

[17] A Surprising Proposal

Carla slowed the rented car to a crawl as waves of nostalgia swept over her. The curving street, the elegant new homes set far back on acre lots, the pleasantly rolling foothill terrain and, at last, the house she hadn't seen since it had been in the framing stage—it all seemed reminiscent of a dream she had long forgotten. *It's beautiful, but I can't believe he's lived in that huge place all alone for two years! I'm sure he hasn't married—at least I haven't heard. Plenty of women would be interested in him! He probably has someone in mind if he isn't engaged by now.*

Sitting atop a steeply sloping and ivy-fringed lawn at the end of the cul-de-sac, the home was all she had imagined and hoped for—in another time that now seemed unreal. The low, sprawling silhouette of its overhanging roof of beige concrete shakes blended into the lush landscaping of stately conifers, blooming azaleas, and rhododendrons. The magnificent native live oaks that had been left in place completed the tasteful artistry, appropriate to the background of wooded hills rising just beyond. It had been little more than raw acreage and a dream the last time she'd seen it.

She had come directly from the airport—hadn't even gone to her hotel yet. At first Carla had thought of calling from there, but that would have made it even more painful. It had to be a surprise for him—and she knew that if she didn't get it over with immediately, she might not find the courage to face him later. Courage? She felt a total lack of it as, with growing apprehension and embarrassment, she forced herself to climb those broad steps onto the front porch and ring the bell. *Maybe he won't even be home. Off on a trip somewhere—or who knows what. I should have phoned first. This is crazy!* Anxiously long moments preceded the sound of familiar footsteps beyond the door. Then it swung open and there he was, a look of shocked and openmouthed unbelief written on his face.

“Carla!?”

“You remember the cartoon of the guy who went by plane, then canoe, and

finally by dogsled to reach a cabin deep in the Arctic, and then said, ‘Thought I’d drop by while I happened to be in the neighborhood’? Well, I just happened to be in *this* neighborhood. Only all I did was fly in from D.C.—no canoes or dogsleds.”

He didn’t laugh at her little joke—didn’t even smile. He seemed too stunned to know whether to invite her in. It was, after all, a staggering surprise.

“Actually,” continued Carla, “I’m pursuing a story. And I desperately need your help or I wouldn’t be here.” Her voice quavered just a little in trying to get out the carefully chosen words through a mouth that had become suddenly very dry.

That’s Carla—still the same. Abrupt, honest, everything up front. That’s one of the many reasons I loved her so much. Ken stood there for what seemed another eternity, trying to convince himself that his eyes and ears were not deceiving him, that it was really happening. *Carla* was actually standing there, looking more beautiful than ever, facing him on the front porch of the home they had dreamed of and planned together.

“Well, come on in,” he finally managed to say, opening the door and stepping aside. “You know I’ll do anything I can to help you.”

“I know. That’s why I came.” She stepped inside, her full skirt swishing against him as she passed. Now he smelled her perfume, the kind she’d known was his favorite. He’d tried to forget her, and thought he had pretty much succeeded, knowing that was best. He had dated several other women, but none of them seemed right. And now suddenly, in spite of himself, he felt that overwhelming attraction again. *Get hold of yourself, Inman! It’s finished.*

They stood without speaking, just inside the door, looking at one another. She was searching his face for scars and not finding any. “It’s great to see what a remarkable recovery you made. Are you as sound as you look?”

He nodded. “Perfect condition, so the doctor tells me. And your job? I confess I haven’t seen many of your articles—don’t read the right journals anymore.”

“No need to apologize. I wouldn’t expect you to.” Her eye was taking in the comfortable but simply-furnished sunken living room just off the entry hall. Its huge windows reached from floor to lofty open-beamed ceiling and looked out upon a breathtaking view of the city in the distance below. The large stone fireplace and raised hearth with its sweeping curve across the far corner of the room had been one of her many creative ideas. The plans they had worked on together had incorporated far more of her taste than his. *He finished it that way—*

and still lives in it!

For a moment she could see them strolling hand in hand over the raw land, then merrily walking through the floor plan that had been laid out on the finished foundation—and finally, the last time, just after it had been framed and just before the accident like children playing house, going through “their home” together, excited to get their first real sense of the size and layout of the rooms. She put a hand quickly to her mouth so he couldn’t see that her lips were trembling. That surprising upsurge of feelings—feelings that she had assured herself were long dead—caught her completely off guard. She was amazed at their intensity.

He led her into the living room and pulled up a chair for her near his in front of the fire. They sat for a moment in another brief but awkward silence.

“Have you had dinner?” Ken asked at last “Mom is fixing it right now.” Seeing her look of surprise, he explained, “My dad died just before Christmas. I’ve got this big house here, you know, that we...” His voice caught and he turned away for a moment, then managed to continue. “Well, she’s out here now staying with me. The winters are pretty tough in Maine. She’ll keep the family home back there for the grandchildren, for summers. It’s right on the bay—well, you remember.”

Carla suddenly felt like crying on his shoulder as the guilt surfaced once again. Walking out on him when he was still in the hospital so close to death. It seemed so heartless. She threw her head back instead and laughed, that rollicking, lilted laugh he knew so well.

“What’s so funny?” he asked in feigned offense.

“You! You look like you’ve just seen a ghost.”

“Well, haven’t I?” They both laughed nervously.

“Dinner is out of the question,” said Carla firmly. “I’m not staying long. I just got off the plane from D.C. and came right here. It’s rather urgent” She was looking around the room again, taking it all in with evident approval. “You’ve done a great job, Ken. It’s beautiful.”

“Would you like to see the rest of it?” he asked eagerly, jumping to his feet. She didn’t move, as though she hadn’t heard. He hesitated, looked embarrassed, then sat down again. “Well—why don’t you tell me how I can help you?”

“You’re still in touch with Dr. Leighton?”

“You mean Frank? Not really. Why?”

“But you could be?”

“I suppose, but I don’t have any real reason. We’ve hardly had any contact

since he bought me out. That's got to be two years."

"And he moved your equipment—that you invented and developed—to another location. Do you know where?"

Ken nodded. "I've been there once—maybe a year ago. He needed some technical advice when it was being reinstalled. But I'm out of that field completely. And Frank's very secretive now. You may have been right about the CIA."

"I was right—about that and a few other things." She stared thoughtfully at the fire in silence. "He'd really like to have you involved once more, wouldn't he?"

"He's told me that a few times." Ken looked uncomfortable. "What's this sudden interest in Frank? I heard you crossed him off your list—which surprised me, really. He could have been a great source."

"It was mutual. But you're still on good terms. Right?"

"As far as I know. But, as I said, we haven't really had any contact for a long time—for reasons that I'm sure you remember."

She looked a bit uncomfortable for a moment, but chose not to take up the challenge, if that was what he intended. Instead she surprised him. "Listen, suppose I said that I'm in agreement—that Leighton's involved in something *evil*?" At Ken's hopeful look, Carla held up a cautioning hand and shook her head. "Please, don't jump to conclusions. I've got different reasons than you have, of course, but I don't like what I think is going on." She paused, choosing her words. "Look, I've got certain suspicions, okay, that I have to check out somehow."

Ken got up and threw on another log. He stood there with his back to the fire, looking at her questioningly. "Why don't you tell me exactly what you have in mind?"

"I don't know *exactly*. That's the problem. I just have a bad feeling about something." She hesitated, then shrugged and continued. "It's too much to go into, really. There's a hot story, as you probably suspect. It's got everything in it—CIA, FSB, a Russian defector—and I suspect that Frank is right in the middle of it."

"The big story that comes along once in a lifetime?" interrupted Ken. "Pulitzer prize?"

"Forget the prize. This is far more important than that. I saved someone's life in Paris. You'd know his name—Viktor Khorev."

"You're kidding! How did you do that?"

“Well, I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Rescued Khorev when he was making a break for it and just about to be caught. I got him to the American Embassy in Paris. They took him into an office for an interview, and then they denied that I’d brought him there—tried to tell me they’d never seen him!”

“This must be some bad dream you had,” interrupted Ken skeptically. “You’re saying they just outright *lied* to you—it was that blatant?” She nodded and Ken laughed. “The State Department doesn’t know what a huge mistake it made. They’ve got a tiger on their tail now. And you’re going to show them.”

Carla smiled and held up both hands in mock humility. “Okay, okay—that’s part of it. But give me credit for having some heart. I’m deeply concerned about Khorev. I don’t want to see him exploited! That’s happened too many times to defectors to let me feel comfortable right now. He’s got to be somewhere in this country, of course, and I think Frank’s got him.”

“And, of course,” added Ken facetiously, “incidental though it may be, there is a story involved—and it sounds like a big one. So you wouldn’t pass that up.”

“I’m not *all* heart. After all, Khorev owes me his life—and he promised me the exclusive on his story. But I think he’s gotten himself involved in something much bigger than his defection, and he’s going to be my entree to that as well.”

“I think you’re probably right about him being with Frank--eventually. But I doubt that he’d be involved out there already.”

“I think he is, and I’ve got my reasons. But again, that’s too much to go into now.”

“And you want me to find out, if I can, whether Khorev’s actually there, and generally what’s going on. Is that it?”

“I want more than that. I want to get inside that installation myself and see firsthand what’s going on!”

“Why don’t you just go directly to Frank? You could reach him at Stanford—that’s where I’d have to call. He still teaches a course or two over there. In fact, he’s head of the department now, in case you hadn’t heard. He’d be glad to be back in touch with you—probably invite you out there himself, if he thought you’d give him a good write-up. Of course, he wouldn’t want you to mention any of his secret work. You know how paranoid Frank is about that side of things—his fear of the Russians and all that.”

Carla shook her head. “No chance of that! You don’t know the way I told Frank off the last time I saw him—for taking advantage of you when you were in the hospital and stealing your life’s work for a fraction of what it was worth,

and for a few other things. I don't think he'd give me the time of day." She stood to her feet. "Am I asking too much?"

"Ken, supper's going to be ready in about five minutes. Do you hear me? Where are you?" His mother's voice drew nearer as she came down the hall from the kitchen. Before Ken could answer, she walked into the living room and stopped in surprise. "Oh, I didn't know you had a visitor." Then she saw who it was and put both hands to her mouth in astonishment.

"Carla—I--well, how wonderful to see you!" She rushed over and gave Carla a hug. "Would you join us for dinner?"

"It's nice of you to ask, but I already told Ken I couldn't."

"Well, I'm much more persuasive than he is. It would be such a treat! Would you?"

"I can't." Carla started toward the entry hall to escape what was becoming increasingly emotional and embarrassing. Ken hurried after her. He opened the front door. "I'll see what I can do. Where can I get in touch with you?"

"At the Hilton. But only if you can get me in out there—or have found Khorev."

She started down the steps and he followed her to the car. "Hotels are terribly expensive. You could stay here. I wouldn't hassle you. There's a suite, you know, at the other end of the house with its own bedroom, study, and bath—and its own entrance."

"I know. That was my idea, remember?"

This house is full of your brilliant ideas, and they all worked out great—except the bomb shelter under the garage. Solid granite begins about six feet down."

"That was your inspiration."

"Well, you thought it was a good idea, too." He looked at her longingly. "You really ought to see how it all turned out."

She put a hand on his arm. "Your mother's as sweet as ever. Tell her I'm sorry I couldn't stay. And maybe you shouldn't even mention to Frank yet that I'm out here."

.. . .

As soon as dinner was over, Ken got on the phone and called the Elliots. Karen answered.

"Everything going okay?" she asked. "We missed you Thursday. Hal was going to call you."

"I missed being there. Had a touch of the flu, but I'm okay now. Is Hal in?"

He ought to get on the phone, too.”

“No. Emergency surgery. What’s up?”

“Carta’s back in town! She just left here a few minutes ago!”

“Praise the Lord!”

“Well, yeah—but I’m sure she’s just as far from the Lord as ever. There wasn’t any chance at all to broach that subject”

“I wouldn’t even think of that yet, Ken!” said Karen gently. “It’s not your job to ‘witness’ to her. You’ve already tried that. She knows what’s right—now it’s her move. If the Lord opens the door, and she shows some interest... okay. In the meantime, you just need to be a friend to her, if she’ll allow that. Let her see the love and forgiveness of Christ in your life.”

“Well, I think it was pretty clear that she has no intention of even giving me a chance to do that. She wants me to do a favor for her, which I’d be happy to do if it was anything else.” Ken hesitated. Finally he added, “I don’t feel comfortable about it, but I promised her...”

“Promised her what?”

“She wants me to get back in touch with Leighton.”

“Ken!”

“Don’t worry. You know it’s completely out of the question that I would get involved again in the slightest. But I promised I’d contact him to try to find out something for her. She’s working on a big story.”

There was a long, thoughtful silence on both ends of the line. “It was great to see her again, and there’s still a lot of feeling there, that’s for sure. It really surprised me—and convicted me, too. I have to confess that I’ve tried so hard to forget Carla that I haven’t prayed for her lately as I should. But I’m going to from now on.”

“I’ve never stopped—day and night. God has given me a real love and concern for Carla, and Hal feels the same way. Well, this is interesting! So you’re going to contact Leighton after all this time. And at least you’re back in touch with Carla. I’ll notify the prayer group right away.”

“Yeah, that’s why I was calling.”

“So she’s working on a big story that involves Leighton—that’s interesting! Is there anything else you can tell me to pass on to the group so we can pray specifically?”

“Not yet. It’s her secret. She thinks it’s the biggest story that’s ever come along. If it’s what I think it is—you know, if Archon is going to make the move like we’ve been expecting—then we’d better start praying around the clock and

getting a lot of others to join us!”

.. . .

Ken called Frank’s Stanford office first thing the next morning. “You just caught me!” exclaimed Leighton, sounding both surprised and pleased. “It’s been a long time.”

“I’ve been wanting to get in touch, but you know how time flies. How are things going?”

“You mean here at school, or at the lab?”

“Oh, I read about you in the alumni news. I apologize for not calling sooner to congratulate you—new head of the department and all that. But actually, I was wondering about the project.”

“Still worried that I’m trafficking with demons?”

“Frank, I’m not calling to push my beliefs unless *you* want to talk about it. I really am interested to know what’s been happening.”

“Ken, I’d love to show you.” Leighton was bubbling with enthusiasm now. “When you see what we’re doing and where it’s leading—well, you’ll forget all about those ‘powers of darkness.’ I can’t talk about it on the phone. It’s too big.”

“And too secret of course. I understand.”

“Well, that’s true. But, actually, we’re not going to keep it secret much longer. Not totally, anyway. We’ve got to gradually leak it to the press. The public has to be informed.”

“Really? You’ve come that far?”

“You can’t imagine what’s happened! It’s interesting you called, because I was just thinking of you last night—and your ex-fiancée. I caught a glimpse of her in Paris last week at the Congress. She’d be the logical one to write some key articles about our research.”

“Frank, this is amazing. I haven’t seen or heard from Carla since she broke our engagement, but she just got into town last night and we were talking about you and the project. She expressed a lot of interest”

“Really? Listen. What about this? Del Sasso—you remember Del Sasso?”

“I never met him, but you’ve talked about him.”

“Right. Well, Del Sasso is going to be doing some work in our main lab tomorrow. Why don’t you and Carla stop in? That would give you both a good idea of how far we’ve come. You remember where we’re located?”

“I can find it. What time?”

“It’s going to be at 10:00 in the morning, so you should be here by 9:30. Actually we’re doing this for someone who just arrived from—well, you’ll meet

him tomorrow. In fact, I was going to call you, because he's very anxious to meet you. Seems to be a great fan of yours,"

"Can't imagine who that would be. Anyway, we'll be there. See you at 9:30."

"One thing, Ken. There's a lot of security around here. Just some precautions. I'll leave word so they'll let you in."

.. . .

Carla was out when Ken phoned. She returned his call just after lunch.

"How would you like to see your Russian friend tomorrow?" he asked.

"Look, Mr. Practical Joker, this is too serious to kid about."

"I'm not kidding." He heard her gasp on the other end of the line.

"You're not?"

"Nope. How about if I pick you up at the hotel at 9:00 tomorrow morning? I promise not to drive over any cliffs."

There was a moment's hesitation, then, "Why don't I come to your house? I'll follow you from there in my car. I'd feel more comfortable that way. And you're really not putting me on?"

"Come on, Carla, you're making me feel bad. Where's your confidence? When you put Supersleuth Inman on the trail—well, you ought to know it's in the bag! Tomorrow you get to find out what's

going on. We're both invited to watch Del Sasso do his stuff in the lab—you know, he's Frank's prize psychic. And you turned out to be right again. I'm just about positive your Russian friend will be there."

She was ecstatic. "This is fantastic, Ken!"

"Oh, that's not all," he added matter-of-factly. "Can you take any more good news?"

"If you try to make it any better than this, then I'll know you're putting me on. What more could there be?"

"Frank says they're going to begin leaking developments to the media, and he'd like you to write some key articles. How about that?"

"You just broke through my credibility barrier. I don't believe a word you've said now."

"Carla, it's all true—every word."

"So I was right on this, too. I told you Frank would be eager to get you involved again. That's what did it."

"But you and I know that isn't going to happen. And I don't want to mislead him. I'm just getting you inside there, and then you're on your own. That was

our deal—right?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. See you tomorrow morning out here at 9:15. I’m about ten minutes away, and we’re supposed to be there at 9:30.”

“I’ll be there. And Ken, thanks. I really do appreciate it.”

.. . .

General Nikolai Gorky’s office was on the third floor of the modern high-rise building the KGB had moved into during the summer of 1972 and was now occupied by its successor, the FSB. The huge crescent-shaped complex was hidden behind a thick wood just off the road encircling Moscow—much like the sequestered Central Intelligence Agency headquarters outside Washington, D.C. The architecture even seemed to have been patterned after the CIA design. Gorky was one of the few people in the new structure who had come up through the ranks in the old All-Russian Insurance Company’s building on Moscow’s Lubyanskaya Square that the infamous Cheka, predecessor to the KGB, had occupied in 1918. He was very happy not to be in that ancient edifice any longer. Many FSB offices were still housed there, along with the notorious Lubyanka Prison where Gorky had gotten his start as a guard and learned the exquisite art of extracting confessions by torture for whatever the State wanted—whether they bore any relationship to what the prisoners had actually done or not. He had come a long way since then to become responsible for an elite corps of commandos trained in psychic power, whose very existence was unknown even among top Russian leaders—except for the FSB director himself, the President, and the General Secretary of the Communist Party, and a very few close aides.

Gorky had always exuded a smug and seemingly justified confidence in his periodic reports to those above him. On this day, however, he was still smarting from the humiliating experience of a meeting with the two most powerful men in the Kremlin—a meeting that had gone on into the early-morning hours. He’d had to confess that the Americans had apparently killed their three most talented psychics. And on top of all that, the most brilliant and productive Russian psychic researcher had defected right under the noses of the psychic force’s field commander and two of their best FSB agents and was now working with the Americans.

Gorky was in no mood to face anyone, but the matter was urgent and time was of the essence. Nor was Colonel Alexei Chernov inclined toward patience and kindness that day. The stitches had only been removed that morning. Two long scars, still ugly and red, were all-too-conspicuous for a man who needed to

be able to blend into the crowd. One scar angled across his nose and down his left cheek, and the other slashed across his neck beneath the chin. Another few millimeters and it would have severed his jugular. These two proud but now humiliated and furious men faced each other in Gorky's office, each knowing that something had gone terribly wrong in their operation, but neither willing to admit it, much less to take responsibility.

"You had your orders in Paris—and you failed." The words came painfully from Gorky, knowing that failure of those under his command eventually reflected upon him.

Chernov stood stiffly erect "There will be no more failure, except by the Americans. I had never been in favor of Khorev's method of penetrating the CIA by projection of consciousness. On the spot, we will accomplish our mission. I have no doubt about that."

"Don't be so cocky," cautioned Gorky. "You know that overconfidence can bring defeat to the superior force in any conflict."

Chernov nodded grimly and shifted uneasily. "I will not be overconfident, just confident—and with good cause. I'm taking my two best men. Together we can accomplish the impossible."

"Are you forgetting the hooded one? From the new information we've just gotten, he's extremely dangerous!"

"We will destroy him."

"I want Khorev alive—don't forget that. We have confirmation that he's working with Leighton and is being housed on the Palo Alto installation. It's a fortress."

"I want to see him *dead*—and the woman, too--but you know I obey orders."

"Do whatever you want to satisfy your thirst for revenge against the woman who helped him escape. Her name is Carla Bertelli. She's got to be a CIA agent. Her career as a journalist is just a front. She's in Palo Alto already."

The general stood abruptly. "Remember: I want Khorev alive, right here in front of me! I want to sweat and bleed his full confession out of him *personally*."

Gorky picked up a large, thick envelope from his desk and handed it to the colonel. "These are your new identities, passports, and instructions for you and your men. They'll be expecting you at the consulate in San Francisco, but they know nothing. Colonel Lutsky is being assigned there as an advisor. You report only to him or to me. Don't fail this time, comrade!"