

Chapter One

Pushley Escapes

Lon Freedom's voice came over the air-car intercom, "The police tracking system has picked out a sighting of an Ingermann-Verex X 4 air-car landing at the small workshop unit."

As Freedom read out the coordinates, Claire heard Mick Tarmy acknowledge and then tell the entire team to converge on the unit.

Claire spoke to Alex, her faithful TK5, who was hovering in the back of the air-car, "What's the betting Pushley will be tipped off and will move out before we get there."

"In all probability," Alex agreed.

A few seconds later, Lon Freedom's voice confirmed their fears by saying, "There's been another sighting of a red Ingermann-Verex X 4 in a public car park." He then gave the new coordinates.

As Mick Tarmy hadn't acknowledged Freedom's message, Claire queried the omission.

"He could be in a communication blackspot. There are still a few in the city," Freedom replied. "I'll try him again."

"Yeah," Claire replied. "Do that. We don't want Pushley getting away this time."

Alex cut in, "Shall I take you to the new location?"

"Yes," Claire replied. "And go as fast as you can without breaking speed limits."

As her air-car picked up speed, she added, "This could be our chance, Alex. If I can get within shooting distance, I'll be able to take him down."

"He knows what you look like," Alex prompted. "If you are going to get close to him, you will have to change your appearance; otherwise, he will probably recognise you."

Taking the hint, Claire began thinking about a woman who'd once been part of Ed Pushley's team when he'd worked at Fort Saunders. Her name was Avene Nother, and she and Pushley had been more than just work colleagues; they'd had a short intimate relationship until it had collapsed, like most of Pushley's liaisons.

Within a matter of seconds, Claire's face began changing to Avene Nother's; then her blonde hair began changing to jet black. To complete her disguise, Claire reversed the jacket she was wearing. Partway through the process, she lifted her head slightly, "So what d'you think, Alex? Will I pass as Avene Nother?"

As Alex had seen Avene Nother, he said, "Once your metamorphosis is complete, ma'am, I have no doubt it will be an excellent likeness."

Satisfied with her disguise, Claire checked her stun gun, "If I find Pushley, I'll get a lot closer to him if he thinks I'm Avene. In any case, if I do get a crack at Pushley and I accidentally kill him, I don't want my real face displayed by the police and the media."

While she was undergoing final changes, Alex said, "This might be useful."

One of his spindly arms appeared from behind his invisibility cloak with a small handgun hanging from one finger.

Taking it from Alex, Claire turned it over in her hands. Like the legendary American Derringer, the gun was small, around 100mm in length.

She said, "I remember this. Mick showed it to me once. This is the gun that Samantha gave Mick when she forced us to come to Arcadia and attack the Great Ones. It's a Mini-Max Five. I thought he'd lost it."

Knowing the miniature gun was a special, Claire clicked it open and transformed it into a razor. She then clicked another button and changed it into a percom. She then said, "Mick stopped using the percom in case Samantha was monitoring us."

"Then don't use the percom," Alex replied. "Having a small gun that is easily hidden may be useful."

After slipping the gun into one of her pockets, she glanced down and realised they were overflying an open-air public car park.

Alex said, "We've arrived."

Claire began glancing around, looking for red air-cars. She let out a mild curse when she realised that there were several red air-cars parked up; red had been the *in* colour for some time.

While she was still staring around, Alex said, "There is a red Ingermann-Verex X 4 over there. My sensors indicate the engine is still warm."

Claire yelped, "That must be Pushley's car. Put me down near to it, fast."

As Claire's air-car touched down, she leapt out and raced towards the other **air**-car, stun gun drawn. While she was staring into the locked vehicle, she heard a muffled cry from the boot and ran around to the back.

While she was trying to force the boot open, her air-car came drifting towards her with a window ajar. One of Alex's skinny arms was projecting out, holding a fob. "This had been dumped in a litter bin."

Grabbing it from him, Claire opened the boot.

A man locked inside blinked owlishly and said, "Thank God. I thought I'd be in here for hours. Can you untie me, please?"

As Claire began undoing the knots, she said, "What's your name?"

"Stid Henderson," the man replied. "The swines hijacked my car and locked me in the boot."

"I suppose it's a daft question, but do you know where the guy that tied you up went," Claire asked.

"There are two of 'em," Henderson replied. "A big guy that did all the talking and weedy guy who just seemed to do what he was told."

"Are you sure there were two of them?"

"Sure, I'm sure," Henderson said, "I heard the big guy tell the little one they were going to the teleport centre,"

As Henderson climbed out of the boot and reclaimed his fob, Claire asked, "Where is the teleport centre?"

Gaining his bearings, Henderson pointed towards a large building about four hundred meters away. "That's it, over there."

When Claire called out to Alex, Henderson said, "If you're going after them. You'd be better on foot. The piazza, concourse, and side streets adjoining the teleport centre are Mannheim protected. The force fields prevent air-car access; it's a pedestrian-only area."

Realising she couldn't take Alex with her, Claire began running. Half-turning, she called back, "Tell Mick and the others that I'm going after Pushley. And make sure they know I'm in disguise. Send them a photograph of Avene Nother. I don't want them shooting me by mistake."

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When Claire arrived at the concourse leading to the teleport centre, one of the departure boards began flashing, indicating the next teleport would be direct to Midway. Although she had no proof, she guessed that was where Ed Pushley was going.

Hoping that she might be able to stop him from leaving, she began moving towards the entrance doors leading into the teleport centre, but she never reached them because her legs suddenly gave way. Then, the hard surface of the concourse seemed to leap up at her.

As she slid along the terrazzo paving, she felt her face and hair returning to normal. Within seconds, she was no longer an Avene Nother look alike. She then realised that she wasn't the only person on the floor. The whole area seemed to be filled with writhing bodies. After sliding two or three metres, scraping the skin from her elbows in the process, Claire ended up face-to-face with a man. Winded, she still gasped, "What happened?"

"I'm not sure," the man replied and ran a hand over one of his legs. "I think we've been partially stunned. Someone must have low swept the whole area with a stun gun."

The stranger then caught a glimpse of a gunman, picking his way through the pile of bodies and said, "I recognise the gun-happy creep who's done this. He's called Vaz Bryon."

"Why would he stun us all?"

The stranger said, "Bryon's a gang enforcer. He's obviously after someone. He probably took everyone down to make life easy for himself. Whoever he's after is now a sitting duck."

Producing a stun gun, the stranger swivelled slightly and then issued a challenge. Instead of heeding the verbal warning, Bryon reacted and fired first. Taking a hit on the shoulder, the stranger dropped his gun. Realising she was in danger, Claire tried to grab the stranger's fallen weapon but couldn't reach it. She began searching frantically in her pockets for her own stun gun but realised she was lying on it, and the deadweight of her partially stunned body made it inaccessible.

Her movements attracted Bryon's attention. As he closed the distance between them, a lopsided smile formed on his face. He said, "Well! Well! Well! If it isn't Mick Tarmy's bitch. I've been looking for you."

Unable to pull her own stun gun, Claire thought about the Mini-Max that Alex had given her as a precaution. While her mind was churning, Claire heard distinct clicks as Bryon selected kill mode. He took careful aim. "Time to die, Tarmy's bitch."

Realising he was about to kill her, adrenaline cut in and Claire managed to roll sideways, dodging the first blast. Locating the Mini-Max mid-roll, she twisted again and fired back three times in quick succession.

When Bryon just staggered and levelled his gun at her again, Claire realised the Mini-Max was only set to minimum stun, flipped the setting with her thumb and fired once more. This time Bryon spasmed as if he'd been struck by lightning and collapsed across two of his victims.

A few seconds later, two uniformed police officers appeared, weapons drawn. The stranger hissed, "Put the gun away. Now!"

Realising the two police officers might assume she was the gunman if they saw the Mini-Max, Claire did as instructed. She'd barely secreted her weapon before one of the uniforms came over and glanced down at the stranger, "Lon Freedom? Is that you?"

"Yeah."

Glancing at Freedom's bleeding shoulder, the uniform said, "You okay?"

Freedon nodded and then pointed at the gunman, "That's Vaz Bryon. He's the perp who shot everyone. Check him out."

As the uniformed officer walked away, Claire said, "So you're Lon Freedon, our contact."

"That's me," Freedon confirmed, "Complete with curly teeth and shiny hair."

"That police officer recognised you," Claire said. "How come you are so pally with the local police?"

"I've done 'em a few favours in the past," Freedon replied. "I've also contributed towards the local police fund on several occasions."

"Given out a few bribes, you mean?"

"That's a harsh assessment of the situation," Freedon replied. "In my job, it's sometimes easier to obtain information if you grease a few palms. The art is knowing which palms to grease."

While they were still talking, one of the uniformed officers checked out Bryon and then shook his head. Glancing at Freedon, he said, "He's dead. Did you take him down?"

Freedon nodded, "I had no choice. I issued a warning, but he fired again and hit me in the shoulder. It was self-defence. I have witnesses."

Once the police officer was out of earshot, Claire's tone became acid, and she hissed, "Do you always claim other people's kills?"

"Believe it or not, I've just done you a huge favour," Freedon whispered back.

"How d'you make that out?"

"You discharged a weapon in a public place, and I suspect you don't have a license to carry. But as you are a friend of Mick Tarmy, I didn't want to throw you to the wolves."

Claire backtracked, "I suppose I should be thanking you."

"You should," Freedon whispered back. "Even though it was self-defence, you were still carrying. In this neck of the woods, the courts dish out mandatory sentences for carrying knives and unlicensed firearms. So unless you want a prison sentence, we stick to my story. Okay?"

"What about the CCTV cameras in this place?"

"They don't appear to be working," Freedon replied, nodding towards a blank screen hanging over the concourse. "I think Brydon fired at a control box just before he shot into the crowd. He wouldn't want to leave the police with evidence they could use against him, now would he?"

When Claire remained silent, Freedon added, "So, do we go with my story."

"Okay," Claire conceded. "You shot him. Good shot. Much appreciated. You can be the big hero PI who took down an evil criminal. No doubt the media reports will be good for your business."

"That wasn't my intention," Freedon replied icily.

Noting that one of the electronic notice boards still working had just indicated that the next teleport to Midway was imminent, Claire swore, "I hope you realise Pushley's going to escape."

Following her gaze, Freedon shrugged. "Not a lot we can do about it, is there? I don't know much about teleports, but I do know you can't stop one in mid-cycle. If you did, there would be a massive loss of life. The teleport authorities aren't going to take that sort of risk just to stop Pushley from leaving Arcadia."

A moment later, one of the uniformed police officers returned with a detective in tow. Freedon recognised him; his name was Hagood.

Before a word was spoken, Claire sensed animosity between the two men, old scores yet to be settled. Giving Freedom a none too friendly smile, Hagood said, "Funny how trouble seems to follow you wherever you go, isn't it Freedom?"

"I had to shoot Bryon. Detective Inspector, I had no choice." Freedom then nodded in Claire Hyndman's direction. "He shot me and was about to kill this lady. Isn't that right?"

Claire nodded, "Yes. I owe my life to Mr Freedom. I don't know why Bryon wanted to kill me, but there is no doubt in my mind that he was going to."

Hagood ran a critical eye over Freedom, noted his bleeding shoulder and said, "Are you badly injured?"

"The shoulder is just a flesh wound. My legs have been stunned," Freedom replied. "I've no doubt I'll be okay once I'm patched up and I recover the use of my legs."

"Are you sure it's just a stun to your legs?"

"I've been stunned before," Freedom replied. "I know what it feels like."

Hagood moved away and activated his percom. After a brief conversation, he returned, "I must take statements from both of you ASAP."

Hagood then called out to some medics. Once the ambulance trollies had arrived, and Freedom and Claire were wheeled away, Hagood walked alongside them and said, "We're going to follow the ambulances and take your statement once you arrive in hospital."

On the way out of the concourse, one of the ambulance staff came over to Claire and said, "I'm just going to give you an injection."

When Claire quibbled, the paramedic said, "If you don't have the injection, you're likely to suffer a lot of pain when the stun wears off. Do you want the injection?"

When she nodded, the needle went in.

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As Bryon died, Ed Pushley felt his mind disengage and uttered an oath; Claire Hyndman had managed to survive. Yalt gave him a worried look, "Is there something wrong, padrone?"

Instead of answering, Pushley glanced at the wall clock and cursed again; going after Claire Hyndman was now out of the question; his teleport was less than two minutes away. While he was still mentally fuming, Yalt gave him a nudge, "Time to go, padrone."

Two minutes later, they both disappeared into the ether.

