

[21] Cat and Mouse

It was very late when Carla, with a restrained yawn, finally stood to her feet to say a reluctant good night. Frank and Viktor stood up stiffly as well. It had been an emotionally exhausting day for all of them. Del Sasso had retired earlier with a bad headache, which had become a frequent occurrence for him lately and gave Leighton a great deal of concern.

"This has been incredibly informative and fascinating," said Carla, "but I just have to get some sleep. Don't expect me before noon. What about you, Viktor? Where are you staying? Do you need a ride?"

"I'm staying out here—In one of the guest apartments. It's nicer than anything I've ever lived in."

"It's for his own protection," added Leighton. "If we gave him a new identity and let him disappear, he'd be of no value to the Plan. But as the top Russian scientist in this field, with an international reputation, his endorsement will mean a lot. So we're guarding him in here where he'll be safe until the Plan has been implemented. Then anywhere in the world will be safe for everyone!"

Carla gave Viktor a quick hug. "It's been wonderful seeing you again, and knowing that you're in such good hands—and that you'll be involved right away in the kind of research you were hoping to get into."

"I can never thank you enough!" he responded. "Without your courage, this wouldn't have happened! I hate to think where I'd be right now."

"Well, don't forget our little arrangement."

"Never! And I'm so happy that you're going to be part of this project too. Is that right?" He looked questioningly to both of them for confirmation.

"I certainly hope so," said Leighton, turning to Carla. "Are you accepting the assignment?"

She had been moving slowly toward the door as they talked. "I'll be back tomorrow to get a closer look and a few more questions answered." Carla paused for a moment, then added cautiously, "I'd be crazy to turn down an opportunity like this! Yes, I'd like to accept the challenge, Frank—provided I can keep my

independence as a journalist.”

“That’s understood,” Frank reminded her, “so don’t even mention it again.”

As the heavy steel gate swung shut behind her and she turned her car onto the access road, Carla breathed a long, satisfied sigh. *Wow! What a day! Incredible! Do I want to take the assignment? I guess I played that cool! Here I thought it would be so difficult to find out what was going on. Instead I’m invited—almost begged.* It was all beyond anything she would have dared to hope for. Yet, in spite of her exhilaration, there was a gnawing pang of doubt. Something bothered her.

Was it too good to be true? Or was it the fact that Del Sasso, who could be so charming and sincere, had shown another side that was frighteningly vicious? And the Archons—were they really highly evolved intelligences or simply deeper levels of the human psyche? Frank had assured her that he had personally met them and that she would, too, eventually. He’d also said that their actual identity wasn’t all that important and was probably beyond human comprehension, anyway. After all, the potential for bringing peace and prosperity to the world was what really mattered, and there seemed little doubt about that. And yet, she hardly knew how to pinpoint the unsettling feeling that something wasn’t quite right.

It was a longer drive back to the highway than she remembered. The remoteness of the narrow road and the intense darkness under the tall trees heightened another anxiety that she had managed until now to suppress entirely. Suppose the men who had pursued Viktor and from whose clutches she had literally snatched him tried to find him? That would not be unlikely. Of course they wouldn’t be able to reach him inside that CIA fortress. In their frustration, might they not try to take revenge on her?

Suddenly the unexpected glare of headlights in her rearview mirror startled her back to present reality. She tried desperately to suppress the impulse to panic. Surely it was paranoid even to consider the terrifying fear that now had her heart beating wildly. But who could it possibly be? No one else had been leaving the research center after her. She’d heard one of the guards at the gate make that remark to his companion. And the road dead-ended there. Cars didn’t materialize out of thin air. Had someone been hiding in the woods, waiting for her? She pressed the accelerator harder and her tires squealed in protest as she skidded around succeeding curves. The pursuing car quickened its pace accordingly.

By the time she reached the main highway, a feeling of helpless terror

gripped Carla. She pulled onto it without stopping—directly into the path of a fast-moving car. The screech of brakes, a long skid, and it had careened briefly off and back onto the roadway. Blinking headlights and blaring horn signaled the driver's anger. At least there was someone between her and what she was now convinced were determined pursuers. She remembered Ken's invitation, but resisted the temptation to turn off onto the road leading to his house. That would be the day! She'd made the right decision two years ago, and now that she had gotten what she wanted from him it would be insane to have any further contact. Seeing his incredible performance at the lab had made that crystal-clear once again. He had developed into an impossible fundamentalist fanatic, just as she had feared he would.

All the way down the mountain the car that had followed her on the access road made no attempt to get directly behind her again. When the highway left the foothills and leveled off in the valley, the intervening car turned off at an intersection. Now the other car hung back. But by the time she had made several turns in town and it was still behind her, there could be no doubt of its occupants' ultimate intentions.

If she continued on to her hotel, they would know where she was staying! Should she drive directly to the police station? That would accomplish nothing except to make her look foolish. *Think, Carla, think!* She willed the terror-driven thoughts into submission. Yes, she had it—a plan—a way that she could get to another hotel without her pursuers knowing it. There was no way to lose them by trying to drive faster than they did. She would go into her own hotel first. If they followed her into the parking garage, however, she would be trapped. To avoid that, she pulled up to the front door and gave her keys to the bellman. As she did so, she noticed that her pursuers had parked just down the street and turned off their lights.

Inside the lobby Carla checked at the desk for messages. There was one call from her editor friend in New York. She hurried to the elevator. Once in her room, she would phone another hotel for a reservation, gather her things, and call a cab to meet her at the rear service entrance. An elevator was waiting with its doors open. She stepped inside and, with a sigh of relief, pushed the button for the eighth floor. Two men stepped in quickly beside her just as the doors closed.

She fought off the first wave of panic and tried to think rationally. From what she'd seen as they had entered and could now observe out of the corner of her eye, they didn't look like Russian agents—or did they? How could one be

sure? They were fortyish and, in spite of their business suits, looked unmistakably muscular and very fit. She tried to assure herself that they couldn't possibly be the occupants of the car that had followed her. Then she remembered that she had carelessly stood waiting for her mail at a portion of the front counter where a side door, through which they might have entered, was not visible. *Idiot! And they didn't push a number for their floor! They're obviously planning to get off at the eighth with me! What to do now?*

The elevator stopped at the sixth floor and a young couple got in, looking a bit embarrassed and hastening to explain why they were out and about in their pajamas and bathrobes. "The ice machine wasn't working on our floor," they mumbled, as though reminding one another. They pushed number five, and then the man exclaimed, "Oh, we thought this was going down."

"Well, we get an extra ride for our money, honey," added the girl, which they both found somehow hilarious.

At the eighth floor the elevator door opened. The two men made no move to get off. Carla stepped to one side and motioned to them. "This must be your floor, too. Go ahead. I'm not getting off. I just remembered I have to go back to the lobby for something." She reached out and pushed the first-floor button.

"What a coincidence!" said the taller of the two. "We've got the same problem."

Don't panic! Think! There's got to be some way. What should she do? What *could* she do? The elevator made its way to the top floor, then started back down. The two men were like sphinxes. Oblivious to her predicament, the young couple chattered away happily in low voices. Should she get off with them? No, they would be no help at all—and she might get them killed as well for witnessing what happened to her. Was this all paranoia? As though in a bad dream, she felt the elevator come to a stop at the fifth floor, saw the door open, and watched helplessly as the young couple, still talking nonstop, got off. The doors closed, leaving her—a lone mouse—to face these two cats who were ready to pounce.

She determined to confront them. Perhaps by taking the offensive she could use up the time it would take to reach the lobby. Just as she opened her mouth to speak, however, the man closest to her reached quickly inside his coat pocket. Instead of the gun she feared would be pointed at her, he held out a badge.

"We're with the FBI, Miss Bertelli. We just wanted you to know that we'll be checking with you from time to time in case you have any problems."

Carla gasped in relief. Then a wave of anger surged over her. "You two

goons really gave me a scare! I thought you were from the FSB! Why did you wait so long to tell me?”

“We were going to get off with you on your floor, and then that young couple got on. We could hardly identify ourselves in their presence. I’m sorry we frightened you. But tell me, why would you even imagine we were from the *FSB*?”

The elevator came to a halt on the ground floor and its doors opened. They stepped out into the lobby together. Carla was still fuming. “If you had identified yourselves right away you might have caught some FSB agents! I don’t know who else would have followed me here! Come on, I’ll show you. They’re parked out on the street.”

The two men ran for the front door, with Carla following as fast as she could. When she joined them outside, the car was nowhere to be seen. “They were right over there,” she said, pointing to where her pursuers had parked. “Followed me all the way from up in the hills west of town.”

“Can you give us a description of the car and anyone in it?”

“They were always too far behind, and they parked half a block away. I think it was a four-door sedan, dark blue or maybe black late-model Ford, I’d say.”

“We’ll cruise the neighborhood and take a look,” said the special agent who had shown her his badge. He handed her his card. “If you have any problems, call that number.”

“I was going to check out of here and into another hotel, now that whoever followed me knows I’m staying here. Should I do that?”

“That wouldn’t help. They’d find you wherever you went. Better than that, stay here and I’ll recommend a 24-hour watch. We can’t guard you, exactly, but we can watch for Russian agents. It has the same effect.”

“So I’m the decoy? Wow! I don’t like this! But what can I say?”

“We’re not asking for your permission. It’ll happen, whether you want it or not. We won’t come up to you in public, and if you see us, don’t show any sign of recognition. Okay?”

“Okay. And thanks a lot. Pardon my temper. I feel a whole lot better now.”