

Chapter 11

(Thursday Evening, August 9)

As Randy drove Terri back to her house, she was uncharacteristically quiet. She faced a confusing situation and was deep in thought over what to say and do about tonight. She had had two encounters now with unknown men trying to gain entrance into her house at night while she was there alone. Randy thought that on their next attempt, there would be no holds barred. This fact was very unsettling, and she was frightened at the idea of staying alone.

Randy had hoped the perpetrators had been watching her house earlier as he and Wes moved the desk to Faraday Hall. If they were, and if it was the desk they really wanted access to, then theoretically she should be safe. However, she still had doubts about the second "if," and the first "if" represented an even bigger long shot. It obviously would be dangerous for the men to keep her house under surveillance, and they might not have been taking that risk. Even Randy admitted as much. That would mean the men still believed the desk to be in the house. Yes, she thought, there was still very real cause to fear.

But the question of what to do tonight was complicated by the developing romance between the two of them. Should she ask Randy to stay with her again? She wanted to ask him because she was afraid. She also wanted to because it had been so wonderful last night. Tonight there would even be time for the candlelight dinner. Would he think her brazen? No, she had confidence that he knew her better than that. Would he think she was trying to be pushy in setting a romantic stage to encourage him to make a commitment?

She finally concluded that she was being silly. She was honestly afraid and Randy knew it. He would not read any more into her request than that. She did have a wonderful time last night, and she was sure he did also. They would simply have another wonderful time tonight.

Randy, too, was deep in thought as he drove Terri home. He had been profoundly moved last night. The affection that they had shown each other created a desire...a longing...for it to continue. He really wanted to stay with Terri again. Emotions were so difficult to pin down. Did he love her? He suspected it, but he was still unable to give a definite, resounding yes to that question.

He pulled the car into the driveway. "I'm going to leave the engine running and check things out. Stay here and keep the doors locked."

Terri swung around in the seat and looked at him in alarm. "Maybe that's not such a good idea." She reached out and touched his arm. "I mean..."

He smiled reassuringly. "It's just a precaution. I'll be fine." Without waiting for a response, he got out and locked the driver's door behind him.

At first, he just stood there, looking around. Since the nearest streetlight was a significant distance away, Terri's house was almost always shrouded in darkness. He looked at the trees and watched the bushes. He heard nothing and saw nothing. He started walking slowly and silently to the front of the car and turned left toward the front porch of the house. Instead of turning up the stairs, however, he kept walking. He intended to walk around the entire house. As he walked, he kept looking to his right and left, watching for any movement, any small flicker of a bush or branch on this windless night. The moon cast eerie shadows that seemed to move as the dark clouds passed overhead.

At the end of the house, he stopped again. He looked long and hard to his left toward the street. He did not want anyone surprising him from behind. Nothing. Finally, he turned right to walk along the side of the house. Once more, he saw and heard nothing. At the back of the house he repeated his strategy, first looking to his left. Then he turned right and began walking along the back side of the house.

He heard a small rustling of leaves and stopped dead, surveying the area ahead of him. He could not pinpoint the origin of the sound. He could detect no motion. He took a few more steps forward, with his heart starting to beat faster and adrenalin being released into his system. He heard it again and stopped. Suddenly, a cat charged out from a bush just ahead.

The quick, unexpected motion startled him, but he soon breathed a sigh of relief. However, this was no time to let down his guard. There was no way to be sure he had been the one who spooked the cat.

Randy continued his slow walk around the house. He turned toward the street to go along the other side of the house. Some distance ahead, he saw his car. He could not see inside, but there was no one on the street or around the car. Continuing at a slow, cautious pace, he walked up to the passenger window. He could now see Terri in the car and signaled her to unlock the door.

As he opened the door, he said, "Everything looks okay."

He reached in and took Terri's hand to help her out. When she felt his fingers curl around her hand, she pulled herself up and right into his arms. But it was not to kiss; she just wanted to be hugged. He stroked her hair as her head rested on his chest.

"I was so afraid for you."

Randy had been tense as he walked around the house, but what he was feeling now was quite different and infinitely more pleasurable. She had been afraid for him. Somehow, that thought touched him deeply. It was one thing for her to be attracted to him, but this seemed to put Terri's feelings for him on a higher level: she really cared for him, perhaps even loved him.

He also was keenly aware of her body pressed so tightly against his and the herbal scent of her silken hair as he slowly ran his fingers through its rich softness. The whole experience kindled feelings deep within him: that primordial role of a man as protector of his woman. "His woman." Yes, it was an exciting thought.

Randy took her by the shoulders and gently turned her toward the house. "It's all right now; we can go in."

They walked into the house and turned on the living room light. "Wait right here," Randy said. He walked into each room, turning on all the overhead lights. Confident that there was no one in the house, he walked back to Terri at the front door. "No problems."

She double-locked the door and then turned on both the front and back-porch lights. When she returned to the den, Randy was sitting in one of the chairs, admiring the extensive library she had assembled.

"Would you like to stay for dinner?" she asked. "I've got plenty of food in the house to put together something pretty nice."

"Love to. And Terri, I have an idea that you aren't sure what to do about tonight, probably for several confusing reasons. So I'll be the one who's forward: I'd be glad to stay over again, and I still think it would be better for you not to be alone."

She smiled, and her expression showed definite relief. "Yeah, I'd like that. Thanks."

"Great! Just in case you wanted me to stay, I drove by my apartment at lunch today to pick up a few things. I'll just run out to the car and get them."

A startled look came over Terri. "Randy, we just locked everything up. I'm afraid for you to go out there again."

He touched her face reassuringly. "I'll only be a minute. It'll be fine. Lock the door after me, and watch for me."

She nodded her head, and Randy opened the door and went out. She locked the door and watched through the peephole. When he got back on the porch, she breathed a sigh of relief as she opened the door for him.

When he looked at her, he could tell the extent to which she was still really frightened. He smiled. "See? I'm back, safe and sound. Now what was that you were saying about dinner?"

Her expression began returning to normal. "Yeah, I'll get right on it." Then her expression brightened considerably. "Now you stay here, grab a book,

and relax. And no fair peeking into the dining room. I want to fix things up for a nice dinner."

Terri disappeared into the depths of the kitchen to perform mysterious arts, and Randy walked over to her library on the opposite wall. He was amazed at the breadth of subjects represented. Then his eye fell on a particular title, and he was absolutely astonished: *Relativity for the Layman* by James A. Coleman. The book looked brand new, and he made a mental note to ask her about it.

Then another section of the library attracted his attention. There were several books on dogs, animal shelters, and adopting dogs from animal shelters. He selected one of them, *Shelter Dogs: Amazing Stories of Adopted Strays* by Peg Kehret, returned to his chair, and began reading.

After some considerable time had elapsed, Terri reappeared at the door to the den. "Okay, dinner's ready." She had a really sweet smile on her face.

Randy noticed immediately that she had changed clothes. Nothing formal, of course, but she was wearing nylons and a cute, pleated skirt, a highlander-plaid pattern with a hem an inch or two above the knees. On top, she was wearing a short-sleeved, dark-green cardigan sweater.

His eyes brightened as a warm appreciative smile appeared on his face. "Wow, look at you, so sweet and pretty, and look at me, in some old work clothes."

"You look pretty good to me," she replied softly.

As he walked into the dining room, he was again surprised. The lights were dimmed, but what really attracted his attention was the dining room table. Terri had put out a white tablecloth, linen napkins, and what looked like very fine silverware. To top it off, she had placed two candles, slightly separated, in the center of the table. From somewhere, there was the scent of incense, maybe from the candles.

"Just give me a minute," she said, and walked past him into the den. In a few minutes he heard soft, romantic music playing.

When she got back and they both sat down, he said, "Terri, you really didn't need to go to all this work."

"Believe me, I've been wanting to do this for some time now."

What she had managed to cook up on such short notice was homemade spaghetti accompanied by garlic bread and a salad. Perhaps it would have left a smug, gourmet unimpressed, but it was a hot, home-cooked meal, and Randy knew it came from her heart.

While they were eating, he brought up the book on relativity. "I noticed

you had Coleman's book, *Relativity for the Layman*. I remember talking a little about Einstein while we were dancing the night we met, but I didn't get the impression you had read anything about Einstein's work."

"At that point I hadn't. But you remember Einstein came up because I asked you what originally got you interested in physics. You said it was learning about relativity when you were in high school. If that's what got you into physics, I wanted to learn more about it."

A moment passed for the significance of what she had just said dawned on him. It was so sweet; he was touched. She wanted to learn more about relativity just because it was the subject that had originally interested him in physics. It gave him new insight into how she really felt about him and how much she wanted to understand him.

"Unfortunately," she continued, "I've only had time so far to skim through it. But I did notice that there were two theories of relativity: the special theory and the general theory. What's the difference?"

"About eleven years of work! Einstein published his paper on special relativity in 1905. It wasn't until 1916 that he had solved the details of general relativity and published his second paper. But the difference between the two theories is really quite simple: special relativity deals only with motion at constant velocity. General relativity deals with accelerated motion. It effectively becomes a theory of gravity."

"Accelerated motion..." she repeated thoughtfully. "We use the term *accelerate* quite often in connection with driving a car. Does it have the same meaning?"

"Exactly the same meaning. Acceleration refers to a change in velocity. You could be going down the road at eighty miles per hour, but if the speedometer fixed on that speed, your acceleration is still zero. However, if your speed is changing, then you have an acceleration. That's why the gas peddle is also called the accelerator, because moving it up or down changes your speed and creates acceleration."

"You wouldn't think it should have taken Einstein eleven years to figure out how to deal with acceleration."

"You would be astonished at how vastly more complicated general relativity is than special relativity. It represents a whole area of physics that you can specialize in. But what amazes me even more about your library than the presence of a book on relativity is the incredible range of subjects covered. The book I actually started reading was a book about adopting stray dogs."

Terri's face lit up. "You started reading that book? Wow! A physicist who deals with strange, esoteric topics like quantum gravity and grand unified field theories picking up that book to read! Do you like dogs?"

"Very much. We always had dogs when I was growing up, and I hope someday to have them again. What's your connection?"

"I love dogs too," she said, her eyes still shining. "We had them as far back as I can remember. My mother was allergic to them, but it didn't bother her so much back then. I guess over the years allergies can get worse. We can't have a dog now. But twice a month I spend a Saturday doing volunteer work at Last Chance Animal Shelter. I help cleaning the runs and bathing the dogs. I also take the dogs for walks on a leash. I enjoy it. It keeps me around dogs, and it's a worthwhile work."

Randy was watching her intently. When she finished speaking, he said, "You certainly are full of surprises." He had now seen many different aspects of her personality: her kindness and compassion to people, especially her customers at the boutique, her vivacious manner, her understanding and love for the academic world, her insatiable curiosity for all types of subjects, her loves of books, and now her love of dogs. He knew exactly what Kathy would say if she knew all this: Terri is one-in-a-million--you better hang on to her!

He found himself thinking along those same lines.

There was no mistaking that Terri wanted their dinner to be a very romantic experience, and he was quite conscious of the effect it was having on him. He was not immune to the candles, the music, and the general romantic ambiance she had created. However, what affected him the most was the very pretty girl who sat opposite him. He was captivated by the warmth of her soft, brown eyes as she looked at him. His heart seemed on the verge of melting. Like last night, the thought had crossed his mind how wonderful it would be to come home to her every night.

Terri's heart had been in a flutter during the whole meal. Ever since her mother left, she had been thinking about a romantic candlelight dinner. Now with him here, she could hardly take her eyes off him. During these last few days of danger, her love for him had grown even deeper. What a thrilling experience it had been to cook for him, to have dinner with him--just having him there with her. She wished she had this to look forward to each day.

When they finished eating, he helped her clear the table. "Well, what would you like to do this evening?" she asked. "Read a book, or do you want to watch another movie?" She knew which choice she was hoping for, but wanted to see what he would say.

His smile reminded her of the Cheshire Cat. "I can read a book any evening. I can't watch a movie sitting next to you any evening." She almost blurted out that there was a way to arrange that, but she caught herself just in time. She did not want to seem too blatantly shameless!

"What kind of movie would you like to watch? I have more than just

romances. In fact, I enjoy a good action movie. Do you like action movies?"

"Is the Pope a Catholic?" He now had another item to add to that long list of virtues he had cataloged earlier: she enjoyed action movies. "Do you have any marshal arts movies?"

"Yeah, I've got a good one with Jean-Claude Van Damme."

"Sounds great. He's a favorite of mine. You know, you might find it hard to believe about a stuffy physicist, but I've actually studied Karate a little. I'm certainly not great at it, but I've learned a little. Studied with a fellow I met at the university. Ex-Delta Force."

Now it was Terri's turn to look at Randy with surprise. Somehow, she never would have expected that he was interested in Karate. How exciting it was to find out more and more about your...well, what should she call Randy? "Boyfriend" just sounded so adolescent. How about "romantic interest"? Yes, that was a good phrase. "Fiance"? Her heart seemed to skip a beat. Maybe someday. Maybe someday soon?

Tonight Terri decided that she was not going to act quite so brazen as she had last night. She wanted to see what he would do on his own. So after she started the movie, she went to the couch and sat down next to him, but not quite touching him.

What he did surprised her. At least he was not one for falling into a rut. He reached over and took her hand, interlacing his fingers with hers, pulled her hand over to his lap, and then curled his other hand around hers, gently caressing it. If physical affection were put on a scale from one to ten, with making love as a ten, holding hands would probably be about one and a half. Yet there was a real tenderness in what Randy was doing. It seemed like her skin was warmed all over.

They sat like that for a half hour or so. Eventually, he returned her hand, put his arm around her, and pulled her to him until her shoulder was pressed against his chest. He began making little circles on her arm just below the sleeve of her sweater. To get more comfortable, she pulled her legs onto the sofa. Her skirt was now several inches above her smooth, nylon-covered knees. Suddenly, Van Damme's sidekicks became less interesting. Randy had a difficult time keeping his eyes off those knees gently touching his thigh. The room suddenly seemed to be quite warm.

Tonight, neither of them fell asleep during the movie, though by the time it ended, the hour was late. Terri looked at both porch lights. "Both lights are still on," she announced. "I wonder why they didn't try anything tonight?"

"Well, they knew you were home, and there was another car in the driveway. Probably thought it was too risky with at least two people here."

She nodded. "I'll get your pillow and blankets."

She brought them out and handed them to Randy. "Thanks," he said. "I'll see you in the morning."

He made no attempt to kiss her goodnight, and she decided not to initiate it herself. After all, he was staying the night. She walked back into her bedroom and shut the door to change into her nightgown. That done, she reopened the door, as she did the night before. With her hand still on the doorknob, she thought about why she was opening it. The reason, or maybe better, the emotion, was difficult to pin down. Certainly it was not to tempt Randy to come in and make love to her. She blushed as an image of the two of them making love flashed before her mind. Her heart started to beat faster. The image was exciting, but she knew she wanted to save that for marriage. No, the reason was more complex. Part of the reason might be the danger they were in: it would be better for each of them to have more of the house within earshot. However, a bigger part of the reason might be that she wanted Randy to know that she trusted him completely. No need for closed or locked doors. But suddenly there was no doubt in her mind: leaving the door open just gave her a very pleasurable feeling of closeness to him as they slept. With a knowing smile on her face, she turned and climbed into bed.

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(Friday Morning, August 10)

The next morning she again made breakfast for them while still in her nightgown and robe. Despite the curious mixture of embarrassment and excitement she had felt yesterday when the sash of her robe accidentally opened, this time she made sure it was securely tied. However, this also had an unexpected consequence. Randy was sitting at the table as she was cooking and did not fail to notice how the sash, cinched as it was so tightly around her narrow waist, created a clear outline of her shapely figure.

The pretty pink robe was longer than her baby-doll nightgown, but it was still short and several inches above her knees. At one point, Randy found himself swallowing hard as she bent down to grab a pan in a low cabinet, causing the back of her robe to ride up provocatively high. Terri was not aware of what had happened, but the moment very forcefully reminded him that his physical desire for her was easily keeping pace with his growing emotional desire. Well, he thought, that was the way romances normally progressed, was it not? But understanding what was happening to him did not prevent the sudden dryness in his mouth.

Terri soon sat down, and they began eating breakfast. "Well, what's the strategy for today?" she asked.

"You can have a normal day at the boutique, and I will spend the day in my somewhat overcrowded office. As soon as I get there, I'll alert the campus police, explaining at least some of my suspicions. That way, if trouble

comes, one quick call will bring them. I won't need to spend any time explaining the situation while visitors are knocking on my door."

"That worries me. Do you really think they'll come to your office?"

"That was the plan--to get them over there instead of here."

"What should I do when it's time to close."

"Close as usual, and then come over to my office. We'll come back here to the house together."

"I really should stay there at least for a little while after closing. With all this trouble upsetting normal routines, there's a lot of paper work I should catch up on."

"That's fine. I'll wait at my office for you. The longer I'm there, the more chance we have of catching them."

Terri looked at him dubiously.