

The Attack

by Jan Perry

Anna Powers was excited — her first national conference and her first research presentation. The adrenalin was flowing! She loved the freedom from all the responsibilities of home when she travelled. Of course, she loved her husband and two children, but the change of pace was great. Breakfast with colleagues and stimulating conversation with her research associates were a stark contrast to spilled milk, Cheerio stacking, and conversations with her three-year-old and her stuffed lizard. She thrived on both but the conferences only came once a year. She relished these few days. Three thousand attendees could be overwhelming, but once year it was so worth it.

The afternoon keynote presentation was interrupted. Martha Frederickson, the president of the National Elementary Educators' Consortium (NEEC), looked grim as she came to the podium. Her voice was just as grim as her face. "Carla Worster was attacked in her hotel room, a short while ago. She was strangled — not killed, not raped. Her prognosis is guarded. We will keep you updated as we have more information. We have asked hotel security to say a few words."

Carla! That can't be. I just talked to her at breakfast. She was excited about her new position in Wyoming and was joking about getting a cowboy hat. She was so full of life. A tear slipped out of the corner of Anna's eye. This can't be real.

The head of security took the microphone. "At this time we don't know how the attacker got into the room. There was no sign of a break in or of robbery. Ms. Worster's roommate was attending a workshop at the time, and was not in the room. We're working with the Memphis police. We offer the following suggestions to help insure your safety during the rest of your conference."

Standard suggestions were offered — don't travel alone, don't get on an elevator with a single person in it and get off an elevator if you feel uncomfortable, avoid areas that are not well lit, use all of the security features on the hotel room doors. All Anna heard was "Blah, blah, blah." She was sure that Carla knew — and practiced — all of this, too. Every woman who traveled alone knew this. The words were not comforting; they only increased the evidence of a vicious attack.

Anna left the ballroom. The entire building felt on guard. Conversations were quieter, people looked hesitant at every hall intersection, no small groups gathered in the halls, everyone's eyes darted around looking for danger. You could almost see the electricity jump from person to person.

Then the chatter started. Rumors were rampant and solid information was in short supply. The assailant was a terrorist; the room service wait person was irate that the tip wasn't enough; a deranged parent had sought revenge for Carla failing her child; a person with mental health issues was enraged that Carla was wearing a blue suit. The talk was crazy.

Anna had supper with some friends who knew people. They said they had heard the most likely assailant was either an acquaintance of Carla's or a hotel employee. That made sense and comforted no one. If

the assailant knew Carla, he or she probably knew other attendees. If it was a hotel employee, no door was secure.

For the rest of the day, the conference participants moved in packs from one presentation to the next. The lobby, the restaurants, and the bars within the hotel were packed with people long past their usual hour. No one wanted to go back to their room.

When the groups finally started to split up, no one went anywhere alone. At least two people walked everywhere. Like several other people, Anna had to go through the lobby-like area in front of the business center to get to her room. The lights had burned out. At the edge of the brightly lit hall, just before the darkened lobby, a small group hesitated. Then as if on command, the cluster moved through the darkness at a jog with their eyes checking every recess and column. When they got to the lighted area near the elevators, they let out a soft cheer, realized how tense they had been, and started to laugh. It was not a light-hearted laugh.

The fear in the hotel was palpable.

Anna's herd had a plan. They planned their route, delivered to each person to his or her room, left the door open, and searched the room and the bathroom to make sure no one was there, and then waited until they heard the person in the room lock the door and flip the security latch. They arranged their route so that the last two people had rooms close to each other on the same hallway. It was a comforting plan.

Anna got to her room, closed the door, locked the deadbolt, and flipped the security latch. Hollered "Thank you!" through the closed door and turned around. She did not feel any safer.

Anna called her husband, Josh. The phone call she wanted to have was to tell him how exciting her presentation had been that morning, what wonderful questions and conversations came up, and how much people appreciated what she and her colleagues had done. That phone call never occurred.

The phone call she actually had was all about Carla, the fear in the hotel, and Anna's sorrow and fear. Josh voiced his concerns about her staying for the next two days of the conference. Anna almost forgot to ask about the kids. She was shaken. She made a lot of small talk. She didn't want the phone call to end. But it finally did. Josh told her to call anytime if she needed to. She said she hoped she wouldn't need to, but if she did, she would.

Then Anna was alone. She couldn't bring herself to put her nightgown on. She just sat on the bed. It was 10:45 PM. She needed to meet some friends for breakfast at 7:00 AM. "This is crazy," she said out loud. "I am perfectly safe." I bet that is exactly what Carla thought, Anna's mind was whirring. She did not feel safe.

Finally, Anna (fully dressed), propped herself up with pillows, and started reading the book she had brought with her. She heard every toilet flush, every shower run, every child fuss all night. She turned the lights out at 2:00 AM and closed her eyes. They flew back open when she heard some people walk

by her door sounding as if they had partied a bit too much. Then she heard the elevator bells chime. She heard everything. It was 2:07 AM. She turned the light back on and read some more.

The book was a good one and it kept her attention. She looked at the clock and it was 4:00 AM. She wanted to call Josh — just to talk. But she knew he had to be up early to get the kids off to school before he headed to work.

She closed her eyes again. And they flew open at the sound of her door being jostled. She panicked and looked around for some kind of weapon. She saw nothing.

The door jostled again and she heard, “Damn, this isn’t my room.” The jostling stopped and she heard the person move down the hall. Then another door on the hall opened. She heard the ice machine a few doors down clink and clunk. Another door closed. It was now 4:10 AM. She had never had a night pass so slowly. She started reading again.

The next time she looked at the clock it was 6:00 AM and she put her book down. She got out of bed, took a shower in record time, and put fresh clothes on. She started hearing more and more people in the hall, probably heading to the fitness center or to breakfast. She felt safer leaving the room with a lot of people in the hall way. She gathered her papers and her bag and headed off to meet her friend.

All of the NEEC participants that Anna saw in the hotel restaurant looked like she felt — tense, almost put together, but not quite, and wary. Her friend, however, lived in Memphis and was commuting to the conference each day. She looked rested, but concerned. The talk of family and projects and teaching stories that they usually shared was eclipsed with concern about Carla and what had been found out about her assailant. It wasn’t a pleasant breakfast.

The first session of the day did bring an update. Carla was not doing well. She was in stable condition, but she was still not responsive. Nothing new had been learned about the assailant. No new incidents had occurred. The hotel thought that the danger was past, but encouraged everyone to continue being cautious. Anna, did not find much comfort in the announcements.

By the afternoon stories were starting to circulate that the hotel had four similar incidents in the past eighteen months. They had not reported that information to the conference planners. The anxiety that had started to abate reversed course and started to build again.

Anna called Josh from the lobby. She told him the news and said she was renting a car and heading home that afternoon. The drive home would be about five hours. She would be home by eight or nine. She wanted the safety of her home and her family. Josh was relieved at the decision. So was Anna.

As soon as she finished the phone call she headed to her room to pack. While she was packing, she heard a ruckus in a nearby room. She froze. It sounded like someone was throwing a lamp or a chair and there were a few dull thuds. Anna immediately called the front desk. Security was dispatched and arrived quickly.

The noise continued and a woman screamed. Several doors opened. Anna looked out of the peep hole and could see people gathering in the hall. The ruckus was coming from right across the hall. Security had arrived. Anna cracked her door to see better.

A security officer shouted, "Open the door. It's hotel security."

Nothing happened except another thud.

"I'm coming in!" the guard announced. He opened the door with his master key with his hand on his gun. The second guard was beside the door and looked prepared for anything - except what he saw.

Anna could see into the room. A surprised woman wearing a garish flowered silk kimono-type robe, with her hair in huge curlers stood frozen in her tracks. "Thank goodness you're here!" she shouted. "A rat ran out of the bathroom and is in the closet. I tried to kill it with the lamp."

"Are you alone in here, Ma'am?" the security officer asked.

"No! There is a rat in here, too! Do something!" She was wielding a hair dryer by its cord.

Just as the woman was about to throw the hair dryer, a small mouse ran across the floor, over the security officer's foot, and out the door.

Anna grabbed her trash can, stepped into the hall, and handed it to the officer. The second security officer captured the rodent by throwing the trash can over it. Soon the unhappy mouse was removed and the chaos in the hallway dissipated.

The woman ranted on for several minutes and the hotel manager was summoned. The security officers thanked Anna for providing a non-lethal weapon. A bit of small talk and several chuckles followed.

Anna suspected that someone would certainly have a complimentary room for at least one night over the incident and that several other guests would find other hotels. She was happy she was leaving.

Anna turned to head back to her room and thought she saw someone slip through her door. Her heart stopped. She couldn't think. Her feet felt nailed to the floor.

The trash can-wielding security officer had walked around her and was about to turn to the elevator. She finally regained control of her feet and followed him. She grabbed his arm and he swung around and almost hit her with the trashcan. Anna's eyes looked wild.

"Are you okay, Ma'am?" he asked.

"I think someone just went into my room! I don't want to end up like Carla." The words tumbled out of Anna's mouth. She was shaking.

The second officer overheard the conversation and was already on his walkie talkie requesting assistance. "What's your room number?" he asked.

"Four thirty-two," said Anna as she headed toward her room.

The first officer grabbed her arm to stop her. "You stay here, or better yet, head down to the front desk and stay there until we get there."

"Happily," said Anna. She turned back to the elevator. Two more security officers stepped off the elevator leaving two of Anna's friends, Claire and Sue, in the elevator looking quizzical. Anna almost ran into their arms. She was so relieved to see familiar faces. "Let's go get some coffee," she said.

"You look like you need something stronger than coffee! What's going on?" asked Claire. Her friends looked concerned. The elevator doors closed. Anna's knees gave way and she slid down the wall and sat on the floor. Was that how someone got into Carla's room, she thought. Was the same thing going to happen to me? Sue helped her up. She was standing and barely composed as the doors opened to the lobby.

They all left and headed to the Starbucks kiosk. Anna insisted that she only needed coffee. As they stood there, two city police cars pulled up to the front door. Four officers, heavily armed, scrambled out and headed to the elevator.

They sat drinking coffee near the front desk. Anna filled them in on what had happened. Anna's hands were still shaking and her coffee sloshed on the table as she put it down.

"I wonder if the same diversion might have been the way someone got into Carla's room," Anna said. Saying it out loud made it feel even more real. She couldn't keep her hands still, even clenched in her lap.

A security officer walked over to the group and looked at Anna. "Ma'am, can you come into the office. The police would like to hear what happened from you."

"Of course," she said.

"Can we come for moral support?" asked Claire.

"You can come until the police get there and then they'll have to answer that question." The officer could see that Anna would benefit from some moral support — and probably something stronger than coffee.

A police Officer, Gerald Blakely, arrived shortly. No, the two friends could not stay with Anna, but they could wait right outside. He took Anna's statement. He seemed satisfied that all of the details he had heard, fit together. "Thank you for your help and thank you for being observant. You may have helped us get answers to several incidents."

“Can you tell me anything about what happened upstairs after I came down here?” Anna asked him when he finished.

“Not officially, but I’m happy you didn’t go into your room. The whole mouse thing looks like it was unrelated, but we’re still investigating that. The officer’s upstairs should be finished in your room in a few minutes and you can go back there. It looks like you were packing to leave....”

“Yes, I was. Carla Worster was a friend and this has been rough. I just want to get home to my family.” Anna didn’t realize how much she wanted that until the words were out of her mouth.

“We called your husband while we were upstairs,” Officer Blakely said. “We had to verify who you were. He is on the road already. He expects to be here about eight.”

The hotel manager knocked on the door. “I have a message for Mrs. Powers.”

“We are finished here. Come on in,” said Blakely as he headed out the door.

“Thank you,” said the manager. “As soon as we can get into your room we will move all of your things to a different room — a suite that will accommodate you and your family. When you finish here, come by the front desk for your new keys.”

Anna’s head was spinning with all of this drama. Suddenly her lack of sleep hit her. She could barely keep her focus on what was happening.

“I think we should all go to your new room and have dinner there.” Claire had taken charge. “I hope you don’t want to be alone, because we’re sticking to you like glue until Josh and the kids get here.” Claire was talking and Sue was nodding.

“I would like that — a lot. Thanks.” Anna felt her shoulders relax just a bit.

Friends were good.

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