

Chapter 8

(Saturday, August 4)

Randy drove Terri to the boutique. On the way, he looked over at her, and she appeared both dejected and tense.

He reached over and squeezed her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm all right. I was just picturing what we might find there. Maybe everything's been taken. Maybe there's a lot of vandalism. I've put so much work into the store, creating just the right look, and now this."

"Terri, we'll work it out. I'll help you in every way I can."

She turned her head to look at him and was comforted by his presence and reassurance. It occurred to her that they were facing this together--as a couple. Having each other, something like this would be easier to handle. When he withdrew his hand from her shoulder, she took it in hers. A feeling of peace began slowly overcoming her anxiety.

When they arrived, a police sergeant met them and took them around to the back door of the store.

"I'm Sgt. Rafferty, Ma'am. You're the owner?"

"Well, not quite. My mother owns the boutique, but I run it. My name is Terri Lockhart."

"And you?" Rafferty asked, looking at Randy.

"Randy Carrington."

Turning back to Terri, Rafferty continued. "The back door was forced. We've already dusted for prints, so you can go in. Do you keep money in the store over night?"

"No, never over night."

"Good. Take a look around and give us an idea what was taken. It doesn't have to be an exact list, just a general summary with an approximate value."

The three of them walked in, and Terri looked around, starting with the office. While she was doing that, Randy asked the policeman, "Do you get many break-ins in this neighborhood?"

"No. This was a real surprise. We hardly ever have any trouble in Old Town. People really like this part of town and want to keep it nice. Apparently, the crooks feel the same way. Except for tonight."

About fifteen minutes later, Terri walked over to the two men. "Well, there are a couple of display racks that are completely empty. Someone just swooped up the entire bundle of clothes on each rack and carried it off. Mostly nightgowns, robes, things like that. Maybe about two thousand dollars worth altogether. But there's something else really odd. I looked through the office pretty carefully. It's a quirk of mine to keep my filing cabinet very neat and orderly. Someone has looked through the files in each drawer rather thoroughly. That's odd in itself, wouldn't you think, Sergeant? No business keeps money in a filing cabinet. But what's even stranger is that the search was done very carefully. If I didn't take special care to keep my file folders in neat arrays, I'd never have noticed that anyone had looked through them at all."

"Yes, Ma'am, that's all quite strange. What about your desk?"

"Same story. Someone looked through the desk drawers, again trying to make the search undetectable."

"I'll put it all in my report. I must tell you, however, that in cases like this, the stolen items are hardly ever recovered, and the thieves are hardly ever caught."

"What would they do with stolen items like nightgowns and robes?" Randy asked.

"Probably sell them out of their car in some other city. Very hard to catch them at it. Now here's what you need to do, Miss Lockhart. Our report will be ready for you to pick up in about five days. While you're waiting for it, put together a complete list of the stolen items for your insurance claim. Once you pick up our report, you can file the claim. If we make any headway on the case, I'll be in touch. But don't get your hopes up."

After Rafferty left, Terri sat down at her desk in the office and shook her head in dismay. "Well, this is certainly a first for me."

Randy came over and stood next to her. "I'm so sorry, Terri. Try not to let it get you down." He gently touched her face.

She looked up at him. There was real concern in his eyes. "Oh, I'm okay. I know it could have been much worse."

"If you'd like, I can come over and help you get the store back in order."

Despite the distraction caused by the robbery, Terri definitely sensed how much he cared for her. She got up and moved close to him. He put his arms around her in a tender and comforting hug. She felt warm and protected in his strong arms. After a few seconds, Randy stepped back to look into her face. There was a definite exchange of affection between them.

"Thanks, but it won't be much work. The thief was really very neat. Would you want to drive me home now? All of a sudden I feel really tired."

"I think that's a good idea. Let's go."

On the drive back, Randy was feeling really sorry for Terri. "It's such a shame that your mother's gone right now. You're going to be all alone again and after all this too."

His concerned warmed her heart. "I'll be okay. Say, I wonder if I should give her a call and tell her about the break-in." She thought about it for a few minutes. "No, I don't think I will. It's such a long trip to Arizona, and it might make her want to come back. It's not like I'm in any danger."

At the house, Randy walked Terri to the front door with his arm around her, while she had hers around his waist. At the door, he gently touched her face and leaned forward and kissed her. Just a short, tender kiss.

"I'm sorry our trip to Chicago had to end on such a bad note," he said.

Terri smiled sweetly. "It hasn't ended badly. Believe me! I had such a great time! It's probably the most exciting thing I every did. Nothing can take away how much I enjoyed being with you."

That was such a sweet thing to say, he thought. "I'll be in touch soon to see how you're doing. Goodnight, Terri."

With that, he turned and left. Again, she stood and watched him drive off.

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(Monday, August 6)

It was common practice in the physics department at the beginning of each school year to hold an informal meeting between the faculty and the new graduate students. This year, Randy and Wes had been responsible for organizing it. At the meeting, each member of the faculty introduced himself and explained something of his research. This year's meeting was held the Monday following the break-in at Creative Fantasies. After the meeting was over, Randy and Wes started down the hall back to their offices. Several of the new graduate students caught up with them.

"Dr. Carrington," said Ahmid, a graduate student from the United Arab Emirates, "we were wondering if we could talk to you some more about your work. We're really interested in studying quantum gravity, possibly specializing in it for our Ph.D. research. What you said was fascinating. We'd like to here more."

Randy looked at Wes, who nodded his head. "Sure. Dr. Tanner and I were

just going out for some lunch. Why don't you come along, and we can talk."

At the restaurant, they had just placed their order when Randy suddenly noticed Aziz. He was talking on a public phone not too far from their table. "Wes, look who's here. I thought he left town already."

"So did I."

Ahmid turned toward Aziz and began listening carefully. "Dr. Carrington, he is speaking Arabic."

Randy's expression was thoughtful. To Ahmid he said, "Well, he's from Saudi Arabia, but what puzzles me is why he's still here." Turning to Wes, he added, "And why is he using that phone instead of his cell phone?"

"Cell phone transmissions can be picked up by others," Wes suggested. "Maybe he wants more privacy."

Ahmid's attention had been drawn back to Aziz. Suddenly, he cut in again. "Dr. Carrington, I am concerned about the subject of his conversation. He is saying something about a robbery. He refers to a...I am not sure of the proper translation for the word he used. Perhaps *bazaar*? He also mentions a search. I am only getting a few words now and then because I cannot hear him well." Ahmid paused, turning toward the phone again. "Now he says he will continue and that he knows where."

After this last piece of overheard conversation, Aziz hung up the phone and left the restaurant without noticing Randy and Wes.

"Who is this man?" Ahmid asked.

"His name is Tahir Aziz. He was working as a post doc for Dr. Baker, but when Baker died this summer, his grant was terminated and Aziz left the department."

"Why would he be talking about a robbery?" Ahmid asked.

"Who knows?" Wes responded. "Maybe he was talking to someone back in Saudi Arabia and describing something that had caught his attention, maybe something that happened in Chicago. Plenty of robberies there, I'm sure."

Randy thought that explanation was highly dubious but said nothing. The conversation soon drifted back to physics, although he found it difficult to concentrate on quantum gravity.

Later that afternoon, Randy was back in his office thinking about Aziz. He got his home number from the department secretary, but, as he expected, the phone had been disconnected. He called the apartment complex where Aziz had lived during the previous year and found that he had moved out. No forwarding address. What was it that Ahmid had heard? Three key words stood

out: robbery, bazaar, and search. Could Aziz have been referring to the break-in at Terri's boutique? The word "bazaar" might be an appropriate word to describe an American boutique to someone in Saudi Arabia. Terri had also said that her files and desk had been searched. But what was the connection between Aziz and Terri? They had dated once, yes. But why would that have prompted him to break in and search her boutique? What about the nightgowns and robes? Was he planning to smuggle them back to Saudi Arabia and sell them at exorbitant prices? No, that would not explain the search. In fact, there seemed to be no logical explanation that could explain both the robbery and the search.

Or was there? Terri had said that the search was carefully done, making it difficult to detect. It was only Terri's meticulous neatness that made its discovery possible. Maybe the robbery was for the sole purpose of covering up the search. But what could he possibly have been looking for that would be worth the risk of a break-in?

The only way to get that answer would be to talk to Terri again. Randy left the office and drove over to the boutique.

She smiled brightly when she saw him walk through the door. "Hi, Randy. What a pleasant surprise!"

"I'm glad to see you so cheerful again. How's everything going?"

"Going fine. Everything's cleaned up, although there was very little to do along those lines. I've got the inventory of what was stolen ready to send into the insurance company as soon as the police report is ready, and I've already ordered replacement stock."

"You're very efficient."

"Well, efficiency helps when running a business."

Becoming more serious, Randy said, "Listen, I overheard something today, and we need to talk about it. It could be very important. How about dinner tonight?"

She looked at him with concern in her eyes. "Yeah, that'd be fine. It's only a few minutes until closing. Did you want to go now?"

"The sooner, the better."

Terri closed the boutique, and they headed to The Barn. After ordering, Randy related the overhead phone conversation that Aziz had made and the tentative conclusions he had reached earlier in his office.

"Oh, that just can't be," Terri said when he had finished. "He's not the type. He's just so..."

"Handsome and polite?"

"Well, yeah, handsome and polite. And anyway, what could I possibly have that he would want?"

"That's what we have to figure out. If we can find an answer to that question, we have the link that ties him to the break-in, and it would confirm my theory. Now let's think. He's a physicist, and he's a foreign national. He met you at the end-of-term dinner, and then you subsequently went out on a date."

"Just once." She looked at Randy with a rather sheepish expression. "I'll admit, he can make your heart skip a beat, but I'm sure his heart beat with perfect regularity. Although he was extremely polite and acted very debonair, I didn't excite him one little bit."

"How do you know?" The question was out before he realized how totally inappropriate it might be to ask such a question.

Terri responded with a rather shy smile. She did not seem at all offended by the question. However, she was too self-conscious to tell Randy about that ho-hum kiss Aziz had given her at the end of their date. "Oh, a girl can tell. I'm sure you guys can tell just as easily when you don't seem to inspire any excitement in your date. Right?"

Randy returned her shy smile. "Yeah, right. I've...ah...been able to draw that conclusion on a number of occasions."

Terri reached across the table and put her hand on his. "Well, I hope you were able to notice that you raised my interest...at least infinitesimally," she added with an impish grin.

"Raised your interest infinitesimally? You've been hanging around physicists too much."

She laughed. "Well, I'm dating one. A little bit of contamination is inevitable."

"Yes, that's naturally to be expected," he said, playing along with her tongue-in-cheek game. "But let's get back to business. So you didn't expect him to ask you out again?"

"No, I really didn't. And that was even before he left for the summer. He went back to Saudi Arabia."

"Yeah, I know. But if I'm right, something must have happened after he came back to make him take an interest in you again. But not a normal interest or a romantic interest. What could make him want to break into your boutique and search it?"

"Nothing. Like I said, I don't believe it could have been him."

"We need to follow my theory to its logical end. We might be forced to abandon it, but we're not at that point yet. As I said, he's a physicist and foreign national. Did you have any other connection with the physics department? Any connection at all, no matter how remote it might seem right now?"

"No, none that I can think of."

"Have you recently made any changes at the boutique? Anything new?"

"No, not really."

"How about at home?"

"No, I don't think so...wait a minute. I did buy an antique desk at an estate sale. In fact," she added with more animation, "the desk used to belong to a CIU professor. But that's not a connection to the physics department."

"What professor?"

"Dr. Joseph Baker."

"Baker!" Randy's mouth almost dropped open. "You bought Baker's desk?" He leaned forward, highly agitated. "Joseph Baker was in physics! He's the professor Aziz worked for."

Terri seemed considerably shaken.

"And that desk is not the one I saw in the boutique?" You have it at home?"

"Yes."

"Let's see...how would Aziz know you bought Baker's desk?" Then it hit him. "Did you meet Mrs. Baker?"

"Yes. When I bought the desk, she introduced herself to me. The desk had been very special to her husband, and she wanted to meet whoever was going to buy it."

"Did you tell her who you were?"

"Yes," Terri said very quietly.

Randy sat back and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. "There's the connection, then. Tomorrow, I'll get Mrs. Baker's number in Iowa and find out if Aziz contacted her and if she told him who bought the desk."

"But what could he want with that desk? You think he wanted to steal it?"

"I don't know...yet. Let's go back to your house and take a look at it as soon as we finish eating."

When they arrived at Terri's house, Randy took a good look at the desk. She had already put the desk to use. All the compartments in the hutch and all the drawers contained her materials. Randy examined the desk carefully, but found nothing that could motivate a break-in.

"Satisfied? Tahir couldn't possibly be interested in this desk. It couldn't have been him."

"That possibility cannot be dismissed with certainty yet until I call Mrs. Baker and find out if he knew you were the one who bought the desk. If he did not, then we can eliminate him as a possibility. If he did, my theory is still viable."

"I have a link to the department through you." Terri had that impish expression on her face again.

Randy scowled. "Aziz had no connection with me whatsoever. That could not possibly serve as a motive for action against you."

He stood up. "Well, I'd better be going. I actually had planned to get more work done tonight."

They walked to the door together. Randy turned and put his hand on her shoulder with a look of concern on his face. "Now we don't know where we stand with this. The only link between you and Aziz that we know about so far is Baker's desk. It was not at the boutique, and it is here at your house. Was he looking for the desk? I don't know yet. I don't think we have any cause for real alarm, but I would suggest caution.

"I'll be careful."

He gave her shoulder a squeeze and then turned and left. Terri stood there dumbfounded. She had been looking forward to his goodnight kiss ever since they got back to the house. There was no mistaking the disappointment she felt. Perhaps he was so caught up in thinking about Aziz, that it just had not occurred to him. She remembered how romance had been pretty far from his mind at the APS meetings when he was listening to those papers. He certainly could be intense when investigating a problem.

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(Tuesday, August 7)

Randy called at the boutique the following morning. "I got a hold of Mrs. Baker. My theory is still the best explanation of all the facts. She said Aziz had called her in Iowa shortly after he got back and found out about Baker's death, and she did tell him that you were the one who bought the desk."

"Did you tell Mrs. Baker your theory about Aziz and the break-in?"

"Oh, absolutely not. It would've served no purpose. Plus, I wouldn't want to upset her or give her something to worry about. And, after all, I might still be wrong. Wouldn't want to be making false accusations."

"But if he was after the desk, why did he break into the boutique? I think I told Mrs. Baker that I was going to put the desk in the house."

"She probably never mentioned that to him. Aziz would have assumed that the most likely place for you to put the desk would be your place of business."

"You still haven't come up with a reason why Tahir would be interested in the desk in the first place."

"I got some information this morning that might supply a clue. I knew that Baker had a grant to do research on cold fusion and that Aziz was working with him on that project. What I just found out today from Cooper is that none of Baker's recent papers were found after his death. For some reason yet to be explained, they're missing."

"And you think Tahir has them?"

"No, just the opposite. I think that's what he really wants. The next step in the logic is simple. The desk forms a link between you and Baker, and with that break-in at the boutique, he must think that you have the research papers."

"Why would he want these papers? What is cold fusion?"

"Fusion is a nuclear reaction in which two atomic nuclei combine to form a larger nucleus and in the process release huge amounts of energy. But the reaction requires extremely high temperatures. Cold fusion research is the attempt to find a way to make the reaction occur at lower temperatures. That's what Baker was trying to do. If the problem is ever solved, it would revolutionize the production of electricity in this country and eventually world-wide."

"How?"

"First, it's nuclear energy and would eliminate the need of burning fossil fuels to produce electricity, going a long way to reduce our dependence on foreign oil. Second, unlike the nuclear power plants today that

are based on fission, fusion doesn't produce by-products that are radioactive for thousands of years."

"Did Baker succeed?"

"No one knows, including Aziz."

"Why would he want Dr. Baker's research? Does he think he could continue on and solve the problem himself?"

Randy gave a cynical laugh. "I'm not quite sure yet. He's a mediocre physicist, but maybe he has delusions of winning the Nobel Prize."

"But, Randy, you still haven't explained how the desk links me up with this research. Does he think Mrs. Baker sold it and that I bought it with research papers lying all over it?"

"That I haven't completely figured out yet. But here's what we have so far, assuming that Aziz is behind this. He wants Baker's research. The desk links you to Baker. He went to the boutique looking for Baker's desk. He didn't find the desk, but he searches your filing cabinet and the desk that you do have there in case you had already found the research. However, since neither the desk nor the research papers were at the boutique, we must assume that he'll keep searching. He now knows Baker's desk is at your house. I'm not sure how the desk figures into this yet, but I do think we have sufficient evidence for raising caution to the next level."

Terri giggled. "I love the way you talk, Randy!"

"Now be serious. The desk is at your house. There could be some danger here."

"Okay, okay, I'll 'raise caution to the next level.' I promise."

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When Terri went back to her house that afternoon after closing the boutique, she remembered Randy's warning. For the first time ever, she felt a little apprehension in walking up to the front door. She unlocked it and slowly pushed it open. In fact, she pushed it all the way around as they do in suspense movies to make sure no one was hiding behind it.

There was no one there, and Terri suddenly felt a little silly. Nevertheless, as she promised Randy, when she closed the door, she made sure the dead bolt was secured. She also would not be opening the door, should anyone come calling, without first looking through the peephole.

She made dinner for herself and then settled down in her favorite chair in the den with the mystery novel she had been reading. However, she was currently in the not-so-tense middle section of the book, and her mind

frequently wandered. She often found herself looking at her new desk, formerly owned by Dr. Baker. Could Randy be right about Tahir? There was no doubt that Tahir could be charming; she had found herself captivated by him. But Randy had seen him in quite a different context in the physics department. Was he really trying to steal Baker's research so that he could take credit for it? But if he thought that she had Baker's research papers, why did he not simply come to her and ask for them? After all, he could easily account for his request by explaining that he had worked for Baker on the project.

Terri looked over at the desk again. There were certainly no papers on it or in it when she had bought it. That, to her, was the biggest problem with Randy's theory. How could Tahir possibly think that she had any of Baker's papers? She shook her head and went back to her mystery novel.

She dozed off several times as the evening wore on. When she finally looked at the clock, it was nearing ten. She decided to go to bed and read herself to sleep.

If there was one type of merchandise from her boutique in which she currently indulged, it was nightgowns. Extravagant, fancy, frilly, sexy nightgowns. She knew all the designs that were available and had access to them all. Tonight, she picked out a favorite from her collection: a mid-thigh length, red baby-doll style with short, puffy sleeves and edged everywhere in delicate lace. It was not sheer in the sense of transparent, leaving nothing to the imagination, but it did allow vague images of what was underneath to escape and stimulate the imagination. What she put on underneath, however, was not what came with the nightgown. Much preferring classic styling, she put on a pair of full-cut, white, shiny, silky panties.

She climbed into bed with her book, having now gotten to a very tense scene. Unbeknownst to Laura, the book's heroine, she had knowledge of something that could identify the mysterious murderer. In the scene, Laura was alone in a large mansion and heard a window break. She tried the phone by her bedside, but the line was dead. Soon footsteps were heard coming from the long, circular staircase. Terri's heart began to beat faster as she read. Suddenly, she heard a noise. There was a moment of confusion. Was her imagination creating some dramatic effect because of what she was reading? Who had actually heard the sound, she or Laura?

Terri heard it again. There was no mistake now--the noise was coming from the front door. She got out of bed and pulled on her robe. Deciding not to turn on any additional lights, she grabbed the flashlight she kept on the bedside table and quietly walked to the living room.

She stood there without moving or even breathing, the moment having a surreal quality. Her heart was again beating very fast. She switched on the flashlight, and aimed the beam at the front door. The doorknob was turning.