

Chapter 9

(Tuesday Night, August 7)

Terri stood there watching the doorknob turn, panic beginning to well up inside of her. She fought to keep a level head, and despite the fear she felt, managed to keep herself under control. After all, the door was locked, and the deadbolt was in place. No one could possibly just walk right in. Using the flashlight to guide her steps, Terri walked silently to the door and looked out the peephole. The moon cast very little light on the front porch, but it was enough. Two men were standing there in ski masks.

Ski masks can be enormously frightening in appearance, and Terri froze, again overwhelmed with sheer panic. However, the doorknob stopped turning as the lock held, and once more she regained control of herself. She turned and walked quickly back to the bedroom. As she reached for the phone on her bedside table, she suddenly remembered the mystery novel she had been reading. Would the phone line be cut? Her mother had taken their only cell phone to Arizona. Her heart raced as she picked up the phone.

The dial tone sprang to life, that wonderful dial tone. She dialed 911. When the call was answered, she said with a trembling voice, "Two men in ski masks are at my front door trying to get in." In response to the dispatcher's questions, Terri gave her name and address. She was assured that the police would be on their way immediately.

She set the phone down without hanging up and walked back to the front door. When she looked through the peephole, she saw that the men were still there, talking softly. She could not hear anything they were saying. On an impulse, Terri decided to flip on the living-room light using the switch by the door. One of the men looked at the light that suddenly appeared behind the curtains and pointed. Immediately, they turned and started walking away at a very brisk pace. Just before they got out of her range of vision, she could see them pull off their masks. Then they quickly disappeared, leaving her only with a brief glimpse of the back of their heads. She would not be able to describe them to the police or recognize them if she saw them again.

Two minutes later, she heard the police siren.

Terri gave her statement to the two men who arrived first. As she was doing that, a second squad car pulled up, and Sgt. Rafferty got out.

"Good evening Miss Lockhart. I heard the call come over the radio. I'm very pleased you were not hurt. This is rather curious that we have an attempted break-in at your house so soon after the trouble at your boutique. Do you think they could be related?"

Terri tried to think quickly. Clear, rational thought was difficult because she was still shaking from the whole incident. Should she tell him about Randy's theory? She remembered what Randy had said about making false

accusations. Could he get into trouble if she told Rafferty that Randy thought it was Aziz looking for Baker's research papers? However, there was another potential problem. Randy was an assistant professor of physics at the university. That was a dignified position, and she felt a strong emotional inclination to protect that dignity. What would Rafferty think if she explained Randy's idea? Good grief, she had trouble believing it herself! If she told Rafferty that Randy thought Tahir wanted to steal some papers from a completely empty desk she had bought at an estate sale, he would think Randy an idiot. She did not think that, but she did think the theory was unlikely. Of course, she had not heard the conversation to which Randy had been at least partially privy. Anyway, she could never present Randy's view with the force or clarity that he could. No, the best strategy, at least until she talked with Randy about this latest event, was to offer no speculative theories.

"I don't know. I don't see any connection."

"I don't either, Ma'am. But if there's one thing I've learned about police work, it's that coincidences are very rare."

After making a few more notes for their reports, the police left. Terri went back into the house and secured both locks on the door. She rushed to the phone in the bedroom to call Randy but then realized that she had never gotten his home phone number. She tried the telephone book, but his number was unlisted. She would have to wait until the morning to contact him.

She decided that it would probably be wise not to continue reading her mystery novel tonight. Nevertheless, it was some time before she was able to fall asleep.

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(Wednesday, August 8)

The following morning, Terri opened the boutique as usual. After going through the normal morning chores, she reached for the phone to call Randy at his office in Faraday Hall. She got the number for the physics department, started to punch it out on the keypad, but then stopped. She wanted to talk with him face-to-face. So she put a "back-in-an-hour" sign on the door and headed over to the university.

Parking at CIU was not an easy task, especially if one needed to catch a metered parking space. However, Terri's student parking sticker was good until the end of the calendar year, so she simply parked in the student lot nearest Faraday Hall.

She found Randy's office number on the building directory. As she walked toward it, she noticed that the door was open. Good. He was there. The aura of Faraday Hall began to calm her, and she slowed her pace. How she loved the halls of academia! To her, the corridors seemed to emanate intellectualism.

Terri approached Randy's open door slowly and quietly. He was busy working at his desk and did not notice her. Inside Faraday Hall, while looking into the office of Dr. Randall Carrington, assistant professor of physics, the tension and apprehension she had felt since the attempted break-in last night seemed to fade into the background. A warm feeling came over her, and she seemed to glow with delight.

She noticed his book cases: two of them filled with books and journals, almost filling one entire wall of the office. Two filing cabinets. A desk covered with papers, open books, and open journals, although neatly arranged. A computer. The office projected an atmosphere of scholarship. How strongly she was drawn to that world. But what attracted her attention more than anything else was Randy. He was writing furiously. Watching his hand, she was sure he was writing mathematical equations. The expression on his face was a combination of intensity and intelligence.

Terri would have been attracted to a scene such as this regardless of who the professor was. But the intensity of her reaction was magnified many orders of magnitude because this was Randy. She loved him. Could she think of him as "her Randy"? It was difficult to say at this point in their relationship what constituted reality. Of one thing she was quite sure: the desperate cry of her heart was that, if not now, then soon he would be "her Randy."

However, she could not indulge her reverie indefinitely. They had a grave subject to discuss. She gently knocked on the open door.

The change in expression that swept over his face was a delight for her to see. There was that brief moment of exasperation that his concentration had been interrupted, followed by a look of utter surprise, and finally settling into a warm and welcoming smile.

"Terri! What a surprise. Wow! You look so pretty standing there. Come in. Come in."

As Terri entered, her face radiated the pleasure she felt. "Hi, Randy. I could see that you were working hard. I hope I didn't interrupt some great breakthrough you were about to make."

Randy laughed. "No, I was just trying out a few ideas. No breakthroughs scheduled for this morning." Suddenly, his look got more serious. "Who's manning the boutique? Is there anything wrong?"

"I'll just open late this morning. I needed to see you. Last night around ten o'clock two men wearing ski masks tried to get into my house." The look on Randy's face became one of grave concern. Terri related the whole episode.

When she finished, Randy leaned back in his chair and said nothing for a

full minute.

"It all fits with the theory I developed yesterday," he said at last. "Like Rafferty said, coincidences of this nature are very rare. Therefore, it's unlikely that these two events are unrelated. Aziz went to your house because that is where Baker's desk is and he still believes that you have the research." Randy paused while pondering a new idea. "But another point now occurs to me. Since you didn't turn any papers into the physics department or to Mrs. Baker when you first got the desk, he probably thinks that you don't know you have the research. He was just covering all the bases by searching your files at the boutique."

"But I don't have it."

"You might, but I believe at the very least he thinks you do, and it's got to have something to do with that desk."

"But there was nothing in the desk when I bought it."

"So it would seem. That is the key problem that still remains unsolved."

"And anyway, if he thinks that I have the research, why doesn't he just come to me and ask me about it? Maybe ask if he could look around and examine the desk. After all, we know each other. We're on friendly terms. We even had a date."

"That question already occurred to me, and I've given it some thought. There are two possible reasons. First, he might be trying to avoid a potential problem. If he asks you, and the two of you find it, you might want to turn it over to Cooper or Mrs. Baker. Since he wants it for himself, he doesn't want to take that chance. Second, and more likely, even if you were willing to give it to him, he might not want you to know that it's now in his possession. This would explain why he didn't want his search of your files to be detected and why he made the break-in look like a common robbery. If this conclusion is correct, then we can make a further assumption: not only does he think you as yet don't know you have the research, he doesn't want to find out that you have it. You not knowing about the research would make life much easier for him and would explain why he and his accomplice left so quickly when you turned the light on. They didn't want to break in if you were home."

"What about my mother? Why wasn't he worried about her?"

"While you were at the boutique, it would have been easy enough for him to determine that she had not been home for several days."

"So why didn't he break in during the day?"

"Maybe just to avoid the risk of doing it in the daytime."

Terri let out a long sigh. "Well, you have an answer for everything."

Almost everything, that is. Your theory about Tahir explains everything except where these papers were in an empty desk."

Randy looked thoughtful--and puzzled. "You're right about that." Neither spoke for well over a minute. Again, Terri felt the comfort of knowing that she was not alone, that they were facing this danger together. But the comfort he gave her went even deeper: he was an intellectual, a scientist, who applies logic and the scientific method to any problem he needs to solve. She had far more confidence in him than she had in the police.

Suddenly Randy looked up and fixed his stare directly on her. "I have been a fool!" he exclaimed. "I thought all this had to do with a mediocre physicist having delusions of winning a Nobel Prize by stealing Baker's work, even if it wasn't finished. Remember when we first started to look for a link between Aziz and the break-in? I mentioned two things about him. He was a physicist and foreign national. I completely forgot about the second! He's not interested in any Nobel Prize. He wants the research for Saudi Arabia! Maybe he's even an agent. NSF grants are in the public domain. Perhaps Saudi Arabia was watching for someone to receive a grant in this area of research. When Baker got one, they sent Aziz to work with him and steal the research. Baker's death would have really upset their plans."

"Randy, don't you think that might be just a little far-fetched? You sound like you're writing a spy thriller. You're a scientist. Where's your evidence?"

"Great advances in science often come from a creative imagination and flashes of insight. Once a hypothesis is formed, then you see if it can explain all the known data. This new hypothesis would explain why Aziz has disappeared. He disconnected his phone and moved out of his apartment. If I'm right, we now know why. He went underground: his mission has now become covert."

Again, Randy paused. Then he said, "I have a call to make."

"Who are you going to call?"

"The FBI."

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Later that afternoon, Randy came by the boutique. "How did your phone call go?" Terri asked.

"Well, after talking with several different agents, I finally got to speak with someone in counterintelligence in Washington. He acknowledged that my theory was a possibility. However, he was not convinced enough to do anything about it yet. First, he said that Baker's death was completely natural; no possibility of foul play. He also pointed out that we don't even know whether Baker made any real discovery before he died, and without some

positive, hard evidence to link Aziz to the break-in and attempted break-in, there was nothing he could do. At least that was his decision. He did do one thing, though. He checked on Aziz, his visa and passport. He's still here, somewhere. Also, since he is no longer employed by the university, he's not eligible to stay. But it could be some time before anything comes of that issue."

Terri laid her hand on Randy's arm, and there was tenderness in her voice. "I'm sorry. I know you're disappointed."

"Well, yes, I was disappointed. I think they're making a mistake. I also called the local police and talked with Rafferty. He showed a bit more interest than the FBI. However, he said there wasn't enough evidence to put out an APB on Aziz. Neither could he justify putting a man on stakeout at your house. The best he could do was to have a car drive by periodically after dark."

Randy walked around the counter and took Terri's hand. "Come on. Let's go in the office." Once there, he put both hands on her shoulders. Again, she felt the magic of his touch as she watched his eyes. But this time, there was concern in those eyes. Could she see something else too?

"Terri, despite the official skepticism, I'm convinced more than ever that I'm on the right track, and I'm worried about you. With your mother away, you're in that house all by yourself. Maybe I should stay there with you, at least for the next couple of nights. I could sleep on the sofa in the living room."

Terri was sure that she blushed. Instantly, her mind was a mass of conflicting impulses. Intense feelings began to stir within her, and her nerves tingled with a disturbing mixture of excitement and doubt. How incredibly romantic it would be for the two of them to be together at the house. Maybe a candlelight dinner, perhaps later snuggling into his arms on the sofa as they watched a movie. These images were made even more romantic by the thought that he would be there as her protector. But then doubt protruded itself into these romantic thoughts: all night...the two of them alone? Would he want to make love to her? This thought also brought very confusing emotions. She felt that same desire stir within her, but she also believed that those heights of ecstasy were reserved for marriage. Would she be able to resist her own desires? But then she realized that she would not have to. He said that he would sleep in the living room while she was in the bedroom. He had no intention of making love to her, and everything she knew about him indicated that, above all, he was very prim and proper, surely believing the same things about marriage that she did. He would be satisfied with the dinner and movie.

Then another question occurred to her: had the romantic implications of his suggestion occurred to him?

This past weekend had been a wonderfully romantic time for her...for

them. She had come to realize that she loved Randy, and she believed with all her heart that even if he was not at that point yet, his feelings for her had certainly deepened. However, as much as she would have liked that candlelight dinner and movie, perhaps slowing things down a little now might be in order.

Her smile was tender and warm. "Oh, Randy, that's very sweet of you, but I think I'll be safe enough at home."

He took her hand in both of his. "All right, Terri. But you be careful, very careful. If you have second thoughts about staying alone or if you feel at all frightened, you call me."

She laughed. "I'd do that in a heartbeat--if I knew your number."

Randy let out a groan. "Leave it to the absent-minded professor! I should have done this a long time ago. Give me something to write on."

He wrote down his home telephone number and handed it to her. Then he reached out and tenderly ran his hand through her hair and drew her to him. His kiss was warm and affectionate.

Maybe she should have had that candlelight dinner after all.

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(Wednesday Evening, August 8)

Terri remained at the boutique after closing to finish up some bookkeeping chores. It was already dark when she left to drive home.

Her car was only a few spots down from the front door of the boutique. She walked to it quickly and got in. As she pulled away from the curb, she looked into her rear-view mirror and saw another car pull out of a parking space about three or four behind where she had been parked. She could not tell the make, but the car was dark blue.

Her heart started beating faster. After a few minutes, however, she told herself that she was acting foolishly, even paranoid. There was nothing at all unusual in someone parked on her block pulling out at the same time she did. Before all this trouble had started, she would not have given such an event a second thought. She made a conscious effort to dismiss her momentary fear.

Nevertheless, she caught herself looking in the rear-view mirror more often than she usually did. The second time she looked, she spotted the blue car again. It was two cars behind her. She made a turn and watched in the mirror. The blue car turned with her. She made another turn. So did the blue car. Her fear was back, several notches higher than it had been before.

As a test, she decided to make two more turns that would essentially put

her on a course back toward the boutique. The blue car, leaving from the same block as she had, could not possibly have an innocent reason for making the same turns.

She slowed so that she could keep the car in her mirror. Turn number one: the car followed. She tried to fight the fear that was escalating. She had to keep a level head in order to think clearly and quickly. She held her breath.

Turn number two: the blue car continued straight.

Terri closed her eyes briefly and let out a long breath. As her heart rate began slowing back to normal, she felt a sense of relief rushing through her.

She got back on the route home. As she drove, she continued to study the traffic behind her. No car seemed to be following. She was now not far from home.

When she told Randy that she felt perfectly safe at home, she had actually believed it. Now, as she pulled into her driveway, she became increasingly more apprehensive. All the lights were off in the house, and her mother was not home. Still, she had come home to an empty, dark house before. However, after what had already happened and with Randy's theory fresh in her mind, the darkness seemed...well, heavier, ominous, more sinister. She should have been feeling a sense of warmth and comfort upon arriving home after a long day at the boutique, but instead a feeling of foreboding swept over her as she watched the dark house loom ever larger through the car windshield. Her scare on the drive home had not helped.

Terri stopped the car and turned off the engine. When she turned off the headlights, almost complete darkness descended. There were no streetlights near her house, and the only glimmer of light came from a sliver of moon occasionally appearing through thick clouds. She sat in the car for a few minutes trying to convince herself she was acting like a child afraid of the dark.

In her peripheral vision, she thought she saw movement at a nearby bush. She forced herself to stare intently in that direction. She could see nothing. Then a new, even more disturbing thought occurred to her: could someone already be in the house? The previous break-in attempt had been after dark, and tonight she had stayed late at the boutique. Maybe this was the opportunity they had been waiting for, but she was arriving home sooner than they had expected. For the second time tonight, she began to experience real fear.

Again, Terri tried to regain control of her emotions. She had no real evidence that anyone was in the house. If someone were in there, would she not have seen at least a flashlight beam? Surely the fact that the house was completely dark should reassure her that nothing was amiss.

She moved her hand to the car door handle but hesitated, her hand suspended in midair. Then with sudden determination, she opened the door and got out.

She walked quickly to the front door and tried the doorknob. Still locked. No one had been here after all. However, her relief was short-lived as another thought occurred to her. Maybe they broke in through the back door. Once again her rational mind was telling her she was letting her imagination run wild. Well, if someone was in the house, she certainly did not want to take him by surprise. She got out her key, unlocked and opened the door, making plenty of noise.

As soon as she got in, she turned on the outside-porch light and the living-room light. Nothing was out of order, and everything seemed to be exactly as she had left it in the morning. She relocked the door and walked in.

Terri looked around the living room more carefully. Yes, everything seemed to be okay. Walking into the kitchen, she gave that room a similar examination. Of course, if Randy was right, there was nothing in these rooms that would interest the culprits. She then realized that subconsciously, she had been avoiding the den...and the desk. The back door opened into the kitchen, so she turned on the outside-porch light. Then, keeping a tight grip on her nerves and taking a deep breath, she walked into the den.

However, after turning on the light, the room seemed completely undisturbed. With a real sense of relief, she walked back into the kitchen and began making herself something to eat.

After eating dinner and cleaning up the dishes, she turned off the kitchen light and decided to retire to the den to finish reading her mystery. She read for about an hour. Maybe it was the book, but as the night wore on, the absolute silence in the big house was becoming more pronounced. Terri was again beginning to feel very uneasy.

Perhaps a glass of water would help. She got up and walked toward the kitchen. However, before she turned on the light, she stopped, frozen in her tracks. The back-porch light was off.