

Chapter 1

CONFUSION

William glanced at the wall.

“All you need to do is see your body as invulnerable, much stronger than any steel.” And then he just walked right through the concrete wall of the building. Like it was the most normal thing in the world. You can imagine the effect that had on all the government observers and scientists assembled in that secret room assuming they were there to expose another fake.

William smiled as he stepped back through the ragged hole before the dust settled. Light shone around him from the sunny day outside and the sparkles from the floating dust created an eerie effect for the people in the gloomy room.

“The time you kindly allowed me for my lecture and demonstration is well over so when you have some more questions for me, you know where to contact me,” William said before he walked out of the room—except by the door this time.

Of the many memories William shared with me that was one he particularly treasured; he recalled happily the shocked look on the faces of all those dour experts and scientists as he stepped back into the room. They had come face to face with something alien to their world view and, deep down, they stubbornly refused to admit it was possible despite having seen William walk through a wall with their own eyes. He had shattered their secure little view of the world.

I first met William in Los Angeles after spending the day wasting time at Disneyland, doing all those touristy things. I walked out of the park and got on the bus from Disneyland to Anaheim, where I was staying at a motel for a few days.

This guy was one of a group of people who got on the bus at a later stop. He looked kind of unkempt with wild hair and beard as he stood gazing down the aisle, so I went back to staring out the window and ignored him. There were lots of empty seats, but after a while he slowly walked down and, after putting his backpack on the seat in front, sat down beside me with a big smile showing through his beard. I was more than a bit nervous, as I was travelling alone and there was nobody sitting near me.

He gave me a hug while I tried to shrink back, which is not easy when you are squashed against the window in a bus seat. When his face was beside my ear he whispered, "Please play along, I'm really sorry about this" and then gently kissed my lips. Oddly enough my strongest thought was that I don't like bushy beards.

He started talking happily as the bus moved off, peppering me with questions about how my day was going and what I was doing on the bus. When he stopped for a breath I just stared back at him and then said quietly, "If you don't tell me what's going on here I am going to start screaming."

He paused briefly and seemed to go kind of blank. After an eerie few moments he said, "I can tell you are trustworthy and I don't know why but it seems important that I tell you the truth. Will you promise not to tell anybody about me or alert the police if I tell you why I sat here?"

All I said was, "Okay," while thinking this had better be good.

"First of all," he said, "I am on the run trying to hide from the government, or rather a clandestine part of it." He saw the look on my face and quickly added, "But don't worry, I'm not a threat to you. I have not done anything criminal, other than being different.

"To their way of thinking that is enough to make me a threat and require that I either be under their control or eliminated. Two men were chasing me earlier and another two who I am sure are also working with them drove by while I was sitting at the stop. Agents have been alerted to look out for men fitting my description, and while I don't know if there were

agents watching or not, I prefer not to take the chance. I got on the bus and came to sit by you as we are obviously fairly close in age. Making it look as if we are close friends or lovers does not fit my profile and should make them think I am not the man they are looking for.”

I noticed he was turning his head and looking behind regularly while he was telling me this. He sat silently for a time, still looking around occasionally, finally relaxing.

“It looks like they are not following me.”

As the bus approached another stop a few minutes later, he signaled the driver that he wanted to get off. When the bus was pulling over he said, “Goodbye,” and stood up to retrieve his pack from the seat in front. Feeling irritated by his casual dismissal I blurted out, “But you didn’t even tell me your name.” He just smiled, walked down the aisle and got off. I watched him walk down the street until he was out of sight, feeling both angry with him and disappointed that he never once looked back.

It is unusual for me to let other people get under my skin, but the oddness of the encounter kept the memory returning to plague me. I replayed the conversation over and over again in my head, trying to figure out if he had been for real or just some weirdo having fun at my expense. The problem with me is once something excites my curiosity, I just can’t let it go.

I went on the Universal Pictures day tour the next day but didn’t really enjoy myself as I spent most of the time feeling angry with somebody I didn’t even know. About the only thing that cheered me up were the Jurassic Park and Revenge of the Mummy rides, which brought back happy memories of when I had seen the movies with friends from the technical institute where I had trained.

The following morning, I got up early to catch the bus to Las Vegas, feeling good because I was on the move again and getting out of LA. I’m not interested in taking bus tours to look at the houses of actors or Pamela

Anderson's star on Broadway or other idiot touristy activities. God, people, will you get a life or something?

I love travelling and doing new things, the more challenging the better. Seeing the Grand Canyon has always been on my to-do list, and I was enjoying the rush of anticipation at fulfilling a long-held dream.

As the Greyhound pulled into a service center on the way to Las Vegas I saw him standing where the out lane left for the highway. He was obviously trying to hitch a ride. I got off the bus following the other passengers toward the diner; then on impulse, I turned around, bumping into the old lady behind me when she couldn't stop in time. After my apologies, I walked slowly up behind him, looking at him carefully.

He was slouching slightly, looking relaxed or maybe resigned—someone your eyes pass over without ever really noticing. He definitely was travelling light, wearing the same clothes he had been wearing in LA—well-worn and faded like his pack, but they had been freshly washed. It's amazing the amount of information you can get in a glance.

God, why am I even thinking like this? He is almost certainly paranoid and delusional but at least I know he doesn't need his mum to do his washing for him.

At a whim I said loudly—and as deeply as I could—“This is the police, hold it right. . .” His transformation was startling and incredible. He spun around with his fists clenched while adopting some kind of martial arts stance. The slightly disheveled or pathetic look was gone. There was no doubt he was a fighter and had reacted instinctively. He scared me enough to make me step back a pace or two. He was looking around and over my head for the real threat, having sized me up, instantly dismissing me before really noticing me.

His gaze finally settled on me as realization dawned and he snarled, “You are that girl from the bus in Los Angeles, aren't you? What the hell do you think you are doing?” I could feel the anger radiating from him.

I guess if I had thought things through a little more I should have expected this sort of reaction and would have handled things differently, but I tend to be a bit impulsive. Feeling angry at myself now as well him I said, "Look, it was only a joke, forget it," and started walking back to the diner.

After a few moments of indecision, he grabbed his pack and followed me. By the time he caught up we were at the door. He stopped me with a light touch on my shoulder saying, "Can we talk for a minute?"

"I don't have much time before the bus goes so you can come in and talk to me while I have something to eat if you want to."

He looked around, sighed and then said, "All right."

I realize, with the benefit of hindsight, that he only followed me back because of his intense sense of honor. He had yelled at me and felt he needed to explain and apologize, which overcame his usual reserve and caution. If I had walked up to him and spoken politely to him, he would have been polite to me too but would have ignored me at any deeper level and then moved on.

We chose a table and he sat with his pack at his feet while I walked over to the counter. At home they have a saying, "Real men don't eat quiche," so I ordered a slice of quiche and salad with a glass of milk for him while getting pancakes with maple syrup and a large mug of coffee for myself.

When I sat down in front of him he spoke straightaway.

"I'm sorry I shouted at you, but as you might understand I am a bit on edge at the moment."

"As I'm not supposed to talk to strange men you can tell me your name before going any further."

"I'm William, if that makes any difference. I might still be strange, in fact I can guarantee I am. I would just like to apologize and get out of here."

“I’m sorry too. I didn’t mean to upset you out there.” He started to get up and I put a hand on his saying, “Just sit awhile, you look as if you could do with it.”

We sat at the table with an uneasy silence between us. When the waitress came with the order and started putting the pancakes in front of William I gleefully told her they were for me along with the coffee. I had intended to tease him a little about the food, but he just said, “Thank you,” and ate it all, including the salad, even emptying the glass of milk. Watching him eat I realized he had been very hungry and had probably not eaten for a while. I was now feeling really guilty for being spiteful when he obviously was suffering. He said quietly as he finished, “When you do something odd like this it makes me memorable, and I prefer to avoid that, but thank you anyway.”

As he got up to leave an Army Jeep drove slowly into the parking lot outside the window, and William sat again. I could see he was not going to say anything more so I gestured in the direction of the Jeep and raised my eyebrows waiting for an answer.

“Part of what makes it so difficult is I never know who has been alerted to look for me. If they know I am in an area they will send the local sheriff’s department and other law enforcement agencies ‘Wanted’ posters with my picture. Usually though, the locals don’t know I exist, but as I said before I can’t afford to take the chance.”

“I keep hearing they. Who are they, William?”

“I have been on the run for nearly twelve months now and they are never that far behind me. If I was a killer or hardened criminal they would not care nearly as much. I wouldn’t be worth the trouble of this continued high-level search. There are thousands of criminals, even murderers who never get caught, and the authorities never lose any sleep over it. I’m something far worse. I’m a threat to the established system that gives them their power. They can never tolerate something like that.”

The Jeep had disappeared around the side of the building.

“Good. Looks like they left,” William said, visibly relieved.

“Who are they?” I asked again.

“Ah,” he answered thoughtfully. “The Military Police and Military Intelligence, probably Homeland Security, some other covert government agencies too I suspect. I am a deserter from the Army. They say I killed two men when I escaped their prison and went AWOL, but that’s a lie they made up to justify the resources they are putting in to track me down. It helps them get assistance from civilian law enforcement agencies.”

William rose from his seat to leave again. Just as he stood, the two soldiers who had been in the Jeep walked in the door.

“Shit, Rangers,” William said under his breath as he dropped back into his seat.

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I spent three years in the Rangers before I had to run. We are proud of what we do, the especially dangerous or difficult missions. We really hate deserters as it disgraces the honor and courage of our units.”

“We?”

William just frowned, but I could see how much it hurt him to be considered a coward and dishonorable.

The soldiers sat at a table near us and looked around the diner as they talked, joked and waited for their meals to arrive. One of them, a sergeant I think, was staring at William from time to time but their meals arrived so they started eating. William had noticed this too.

“Excuse me a moment.” He picked up his pack and walked slowly over to the corridor that led to the bathrooms and disappeared down it.

After a few more minutes I looked at my watch and knew I needed to get back to the bus soon. As I stepped out onto the pavement a strong hand took my arm at the elbow and propelled me around the side of the

building. When we rounded another corner, I saw the Jeep parked close to the back wall of the building, taking advantage of the scant shade from the afternoon desert sun.

“Miss, I would like you to come with me and answer a few questions about the man you were with,” the sergeant said.

The other soldier ran around the corner.

“You were right, he isn’t in the bathroom.”

The sergeant barked back, “Did you search the other rooms off the rest of the corridor? I did not see him out here so he must be in there somewhere, get back and look properly.”

The sergeant then turned back to me and said, “I have to report this, then we will have a nice little chat.”

I could see the rear fire exit door was opening behind the sergeant as he fished in his pocket with his spare hand for the keys, obstinately refusing to let go of my arm. While he was still unlocking the door, William stepped silently up behind him and hit him on the back of his head. The sergeant crumpled slowly to the ground, releasing my arm as he fell.

William was already on his way back to the door. He almost stepped through, jerked to a stop and stepped behind it. A few moments later the other soldier emerged through the door heading back toward the sergeant. He stopped when he saw the sergeant at my feet, and at that moment William hit him from behind too.

I was too shocked to move, but William had caught the soldier before he hit the ground and was half dragging, half carrying him to the back of the Jeep. He put him down to get the keys that were still in the front door to unlock the back door. He never paused, but said to me, “Did you tell them your name?”

“No, why?”

“How did you pay for your ticket—bank or credit cards?” When I looked blank he snapped, “For the bus, obviously.”

“Neither, I paid cash.”

“Great, in that case they have no record of you but they will get a description of you when these men are found. I’ll see to it that won’t be for a while. You can get back on the bus and decide what you should do later.”

I took that to mean he had not actually killed the men.

“Just don’t draw attention to yourself.”

Not liking to be ordered around I said, somewhat petulantly, “What happens if I stay?”

“In that case, if you have any luggage on the bus that identifies you, they will find out who you are when it is not claimed.”

He continued. “On the bus in LA I was just using you as camouflage—protective coloration to make me blend in with everyday activities and not stand out as much. But I really did not mean to involve you with my problems. I’m sorry I did that now. If you are linked to me your own life will be in danger too as they don’t know how much I have told you. They won’t care if they decide to kill you anyway. After all, killing people is what the military does best.”

I gave him the name of the hotel I would be staying at in Las Vegas.

He lifted his eyebrows. “It was in my price bracket, all right?” I said in my defense. “Meet me there and let me understand what this is all about, please.”

He only nodded, so I said, “Promise me, word of honor.”

“On my word I will be there, I have an obligation to you now. Now get out of here!”

He was already struggling to fit the sergeant into the back.

“Ask for Diane,” I called as I ran for my bus.