, I'm scared," she said, without any preamble. "I had the back-porch light on, and now it's off. I thought of calling the police, but what could I say? Maybe the bulb burned out. How could I call them without checking? But I was afraid to go out. Please come."

She hung up, trying to figure out what to do next. Who cares what the police think! She was terrified.

She picked up the receiver and waited for the dial tone. No dial tone. She put the phone down and tried it again. No dial tone. The scene from her mystery novel flashed before her mind. Someone had cut the phone wire outside. She had gotten that message through to Randy, but how long would it be until he got back? Where was he?

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After leaving Terri at the boutique that afternoon, Randy returned to his office to get in another hour or two of work. However, the time slipped by faster than he thought. When he looked at his watch, it was already after seven o'clock.

He decided to have some dinner before returning to his apartment. Maybe he should ask Terri if she would like to join him. No, she was probably already home. He drove over to The Barn. That restaurant had become very special to him. Even when he was there alone, somehow he felt closer to Terri.

As he ate, he again berated himself for being the absent-minded professor. He had given her his apartment phone number so that she could call him if she felt frightened or if there was any trouble. Why in the world had he not given her his cell phone number?

He pulled out his cell phone and called her home number. No answer. He tried the boutique. No answer. Now beginning to worry, he called his

apartment phone to retrieve any messages that might be on it.

When he heard Terri's message, the blood drained from his face. He got up, laid down more money at the cash register than his unfinished meal cost, and ran out the door.

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Terri ran to the front door. That outside light was out as well. When she looked through the peephole, the moon afforded just enough light so she could see a dark, sinister ski mask filling her view.

She turned around and leaned back against the front door, her heart pounding in her chest. She was close to hysteria. She closed her eyes and tried to summon her reserves. She must get control of her fear. She needed a plan. She needed a weapon.

She ran back in the den and picked up the heavy iron poker near the fireplace.

If the men were at the front door, maybe she could get out the back door. She ran to the kitchen. Its light was off, so she pulled the kitchen door closed behind her, putting the room in complete darkness. Silently she walked toward the back door.

Instead of walking directly toward the door, she headed to the wall immediately to its right. She put her back to the wall and took several deep breaths. Gripping the iron poker tightly, she bent down to make herself less visible and slowly turned to look out the window.

Another ski mask! Suddenly the man attempted to turn the doorknob. The unexpected sound almost made her scream out, but she suppressed it in time. She whipped around with her back to the wall again, and then quickly walked back to the den.

She could stay here and wait for them to break in and come to her. No, that would put her at a disadvantage. Her heart still pounding, she decided to go into the living. She would wait behind the outside door like the villains do in scary movies. That would give her the element of surprise.

She walked quickly back into the living room and took up position behind the front door. Gripping the iron poker in both hands, she waited, ready to swing it.

After what seemed an eternity, she heard a car pull into the driveway. She moved over to one of the far windows, pulled a curtain back a few inches, and peered out. It looked like Randy's car.

She ran to the front door again. She had to warn him. However, when she looked through the peephole, the man in the ski mask had vanished. Randy had

stepped out of the car and was looking around.

Terri flung the door open and rushed out to him. "Randy, be careful! There were two men here just now, one at each door."

"I saw one of them running away as I was slowing to turn into the driveway. He think he was able to tell I was coming here. I'm sure the other one's gone too."

He looked down at the poker, took it from her hand, and laid it on the hood of his car. "It's okay. Everything's all right now," he said softly.

Terri reached out for him, and he took her in his arms, holding her tightly and gently caressing her hair.

"Come on, let's go in," he said. For a few more moments, she continued to hold him, the tension and fear in her slowly releasing its grip. In his arms she felt safe at last. This was the first time they had embraced so fiercely, and she wanted the moment to go on forever. But after prolonging it as long as she dared, she backed out of his arms. Randy grabbed the poker, and the two of them walked toward the house.

"I was so scared."

"I know. You had every reason to be. They tried once when they thought you weren't home. I suspect they're now getting more desperate to get that research. They may not care anymore whether you're home or not."

"Boy, you're a great comfort!" Terri managed to say with a weak smile.

"Let's have a look at this porch light." He tried turning the bulb. "The bulb's been unscrewed." Randy tightened it, and immediately they were bathed in reassuring light.

"Let's go in and and see about the back-porch light," he said.

They walked in and went to the kitchen. After Terri unlocked the back door, Randy walked out, first looking around carefully. Then he turned to examine the fixture and tried the bulb.

"Same thing. Bulb's unscrewed."

When he came back in, she locked the door behind him. "They cut the phone line as well."

"That's no problem. I've got my cell phone if we need it. Tomorrow morning, I'll splice the wire back together. We can get the phone company to put in a new wire later."

Terri looked up at him rather sheepishly. "You offered to stay here with

me. Is the offer still good? I'm really pretty scared at the thought of spending the night in this house all alone."

He smiled reassuringly. "Of course it's still good. Naturally, I didn't take time to bring anything with me, but I can just sleep on the sofa like this. Tomorrow we can talk about strategy again."

Since it was already close to 9:30, Terri knew that it was too late to offer him any candlelight dinner. However, a movie might still be in order. It was too early to go to bed. With Randy there and her fear temporarily dispelled, she thought a little romance might help her even more.

"How about a movie? Maybe it'll help calm my nerves." Calm her nerves with regard to her safety, she thought. However, picturing the two of them on the sofa together made her nerves tingle for entirely different reasons.

"Sounds like a good idea."

She selected one of her favorite romantic comedies. If they were not in any immediate danger, it certainly would not hurt to get Randy thinking about romance as well. They went into the living room, and Randy sat down on the sofa. After starting the movie, Terri came over and sat down close to him, hoping he would take the hint. He did. He reached his arm around her and she snuggled up as closely as she could.

At some point during the movie, Terri pulled her legs onto the sofa and rolled into a fetal position with her head on Randy's lap. He put his hand on her shoulder, stroking her lightly.

As he sat there watching the developing romance on the screen, Randy was acutely aware of the girl curled up on his lap. He found his eyes frequently leaving the screen and looking down at Terri. Her attire certainly had something to do with it. She was again wearing a pair of leggings, the thin, tight-fitting, stretchy material conforming to every delightful, feminine curve of her hips and legs. His imagination could not help but be stirred by her derriere propped up so close to him and bordered with very visible pantyines.

However, there was more going on here than just a sexy view. She seemed so small and delicate and pretty as she lay there. The nerves in his hands seemed to tingle as he touched her and held her. He marveled at the thrill it gave him and how much he enjoyed it. His attraction to her, warm and strong, was consuming him, and there was no denying it.

Again he thought about falling in love. In one sense, it was a very scary thought. It suggested life-long commitment. But on the other hand, he knew how he felt right now with Terri cuddled in his arms. They were alone in a house watching television together and thoroughly enjoying each other. He imagined how really great it would be if they were married so he could come home to this every night.

The movie ended, but Terri did not make any move to get up. He looked down at her again, and realized that she had fallen asleep. He took a quick look at his watch. The movie had been a long one. It was going on midnight.

His hand was resting on her shoulder. He squeezed and tenderly shook her. "Wake up, sleepy head. It's almost midnight."

"Almost midnight?" she asked groggily.

"That's right, and it's time to put you to bed."

Returning to full consciousness, she asked with an impish grin on her face, "Are you going to tuck me in and kiss me goodnight?"

"I just might. Now get going."

Suddenly something occurred to her for the first time. "Randy, you won't have to sleep on the sofa. What was I thinking? With my mother gone, I'll sleep in her bedroom, and you can sleep in mine."

Randy smiled. "I appreciate the thought, but the sofa'll be fine. I really don't want to sleep too heavily anyway."

"Well, okay. I just hate the thought of you having an uncomfortable night."

"I'll be fine, believe me. Now you get to bed."

She touched his face briefly, then went into the bedroom. Closing the door, she changed into her nightgown. Then she put on her robe, grabbed a pillow and some spare blankets, and went back into the living room.

"Here. You might get cold tonight." Then she reached up with one hand and kissed him. "Thanks for staying, Randy." She turned and went back into the bedroom but this time left the door open.

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(Thursday, August 9)

Terri woke up gradually the next morning, falling in and out of sleep several times. She rolled over to look at the clock. 7:30. That was late for her. It was definitely time to get up.

She thought about Randy in the living room. What a wonderful time she had had last night. Snuggling close to him with his arm around her and then actually falling asleep curled up on his lap. It was like heaven. She sensed her love for him growing. She was convinced of something else as well: as afraid as he might be to say it, maybe even to himself, he loved her too. She

could read it in his eyes and in his tender physical attentions to her. The memory was so strong, she could almost still feel his hand gently caressing her shoulder last night.

Terri got up and pulled on her robe. Looking out the open door of her bedroom, she neither saw nor heard any sign of Randy. He was probably still asleep. What should she do? Go out there and wake him up? Start cooking some breakfast for the two of them? Well, she thought, suppose we just take things one step at a time.

She walked into the living room. Yes, Randy was still asleep on the sofa. She watched him there for several minutes, her heart warmed by the sight. His breathing was light and regular.

Finally, she walked over to him. Bending down, she gently touched his face. He needed a shave, but to her it seemed very masculine and attractive. She also took delight in the thought that perhaps their relationship had reached a stage where they could see each other in less than perfect condition. She shuddered briefly when she wondered what her hair must look like.

"Randy," she said softly, "maybe it's time we get up."

His eyes opened, and he seemed to be wide awake almost instantly. "Is anything wrong?" he asked on full alert.

"No, no. Everything's fine. It's 7:30, and I thought maybe we should start planning that strategy you mentioned last night."

Randy swung his legs around and sat up, but his movements were just a little reserved. He still had all his clothes on.

"You're a little stiff from sleeping on that couch all night, aren't you?"

"It's nothing. I'll be fine. Did you want to go out for breakfast?"

"No, I thought I'd whip up something here. Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks. I don't drink coffee."

Terri smiled brightly. "Neither do I. We have it here because my mother drinks it, but I've never liked the taste of coffee."

"You have discriminating taste!"

They walked into the kitchen. Randy sat down as Terri started frying some eggs. She frequently caught herself glancing at him. Again she got that warm feeling in her heart. How wonderful it would be, she thought, to be married to Randy and cook breakfast for him like this everyday.

While they were eating, Randy began discussing what he thought they should do next.

"First, if my theory is correct and if Aziz is behind all this, there have now been three failed attempts to obtain Baker's research. I don't think they'll hold anything back on their next attempt. They'll do whatever is necessary. By now, they must surely realize they can't keep this up indefinitely without getting caught.

"Second, I'm convinced it must be the desk they're after. As much as we're at a loss to explain it, there just is no other tie between you and Baker's research.

"Third, to keep you and your house out of it, I think we should change the battlefield. We should bring the desk to my office. The most likely time they will be watching your house is right at dusk tonight. That's when we'll make a big show of moving the desk over to Faraday Hall. They'll see it, and they'll follow it. Once it's there at my office, maybe I can set a trap."

"Trap? What kind of trap?"

"I don't know yet. But I do know that in an emergency I'll be able to get the campus police to my office a lot faster than we can get the city police to your house. I probably also have more influence with them. Maybe I can get one or two to cooperate in setting a trap."

"I don't know about all this," Terri said doubtfully. "If your theory is correct, you could be putting yourself in a very dangerous position."

"Not necessarily. By getting them onto my turf, so to speak, I'll be able to control the situation, at least to some extent. I'll probably be safer in Faraday Hall than confronting them here at your house. What do you think? Are you willing to give up your desk for a few days?"

"Oh, Randy, of course. I'm not thinking of the desk at all. I'm thinking of you."

Randy reached out and put his hand over hers and gently caressed her skin, smiling reassuringly. His touch and the warmth of his hand on hers sent a shiver down her spine. "Don't worry. I'll be all right."

When she realized that there was still sufficient oxygen for her to breathe again, they cleared away the dishes and walked into the den to have another look at the desk.

It was the first time Randy had really taken a good look around the den. The knotty-pine paneling and the fireplace, in his opinion, seemed to give the room a masculine feel. But his eye was soon attracted to her magnificent collection of books that filled one entire wall of the den.

"Is this your library?"

"Yes. Mom has a few books, but almost all of these are mine. I love the look of them on the wall. I've been collecting books for years--not in the sense of collecting rare editions, but in the sense of getting a large enough library so I can find something on any subject I want to look up. A number of these books were also my textbooks, and I think of some of them as old friends."

Randy smiled and again looked at Terri with renewed interest. She thought of books the same way he did. "That's amazing. You're amazing. That's just how I look on my library. I've been collecting books since my first year in high school. Most of my books are on physics and mathematics, but I've had that same philosophy: assemble a large enough library where I could find at least something on any subject that might come up. You know what people like us who have this attitude toward books are called, don't you?"

"Yeah, we're bibliophiles. It's from the Greek and means *lover of books*." She amazed him once again. The smile she returned was sweet, and her eyes projected real warmth.

All the walking around Terri had done since she began to cook breakfast had loosened the sash on her robe. Suddenly it fell open. Randy was briefly startled, but instinctively ran his eyes over her with that unmistakable look of male appreciation. The nightgown was red, one of her short, baby-doll styles with pretty lace around the neckline and hem. It was thin enough that he could definitely detect the shimmering, vague silhouettes of her breasts and panties underneath the flimsy gown. His mouth went dry.

When Terri realized what had happened and saw the look in his eyes, her face went very warm. She could almost hear that silent "Wow" that his eyes projected. "Oh, sorry," she said with embarrassment in her voice. She pulled the robe around her and retied the sash. "I didn't mean to embarrass you," she added sheepishly.

Randy got a decidedly boyish grim on his face. "You didn't embarrass me. In fact, I rather liked it."

She recovered her poise and gave him a knowing smirk. "Yeah, I bet you did! Maybe I better get dressed before any more accidents occur." Randy was laughing, and Terri was definitely giggling as she walked off to the bedroom.

Odd, she thought. She had been embarrassed but yet paradoxically rather liked the feeling. Well, maybe not so odd after all.

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(Thursday Evening, August 9)

As darkness was descending that evening, Randy and Wes were at Terri's house loading the desk onto Wes's pickup. Randy had already explained most of his theory to him.

"I still think this is the craziest scheme I've ever heard of. You think you're James Bond or something? It's a good thing I didn't tell Kathy what you're up to."

"Never mind the sermons, Wes. Let's just get the truck loaded. And don't talk so loud."

Terri smiled as she listened to the two friends. She liked both Wes and Kathy the moment Randy introduced them.

The desk loaded, they started out for Faraday Hall. Terri was sitting between the two men. Her shoulder was touching Randy's, and she felt that same excitement she always felt when she was close to him. Then to her surprise and delight, he reached down to hold her hand. Wes was probably not able to see this. It almost brought tears of happiness to her. She squeezed his hand tightly.

Wes was driving slowly and leisurely so that if anyone was following them, he would have no difficulty. "One thing I'll have to say, though," said Wes as he drove, "Kathy is simply ecstatic about you guys. She's been after our friend Randy here to find a nice girl, and she thinks he finally has."

Terri was sure she blushed, and she was glad the cab of the truck was dark enough to keep Wes from seeing this. She squeezed Randy's hand a little tighter.

They pulled into the faculty parking lot nearest Faraday Hall. Randy and Wes began wrestling the desk off the truck. It was a well-built piece of furniture. With some difficulty, they carried it to one of the back entrances, and Terri held the doors open as they brought it in. After it was inside the building, they put it down to rest and catch their breath.

"Well, come on," Wes grumbled. "It's not going to get into your office by itself."

It was a real struggle, and some items in Randy's office had to be moved around to make room, but they finally managed to get the desk into his office. The three of them walked back into the hall, and Randy locked the door.

"Nobody else has a key to this office but me, the department secretary, and security. Now we wait and see what happens."