

[23] Invasion!

The isolated stretch of access road was empty when Carla at last drove out to the main highway after leaving the installation. She had, of course, no knowledge of the deadly drama that had been acted out along that route earlier. Nor did she know that she had reached its juncture with the main road just minutes before the back-up FBI team assigned to escort her arrived. Consequently, the men sat waiting for nearly an hour before they were belatedly notified that she had already driven to Palo Alto.

Twenty minutes later, she was racing up the steps of the hotel. A quick survey of the lobby revealed one of the two FBI special agents from the previous night. He was sitting in an easy chair and glanced at her over the newspaper he was reading, then went back to it without a flicker of recognition. Just seeing him—together with the fact that she hadn't been followed this time—made her feel immeasurably better. Uncle Sam's men really were on the job! Carla resisted a second glance.

There must be a convention! she thought as she took in the crowd. *People everywhere!* About a dozen of them squeezed into the elevator with her. Ordinary people, it seemed—except for the two men on the far side that she noticed just as the door shut. There was something strangely familiar about one of them. Was he the shorter of the two FBI agents she'd encountered in the elevator the previous night? He'd had a beard. She stole another look. *Pavlov?* *No, it can't be!* He turned to look at her, and their eyes met, just as her lips framed his name in disbelief.

She turned her head quickly away, but was drawn irresistibly back to that face again for another furtive glance. It was important to be absolutely certain. He was not looking at her, so she was able to study him for a moment. The new beard—*perhaps to cover some nasty scars*—had almost fooled her, but there was now no doubt about it. The man was unquestionably Dr. Alexandr Pavlov from Paris, who, as Viktor had explained to her, was in fact Colonel Alexei Chernov, a Russian Army officer in charge of a special contingent of psychic combat

troops! Nor could there be any doubt as to his intention!

Instead of experiencing the waves of panic she'd always imagined would possess her if she ever actually faced such a situation, Carla felt strangely detached from herself and everyone around her. Was this real? The elevator began to spin. Would she faint? She longed for the oblivion of unconsciousness, but fought it off in terror. She leaned against the wall and clenched her fists, trying desperately to hang on and think. *What can I do? No way am I going to get off on my floor! And getting off with someone else is no better. If I ride it to the top, I'll finally be on it alone with the two of them. Should I scream right now? They might kill everyone!*

There was only one thing to do. Clutching her left side, she fell against the man next to her and in a weak voice, but loud enough for everyone to hear, pleaded with him: "I must be having a heart attack! Please get me back down to the lobby! I need an ambulance!" Gasping loudly for breath, she clutched her chest with one hand, and with the other grabbed at him frantically for support as she slid helplessly to the floor. People craned their necks to see. She had turned ashen with panic, and thus gave involuntary authenticity to the scenario she was playing out so desperately.

"Stand back!" The man just behind her had taken charge, easing Carla to the floor and pushing passengers back to make room for her. "Give her some air! How can we get this thing turned around?"

"You can't," said a woman. "Where's everybody getting off?"

"There are only four floors punched," said someone else.

"Don't anyone get off!" wailed Carla. "Please stay with me. Help me!"

"Okay, lady. Keep calm. Everyone stay aboard," the reassuring and authoritative voice barked. "Push the 'close door' button as soon as it opens."

"Anyone know CPR?" asked a concerned male voice.

"I do!" responded a female, "but she doesn't need it yet. We'll need all of the men to help carry her when we get back to the lobby!"

Amazingly, no one got off. The door was closed promptly each time it opened and in no time at all they were back to the ground level. Through a forest of shins and ankles, Carla had warily observed the feet and legs of Chernov and his companion. They had shuffled around on the far side of the elevator, but had made no move toward her. Now as others bent over to carry her, she saw the two Russians scurry out into the lobby.

"FBI!" Carla screamed, pushing away those who were bending over to lift her, and getting warily to her feet "Help! FBI!" she yelled even louder. The

special agent who had been sitting in the lobby when she'd entered came running around the corner, and another one rushed up from the opposite direction. Carla's fellow passengers fell back in surprise and stood nearby staring at her in shock.

"Two Russians—one with a beard!" Carla managed to tell them. "They headed for the front door! That way!" Now she became aware that she was trembling from head to toe.

The two agents ran off at great speed and Carla, still trembling, followed them cautiously at a safe distance across the lobby and out the front door. There she stood and looked anxiously in all directions but saw nothing. In a few minutes they came back separately and empty-handed. A crowd of the curious had gathered in front of the hotel.

"We can't talk here," said the agent who seemed to be in charge. He showed her his badge and introduced himself and his companion. "I'm Carl Richardson. This is George Lawton. Let's get out of here."

They led her to an unmarked car parked by the curb and put her in the backseat. Richardson climbed in there with her. "Now tell us what happened," he demanded.

As she told her story, Lawton drove slowly around the area, then parked a block down the street so they could keep the hotel in view. "That was quick thinking, Miss Bertelli," Richardson said when she'd finished. "It probably saved your life. We have a thick file on Chernov. He's the most vicious and dangerous man the FSB has. But we need as complete a description as you can give us of his present appearance, and of the other man as well."

"Well, physically Chernov hasn't changed since I saw him less than three weeks ago in Paris," said Carla, trying to picture him. "He looks about 45 years old, an even six feet tall, powerfully built—I'd say about 200 pounds. Sharp nose, square jaw, his eyes are sort of sunken and narrow, broad forehead, thick black hair cut very short, but it lies down flat. His beard is extremely short—it can't be more than three weeks old because he didn't have a beard in Paris. His companion, also powerfully built, is about two inches taller, but I really didn't get a good look at him. I think he had short, sandy hair and broad cheekbones, but that's about all I remember. They were both wearing dark suits."

As she gave the descriptions, Lawton repeated them over the car radio. "That's going immediately out on an All Points Bulletin," explained Richardson. "It goes not only to our agents, but to local police, sheriffs, highway patrol—every law-enforcement agency. Unfortunately, we don't have a description of

their car other than what you gave us last night, which isn't much to go on."

They drove back to the hotel, this time parking around the corner, and the three of them walked in the side door and hurried across the lobby. Immediately they were recognized and several of the most inquisitive guests followed them. "Stand back!" ordered the two agents as soon as an elevator door had opened, and they prevented anyone else from entering. The door closed on the three of them, and Richardson punched floors four, six, and ten. Responding to Carla's questioning look, he explained, "Some of those people will be watching to see what floor we get off at and they'll literally snoop along the halls trying to find out something."

At the fourth and sixth floors he punched the button to close the door immediately. When the elevator opened at the tenth floor, they got out and the FBI agents led the way down the stairs to the eighth, where Carla's room was located.

She opened the door to her room, and they went in with her to check it out. "Lawton and I have blown our cover," explained Richardson. "You won't see us again in the lobby. We'll trade places with the team that has been occupying the adjoining room." He pointed to the access door between. "The door on our side is open at all times. If you have an emergency, just open your side and come on in. We'll be there 24 hours a day. There's another team in the room directly across the hall watching your door day and night."

"You really make me feel secure," responded Carla gratefully. "I didn't know I was this important. It's hard for me to believe that someone actually wants to kill me. That's a horrible realization!"

"From what you told us, you nearly killed Chernov," said Lawton. "He's not the kind to take that without getting revenge."

"Don't forget, however, you're not his primary target," added Richardson. "That's in your favor. He's after the defector you rescued. He now knows you'll be watched around the clock after you recognized him tonight, and he may decide it isn't worth the risk and effort. We hope so, but if he tries, we've got you covered. No more elevator rides unescorted. Everywhere you go, someone will be right there. You won't always know it but you can count on it."

Carla was in bed trying to fall asleep and finding it impossible, when the phone rang. "Miss Bertelli," said a deep male voice, "this is Don Jordan. I'm in charge of the FBI teams that have you under surveillance. I just wanted to explain a couple of things. First of all, you might be interested to know that the men you saw in the elevator were apparently on the private access road out near

the research center earlier tonight—probably to waylay you. A mutual friend of ours, Ken Inman, seems to have frightened them off.”

“You’re kidding! What in the world was Ken doing out there?”

“Exactly what he shouldn’t have been doing—and I’ve warned him about that. But he had such concern for you, he just didn’t realize what he was getting into. But he knows better now. This is a very dangerous Russian team. They killed two of our men who tried to arrest them a little later.”

“So Ken saved my life—and risked his own to do it?”

“I guess you could say that” said Jordan.

For a moment Carla saw herself walking out of a hospital room and heard Ken calling to her. Then she realized that Jordan was telling her something important

“... we don’t know how many more there may be in this elite Russian team, but we’ve got a company of specially trained Army commandos coming in from Virginia who can handle them. By tomorrow evening they’ll be deployed all along that access road leading from the main highway to the laboratory so you won’t have anything further to worry about.”

“Are you expecting a major assault on the laboratory?” asked Carla in surprise.

“I can’t say what we’re expecting. Of course, everything I’ve said to you is confidential. I mainly wanted to let you know that we have the situation under control. Just relax and have a good night’s rest.”

“I really appreciate this,” said Carla. “I was having a terrible time trying to get to sleep. I don’t like to take pills.”

“Definitely don’t take any under *these* circumstances!” Jordan cautioned her.

“Thanks again. You’ve made me feel so much better!”

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Carla slept fitfully. Nightmares merged with waking fantasies. The whole of life had become a bad dream from which she hoped one day to awaken. Was it worth going on? *Of course it is!* she told herself whenever such a thought surfaced. There was no doubt that she had a Pulitzer-prize-winning story in the bag, at least five million dollars in movie rights, and all of the other endless benefits. She was not only sitting on the story of a lifetime, but she was living it, participating in its frightening development, *experiencing it all herself from the inside!* Had any other journalists ever been so lucky as to stumble upon such an opportunity?

After a late breakfast in her room—delivered by an FBI agent--she dressed

and went down to her car. The man in the hall who got on the elevator with her and followed her into the garage, the unmarked car with two men in it that pulled out just ahead of her, and the similar one that followed just behind and stayed with her all the way to the gate of the installation, gave her a feeling not only of impregnable security, but also of importance that was more than gratifying. She wouldn't want to live that way for long, however. At least it was quite apparent that Chernov was not going to be able to complete his designs upon her—and certainly Viktor was beyond his reach in Leighton's impregnable fortress.

"I hear you've had some adventures," exclaimed Leighton the moment she walked into his office just before noon.

"I had some anxious moments, but I'm really not worried anymore," said Carla, trying to be blasé about the whole thing. Then she added with a laugh, "You'd think I was the president of the United States if you could see the way my hotel room is watched—and the escort I got right up to the gate!"

"Well, you're safe out here—that's for certain. This place is guarded better than Fort Knox. Maybe I can persuade you to move in. You'd have your own apartment like Viktor, great food—the Hilton can't offer anything better—sauna, gymnasium, swimming pool..."

Carla laughed and shook her head. "And miss the celebrity feeling I get with escorts and guards following me everywhere? I appreciate the offer, but I'm not worried anymore. They told me they're going to have a whole company of special Army commandos guarding the road by evening, so even that spooky stretch that used to scare me to death is going to be a piece of cake from now on."

"I know," responded Leighton with a scowl, "and I think it's a ridiculous overreaction. The escort they've given you should be enough. I don't like so much attention—not that kind. Some senator could start asking questions that we can't answer yet." He shrugged and managed a half-smile. "Look, I'm not suggesting it's your fault. Anyway, we've got a job to do out here. Let me get the lab on the intercom and see what Del Sasso's up to. Viktor is already down there. We've got a lot of ground to cover today."

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The night was pitch-black. Not only was it the dark of the new moon, but a heavy bank of fog had crept inland from the coast a few miles to the west and up and over the mountains, seeping down to the ground through the treetops. Silence and immobility reigned. The two guards on duty at the gate were facing the usual evening boredom. It was now about 8:30 p.m. and there had been no

activity since the lab assistants and secretaries had left in the normal day's-end exodus shortly after five o'clock.

This was not a job that lent itself to cards or television in off moments. Even though the daily routine was mostly watching and waiting for something that so far had never happened, vigilance was demanded at all times. The guards took turns peering from their fortified station through the small, thick pane of bulletproof glass at the fog swirling along the floodlighted road in front of the steel gate they were manning. The report that Russian agents were known to be in the vicinity stalking Miss Bertelli and were likely to attempt a penetration of the installation to kill Dr. Khorev had put nerves on edge.

"I can't believe they think they can attack this fortress," mused the younger of the two guards for the fourth or fifth time that evening, more to himself than to his companion, who was tired of hearing it

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard that opinion. Myself, I don't take anything for granted."

The younger man turned away with a loud yawn from another look at the fog-enshrouded road leading to the gate. "If you had the job of getting inside here and killing someone, how would you go about it? Not a frontal assault."

"I wouldn't even try. I'd wait till the guy came out which he'd have to do eventually. I'd lie low and get him when he was on vacation somewhere and not expecting it."

"Suppose there was some reason why you couldn't wait that long?"

"You'd have to wait. It's impossible to crack this place. You know that. You can't go through the wall, and even if you could get over or under it, the electronics would trigger an immediate alarm. You'd have to come through here—over our dead bodies. And I don't know how anyone could get at us." He took his turn peering into the night.

"Helicopter, maybe?" persisted the younger one.

"Don't be silly. You've been watching too much TV."

"Well, how about parachutes? Some of these guys can land on a dime."

"In the middle of these tall trees—and at night? Now you are getting crazy!"

"Tap, tap, tap." At the sound coming from behind them, the two men whirled around, automatic weapons poised. They could see a familiar face peering into the small window in the heavy steel door that gave them access to the inside of the compound—a retreat route they could take if it were ever needed.

"Well, look who's here," said the younger to his companion. "It's not often

we get a visit from the ‘big wheels.’” He went over, unlocked the door, and opened it. “Out for a stroll, are you?”

“Yeah. My brain was getting foggy, so I thought I’d clear it with a short walk around the base. That never fails.”

“Well, come on in,” said the older guard, “and relieve our boredom for a few minutes. We’re supposed to be on alert, but what’s the point? The woods are crawling with Army commandos. Any Russian agents out there couldn’t get within a country mile of this place. And if they did, I’d like to see them try to get in!”

Suddenly the visitor, who had stepped inside the small station, stared with shocked expression past the guards through the small window and asked in a hushed voice, “What was it that just moved over there across the road?”

The two guards stepped quickly over to peer out through the bulletproof glass into the fog. “Straight across?” the elder one asked, half-turning back toward the visitor. As he did so, he noticed a quick movement out of the corner of his eye.

With a lightning motion, the video surveillance camera had been shoved to one side. Wearing a derisive smile, the visitor was pointing a handgun fitted with a silencer. The guard had no chance to aim his own weapon in defense: The three slugs tore into his face and head, killing him instantly. His younger companion whirled around but was dead before he could raise his gun.

Instantly, the visitor pushed the button that opened the armored door, stepped quickly over the two bodies and into the open doorway, and waved at the empty road. Four men in dark sweat suits raced swiftly out of the thick woods. Chernov was the first to enter the guard station. “Harasho!” he grunted, taking the gun that had just killed the two guards. It would leave the base with him when he and his men had accomplished their mission.

When all four were inside, the “big wheel” closed the automatic door again, pointing out the control button to the others, and said in fluent Russian: “Give me two minutes to get back inside. Then you angle left to the side entrance. Get immediately away from the wall and stay away from it. That’s where the electronic surveillance devices are. Otherwise you only have to contend with dogs and guards.” Stepping quickly out the inner door, the “big wheel” was gone.