

[18] Inside!

The thick fog that had drifted over the hills from the coast during the night was vanishing under the warming rays of the morning sun. The few lingering wisps of vapor lent a momentary translucence to the air, giving the leaves and blossoms on trees and shrubs a delicate, glistening sheen. It was a morning of rare beauty—which only seemed to accentuate the bittersweet mood that gripped Ken. In spite of the fact that he had long since given up any thought of recovering his past relationship with Carla, their brief meeting the night before had stirred emotions for her that he had thought were long dead and that he dared not nourish now.

Ken backed out of the garage and eased his GMC Yukon down the steep driveway just as Carla, in her rented Chrysler, came around the curve and stopped in the cul-de-sac to wait for him.

“Perfect timing!” called Ken, as he pulled up beside her. “Follow me, and we’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Traversing the rolling residential area through a maze of curving streets, they came at last to the main highway. Here Ken turned left and headed higher into the coastal range. As they began climbing into the foothills, a flood of memories poured over him. This was a route he purposely avoided for that very reason. Ten miles ahead was the cliff he’d gone over. He’d been up there only once since that fateful day. Looking down from the road to the chasm below, he’d been overwhelmed by a mingled awe and gratitude at the miracle of his survival. As a result of that fearful plunge that should have brought death, he had found a new life as different as night and day from what he’d known before.

A little more than a mile up the winding highway, the two cars turned right onto a newly paved road marked “Private: Keep Out.” After another mile of meandering through a thick forest of young pines, the road led into a stand of mature redwoods. It was one of the few groves that had survived—through belated government intervention—the earlier indiscriminate slaughter in the 1800s of these ancient giants. Soon another much larger and obviously newer

sign warned: “Restricted Government Property. No Trespassing!” Shortly thereafter, they came over a sharp rise and the trees opened up to reveal a broad meadow. Here the winding approach straightened and ran along a ten-foot-high stone wall that had not been there on the one previous occasion when Ken had visited the clandestine installation. Except for the coils of barbed wire on top, it was vaguely reminiscent of an ancient medieval castle, complete with moat.

Ken pulled left into a narrow entrance. There were no signs to indicate what kind of government operation this might be. The heavy, solid-steel gate was nearly as high as the wall and revealed nothing but a few scattered treetops beyond. Built into the wall next to the gate was a fortified guard station manned by two men carrying automatic weapons and wearing flak jackets over their civilian clothes. One of them approached Ken’s vehicle, while the other remained inside, on the alert.

“Dr. Inman?” the guard asked.

“That’s right.”

“Identification, please.” He leaned down and looked through the window, searching the interior of the car. “Is that Miss Bertelli behind you?” Ken nodded. “Would you please open the back?” asked the guard. A brief search followed, then the businesslike order to close it. Only after the same procedure had been followed with Carla did the heavy gate swing slowly open. It closed with ponderous precision the moment the two cars had moved inside.

Fifty yards directly ahead, at the end of a broad drive lined with flowers and exotic shrubs, stood the main complex—a wide, two-story building of heavy construction, few windows, and a solid front door sheltered behind a stone wall of about shoulder height. Other buildings, low and rambling, lined the wide lawn that stretched out to the right and left on either side. The installation had been greatly enlarged since Ken had visited it earlier and now formed a giant U-shape, open toward what seemed to be the only gate in the massive, high wall surrounding the property.

In front of the main building the drive widened to allow a dozen spaces for “Visitor Parking” on either side. There Ken and Carla left their cars and walked the short distance to the entrance under the vigilant surveillance of two more guards wearing flak jackets and with automatic weapons slung over their shoulders.

“Just your average psychic research lab,” whispered Ken with pretended naiveté. “No reason at all to imagine the CIA could possibly have anything to do with this friendly little operation!”

“I knew *something* was going on,” returned Carla softly, “but this is *awesome*—a far cry from any parapsychology lab I’ve ever visited!”

“May I see your bag, Miss Bertelli?” asked one of the guards half-apologetically as they approached the front door. “Just a formality.” While he performed that inspection, his companion ran a metal detector over their bodies. “Okay. Go on in. Dr. Leighton is expecting you.”

Leighton was waiting in the small lobby just inside the heavy carved-oak front door, which Ken suspected had a steel core. As they entered, Leighton rushed over to greet them, arms extended exuberantly. Shaking Ken’s hand vigorously, he exclaimed, “You don’t know what your call meant to me, Ken! It’s great to be back in touch and to know that you’re interested again. We could sure use your expertise!”

“And Carla—what a wonderful surprise this is!” Leighton began, turning to greet her warmly. She gave him her hand tentatively. He shook it gently, then held it in both of his for a moment. “I had planned to talk with you in Paris, but then I had to leave suddenly. And now here you are!”

Then to both of them, Leighton explained apologetically, “I hope the tight security wasn’t too bothersome. It’s just a precaution.”

“Do I detect that same old paranoia about the Russians, Frank?” Ken shook his head in mild reproof. “I thought it was all peace, love, and brotherhood now, with arms reduction and all that good stuff.”

“It is!” replied Leighton, winking at Carla. “However, we’ve made some reluctant concessions to the normal world of bombs and bullets—but not for long. What we’re developing here will bring *real and lasting* peace to the world, not just a slogan. And I don’t mean decades or even years from now, but in a matter of *months*!”

“If you can do that, Frank,” said Ken sincerely, “then you’ve got me and everyone else on your side. I’d be very interested to know *how* you’re going to do it. I guess that’s what we came here to find out.”

“And have I got a trip for you!” Frank’s eyes were gleaming. “Buckle your seat belts and hang on.”

Motioning to them to follow, he led them down a long hallway, pausing beside the first door on the right. “We’ll stop in my office for a moment.” With his hand on the knob, he turned to Carla. “Are you ready for a surprise? Someone in there is very anxious to see you. Can you guess?” She looked nonplussed and shook her head. It wouldn’t do to let him know that she had suspected Khorev was here and had actually come in search of him.

Leighton opened the door and led the way inside. A slightly built man of medium height with dark, prematurely graying crew cut hair and Slavic features jumped up from the sofa facing the huge desk and rushed toward Carla, arms extended.

“Miss Bertelli!”

“Dr. Khorev!” There was a quick, affectionate embrace, then a momentary awkward silence.

“They didn’t let me say goodbye,” began Viktor at last “I’m sorry. Of course, they explained to you.”

Carla started to say, “No, they didn’t,” but glanced over at Leighton and some sudden instinct caused her to swallow those words. “It’s so good to see you here safe and sound!” she exclaimed. “Th’t’s all that matters.”

Putting an arm around Carla once again, Viktor turned to Leighton. “You can’t imagine how brave she was! If it weren’t for Miss Bertelli, I wouldn’t be here!”

Frank motioned toward Ken. “Viktor, this is Ken Inman—the man you wanted to see. He’s actually the genius who invented the Psitron.”

“It’s a great honor to meet you,” said Ken enthusiastically, giving him a warm handshake. “I’ve followed your work for years—what little we could learn. I’ve read everything of yours that’s been published in the West.”

“It’s a greater honor for me to meet you, Dr. Inman. Dr. Leighton has told me about your research—and your terrible accident. I only arrived last night and I’m looking forward—”

“Let’s drop the ‘doctor’ stuff, Viktor,” interrupted Leighton good-naturedly. Viktor acknowledged the reproof with a nod and returned Leighton’s smile. They had apparently been over that before.

“About five more minutes, Frank!” The penetrating, slightly abrasive voice belonged to a tall, spare, and rather attractive fortyish woman in a white lab coat who had materialized briefly in the doorway, then disappeared down the hall.

Leighton called after her, “Come back here, Kay!” She reappeared, smiling, and took two short steps into the room.

“This is Kay Morris,” said Leighton. “She’s in charge of our labs—and what she says goes.”

“Want to put that in writing?” responded the woman with a short laugh. “That would be the day!”

“Kay’s made some fantastic contributions,” returned Leighton, sounding almost too effusive. Carla’s investigative reporting instincts were suddenly

aroused. As a bachelor, and not a very handsome one at that, Leighton had always been known at Stanford as a cold fish. Yet there was an uncharacteristic warmth between him and Kay—an intriguing chemistry that obviously went beyond the most amiable employer-employee relationship. That in itself would not have been enough to pique Carla’s interest had it not been for something else she sensed as Leighton hurried on with his introductions.

“Kay, you haven’t met Viktor Khorev yet .He’s just come from Russia to join our team.” Viktor half-bowed, and Kay’s smile suddenly froze as she seemed to notice him for the first time. Quickly she recovered.

“Not the world-renowned parapsychologist!” she exclaimed smoothly.

“You’re right!” went on Leighton with great enthusiasm. “This is *the* Viktor Khorev—fresh from the base we know so well just north of Moscow. He’s going to be quite an addition to our staff, and I know he’ll have a great deal to contribute.”

“I’m sure he will,” responded Kay. Turning toward Viktor, she said with less-than-ample enthusiasm, “I’m looking forward to working with you, Dr. Khorev.”

Something wasn’t right, but Carla couldn’t put her finger on it. *Is she, perhaps, paranoid about Russians? Or does she feel threatened by a male world-class parapsychologist coming into the picture? Or are my journalistic instincts out of control? I don’t know, but there’s something...*

“This is Carla Bertelli, the journalist,” Leighton was saying. “I’m sure you’ve read some of her stuff.”

Kay managed a more convincing smile than she’d given Viktor, and seemed almost relieved to turn her attention away from him.

“Yes, in fact I have. Most insightful. What a pleasure to meet you, Miss Bertelli.”

“And last, but far from least” continued Leighton hurriedly now, glancing at his watch, “this is Ken Inman, who invented the Psitron a few years back and wants to see what we’re up to now.”

Kay extended her hand. “I think you’ll be astonished,” she declared with a show of real enthusiasm, “to see how far we’ve gotten using your incredible electronic device—and some of the innovations we’ve added.”

“I’m looking forward to that,” replied Ken.

Kay nodded to each one again. “It’s an honor to meet all of you,” she said cordially. Then, glancing at her watch, she added, “I’m sorry, but I have to get right back to the lab. I’ll see you over there. In about two minutes,” she added

pointedly to Leighton, then turned and hurried from the room.

“Ph.D. in robotics from MIT,” said Leighton, with evident pride. “Brilliant, efficient. The smartest thing I ever did was hire her three weeks ago. She has really gotten us organized.” He hesitated as though he felt he might have waxed a bit too enthusiastic. “I don’t need to tell you the connection between Kay’s expertise in artificial intelligence and what we’re involved in here.”

He started toward the door and motioned for them to follow. “We can talk more later. The man I want you all to meet is Antonio Del Sasso, the most remarkable psychic in the world. He’s already in the lab preparing himself—and Antonio’s a stickler for promptness, so we’d better get over there.”

Leighton led them out into the hall again and around a corner to the right. Carla was still preoccupied. Suppose there was a romance between Frank and Kay. While it was none of her business, she hoped it would bring the real happiness that, as long as she’d known him, she had sensed Frank desperately needed. Add to the strains inherent in such a relationship with one’s boss the tremendous pressure Kay must be under to perform, and now the unknown elements being introduced with Viktor’s entry—perhaps her reaction to Viktor had been only natural. Carla filed the impressions away for further reference and determined not to let them inhibit her relationship with this rather unusual woman.

Again Leighton’s effusive voice commanded Carla’s attention. “Antonio is the first one to be fully developed on the Psitron. He’s been under the direction of the Archons for two years. They have a program for developing other psychics—in fact a plan for the world.”

“You’re in touch with *Archons*?” asked Viktor, looking at Leighton in sudden consternation.

“I thought I’d explained that.”

“You invited me to join ‘Project Archon,’ but I had no idea...” Viktor seemed almost frightened.

Leighton stopped in front of a door marked “Laboratory 1”. Above it a large red light was flashing the warning: “Experiment in progress.” He looked at Khorev with concern. “Would constant contact with the Archons and guidance from them bother you?”

Viktor hesitated. “They have done you no harm?”

“Harm?” returned Leighton with a laugh. “Of course not! They’re our mentors. That’s what this whole project is all about. Forget any contact you may have had with them in Russia. You’re on our side now and there’s nothing to

fear.”

Viktor seemed relieved. “That explains a few things. I think I’m beginning to understand what I really came to the West hoping to find out.”

Leighton put his hand on Viktor’s shoulder and gestured toward Ken. “My good friend here once thought that the Archons were *demons* up to deviltry. I think what we’re all about to witness will make it clear that they are indeed highly evolved intelligences that want to rescue mankind from self-destruction.”

“I’ll believe it when I see it” said Ken with a good-natured grin. “So let’s take a look at what this Del Sasso can do. That’s why we’re here, isn’t it?”

“That’s right!” Leighton was beaming once again. Putting a finger over his lips for silence, he pushed the door open.