

## Chapter 12

(Friday Evening, August 10)

Terri closed the boutique precisely at five o'clock. Since it was Friday afternoon, the street was already mostly deserted. Many stores in Old Town closed earlier on Fridays, and everyone was anxious to get home and start the weekend. She turned off the lights in the store area and went back into the office to get to work.

The boutique was very quiet. Usually, that was relaxing and helped her quickly get through the paper work of running a business. However, now, after all this trouble, it meant that every little noise, no matter what the origin, startled her. And that, in turn, annoyed her. She always had felt safe here, and she certainly had always felt safe in her house. She had been raised in that house. This whole nightmare of Dr. Baker's missing research on cold fusion and the mysterious desk that she had bought was disconcerting in the extreme. Most people, she mused philosophically, take routine and normalcy for granted until they no longer have it.

It was pushing seven o'clock when Terri finally finished, and darkness had fallen over the city. She berated herself for not watching the clock and for staying too long. Where had the time gone? She had not wanted to leave after dark. She turned off the main light in the office. Only the few low-wattage night lights remained on in both the office and store areas. The back door in the office had no windows, so she decided to leave the boutique from the front door. That way, she could first look out at the street to see if she saw anything suspicious before venturing out. She grabbed her light coat, put it on, and walked to the door of the office.

She stood there for a moment before walking into the store area. After looking around, seeing nothing and hearing nothing, she decided that she had just been foolish. If anyone had come in the front door, she would have heard it, and the boutique was too small for anyone to have been hiding when she locked up.

The street, however, was another matter altogether. She walked toward the main doors slowly, watching the ever-widening angle of vision she had through the windows. At the door itself she stopped. The streetlights provided some light, but it was an overcast night. Craning her neck, she looked carefully as far up the street and as far down the street as she could see. The streetlights cast many shadows, but none of them seemed to be moving. She unlocked the door, walked out, and relocked it behind her.

As she started walking, Terri thought back to the morning. When she had arrived at the boutique, the streets were unusually crowded, and she had to park two blocks away. At the time, the thought occurred to her that she might feel a bit uneasy walking back to her car when she left that evening. She had intended to move the car closer during the day. However, as Murphy's law would have it, when she remembered what she wanted to do, there were always

customers, and when she was alone, she never thought of it. Now she was paying the price.

Her assessment this morning that she might simply feel uneasy walking back to her car had assumed a certain measure of daylight. Now in the dark, it turned out to be a gross understatement: she was downright afraid. If Randy's theory was correct, she had cause to be afraid. Maybe they had not seen them move the desk to his office and had it in mind to take her by force to her house right now. If Randy's theory was not right, and something else entirely lay behind all the trouble, she could also be in grave danger. She looked down the street in the direction of her car. She was still a block and a half away and picked up her pace.

She was wearing soft-soled shoes and was making little noise as she walked. One minute all was quiet; the next minute, she heard the footsteps.

Fear gripped her with its icy fingers. She seemed temporarily paralyzed, momentarily coming to a stop. Should she turn around? Should she start running toward her car? On an impulse, she did the former, and quickly turned her head to look briefly over her shoulder. She fully expected to see someone in a ski mask ready to grab her. What she saw was nothing. The fear subsided somewhat and was replaced with puzzlement. She could have sworn she heard footsteps. But now was no time to have this debate with herself. She began walking briskly toward her car again. She crossed the first street. One more block.

It occurred to her that someone could be hiding in any of the recessed store entrances she was passing. They were dark and crypt-like, and someone could easily be hiding within. She began watching each one as she approached it. Suddenly something caught her eye across the street. A movement. Odd how that peripheral vision is so adept at picking up movement. She quickly turned her head and strained to find what she might have seen. Nothing was moving. As she turned back to continue watching directly in front of her, she immediately collided with a man.

She was so tense that she let out a startled scream. The man caught her by the arms to steady her.

"I'm terribly sorry," he said. "I wasn't watching where I was going. Are you all right?"

Terri's heart was pounding, but she took a look at the man and registered several things. He was dressed in a three-piece suit, and he still had a large set of keys in his hand. Evidently, he had just come out of the store, locked the door, and rushed onto the sidewalk without looking.

"Yes, I'm fine. Please pardon me. I wasn't paying any attention either."

The man nodded his head, then crossed the street and headed in the opposite direction. Terri continued walking toward her car.

After passing a gap between two buildings, she heard the footsteps again. Suddenly, the connection was obvious: there must be two men following her. Now she was consumed with panic and began running toward her car.

Closer and closer she got. When she reached the back of her car, she darted out into the street in order to unlock the driver's door. Why had she not replaced the battery in her transmitter? Fumbling with a shaking hand to get the key into the lock, she finally was able to turn the key and started to pull the door open.

Suddenly she saw the flash of an arm reaching out and pushing the door shut. Then two strong hands grabbed her arms and pulled her toward the sidewalk. She was just about to scream for help when a gloved hand holding a handkerchief wrapped itself around her mouth. She was pulled into a large and dark entranceway to a closed store.

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In Faraday Hall, Randy looked at his watch. Seven o'clock. He had expected Terri before this. Picking up the phone, he dialed the boutique. No answer. She must be on her way.

The day had been uneventful, both for him and for his research. He had gone out for lunch but came back and worked for the rest of the afternoon. Now, at seven o'clock on a Friday evening, Faraday Hall was virtually deserted.

Leaving his office and locking the door, Randy walked over to the nearest outside entrance, the one he assumed Terri would use. There was no sign of her yet. On his way back to his office, he thought he heard a noise, almost like a shoe scuffing the floor. He looked up and down the hallway. Nothing. No further sound either. He walked back to his office.

For the one-hundredth time, his mind went back to Dr. Baker's desk. What secret did it hold? he wondered.

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The two men pushed Terri roughly up against the door of the store, the one still pushing hard against her mouth. Neither of them wore a ski mask, and neither of them was Tahir Aziz.

"Do not struggle, Miss Lockhart. It will not help. We have some important issues to discuss. I am going to remove my hand from your mouth. If you scream, we will hurt you and then resume our discussion. Do you understand?" He had a definite accent. Was it Arabic?

Her eyes were wide with terror, but she managed to shake her head yes. The man removed his hand.

"Who are you?" she asked with a trembling voice. "What do you want with me?"

"As to who we are, names are unimportant. But I will tell you this. We are not what you would call in your country common muggers. We are agents of a foreign government. But do not take comfort in that. My mission is very serious, and I am authorized by my government to use any means necessary to accomplish that mission. Do you understand the implications of that? Any means necessary." He repeated it slowly in a tone that made her blood run cold.

Terri made no response, and the other man let go of her.

"Good. Now that we understand each other, I will proceed. You and Dr. Carrington have acted very foolishly. If you had not tried to thwart our every attempt to gain access to Dr. Baker's desk, we would now be long gone and you and Dr. Carrington would be quite safe. Last night, you even carried the desk to his office in Faraday Hall. Everything you have done has now made our task much more difficult. You will notice that we have abandoned the use of ski masks. Come. Dr. Carrington is still waiting for you. We would not want him to worry," he added with a ominous sneer.

The two men grabbed her arms again and walked her firmly back to the sidewalk and then beyond her car to the next street. Terri saw no one else, no one to whom she could appeal for help. At the next street, they turned right and then forced her into a parked car. The man who had talked to her slid in beside her, while the other one got in the driver's seat and started the engine. They drove off and headed for the university.

As they drove, Terri was still deathly afraid, but little-by-little she began thinking about what the man had said. They knew Randy was still in his office. They must have someone there watching him. She was now becoming afraid for him. He might be taken by surprise. No, that was not their plan. If it had been, they would not have come for her. Their plan was to use her as a hostage to gain leverage over Randy and thus gain access to the desk in his office. How could she and Randy have fallen into such a trap? What would happen to them now?

Parking in faculty lots was not restricted after five o'clock on Friday afternoons. They pulled into the lot nearest Faraday Hall's main entrance. Terri was trying to think clearly. This was not the lot where she would have parked, nor was this the entrance she would have used. Would this give them an advantage or would it be a terrible disadvantage?

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It was now almost 7:45, and Terri still had not arrived. Randy was beginning to worry. For the tenth time, he walked to the door of his office and looked up and down the hall. He had not heard any more noises, and the

hall still looked quite deserted. Several times he had checked the entrance he had expected her to use. This time he decided to check the main entrance. Again he locked the door of his office on his way out.

There was a foyer of sorts at the main entrance. One set of outside doors led to a small, heated area of about ten feet by fifteen feet. As Randy approached the entrance, he saw three people enter the outer doors, two men and a woman, but he was unable to make out the faces.

Suddenly his face lost all color, and his heart started to pound: he saw that it was Terri, each arm held by one of the men. What a fool he had been! Why had he not anticipated that they might watch the boutique and kidnap her as she left? From their point of view, she certainly would make a good hostage to use against him and gain access to the desk.

He slowed his pace and tried to think fast. Should he try running back and putting in his call to the campus police? It took less than a second to reject that idea. Maybe he could trade the research for her or maybe he would fight, but he could not leave Terri.

Randy continued to walk slowly toward the entrance as the three of them stepped through the second set of doors. As they watched him approach, he was trying to plan some form of attack, should it come to that. Suddenly, he was aware that someone else was just coming through the outer doors. Both of the kidnapers were watching him so intently that neither of them noticed her yet. Randy recognized her at once: Lorraine, the girl he had met in the boutique, a chemistry graduate student who, according to Terri, seemed to have a crush on him. Terri and the two men were now about ten feet within the building. That was enough. The timing would be tight, but it should work.

As Lorraine opened the inner door, Randy leaped to the side to get direct eye contact with her. Her face brightened, "Hi, Dr. Carrington..."

To leave no room for indecision on her part, he raised his arm and pointed to the outer doors shouting, "Lorraine, go and get the campus police." Her eyes widened, but the moment of confusion was brief. She whipped around, pushed open an outer door, and began running.

The two men holding Terri turned around to see who had come in, but they were too late. Lorraine was already on her way down the steps from the entrance.

While they were distracted by Lorraine, Randy darted toward them. Again, they were too late. The nearest man had caught his movement and just started to turn back when Randy inflicted a devastating kidney punch. The man almost collapsed in excruciating pain, but Randy grabbed him by the hair and pulled him out of the way.

By this time, the other man realized they were under attack. While still holding Terri with one hand, he started to reach inside his jacket,

presumably to pull out a gun. But Randy had already started to move toward him. As the gun cleared the jacket, Randy delivered a front kick directly to the man's kneecap. He cried out and stumbled backward, letting go of Terri to help regain his balance.

At first Randy thought they could get out of the building right there. However, he saw that the man he had punched in the kidney, now leaning against the wall, was beginning to pull out a gun. The other man also seemed to be recovering enough to be a threat, and he blocked the way to the door.

"This way," Randy shouted, as he grabbed Terri's hand and began to pull her down the hall through which he had just come.

Scared and out-of-breath, Terri asked, "What about your office? We could lock ourselves in until the police get here."

"They had guns. That office door wouldn't keep them out very long, and we'd be cornered."

"So what are we going to do?"

"I think I know a good place."

"Randy, they were talking in the car about a third man who I think has been watching you here."

They were approaching an intersecting hallway. Randy stopped. Dropping her hand, he turned to face her. "You mean there's a third man here?"

"It sounded like it."

"Then he might still be watching my office. We can't go that way." He took her hand again and started running. At the intersection, he turned left and headed down a different hallway.

He stopped in front of a set of double doors. "Let's go in here." As they disappeared through the doors, he looked back and saw no one.

They were in a large lecture hall. The seats were in tiered, circular arcs around a demonstration table and lectern in the center of the lowest level.

They both were breathing heavily as he put his hand on her shoulder. "Hang in there. We'll make it. Come on, we have to get going again. This'll get us to the basement floor."

They ran down the stairs of the center aisle and then out one of the side doors. "This way. I think our best chance might be in the boiler room."

The boiler room housed the huge boiler used for the hot-water heating

system in Faraday Hall. They ran about halfway down the hall and then went through the heavy, metal doors leading to the boiler.

"There's always a boiler operator on duty in the building, but he's not always in here. Come on, let's find some place to hide."

They walked over to one of the far corners of the room, as far from the two entrances as they could get.

Randy reached out and cradled Terri's face in his hand. "Are you all right? Did they hurt you?"

"I'm okay. All they did was scare me half to death." He moved his hand to her shoulder and gently drew her to him in a reassuring hug. Despite the danger they were still in, she felt truly comforted in his arms.

When they separated, she said, "Randy, you were right. It's the desk they're after. The one who did all the talking said they were agents of a foreign government and that they were authorized to use any means necessary to get Dr. Baker's research. I think he meant they would kill us if they had to."

"Did he say what country they worked for?"

"No, but he had a pronounced accent. My guess is that it's Arabic."

Randy closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm going to look around for a phone and something I can use as a weapon. We're not out of this yet."

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Lorraine kept running and headed straight for the office of the campus police. She sensed that Dr. Carrington was in serious trouble. And who was that other girl? Yes, it was Terri, Dr. Carrington's girlfriend from the lingerie boutique, and it looked like those two men were holding her. Lorraine started to run a little faster.

She burst into the police station, very much out of breath. "We need help! Two men are threatening Dr. Carrington. Faraday Hall. Hurry!"

Without saying a word to Lorraine, the man picked up a microphone and clicked on the radio. "This is it--Faraday Hall. Move in. Cover every exit."

"Please have a seat. Look's like you ran all the way over here. Don't worry. We'll be there in less than a minute. Dr. Carrington alerted us that there might be trouble tonight. I'm Sgt. McGill, and you are?"

"Lorraine Anderson."

"Well, Miss Anderson. Let me get your statement. Everything you saw and

did."

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There was an office with a phone in the boiler room, but it was locked. Randy removed a fire extinguisher from one of the walls. As he turned to walk back to where Terri was standing, he saw a door open at the far end of the room. Someone had come into the boiler room.

He hurried back to Terri, and took her hand in both of his. "Someone just came in." His eyes bore into hers with an intensity she had never seen before. "Now Terri, stay right here. You're in a good spot--there's only one way to get to you. I need to be able to move around quickly, and I want you where I can easily see if anyone is coming your way."

Fear began to fill her again, but somehow she felt a real sense of confidence in Randy and his ability to protect her. "I'll stay right here." She squeezed his hand. "Be careful."

He nodded and silently moved away.

He could not hear footsteps because of the general noise level in the boiler room. However, he knew which door had been opened, and moved into position to intercept whoever had come in. Leaning up against one side of the huge boiler, he got the fire extinguisher ready. He figured that he would have one to two seconds after the man walked by his position before the man saw him. That should be enough time.

Randy waited, his muscles tensed.

The first thing he saw was a hand carrying a gun with a silencer. When the man's head came into view, Randy reached out with the hose and started to spray.

The man dropped the gun and reached for his eyes, screaming. Randy then grabbed the top of the fire extinguisher in both hands and swung it hard through a full half circle right into the man's face. He collapsed onto the floor.

Randy picked up the gun and then dragged the man into an obscure corner. If his partners came in the boiler room, he did not want them to know that he had a gun. When he had done that, he ran back to where Terri was standing.

"One down, and now we're armed." He held out the gun for her to see. "This guy was not one of the two who brought you here. That helps us. I don't think the other two are operating at their peak efficiency anymore."

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At that moment, the other two were in fact standing in front of the door

to Randy's office in the deserted corridor. "Abdul should not have gone off chasing them," one of them said in Arabic. "Carrington is not in his office, so we do not need the girl anymore. We simply retrieve the papers from the desk and vanish into the night. Dabir, destroy the lock."

The man called Dabir, still feeling the effects of Randy's kidney punch, raised his silenced gun and shot three rounds into the lock. Hakim, the leader who had done all the talking, walked to the door and opened it.

What he saw caused him to stop and stare in astonishment. The only desk in the office was obviously Randy's modern, metal desk.

"Where is the desk?" he shouted in fury. "Now we must find him. Come. We must hurry. That girl who escaped probably has summoned the police."

"Where could it be?" There was a hint of desperation in Dabir's voice.

"I do not know. We must find Carrington. Can you raise Abdul on the radio?"

Dabir tried. "No, he does not answer."

"What was Abdul's last communication?"

"He said he was going to the lowest level."

Hakim spotted a door leading to a stairwell and pointed to it. "The stairs. Have your gun ready but do not shoot either of them unless our lives are in immediate danger. We must have him alive, and the girl might be the only way to make him tell us quickly."

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"Do you think the police will be here soon?" Terri asked.

"I think they're probably already here, so we don't need to be going anywhere. We'll wait here until they find us, and we know that it's over."

"This was such a horrible nightmare. I was so scared--not only for me, but for you. You were the one guarding the desk."

Randy put his one arm around her and hugged her tightly against him. "It's almost over." She looked up at him with tears in her eyes. Emotionally, she sensed that the bond between them had grown strong through these experiences.

As Terri looked back toward the boiler, her eyes suddenly widened in terror. Before she could shout a warning, Hakim spoke.

"You will please restrict your movements." He paused. No one moved.

"Let Terri go," Randy said. "I'll take you to the desk, and you can have the damn research."

"It is too late for that, and you know very well the desk is not in your office. Now, Dr. Carrington, turn very slowly and face us." Randy obeyed but turned in such a way to keep his hand with the gun on his far side from them. Both men had their guns aimed at him, but they did not see the gun at his side.

Reaction time is never instantaneous, even for professional assassins. It is simply a fact that the mind requires a finite amount of time to process new data and decide a proper response. Randy knew this. Since he did not know how soon the police would rescue them, he must assume that he was still on his own.

In one smooth move, he simply raised his arm and fired.

Dabir whirled around from the force of the bullet and fell, his gun sliding across the floor. Randy immediately leaped away from Terri and rolled onto the floor, ending on his stomach with both arms outstretched and his gun aimed at Hakim.

Hakim had not expected anything like that reaction and was taken by complete surprise. However, before Randy fired again, everyone heard shouting from both directions in the large room. Hakim turned and found policemen visible everywhere he looked. He crouched and raised his gun, but before he fired a single shot, six police automatics opened fire. The riddled foreign agent spun around several times and then fell to the floor.