

PART I CALIFORNIA

CHAPTER 1 WELCOME TO LA

Her walk revealed her as a true goddess.

—Virgil

A question soared relentlessly alongside the airplane Roger McAllister was riding in, blinking on and off like a UFO, and he was trying unsuccessfully to warn the captain when the voice of a flight attendant woke him from his doze.

"The captain has turned on the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign in preparation for our descent into the Los Angeles area. Please return to your seats and be sure your seatbelt is securely fastened. Passengers whose seatbelts are not fastened will be ejected from the aircraft. We will be landing in Los Angeles in about twenty minutes."

Had she said what he thought he had heard? Or was he still asleep? Roger couldn't handle whatever the reality of the situation was so he blotted it from his mind. He had been asleep for the first time since leaving Buffalo early this morning and was feeling spaced out.

Suddenly, the question that had been chasing him in his dream presented itself clearly in front of him, lit in garish neon. The question was, "When your idea of physical exercise is a rugged game of Scrabble, why would you ever agree to walk from Los Angeles to Denver?"

He didn't have a better answer now than he'd had for the past two months. Try me again in three more months, he told himself, and we'll know whether this was a good idea or a catastrophe waiting to happen.

He looked at his watch. It was only 9:47 a.m. It felt much later. Of course, it was three hours later in Buffalo. And two in Chicago where he had changed planes. And one in Denver, which the plane had passed over two hours before. And which he hoped to see again in 90 days or less—if his body and his determination held out. That is, if he found some determination. Right now, his determination level was less than zero.

What had possessed him, a man who had taken the same route to work every day for 19 years, complete with a stop for coffee and a doughnut, to fill out the application form he had seen in a newspaper ad by Zeus Footwear, advertising for walkers? He could only attribute it to the mental state he had been in since Sonya, his wife of over 20 years, had died three months ago.

He hadn't dreamed he would be accepted. In answer to the question, "What are your qualifications for this walk?" he had said, tongue in cheek, "I played tennis in high school and still play tennis or racquetball once in a blue moon." In answer to the question, "Why do you want to participate in the walk?" he had waxed poetic. "I have flown over most of the country and driven through a good deal of it, from sea to shining sea. I have seen the purple mountain majesties and the fruited plain, but you can't see much at 600 miles per hour or even 60 miles per hour. Now I want to see them up close and personal."

There was a slight bump and they were on the ground. "Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to be the first to welcome you to Los Angeles. The local time is approximately 10:05 a.m. We will be taxiing for a few minutes. Please remain seated until the captain has turned off the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign. Then you may party."

Irreverent flight attendants he could do without, Roger thought, sourly. How could he get out of this mess and return to the safety of Buffalo? He already missed his comfortable chair in his comfortable office at the small accounting firm of Stern and Kowalchik, where he was a

partner. The leave-of-absence he had requested could easily be shortened from several months to two days. They would love to have him back, especially during tax season when they needed all the help they could get.

"Glad to have you back, Roger. Glad to see that you've finally come to your senses. We've taken the liberty of scheduling ten appointments a day for you from now until April 15th. And then we'll start scheduling the late-comers who have asked for extensions."

But would his son, Ray, understand? When the acceptance had come from Zeus he had made the mistake of showing it to Ray, a sophomore at SUNYAB, the State University of New York at Buffalo.

"Of course, I'm not going to do it."

"Go for it, Dad," Ray had said with youthful energy. "You need a change."

"They say you shouldn't change your lifestyle for at least six months after losing a...a spouse." It was still hard for him to speak of Sonya, especially to Ray.

"This will be good for you. It's not like you're selling the house and sailing off on a yacht. You'll come back and your job will be waiting for you. And you no longer have Grandpa and Grandma to look after."

His mother had died several years before, preceded several years before that by his father. Sonya had always told him what to do because "it's good for you." Now it seemed that Ray was taking over this role. "But I'll be away from you. And away from civilization a lot of the time."

"I'll be fine, Dad. And I'm sure I'll be able to reach you through Zeus if I need you."

Roger's last hope as he hobbled off the plane, his legs cramped from sitting too long, was that there wouldn't be anybody waiting for him here. Then he would be justified in taking the next flight back to Buffalo. He scanned the expectant faces of the people waiting as he came out of the jetway. He didn't know what or who to look for. A sign with his name on it, perhaps?

A tall and beautiful blonde woman dressed in pink warmup pants and a T-shirt caught his eye. He could certainly discount her as a possibility, except in the realm of wishful thinking. His eyes inadvertently strayed to her chest. It took a second before the strategically-located red letters spelling "ZEUS," bisected by the yellow lightning-bolt, registered.

"Hi, you must be Roger."

It took another second for him to realize that the smile and words were intended for him, even though by now she was almost in his face.

"I'm Susan. Let me help you with your bags." He was only carrying two small bags, but she grabbed one and led the way toward the baggage claim area. "You've got checked stuff, right?"

"Yes." Of course, he did. He had been told to pack for 90 days. He glanced at her feet. She was wearing a brand-new pair of white Zeus walking shoes, just as he was. There was no chance of a mistake. Did she work for Zeus?

"How did you know who I was?" Roger asked, struggling to catch Susan as she knifed through the crowd like a running back.

"From the picture on your application."

He'd forgotten about that. Conversation was impossible on the escalator as Susan squeezed to the left side and almost ran down the steps, jostling several standing passengers on the way. Roger tried to follow and noticed that she was getting looks and not just because she was a babe. He wondered where the fire was as he fell behind, not wanting to knock over an old lady.

He thought he'd catch her on the moving walkway, but she took off down the left side of that, as well, past the standees, and it was all he could do to keep her in sight. He finally caught her at the baggage carousel, which was not moving yet.

"You can fly when you're wearing Zeus shoes," Roger said, puffing a little.

She smiled. "We're late. Earl's going to be pissed. I hope the luggage doesn't take long."

He mentally winced at her language. The plane had only been about ten minutes late. He resisted mentioning that since the baggage wasn't out yet all that rushing had been for nothing.

"Who's Earl?" He didn't know the players.

"He and Ethel are our gallant leaders. They're married. To each other. And he's a tyrant. He likes to keep things right on schedule, down to the second. In fact, when he found out you couldn't get here until this morning, he wanted to eliminate you. But he was overruled by the Zeus people."

Maybe it would have been better if he had been "eliminated." Then he could go back to Buffalo. Yesterday, Roger had been doing a few final things to settle Sonya's estate; he hadn't been willing to leave Buffalo with ends still loose. Of course, he was her only heir but it was still amazing what hoops the bureaucracy made you jump through when someone died. He asked, "And what's your, er...capacity?"

"I'm walking, too." She sounded hurt. "What, did you think I was too pretty to walk?"

"Yes, I mean no, of course not. I mean, you're very pretty, but..."

She laughed. "Forget it. It was a trick question. But don't think I'm an airhead. I was valedictorian of my high school class. Sometimes being beautiful is a curse."

However, she didn't look as if she felt particularly cursed. The carousel started, and amazingly, Roger's two bags were the first ones down the chute. The attendant compared the luggage tags to his claim checks and they were out the door before a line formed. Susan was parked in the nearby metered lot. The white car had "ZEUS" painted on the side in red letters, bisected by the yellow lightning-bolt. Five minutes after Roger had retrieved his bags they were out of the airport and headed south on Sepulveda Boulevard.

"I was sent to get you because I'm the only one from LA," Susan said, as she maneuvered the car through traffic at something above the speed limit, as easily as she had navigated through the airport. "They figured I wouldn't get lost. Also, they wanted me to hang around for some final publicity shots with you. The others took off at eight, right on schedule."

Roger tried not to look too frightened at her driving as he hung on to the door grip and made sure his seat belt was tight.

He assumed by the "others" she meant the other walkers. Trying to be cool, he said, "So, are you a model?"

"Yes." She looked delighted that he had figured it out.

"You look like that girl in the..." he hesitated, but Sonya wasn't present to hear him, "...in the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue...Christie something."

"Christy Brinkley. People are always telling me I look like her."

"But you're taking time off to go on this walk."

"Zeus is going to do some publicity shots along the way, and they want me for that. Of course, it doesn't pay as well as the other stuff I do, but..." She hesitated, then blurted, "I was supposed to do the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue, too. My agent and I had it all wrapped up..." Her voice trailed off. Then she smiled and said, "But you won't find any other model doing anything like this walk, not even Christie."

Roger had never been this close to a real model before. Furtively, he glanced sideways at her T-shirt, trying to figure out something that had been puzzling him about her breasts. They looked too...real. There were no visible straps or bulges of material. It appeared—he was almost certain—that she wasn't wearing a bra. Just like the girls in the sixties. But this wasn't the sixties. This was 1984, the year of George Orwell. What kind of a girl didn't wear a bra these days? He'd better watch out for her.

Besides, wasn't bralessness illegal now? He was quite sure it was illegal in Buffalo. Or at least showing women's nipples was. By the way they were airbrushed from lingerie ads and banned from prime-time television, you'd think nipples were obscene and not just baby-feeders. He jumped when she spoke, as if she could read his thoughts.

"It would speed things up if you had your walking clothes on by the time we got there. Which suitcase are they in?"

Susan pulled over to the curb so quickly that Roger lost his breath. He hadn't thought much about his walking wardrobe. He didn't have a chic warmup suit like the one of which Susan was wearing the pants.

"I recommend shorts," Susan said, as she pulled the trunk release. "Long pants are only good for the early morning chill."

Roger realized that the day would soon be warm enough for shorts, even though it was only the first of April. Luckily, he had brought a pair with him, even though during his three weeks of training in still cold Buffalo, wearing shorts had been the furthest thing from his mind.

Susan opened the trunk and he found the pair of shorts and a Zeus T-shirt, compliments of Zeus, in one of the suitcases.

"Where can I change?"

"In the car."

Susan jumped back into the driver's seat. Roger followed, slowly; she impatiently gunned the engine. As she accelerated away from the curb he said, "Maybe I should get in the back."

"There's more room in the front. Don't worry about me. I'm used to seeing lots of skin. And you should see the places where I've had to change. I'll tell you about them sometime."

Roger was worried about her. He had never changed clothes in any car before, not to mention one in which he was sitting next to a beautiful woman. And what about the prying eyes he imagined he saw in the other cars? He felt trapped. He hadn't dreamed of doing anything like this. He should have remembered what Los Angeles was like: loose loose loose.

He started at the top. He took off his shirt and then his T-shirt, replacing it with the Zeus T-shirt and the red-lettered "ZEUS," ubiquitous yellow lightning-bolt and all. It did make him feel more official, but that was the easy part.

With a glance at Susan he unbuckled his belt and tried to unzip his fly without making any noise. Then he made a critical mistake. He tried to take off his pants without first removing his shoes. When the pant-legs wouldn't go over the shoes he pulled the top of the pants over the shoes until they were completely wrong-side-out. Now he was in his briefs with his legs up in the air, frantically trying to pull his pant-legs over his shoes; they wouldn't budge. His face was hot and his heart was racing. Sweat trickled down his armpits. The more he tugged the more stuck they became. A horn honked beside him. He was sure Susan was laughing at him, but he didn't dare look at her.

"Try taking your shoes off," she said, nonchalantly.

He wished he were in Buffalo, or better yet on Bora Bora. He would never be able to face her again. Finally, he pulled the pants back up far enough so that he could take off his shoes.

Hastily, he took off his pants and pulled on his multi-pocketed shorts, trying to look graceful, but it was too late. Susan already knew he was a clod. And it was a good thing Sonya wasn't here.

They were now on the road overlooking Redondo Beach. Roger turned his head to the right to avoid Susan's eyes and saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time in several years. He could make out a school of surfers floating easily on the swells, waiting for the perfect wave. Their black wet-suits made them look like seals. The water must be cold at this season. Susan pulled the car up to a parking meter and announced, "Here we are."