

Chapter 9

Catrina Flaherty didn't need much sleep. Although she often worked late, she was up at the crack of dawn every day. No matter what time she made it to the office, Abiba was always there, with a cup of coffee in her hand, as Katrina walked through the heavy door. She must have some kind of supernatural boss radar.

"Good morning, Mrs. Flaherty," the large black woman said in that strange British accent. As always, she was wearing a loose fitting dress with outrageously bright colors. She wore an orange band around her head, making her kinky black hair stick straight up.

"Morning, Abiba." Katrina gratefully took the coffee. She took a sip. Hazelnut creamer today, her favorite. "Anything exciting on the books today?"

"You have an appointment with a new client, ma'am." Abiba turned back to her desk and picked up a couple of pink slips of paper. "A Mrs. Randall, seems her husband is missing. Here are your messages."

Catrina walked through the old warehouse mezzanine to the back wall where her office was. Already women were starting to check in and sit at the sea of battered desks filling the room. She stopped at her office door and looked back over her little fiefdom.

Not too bad, girl, she thought. Just seeing the women she had helped to start new lives always gave her a warm glow.

It was almost an hour later when her phone buzzed.

"Mrs. Randall is here to see you ma'am."

"Thank you, Abiba, show her back." Katrina put down the phone and looked around her office. The battered desk and aged furniture wasn't too impressive. *Oh well, results are more important than looks*. Still, first impressions were important.

Catrina got up from her desk and headed to her door. She knew that meeting her new client standing up always made a good impression. She was proud of her height, and the three inch heels on her boots always gave her a sense of power. She could stand eye to eye with men and tower over most women.

"Mrs. Flaherty, this is Mrs. Randall," Abiba said as she brought a good looking middle aged woman to Katrina's door. It always amazed Katrina how Abiba could move with such grace for so large a woman.

"Thank you, Abiba. Mrs. Randall, it's nice to meet you."

Not many women were as tall as Katrina. With the six inch stilettos Karen wore, Katrina had to look up to her.

"Karen," the new client said. "Please call me Karen." Her high-pitched voice reminded Katrina of Minnie Mouse.

"Okay, Karen, would you like coffee, tea, water?"

"Coffee would be nice."

Catrina looked at her receptionist. "Abiba?"

"Coming, ma'am."

"Step into my office, sit down." Katrina waved towards the office door. "How may I help you?"

"I've heard about you," Karen Randall said. "I live in Vegas, but my husband has a house here in Seattle. I remember when you had the sexual harassment suit against the Seattle Police Department. I've seen reports about you on the TV, in the newspapers. You always seem to take the woman's side, to help them out of jams."

"Actually, that was the Port of Seattle Police Department. And what kind of jam are you in?"

Abiba arrived with a silver tray with two stemmed glass mugs with gold rims, an ivory creamer and sugar bowl and a silver thermos.

“Coffee’s here.”

While Abiba poured the coffee, Catrina studied her new client.

Karen was a good looking woman, probably ten years or so older than Catrina, but in pretty good shape. Blonde over blue. She wore tight white slacks, an ivory colored silk blouse and brightly painted acrylic nails. And a September tan? *She definitely is not from Seattle.*

“My husband has disappeared,” Karen said. “The police came to my house a few days ago to tell me that his truck was found burned out along side some road in California. I don’t know what he was doing in California, he had no business there.”

“And you haven’t heard from him since?”

“No, I’ve tried calling his cell phone a dozen times. It’s turned off. He never does that. I’ve talked to the people in his businesses, his son, my brother, no one has heard from him.”

“Your brother?”

“Danny works for Dick. Actually, Danny is Dick’s accountant.”

“I see.” Catrina put her cup down on her desk and started taking notes on a yellow legal pad. “Have you filed a missing persons report yet?”

“I did. I called the Seattle Police. They were as bad as the Las Vegas Police. Worse. They were already looking into the case. I guess the San Bernardino Police had asked them to find Dick. They treated me like a suspect. Like I did something to him. They put me in a little room and grilled me just like on the TV cop shows.”

“Just so I get this straight, we’re talking about Dick Randall, right?”

“Yes, do you know him?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Catrina tapped her pen on the yellow tablet, deciding. “He’s in the same business as me. He does criminal background checks out of his garage. I have a background check division. We’ve crossed paths a time or two.”

“The police seem to think that something has happened to him.” Karen’s eyes were blinking rapidly, her breathing rate accelerating. “They think I did something.”

“And did you?”

“No! Of course not.” Karen’s voice got even higher, bordering on a shriek. “I filed for divorce, again. But he hadn’t been served with the papers yet. I have no reason to hurt him. He said he was behind on payments to my house. If something happened to him, who’d pay for my house?”

“Does he have any life insurance?”

“Yes. I remember him talking about it once. At least I think he does. That was several years ago. I don’t pay any attention to his business. I assume he kept the policy.”

Karen seemed to be calming down a little.

“How much was the policy for? Do you remember?”

“I think it was a million dollars. I would remember a nice round number like that.”

Catrina put down her pen and looked in her client’s eyes. “I can see why the police might think you had something to do with it. That’s a lot of motive.”

“I hadn’t thought about it in years.” Karen reached in her purse for a tissue, then wiped her eyes. “Can you help me?”

“Just exactly what do you want me to do?”

“Find Dick. That scum-sucking bastard has probably run off. He faked his death, then took off to some Caribbean Island. He’s probably sitting on some beach, sucking up piña colodas with an empty headed bimbo by his side.”

“You know, this won’t be inexpensive. Especially if we have to travel to find him.”

“I don’t care. He has plenty of money. If you can find him, I’ll get it out of him.”

Ted looked up to see his boss standing in his office door. Well, technically, she wasn't his boss anymore, she was his partner, but he would always think of her as the boss.

"Whatcha workin' on, Higuera?" Catrina asked.

Ted's heartbeat always sped up a notch when Catrina entered the room. Her deep voice and slow, cat-like movements always caught him off guard.

"Just reorganizing the background check database. You haven't done any maintenance on it in a while. This'll save disk space and make it faster to search."

Catrina came in and took a chair.

"Great, but I have something else for you to look at." She crossed her legs. "We have a new client."

Ted slid his keyboard off to the side and grabbed a note pad. "Oh?"

"Karen Randall. Her husband, Dick, has disappeared. She thinks he's run off. The police think he's been killed. They like Karen for it."

"That's Richard Randall?" Ted scribbled furiously on his notepad. "Have you talked to the cops yet?"

"Yeah, I just got off the phone with Tom." Sergeant Tom Bremen was Catrina's long-time off again, on again boyfriend. He was conveniently a homicide detective for the Seattle Police Department too.

The SPD had no use for Catrina. Her successful sexual harassment suit had made her a pariah. Even worse than that, she often did a better job than they did. She didn't have to worry about paying attention to little things like laws and Constitutional rights. They hated to be shown up, especially by a woman.

If his captain ever found out that Tom was passing information on to Catrina, Tom would spend the rest of his career handing out parking tickets, but he always managed to find a way to help her.

“He says that the San Bernardino Sherriff’s office found evidence of a crime. There was blood on the ground under the truck and a .45 embedded in the driver’s seat. They’re looking at this as a homicide.”

“But they haven’t found the body yet?”

“No. They’re looking at the wife, they usually do. She knows it and wants our help. She thinks that hubby has taken a powder.”

“Uh-huh. And what are we doing? What do you want me to do?”

“We’re going to find the runaway husband for her, if he’s still alive. I know Dick Randall. He has a background check business here in Seattle. He’s always on the shady side of the law. He runs a chain of bikini barista stands. I’ve already done a little digging. He was just convicted for sexually exploiting a minor. Faced some hard time. Didn’t show up for his sentencing hearing. Snohomish County has a bench warrant out on him.”

Ted stopped writing and looked up. “Sounds like a slimy dude. Do you think he’s skipped?”

“I don’t know yet, but I wouldn’t put it past him. I need for you to look into it. Dig around a little. Find out everything you can about him. His wife said he was missing their house payments. Look at his financials. It seems to me that he has a pretty lucrative little business. Find out where the money’s going. See if he’s been stashing it anyplace.”

“Gotcha. What’s the priority on this? I’m still digging on the Murray case. Is this more important?”

Catrina got up from her chair. “No. This is just luke warm. Go ahead and finish up on Murray. Fit this in when you have time. There’s nothing urgent about this, yet.”

Ted watched Catrina walk out of his office and thought for a moment, then pulled his keyboard back in front of him. His curiosity got the better of him. A new case was always too tempting to put off.

He called up WebPI.com, a detective website that they subscribed to and that he frequently used to get basic information on subjects. He typed in Dick Randall's name and got several hits. He selected the one with a Seattle address.

Wow! This guy's been married five times. He really gets around. Ted continued to read the screen. He owns eight coffee stands. Been arrested four times. Uh-oh. His lawyer is Abe Weinstein.

Ted and Catrina had crossed swords with Weinstein in the past. He did a lot of work for the Mob and Mexican drug cartels. Not good people.

Why would Randall be mixed up with a Mob lawyer?

Randall's credit rating was a mess. He made good money but never paid his bills on time. He owned three houses and was behind on the mortgages on all of them. He had two apartment buildings in the Seattle area. His tenants had filed claims against him saying that he wasn't keeping them up. He had two lawsuits pending from landlords of his barista stands saying he was late and missing payments to them.

How did this guy stay in business? Why would anyone want to be a vendor to some schmuck that they had to chase down for payment every month?

Ted got Randall's bank's name. He would hack in later and get his financial information. He could get credit card info too; find out if Randall had used any of his credit cards since his "disappearance."

What had happened to Ted's moral code? There was a time when he would have refused to hack a bank or the phone company because it was illegal. Had Catrina really led him so far astray or was he just growing up and not seeing the world in such blacks and whites?

Whatever the case, if they were going to find out what happened to Randall, Ted needed to get the data.

What else? Oh yes, phones. Back when Ted was on the Millennium Systems case, he'd gotten the back door into the phone company's system. He could check Randall's phone records. He hoped that his landline carrier was his cell carrier too. That would make it easier.

How about a little honey pot? Ted had a porno website he could use to plant a Trojan horse in Randall's computers. He'd email Randall a solicitous message getting him to click on the link to Ted's trap. When Randall opened the web page, it would capture his IP address and download the virus to his computer.

After that, Ted would own his systems. The Trojan horse would capture all of Randall's key strokes and build a file with an image of his hard drive. Ted could upload them at his convenience and get all of Randall's passwords, bank accounts, correspondence and anything else that would help find him.

Poor bastard. He didn't stand a chance against Super-Teddy.