

## Chapter 14

(Late Friday Evening, August 10)

An hour later, they were again sitting in Lt. Jurgens' office at the NIU campus police station.

"Once more you astonish me, Dr. Carrington."

"You should also be astonished at Terri. She reacted with cool precision in retrieving the gun."

"Yes, you're quite a pair."

Terri smiled. The similar statement about them made by Lorraine earlier in the evening was a clear reference to them as a romantic couple. By contrast, it seemed to her that this statement by Lt. Jurgens, in the context of what they had done twice now, seemed to highlight those skills they had in common with Bonnie and Clyde.

Jurgens gave them a wry smile. "But I'm sure the FBI will be very pleased that your latest contribution to them is in considerably better condition than your previous donation, who is still in the Medical Center. Now don't you think you ought to get this young lady home once and for all tonight? And do try to stay out of trouble."

On the way back to Terri's house, she asked, "Do think it's really over this time? We thought that before, you know."

Randy turned his head to look at her and reached out for her hand. "Yeah, I really do think its over now. I'll look through the house before I leave, but I think we've gotten all the bad guys."

She squeezed his hand. They had been through great danger together, and she felt very close to him. "Do you realize that your plan to move the desk to Wes's office turned out to be brilliant after all? It's what enabled you to get the jump on Tahir."

Randy thought about that. "Yeah, I guess it worked out okay for us."

Suddenly, Terri became rather animated, a significant feat considering the lateness of the hour and how much stress they had been under for many hours now. "Randy, the research--we know where it is now!"

"I'm anxious to take a look at it too, but not tonight. Tomorrow we can meet Wes at his office and find that secret compartment. Tonight, young lady, you are going straight to bed."

When they got back to the house, Randy first walked around it on the outside. After they went in, he examined every room. All was as it should be.

Their lives in this generally quiet university town could finally return to normal.

Terri walked along with him as he headed to the front door to leave. When he turned to face her, she reached up and they went into a tight embrace. The stress and danger had been so intense, she felt a great emotional release as they held each other close. Randy lowered his head and they kissed with a passion born of facing death together and surviving.

"Randy...I..." She hesitated.

"I know. It's all right. I have a feeling tomorrow will be a big day for us. Try to get some sleep. I'll pick you up around ten."

They released each other, and Randy touched her face lightly, then turned and left.

She had almost said that she loved him. Did he know what she was about to say?

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(Saturday Morning, August 11)

Randy picked her up the next morning, and they headed to Faraday Hall. Wes and Kathy were already there when they arrived. Kathy rushed over and hugged Terri. "I'm so glad this nightmare is finally over for you."

"Thanks, Kathy. I think maybe the future looks pretty bright now." The two women eyed each other. Then Kathy hugged her again. "I hope so, Terri, I really hope so."

They walked into Wes's office. The two men were already in there and going over the desk with a fine-tooth comb, systematically examining every square centimeter. Finally, Randy said, "I feel something." He was reaching as far back as he could in an open compartment in the upper right-hand part of the hutch. "It's very small, but it might be a lever. I'm going to try to move it."

Indeed, it was a small, almost unnoticeable, spring-operated switch that opened the secret compartment. When he tripped it, what looked like a decorative panel just below the compartment with the switch flipped open. The four of them looked at each other with nervous anticipation.

Randy reached in and pulled out a sheaf of papers.

The two physics professors immediately started pouring over the papers, the looks on their faces growing more animated with each page they turned. When they had gone through them all, they stared at each in silence. There was an excitement in the air that could be felt by everyone, especially Terri

and Kathy. Each of them loved a physics professor and understood what the two men were feeling right now.

Wes broke the silence. "Condensed-matter physics is not my area, but it looks to me like this might really be the answer."

"Gibbons works in that area," Randy said. "We'll show this to him on Monday and see what he thinks. But just imagine: a breakthrough of this magnitude...solving the problem of cold fusion. It could go a long way in breaking our dependence on foreign oil. If the experimentalists can make this work, I think Baker has a real chance at the Nobel Prize posthumously."

Terri looked ecstatic. "Oh, Randy, do you really think so?"

"He'd certainly be considered."

"That would be so wonderful for Mrs. Baker. You remember I met her when I bought the desk. She'll be so proud, so thrilled, that the memory of her husband will live on in physics."

Randy went over and put his arm around Terri. There seemed to be no end to discovering new things that he liked about her. Squeezing her shoulder, he said, "You certainly seem to have a wonderful perspective on being a physicist's wife."

Kathy could not believe what she had just heard and her mouth almost dropped open in astonishment. She looked at her husband, her eyes clearly projecting the thought of "Wow!"

Terri felt her face flush, and her mind began jumping about as erratically as her heart. For some highly irrational reason, the idea of "proposal" jumped into her thoughts. She shook it off. Surely, even if he was thinking about it, which in itself was still hard to believe, he certainly would not propose to her in front of Wes and Kathy, would he? Well, the whole idea might be wishful thinking on her part, but just in case...this was not her idea of a romantic atmosphere for a marriage proposal. Time to change the subject.

"Well, guys," she said, "you think maybe we could get the desk back to my place?"

"Sure," Wes responded quickly. "Come on Randy, I've got my pickup here."

After they brought the desk back into Terri's house, Wes and Kathy left. They put it in the den where it had been before all the trouble started. There was no sofa in the den, so Terri sat down in her favorite reading chair, while Randy took a seat opposite her. She was looking at the desk, while he was looking at the books.

"When is your mother due back?" he asked.

"She just said, 'Expect me when you see me,' so who knows?"

"Does she call to let you know when she's leaving?"

"Not usually. She thinks it worries me to know that she's on the road. I guess it would a little. This way, I never know quite when to worry."

Randy laughed. "Not a bad strategy." He paused and tilted his head, listening intently. "I think I hear a car in the driveway." Terri's face turned pale, as fear suddenly gripped her. Randy saw her expression change. "I'm sure it's all right. There's no one left to come after the research. I'll just go and have a look."

Terri got up quickly to stay close to him. They went into the living room and looked out the main picture window.

"It's my mother!" she said. Her tone expressed both surprise and immense relief. She bolted to the door, flung it open, and ran out to meet her. Terri practically jumped into her arms and hugged her. Randy smiled as he watched the touching scene. After what she had been through, Terri had probably never been happier to see her mother.

Mrs. Lockhart was a little surprised at the intensity of this greeting, but before she could say anything, she noticed Randy standing on the front porch. She had a highly developed sense of humor, especially when it would be exercised at her daughter's expense, and it got the best of her just now. She smiled impishly. "Ah, now I see why you came running out of the house into your mother's arms. Was this young man trying to kiss you?"

Terri's face went beet-red. "Mother!" Randy started to laugh.

Mrs. Lockhart ignored her daughter's embarrassment. "Hello, Dr. Carrington. What a pleasant surprise seeing you here!" The surprise was indeed quite pleasant to her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Lockhart. I'm glad you had a safe trip. I must say, however, that Terri really does have cause to come running to greet you, but I'm afraid I can't take any credit for it myself."

"Oh? There is something I should know about?"

"You could never guess." Randy said.

Well, thought Mrs. Lockhart, just a bit disappointed, that means there's no engagement to announce yet.

"It's a very long story, Mom."

"Yes," Randy agreed. "Why don't I help you get your things in the house."

Then I'll be going, and Terri can tell you all about it."

"Oh, no, Randy. We'll both tell her."

He put his hand tenderly on her shoulder, a gesture that did not go unnoticed by Mrs. Lockhart. "It's all right. I think it'll be better for you to tell your mother on your own."

He thought it would definitely be better. Something difficult to define had been taking place between them over the last couple of days, perhaps heightened by the danger they had been in together. He thought Terri would feel more at ease talking to her mother about those aspects, if she wanted to bring them up at all, with him not there. Moreover, if she did bring them up, he did not want to be there, listening as a third party. Finally, even if she did not bring them up, he was not sure he wanted to be there when Terri told her mother that he had twice spent the night with her.

Her soft, brown eyes seemed to turn misty as she looked at him. "Please stay."

His heart melting, he said, "Sure, okay. Come on, let's get her things in the house."

They sat in the living room, Terri and Randy on the sofa, Mrs. Lockhart in her favorite easy chair. Terri related the whole sequence of events, beginning with the break-in at the boutique. Her summary was succinct and amazingly well-organized. Randy was quite impressed, mentally adding another item to his list of Terri's qualities that he appreciated.

He watched Mrs. Lockhart carefully. She sat with her eyes on Terri through the entire story without once saying a word. Terri had said nothing about any of the romantic events they had shared, but naturally she did include the fact that he had stayed with her at the house two nights in a row. As far as he could detect, her mother never so much as batted an eyelash. However, inwardly he was still tense. Would her reaction come now?

Instead of saying anything to her daughter, Mrs. Lockhart turned to him. "Dr. Carrington, Randy, you have my deepest gratitude for everything you did to help and to protect my daughter, even to the point of putting your life on the line for her."

"I have...a great deal of affection for your daughter, Mrs. Lockhart."

This amazing statement produced a reaction in all three of them. Terri's eyes widened in astonishment. He had never said that much even to her! Mrs. Lockhart sat back in her chair, a subtle smile beginning to form. And Randy himself was somewhat shocked at what he had just said. He had barely reached the point of admitting so much to himself.

He needed time to think; maybe Terri did too. "Well, Mrs. Lockhart,

Terri, now I really think I should go." Looking at her mother, he said, "I'm sure there's a lot you have to tell Terri about your visit to your sister." Turning to Terri, he said, "How about dinner Monday evening. I can let you know what the department makes of Baker's research."

She shook her head yes. Randy had not intended to kiss her goodbye in front of her mother, but Terri leaned forward and gave him a short kiss before he walked out the door.

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After Randy left, Terri returned to the living room and sat down again. Her mother looked directly at her. "You're in love with him." It was a statement, not a question.

"Yes. I'm in love with him...but I don't know if the feeling is mutual...yet. Sometimes I think I can see it in his eyes and in the way he treats me. But..."

"Terri, it's as plain as the nose on your face: he's madly in love with you. How many times have I told you now? Men just seem to take longer admitting such things to themselves. But he spoke from his heart just now. It came out before his mind had a chance to stop him."

"But Mom, he's worried about his career, his research." Terri had managed to convince herself that this was no longer true, but to get her mother's opinion on the issue, she decided to play the devil's advocate. "On our very first date, he said that these next few years should be his most productive years. He told me that historically, most Nobel Prizes were awarded for work done by young men. He doesn't think it's possible to make a commitment to love or marriage while maintaining his commitment to physics."

Mrs. Lockhart's smile reflected the wisdom of her years. "It will soon dawn on him that you will be his greatest asset in that pursuit. You and he were made for each other. You've always been so infatuated with the academic environment, with books, with scholarship and all that. You're just what he needs. His heart has already told him that. It's only a matter of time before his logic tells him the same thing."

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(Monday, August 13)

Monday morning found Randy, Wes, and Dr. Keith Gibbons in Dr. Cooper's office. The four physicists were in animated discussion over Dr. Baker's research.

"I don't think there's any doubt about it," Gibbons said. "He's come up with a way to make it work."

"I agree," Cooper said. "With this, we can get Baker's grant renewed with you as the new P.I. And I think we can get a grant proposal from Michaels approved by the NSF to build an experimental prototype, a fusion reactor. Gentlemen, this will make history--for this department, for this university, for our country, and eventually for the world. This afternoon, I'm going to call Mrs. Baker and tell her all about it."

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Randy left the office early Monday afternoon. Back at his apartment, he sat in his living room, surrounded by his books, trying to make some rational decisions.

He was going to be with Terri tonight. She was expecting to hear what the department decided about Baker's research. However, the real subject he was planning to bring up was their relationship and its future. He had somewhat inadvertently spoken from his heart on Saturday saying that he had great affection for her. As he thought about that statement, he realized that it had actually been an understatement. His heart always aches when he is with her. Is that love? Why have the philosophers never come up with a precise definition? It would then be a simple matter to identify the emotion, if and when it was present.

Unfortunately, he was aware of no such definition. So was he in love? He was going to have to decide that question without the help of the philosophers. In his heart, he believed he knew the answer. But both by disposition and by training, he also believed that if the heart was right, logical analysis should be able to confirm it.

Then he reflected on each little milestone as he discovered more and more about her. There was that profound statement she had made about an academic career while they were eating hot dogs at the county fair. Not only did she show great insight into the academic world, but she was obviously captivated by its wonders. He thought about her love of books, knowledge, and intellectual inquiries. A sudden thought struck him, and he smiled: if anyone could find out what the philosophers had said about love, Terri could!

He remembered her genuine interest in Wes' work and Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, how thrilled she was to attend an APS meeting, and buying that book on relativity just because it was what got him interested in physics. Then there was that astonishing statement she made in front of Wes and Kathy about how proud the wife of a research physicist could be of her husband.

However, there was more to her than just a love of academics. He thought about the kindness and understanding she had shown to that older woman who came into the boutique looking for a pretty nightgown. He smiled as he remembered the kindness she had shown even to Lorraine in order to help her through the disappointment Terri knew she was experiencing. He could still picture how Terri's eyes lit up when she talked about dogs and her work at

the shelter.

But something else was also clear to him: he was very much attracted to her romantically and physically. He had been from the first time he saw her, held her in his arms, and danced with her. It had ever since been a thrill to touch her, to hold her. Past images flashed through his mind. That first, spectacular kiss on their second date. Then he remembered how exciting it was running his fingers through her hair as he teased her on the ferris wheel and how wonderful it had been when he held her as she fell asleep on his lap while watching a movie. He had thought at the time how much he would like to come home to her everyday. He recalled hugging her when she had been so scared and yet so brave that first night he had stayed with her. That experience, however, touched a chord that went far deeper than just physical enjoyment. It had brought to the surface impulses as ancient as mankind: he was her protector.

Yes, Terri was a bright, kind, and compassionate girl who also loved and understood the academic life. She was cute, funny, and romantic; she was affectionate with him, and her eyes told him that she...yes, that she loved him.

All of a sudden, he knew that philosophers were unnecessary. He was in love with Terri Lockhart, and he wanted to spend the rest of his life with her. Why had it taken so long for him to admit this?

What about his research? His career? Perhaps he had overestimated the magnitude of the problem. He had never known a couple more happily married than Wes and Kathy, and he remembered everything Kathy had said about how she and Wes worked things out. How had that conversation gotten started anyway? Who started it? Of course! Terri started it. Pretty foxy.

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(Monday Evening, August 13)

Randy picked Terri up at her house at seven o'clock, and they went to The Barn for dinner.

"So he did it? Dr. Baker really discovered how to make cold fusion work?" Terri could hardly contain her excitement.

"That's the consensus...and you'll be happy to know that Cooper called Mrs. Baker today and told her the good news."

"Oh, I'm so happy for her!"

"Cooper also thinks we can get the grant reinstated with Gibbons as the P.I. If Baker turns out to be right, cold fusion power plants should only be a few years away."

"Wow, this is just so exciting! And to think that I was actually involved in all this."

"That's right. You played a pivotal role in bringing a great discovery to light. With your love of science, I know what that means to you."

All she could do was shake her head in amazement.

They finished eating a few minutes later. "Let's go back to the university," Randy suggested. "I was thinking of Davis Fountain. We can sit there for awhile. There's something I want to talk about."

Terri's heart started to beat faster. What was this? Had he come to some decision, as her mother had predicted? Maybe it was to break up with her. No, she had watched his eyes all through dinner. He just did not have the right look in his eyes for that. Would he tell her that he loved her? Could he actually be thinking of proposing? Honestly! She had to get control of her imagination. Thoughts like this could end leading to severe disappointment.

Davis Fountain was behind Davis Hall and on the side of Faraday Hall. Randy always considered it a miniature version of Buckingham Memorial Fountain in Grant Park. The fountain itself was at the center of a small, paved area. Multicolored spotlights were projected onto the fountain, and stone benches formed a circle around it. The site was beautiful after dark, and it was Randy's favorite place on campus. He often went there just to sit, usually reminiscing. He wanted to share it with Terri on this very special night "and let the stars put on a show for free."

He parked the car in the usual lot near Faraday Hall and held her hand as they walked to Davis Fountain. When they sat down on one of the stone benches, Terri could tell that Randy was uncharacteristically nervous. She herself felt a little nervous. What was he going to do? This could be the most exciting moment of her life.

Randy watched as the night breeze blew her hair. As he probed the depths of her soft, brown eyes, he thought again how pretty she was. They both turned a little so they could see each other better. Suddenly, the wind caught her skirt just right and flipped it up five or six inches above her knees. He looked down at her nylon-adorned legs and felt that familiar desire for her stir within him.

Terri also looked down and then back up at Randy. "You've seen a lot more of me," she said with a slightly embarrassed smile.

"Yes, but we're in public now." He took the errant hem and smoothed it back into place. Then he took her hand in both of his and just sat there, apparently in deep thought, slowly caressing her soft skin with his fingers.

His action was having a very disturbing effect on her: his hand gently cradling hers, the feel of his warm caress, and sitting there under the

stars. Her heart was pounding, and a shiver of excitement was racing through her. Incredible, she thought, how such a simple thing can, in the right circumstances, seem so erotic.

Randy was almost intoxicated with the feel of her hand in his. His emotions were running over. It was now or never.

"I think our feelings for each other have been getting stronger. At least I know mine have. I hesitated so long to believe how much I really cared for you. But I have no doubt anymore. I love you, Terri. I guess I've been fighting this because I couldn't see how to devote myself to my research, my career in physics, and at the same time devote my love to you. But I believe it can work. Everything I've learned about you tells me that. It won't be easy for you, though. Research takes a lot of time and energy. But with you beside me, I'll be the better for it. You'll inspire me, bring out the best in me. Research without you would now be very hollow. It's you I want."

Terri took her hand back and threw her arms around him. "Oh, Randy, I love you so much. You've made me the happiest girl in the world." Her heart was overflowing.

He pulled back and put his hands on her shoulders. "You know me pretty well now, and you know what academia is like. You will marry me?"

For a moment, all she could do was stare at him as her eyes began to tear. "Yes, yes! Of course I'll marry you. You're everything I ever wanted, everything I ever dreamed of. And I'll be right there beside you when you win the Nobel Prize in physics."

They hugged again, then kissed. He tenderly placed his hand on her face and then ran his fingers through her hair several times, just admiring her. She was now his. It was difficult to believe.

As the moment passed, a roguish smile slowly materialized on his face. "Well, now, in view of our new relationship, I'm going to take you up on an offer you once made."

"An offer?"

"Yes. The first time I came to see you at your boutique, you said that if I had a girlfriend to buy them for, you would recommend the bra and panties you thought were the most adorably cute. Tomorrow I'll stop by for your recommendation."

Terri giggled. "Well, I can see there's never going to be a dull moment in this marriage. I think you'll be surprised by the ones I pick."

"I can hardly wait!"

"And now I have another surprise for you."

"What's that?"

"Tomorrow I'm going to introduce you to Mogul."