

>CHAPTER 9

“Hey, you ready yet?” Kate said, appearing in the bathroom doorway.

Peter stood leaning over the sink, carefully dragging a razor across his chin. The scruffy beard he had maintained since departing from Via was on its way out.

“Hallelujah!” Kate said.

Peter paused for a moment to wink at her in the mirror, his face foamy with shaving cream.

She leaned a shoulder against the doorframe and stood watching him. “I’ll like your face smooth, Petey. It feels better on me.”

“Ouch.” He jerked the razor from his face. A dot of blood instantly formed on his chin.

Kate slipped off her robe and hung it on the door hook. “So, Lancelot, what do I wear?”

“Anything you want. It’s just a neighborly sort of thing.” He rinsed his face and pulled the skin on his neck taut to inspect his work, noticing her full naked reflection. He turned and smiled at her.

"I think it's more than that," she said.

"What's more?"

"The dinner. I think this Byron Holmes guy is probably excited he's met you, and wants to get to know you better."

"Yeah, maybe. Me too. I could use a friend here. I only see you for two or three days at a time." He crossed his arms and rested his rear against the sink, looked her up and down with a playful grin. "You know, for a forty-year-old lady, you're quite a knockout."

"Oh yeah? Well for a thirty-something boy, you're not so bad yourself." She moved over to him and slid her fingertips beneath the waistband of his Jockey shorts at the small of his back. She rubbed her cheek softly against his. "Mmm, definitely better." They stood holding each other for a while, quietly appreciating the closeness.

He pulled away to look into her eyes. "What is it about us? That makes us work? Worth only seeing each other so little?"

She thought for a moment. "Well, we're a lot alike." She kissed the tip of his nose. "And a lot unlike. Which makes for an interesting blend, I'd say."

He touched his forehead to hers and looked down at their pressed hips. "Do you think maybe we should be together more?"

"Maybe. Sure."

"More permanently?" He gave a small thrust of his hips.

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" He sought her eyes.

"Petey, we work great because we both have things in our lives that we believe in."

"Had."

"Have," she said, lifting his chin. "You're just a little dry right now, that's all. You have to give yourself some time to let things happen." She kissed his brow. "It doesn't all just suddenly change overnight, babe."

"I know. But I've been thinking." He hesitated, unsure

how to go on. He still had not told her about what had happened with Ivy. And now, standing here as they were, Via and Ivy and everything else that had gone wrong seemed so far away, so irrelevant to his life now. Their life together. Would telling her about Ivy accomplish anything other than to absolve his guilt? He knew Kate would be hurt. And he did not want to hurt her. No, he decided, there was no point in telling her.

“And?”

“About if, I don’t know, maybe we should settle down. Split more time between here and California. Together.”

She smiled at him knowingly. They’d had this conversation many times in the past, usually at times such as this, when he was feeling depressed. “Babe, you know neither of us would really be happy if we settled down. Not yet, anyway.”

“No, I don’t know that. We might. I mean, what if it was official. If we were to, you know—”

“No.”

“But maybe—”

She pressed her fingers to his lips. “Peter, you know the minute you get going on something again you won’t feel this way.”

He shrugged. “Okay, okay. So maybe no wedding bells. But I’ve been thinking how I’m not getting any younger. I remember the first time I saw a kid using a Mate computer. Kate, it was so incredible.” He tightened his grip around her waist and pulled her closer. “God, imagine if . . . you know . . .”

She lowered her head and he knew he’d gone too far. Her eyes were moist when she looked up again. “Peter, you know I can’t have a baby,” she said. “You know that.” She moved his hand around to her taut belly. “Closed for business, sorry.”

He hugged her tightly. “I’m sorry, Kate.” He kissed her eyelids. “I didn’t mean like that. I meant maybe adopting. But listen, I’ll give it a rest for now. You’re

right. I know you are. I'm just feeling sort of lost and mixed-up. I'm sorry."

She nodded and he gently thumbed away her tears. She spoke softly in his ear. "It'll come again, Peter. I know it will."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart," she said, and kissed his cheek. "Now put some clothes on. I'm getting cold and hungry and we don't want to be late for your new friend." She slapped his rear, then turned and went into the bedroom.

An instant later his underwear whizzed past her head, grazing her long hair. She set her hands on her hips and turned around to face his mischievous grin.

"Isn't it fashionable to be late?"

"Dinner in five minutes, Matthew," Greta said, standing in his office doorway. He spun around, startled. She leaned to one side to see what he had behind his back. "What are you hiding?"

"I wanted to surprise you," he said. He drew his hand around, revealing a brand-new At Hand PC Plus. "It's for you, Gret. Your very own. I was just moving all of your files and things over to it."

"Matthew, it's beautiful."

The company had changed the color of the newest model to midnight blue, with a lightly textured surface that felt soft and almost pliable to the touch. He held it out to her, and she accepted it in her gloved hand. She looked at him expectantly, waited for him to say what she'd been waiting all day to hear.

"Pretty slick, huh?"

That wasn't quite what she was hoping to hear. She smoothed the fabric of her dress, hoping to draw his attention to it, but he didn't seem to notice. Maybe he was just waiting until they sat down to dinner to say it.

Surely he remembered. The present proved it. She kissed his cheek anyway. "Thank you, darling. It's perfect."

"All yours. And look in back. There's a pullout phone cable now, so you can plug it in anywhere."

"You mean anywhere but in your office, darling?"

"Well, not really. You can keep working in here if you like. I just thought maybe you'd want to use the drawing room or one of the guest rooms for yourself. Your own home office. I can bring home a printer too, if you want. Whatever you want, Gret, I'll get it for you."

She thanked him and set the unit on his desk. "I'll take it upstairs later. Now, come on. I don't want dinner to get cold."

"Right behind you," he said, but he remained in his office a little longer, tinkering with Zip disks and connections and his own new unit, which he'd been updating with his existing documents and programs as well. He looked at his desk and groaned. It was piled with notes and charts, schedules, technical documents—all of which he still had to consolidate into a cohesive strategy. He'd put off working on the ICP alliance strategy in favor of configuring the pair of new At Hand PC Pluses. And now he was behind schedule. He could probably finish the report by morning, so long as he hurried through dinner.

He was momentarily disoriented when he left the light of the bright office. The house was uncharacteristically dark. He padded down the long hallway and passed the closed dining-room door, crossed the foyer, and rounded the corner to the family room and kitchen area. Except for the range light, the kitchen was dark too, and there were no plates or utensils set on the table where they usually ate, facing the family room and the big-screen TV.

He turned back to the kitchen, observed the pots and pans with their lids askew, knives and spices and assorted other preparations scattered about the counter-

top. "Greta?"

"In here," came his wife's voice softly.

A flickering glow caught his eye at the far end of the kitchen, coming from the adjoining dining room. He'd passed its other entrance, from the foyer, on his way through.

His surprise was apparent when he found her sitting at the formal dining table. The room was bathed in soft candlelight, creating sparkles in the crystal glasses and silverware place settings. Between the settings was an arrangement of serving plates and a basket of warm bread. Poached vegetables and steaming potatoes sat beside a covered serving dish. To one side stood a grand bouquet of flowers from Greta's garden.

"My word," was all he managed to say as he seated himself at the head of the table, to her right.

"I gave Dolores the rest of the day off," Greta said. "I prepared the whole thing myself."

"It smells wonderful, Gret." He smiled, a bit puzzled by the formality and candles. They took meals in the dining room only when entertaining guests.

She withdrew a bottle of champagne from the standing silver ice bucket at her side and held it out to him. "Would you, Matthew?"

"Well, well," he said, "my favorite." He undid the wire cage and popped the cork, expertly filled the flutes and handed one to her, then held up his own. "Cheers, darling."

They clinked their glasses together and he winked at her, tasted the champagne. He made an approving sound, unaware that she had not taken one sip. He set his down and went straight for the covered serving dish.

"Oh, boy. Another favorite." He gestured for her plate, selected a delicate squab for her, two for himself. He ladled sauce over his birds and vegetables, took another sip from his glass, and then dug into his meal with unbridled gusto.

Watching him, she felt like crying. She took her first

taste of the champagne. Some celebration. She knew her husband so well. Barely two minutes into his dinner and already his mind was elsewhere. She'd misinterpreted the At Hand PC Plus as a present. Well, she'd been wrong. No, he hadn't remembered, and admitting this to herself caused a strange, aching feeling in her left hand. The doctors had warned her the sensation might manifest itself on rare occasions. An itching or throbbing or tingle, as though everything were in its right place, like normal.

The same was true, she thought wanly, of her marriage. How at times it tricked her into thinking it was still all there, like normal. But not now. He'd flat-out forgotten. As though in protest, her left hand suddenly shook with a small spasm, causing her untouched utensils to loudly collide. The silver tines of the fork made an enchanting sound that slowly faded into a silence so pronounced it finally attracted Matthew's attention.

He looked at her with a curious expression and wondered why her eyes were shimmering. Before he could ask what was bothering her, she spoke.

"Happy anniversary, Matthew." She raised her glass and downed the contents.

"Oh, Gret." He set down his utensils and for the first time really noticed the details. The glossy shine of her lips. The extra touches around the eyes. The exquisite silk dress. The light scent of perfume. She blinked and a teardrop fell and painted a dark trail down her cheek. Ashamed, he looked down at his plate. Their anniversary dinner. He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture.

"Greta, I am so, so sorry. With all the work . . . the new product . . . the alliance coming together. I just, well, I just honestly forgot. Can you forgive me, Gret?"

She dabbed at her cheek with a napkin and reached her good hand across the table. He took it in his own, touched his lips to the soft material.

"It's all right, Matthew. It's all right." She withdrew her hand and put on her best forgiving smile. Her husband,

the busy executive. Why should tonight be any different?

Refilling her glass, he made an effort to cheer her up. "It's delicious, Gret. The best I've ever had. Really. We've eaten in all the best places and I'm telling you, I've never, ever had it this good."

She smiled her gratitude and picked up her fork, speared an asparagus. She chewed slowly, trying to think of something to talk about. She took a long sip of her champagne and observed her husband's eager appetite.

"Matthew, you could at least slow down and enjoy it."

He looked up, a dribble of sauce getting away from his lower lip. "I'm sorry, honey. It's just that I have to call up my coauthor tonight to go over the biography outline. It's, what, going on ten-thirty her time? Plus, I have more work to do tonight." He wiped his chin with his napkin. "For the trip."

"The trip," she repeated sarcastically as she set down her fork and hefted the bottle of champagne. She refilled her glass and ignored his. "What trip, Matthew? What are you talking about?"

"Tomorrow. New York. I told you I was meeting Harrell on Monday. Didn't I? I must have. I'm sure of it."

"No, Matthew. You didn't."

"God, I could swear I said something, honey. I'm sorry. But you see what I'm talking about? I'm so overwhelmed." He let out a dramatic burst of air, then gulped the rest of his champagne.

"Well if you're going to New York tomorrow, can't you meet this writer woman while you're there, rather than call tonight?"

"I am. And that's why I have to call tonight. So she can hear my comments on the preliminary outline, tighten it up so we can go over it when I arrive tomorrow night. Then it's all day Monday with Harrell."

She frowned. "It's amazing. The way you're changing. And if you'll forgive my candor, I don't mean

pleasantly.”

“Hey, what the hell’s that suppose to mean? Come on, how about a little understanding? I said I was sorry already.”

“Saying it and meaning it aren’t the same, Matthew. I swear, since you got rid of Peter Jones you’ve become so involved in that company.”

“Look, I said I was sorry. I meant it. You’re just upset because I forgot our anniversary, and so you’re attacking me.”

“No, Matthew. That’s exactly what I’m talking about. The way you’re behaving. Right now. You’re trying to convince me of what you think, without hearing a word I’m saying. And who was famous for that? Who was it you used to come home saying the same thing about? Does replacing Peter mean that you have to take on his awful behavior as well?”

“Jones has nothing to do with this.”

“Jones? No one despised him more than I, but Jones? Even during your worst arguments you always called him Peter. And Harrell? You keep saying Harrell this, Harrell that. Whatever happened to William, your friend?”

“Friend? Did I ever say friend? He was never my friend, Greta. He’s my business partner. To be blunt about it, more of an accomplice, really.”

“Accomplice. How charming.” She let out a disgusted sigh. “Like us, I suppose. Wouldn’t you say, Matthew? Partners is too kind. Accomplices, yes. That sounds truer. His and her accomplices.”

He gave her the look to indicate he’d had enough of this discussion. She poured the last of the champagne into her glass and sat back with one arm across her breast, cupping her elbow in her hand. She looked at her plate. She’d hardly touched it. She gave a sad shake of her head. Their anniversary dinner had turned into a disaster. And their marriage? What word would she choose to describe it?

“Matthew, I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m upset. But doesn’t that mean anything to you? Doesn’t tonight, our anniversary, mean anything—despite however busy you are? What’s happened to us?”

“Greta, it’s too late for this conversation right now. We’d go in circles for the next hour. I’m sorry, I can’t. I’m going to be up until six in the morning as it is. I’ve got an early flight. I’ll just be able to get in a jog and a shower, if I’m lucky.” He tore a slice of bread in half, wiped up the last smear of sauce from his plate. He spoke with his mouth full. “We’ll talk when I get back if you’d like.”

She grimaced. “God, you make me sick.”

He shrugged, not caring enough to disagree.

“Fine then, Matthew. Take your trip. Don’t even bother to ask if I’d like to go with you.”

“It’s one day, Greta.”

“It’s Manhattan, Matthew. You know how I miss it.”

“Darling, you know you can go anytime you want. Have I ever stopped you from doing whatever you want, Greta? No. I didn’t think so.”

“I believe we were talking about you, Matthew. When will it stop with you?”

“What stop? Jesus, Gret. No more to drink. You’re not making sense now.”

“This. You. Us, like this. All of it. Damn it, Matthew, you’re obsessed with Via. Obsessed with your big secret deal. You’re worse than Peter ever was. It’s horrible, seeing you turn into this.”

“It’s not an easy job replacing him.”

She scoffed. “That’s how you see it? That you’ve replaced him? Dear God, you’re worse than I realized.”

He wiped his lips and carefully set his napkin down beside his place. “I’ve got a job to do, Greta.”

“Well don’t let me stop you.” She waved him away, and covered her eyes with her gloved left hand, waited for him to leave her alone. But what he did next completely surprised her. Had she finally gotten through to

him?

He came around the table and settled a hand on her shoulder. Softly, he spoke. "Greta, whether you understand or not, everything I do is for us. The things I'm making happen at work are very complicated. And very important. Things that will change our lives together forever." He rubbed her neck. Too briefly. Like everything else. Hollow promises. Shallow meanings.

She dropped her face into her hands and shook her head. "You've changed our lives forever already, Matthew. That's what's so sad. You just don't see it. How bad it is. How it's already happened."

He slipped his hands into his pockets and turned around to go, pausing for a moment. "I'm sorry, Gret, but I have to get back to work now. Please try to understand. And don't worry. Nothing bad will happen to us. Nothing. I won't let it."

And then he was gone, leaving her to sit in the flickering candlelight with her unfinished dinner, her empty glass. She turned and looked beyond her own reflection in the window, at Silicon Valley glittering in the distance.

"Then maybe I will," Greta Locke whispered.

"Poppyshit," Byron Holmes said with a dismissive wave at Peter, seated at the other end of the dining table.

"Dear," Grace said, patting her husband's arm affectionately. "Don't get too worked up. You don't want to scare off our new friends."

Kate and Peter chuckled good-naturedly. They were enjoying themselves immensely.

"I disagree, Byron. It's not, ah, poppyshit," Peter said. "Kids are only as strong as what you feed them. It's everything around them. How many good examples can you honestly name? Movies? Television? MTV?"

The foursome sat around an antique Shaker table, situated near the living-room hearth. The home was dec-

orated in a simple and warm country style. The effect was homey, comfortable, like Byron and Grace Holmes themselves. Peter and Kate felt instantly at ease the minute they walked in the door. Outside, dock lamps dotted the inlet and a few boats bobbed silently in the lulling bay.

"It's funny, the way kids take so quickly to computers," Peter said. "We'd invented the Mate with no one in mind but ourselves, computer guys. But almost at once parents bought them for their kids."

Grace said, "I wonder what the ratio is. Between the computer haves and have-nots. It must be enormous, when you consider how costly they are."

"True," Peter said, "And at Via we—" He paused for an instant to correct himself. "I mean, they . . . they are always trying to figure out how to make them cheaper, so that the education market can afford them."

Peter's longing tone hadn't gone unnoticed by the others. Byron took a shot at lightening him up. He pointed his mustard-smearred knife at Peter's dinner plate. "That's all well and good, son, but if you don't eat my Gracie's cooking I'll have hell to pay."

Grace smiled at Peter. "They have one of your computers at the foster home where I volunteer a few hours a week. The children spend hours on it, doing their homework or playing games. They talk in a language all their own, and it's remarkable to see how it brings them together and gives them something in common to share. They interact with one another in wholly new ways."

The discussion carried on some more, and halfway through the meal, even with Byron's demands, Peter stopped eating. Grace excused herself and began clearing the table. Kate stood up with her. "Let me help you."

Byron briskly rubbed his hands across his chest with evident satisfaction.

"Everything was delicious," Peter told Grace. "I just

haven't had a very good appetite lately."

"That's all right," Grace said, removing Peter's plate. "You can take leftovers home if you like."

"Too late," Byron said, snatching the uneaten sausage. "And wait till you see what's for dessert."

When Kate and Grace were out of earshot, Byron leaned into the table and lowered his voice. "You're a lucky fellow. She's lovely."

"She sure is," Peter said. He felt an uneasy stirring in his chest when he thought once more about not telling Kate about Ivy. He'd already decided that there was nothing to gain by telling her, yet it kept coming back unexpectedly, to gnaw at his consciousness. He wondered if he'd just forget about it someday.

"Come on," Byron said, pushing away from the table. "Let's get some air while the ladies fuss and giggle." Peter had a quiet laugh at that one when he tried to picture his feminist Kate "fussing" about in the kitchen.

Heading outside, Byron drew a small pouch and a briar pipe from his jacket. He filled it in silence as they strolled out onto the dock. He lit up when they reached the end, the glow of his match flickering in the black water below their feet. That's just what I need, Peter thought, a spark to go off inside my brain.

Byron shook out the match and worked his pipe, regarding Peter for a moment. "You know, boy. I like you."

"Thanks. You're a good guy, too."

"That's what my wife tells me," Byron said, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke. He pointed the mouthpiece of his pipe at the boat docked alongside the landing. "You and I ought to take her out for a float before the season's completely finished."

"The *Net Work*," Peter observed aloud. "Pretty fitting name."

"Aye," Byron joked with a pirate's voice. He sat on the edge of the dock and gestured for Peter to join him.

Their feet dangled a few inches above the low tide.

Byron took another draw from his pipe and looked up at the stars. He puffed out a few smoke rings, then turned and looked at Peter. "Listen, I'm gonna tell you something. And I want you to promise me you'll think about it, okay?"

"Sure."

"You're a bright fellow. But if you don't mind me saying, you're walking around with this long look on your face. Like a little boy who's lost his old dog and blames the world for it."

Peter didn't know what to say. He knew it was true, and felt embarrassed that it was so plain for everyone to see. He stared down into the dark water and shrugged.

"Son, everything dies. It's how life goes on. Your ol' pooch? He's gone. That's how you have to think of it. Things live, and they die. Now it's time to go pick yourself a new puppy. Train it, love it, make it great."

"It's easy for you to say," Peter said. "You've done it all, and it lasted a long time for you, so much of your life. A whole career's worth." He gestured toward the softly lit house behind them. "You have your success and your wife and you're happy."

Byron scoffed. "You think the 990 was the only thing I ever did with ICP? No way. I did all sorts of things, new products. The difference is I stayed on board. And times were different then. I was trained to do the things I did. You're different."

"Why's that?"

"Simple. Son, you're a rebel. With a cause, for sure. I was too, but in a different sort of way. You're a genuine risk taker, but not for the sake of taking risks. No, you do it because it's the only way you know how to be."

"Right now I feel like the only way I know how to be is lost."

"That's fine. But is it the end? Naw. You just have to understand and accept that it takes healing, over time. Sometimes longer than you think. There's nothing like

time, and you have to respect it.”

“I know that, I do. And pardon me for saying this, but I feel like time is running out for me. I can’t explain it.”

Byron gave a hearty laugh. “Less than half my age, and you’re feeling old are you? Ha. Let me tell you about time and age, son. Hell, I’ve been there and back already. And I almost died along the way. True story.”

Peter turned to him. “Died?”

Byron nodded thoughtfully. “Yes sir, after that heart attack I mentioned the other day. And why? From not letting go. Almost bought the farm. But worse, after I got out of the hospital, I almost lost my wife. I’ll spare you the gruesome details, but let’s just say you’ll get through this one. And it may not be the last time it’s going to happen, either. The more you invent, the more you run the risk of failing. I won’t say you were just lucky your first time at bat, but that was quite a home run you hit. And you’ll have more. And you’ll strike out too. Maybe more of those than homers or even decent base hits. But either way you’ll get going again. And take it from an old man, it’s true what they say.”

“What’s that?” Peter asked with genuine interest.

“That everything gets better with age.”

Peter gave an appreciative nod. Staring at the water, he forced out what he found so hard to say. “But it hurts.”

Byron patted him on the back. “Yeah, I know it. But you’ll pick up and dust off pretty soon.”

“Well, like you said. Only time will tell.” Peter turned and looked back at the house. Through the kitchen window he could see Grace laughing at some story Kate was telling, gesturing wildly with her hands.

Byron withdrew his pipe from his mouth and poked Peter’s arm. “Boy’s blind, too. I see a lady in there who looks at you with a real fancy in her eye. She standing strong by you, son. I can tell.”

Peter nodded. “I’m lucky, I know. I feel like Kate’s all I’ve got now.”

“Yeah, well how about I try to broaden your horizons a little. I’ll give you something to think about.”

Peter looked at him attentively. “Such as?”

“Mmm, let’s just say I’ve been bored lately. Yeah, I love it here, and our home in Connecticut, and we’ve been talking about maybe traveling again this winter. But I’ve got this sort of itch, like I have to find something new to play around with. The way I used to feel, a long time ago. You ask me, I think there was a reason for us running into each other the way we did.”

“How so?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Not yet, anyway. But I’ve got a sneaking suspicion it’s got something to do with our difference in thinking. I mean that in a good way. We come from very different worlds, yet they’re rushing toward each other. Yes sir, if you and I put our heads together, I bet we could really show the rest of them a thing or two.”

Peter was intrigued by the prospect. “You really think so?”

“Son, I know so,” Byron said, stuffing his pipe in his shirt pocket. He lifted himself to his feet with a laughing groan and rubbed his belly. “Come on, let’s go get us a wedge of that apple pie.”

She set the dirty dishes in the sink and wrapped the leftovers in foil. On the counter sat a cranberry-and-apple crumble she’d fixed. The bourbon sauce, meant to be warmed and drizzled over the piping-hot dessert, sat hardening in a saucepan. Seeing no point in heating it, she dumped it down the drain and left the dishes for the maid to deal with in the morning.

Matthew was back in his office working away, while here she stood in the dark, quiet kitchen. Happy anniversary, she thought wryly as she opened the refrigerator to withdraw a bottle of wine. She looked at the label. Not her favorite, but it would do. If Matthew was going

to work the night away, then she would celebrate by herself. She set the bottle on the counter and grabbed a clean glass from the cabinet. The glass fumbled in her shaky left grasp and fell to the floor, shattering into a hundred bits.

She swore out loud, and the sound of her own broken voice unleashed a flood of anger and sadness. She slumped against the counter, the numbing effect of all the champagne now setting in, and wondered if Matthew had even heard the glass break, her shout. She cried and waited, but he didn't come. Evidently the sound hadn't carried all the way back to his precious little office. Or if he had heard, he didn't care.

She thought about his "gift" to her, the new At Hand PC Plus waiting in his office. It gave her an idea. If he wouldn't celebrate with her, she was pretty sure she could find someone who would.

She opened the utensil drawer and withdrew a corkscrew. Kicking aside the largest broken shards on the floor, she took down another glass and carried it, the wine, and the opener through the dark foyer to the library and Matthew's adjacent office.

She found him on the phone, pacing back and forth in front of his desk. He turned and saw her standing with the bottle of wine and gave her a disbelieving look. "Excuse me," he said into the phone, then cupped his hand over the mouthpiece. "I'm speaking with my coauthor."

"Good for you." She waved the bottle at him. "It's not for you, anyway. Just open it." She held it out to him and he took it, then the corkscrew, and resumed his phone conversation as he proceeded to open the bottle.

"Yes, yes," he said, "I like that angle. Sort of, 'Go west, young man.'"

Greta snorted and glanced around the room. One of the yard lights shone into the library through the rear windows, illuminating her brilliant salmon bowl. Seeing it made her feel even sadder. She turned around and

picked up her new At Hand PC Plus and tucked it under her arm. Matthew handed her the open bottle of wine. She took one last look at him, but he was already pacing again, as though she weren't even there.

"Happy fucking anniversary," she said loud enough for his dear coauthor to hear, then turned and ran out without looking back, smiling a bitter smile all the way up the broad staircase to the second floor of the mansion.

She ambled down the long hallway to the guest room farthest from the master suite. Her own private office, she thought cheerily, paying no attention to the room's unlived-in air. She set everything down on the antique secretary desk facing a window that overlooked the rolling Stanford hills. She poured herself a glass of wine and took a sip, then set about plugging in the At Hand PC Plus's power cord and phone cable. Between her studies of the first unit's manual and the Plus's ingenious plug-and-play design, even Greta, bombed, could get it started.

Unlike Matthew's configuration, she had no monitor or external keyboard, no extra mouse. Instead, she would have to make do with the smaller built-in screen, compact keyboard, and stylus pointing device, which popped out of the side of the unit. She picked up the instrument and looked over her shoulder, down the long hallway. It was dark and empty, yet for some reason she felt uncomfortable, as though Matthew might come up behind her at any moment and unexpectedly catch her doing . . . what?

She knew what, but she wasn't quite ready to admit it to herself. She pressed the Power button and waited for the unit to start up. True to his word, Matthew had moved all of her files over, including her preferences and World Online settings. She started the program and a moment later she was connected.

Before she could even check to see if any of her "friends" were online, her screen flashed. It was

Gregor.

“Greta! Where’ve you been? I’ve missed you ☹.”

She glanced nervously over her shoulder again, then got up and closed the door. She locked it and, turning around, hesitated for a moment as she considered the little room and her place in it. She looked at the bed, the armoire, the fresh flowers she’d placed in here earlier that day. The setting struck her as curiously exciting—more like some exquisitely appointed hotel room than a home office. So anonymous, she thought. She swayed a little and reached out to the dresser to get her balance, then seated herself at the secretary desk and began typing.

“Gregor, I’m sorry. I’ve been . . . busy.”

“Happy anniversary, Greta. It’s tonight, isn’t it?”

A sudden tear dropped down onto her keyboard. She hadn’t realized she’d been crying. “Yes,” she typed. “☹.”

“Aw, Greta. What’s wrong? Why are you sad?”

She plucked a tissue from the nearby dispenser and wiped her nose. “Let’s just say things didn’t go as planned. I made a big dinner. But he forgot.”

“I’m sorry, Greta. Maybe you’d rather be alone . . . ?”

“No! I was hoping you would be here.”

“You were? I was afraid I’d frightened you away the other day. I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“It’s okay.” She was dizzy with so much to say. Her touch was fast and loose, as though she were speaking freely, drunkenly, but of course with her hands instead of her mouth. She typed away—it was so easy to just say whatever she wanted to say, anything at all.

“No, Gregor, I was touched. I was surprised. I blushed I think. And here you are again. I wasn’t sure if you’d be here.” An unexpected pang of jealousy stopped her for a moment. She wondered: “Gregor, you seem to be here a lot. Do you have a lot of ‘friends’ on here?”

“Lots, yes. But you mean women friends, don’t you?”

“Sort of.” She held her breath, thinking for a moment how crazy this was, how she could feel jealousy about someone she’d never met in person. It was an oxymoron. But she was curious and concerned, just the same.

“No. Just you, Gret.”

“Really, Gregor? Honest?”

“Cross my virtual heart. The reason I’m here so often is because I have a second phone line that I’m always connected to. I have my World Online configured so that when you come online, a special little bell ring-a-lings. So if I’m working or close by, I can come running to see you.”

She was touched. “That’s so sweet.”

“Yeah, yeah . . . and now comes the part where you remind me you’re a married woman.”

She didn’t respond. She wasn’t sure what to say. She waited for him to make the next move.

“Greta? Come on, say it. That’s what you always say.”

She waited.

“Greta? Are you still there? If you don’t respond, I may say something crazy.”

She waited, watching the little clock in the corner of the display tick off a full minute and ten seconds before he said more.

“Greta, come on. I’m warning you. This silence is getting a ‘rise’ out of me.”

She didn’t make the connection as she watched another minute roll by, unbearably, thrillingly, before he finally prompted her into action with his next line.

“I wish you were here with me, Greta. I wish I could see you.”

“Gregor.”

“Greta, tell me what you are wearing. Did you dress special for the dinner?”

“Yes. I put on a black silk Gucci dress. My emerald earrings. My best gloves.” She pressed Enter, then sud-

denly gasped, realizing too late what she had typed.

“Gloves?”

She thought quickly. “In case we were going to go out for a stroll.”

“Oh. You mean fancy gloves. Not the keep-warm kind. Okay. Go on.”

Her heart was still racing from her slipup. Gloves. She’d actually typed gloves. She closed her eyes and considered again what she was doing. It seemed so crazy to be describing herself to him like this.

“Anyway,” she typed, “it doesn’t matter. Matthew didn’t even notice. He had his head up his ass over work. As usual.” She refilled her glass, noticing that she’d polished off nearly half the bottle already.

“What could be more important to him than dinner with his beautiful wife?”

“Oh, his big deal with ICP. It’s all he thinks about now.”

For the first time in all of her online conversations with Gregor, he didn’t immediately respond.

“Gregor, are you there?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

“You got so quiet of a sudden.”

“I’m sorry. I was just . . . I’m sorry. Shocked, is the word. That a man would be that, well, obsessed with his work, to ignore his wife.”

“Now you know how I feel.”

“Do I? How do you feel, Greta? Right now? I mean really feel. Sexy?”

“Oh, Gregor. You always make me laugh.”

“I’m serious, Greta.”

“Sexy, no. Drunk, yes.”

“I’ll bet I can make you feel sexy.”

“No, no. I don’t think so.”

“Oh, I bet I can. If I were there with you, I bet you would feel sexy.”

“Yes, well. That’s neither here nor there, is it?” Her

heart was speeding up in a strangely familiar way, as though she were reading a novel in which a seduction was unfolding. It was so detached and unreal, yet somehow his words were getting to her, touching her.

“I can make myself a little there, you know.”

“Beam yourself here like in *Star Trek*,” she typed, laughing aloud without even thinking about it.

“In a way, yes. But just a part of me.”

“Gregor, you’re getting awfully weird on me. Dare I guess what part?” She giggled, surprised by her own candor. She would play along with his game. What would it hurt?

“The middle.”

“Just the middle. I’m disappointed. Why not all of you?”

“That can be arranged. But just the middle for now. But you have to make a deal with me.”

She laughed again, amused by her own frivolity. She sipped more wine, making it last.

“What’s the deal.”

“That I get to see you, too.”

“Why, of course, Gregor. I’ll just beam my middle to you, too.”

“I’m serious.”

“You can’t be. It’s not possible.”

“But it is, Greta. That’s what I’m trying to tell you. Hasn’t anyone sent you a photo of themselves over the Net?”

And suddenly what he was talking about made sense. He meant a picture. That he would send her a picture. And by the sound of it, a very personal picture.

“Greta? Oh no, I did it again. Scared you off.”

“I’m here.”

“Well? Do we have a deal?”

“Gregor, this is all so new to me. I don’t know what to say.”

“Say yes.”

“I can’t. It would be . . . unfaithful.”

“No, it wouldn’t. It’s just a picture. Tit for tat, so to speak.”

“Gregor, I’m trying to be serious.”

“I’m sorry. But listen, you don’t have to send anything too revealing if you don’t want. Not right away, anyway. But at least agree to the possibility.”

“But how? I don’t even know the first thing about sending a picture of me this way. I’m not that advanced.”

“I’ll help you. In fact, I’ll send you everything you need. And explain to you how to set it all up.”

“I don’t know, Gregor.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, Greta. It’s just like exchanging photos with a pen pal.”

“But you said your middle.”

“Okay, so not exactly like pen pals. You know I’m drawn to you, Greta. So I’ll take the first chance. I want you to see the effect you have on me. I’ll capture a photo of myself right now with my little digital camera here and send it to you. You look at it, see if it does anything for you. But at least promise you’ll consider it, okay?”

She didn’t see any harm in what he suggested. What the hell. “All right, Gregor. It’s a deal. Go on, send away. Show me what you’re made of!” She laughed with gusto.

He told her to wait for a few minutes while he prepared the image. She stood up and strolled over to the corner window and looked outside, sipping her wine.

Matthew’s office lamp cast a glow onto the lawn. She could see his shadowed profile leaning forward at his desk, before his own At Hand. Dear God, she thought, when it occurred to her that she and her husband were living in the same huge mansion, yet both were up to their own private business, a million miles apart. She shook her head in astonished disbelief. Had her obsession turned as intense as his? It made her wonder, as she glanced longingly at her At Hand computer and realized how much its connection to the outside world had come to mean to her.

Just then, the computer announced she'd received new mail. A shiver of excitement raised the hairs on the back of her neck. She seated herself a little unsteadily, picked up the stylus, and tapped her E-mail box, revealing a single new message from Gregor. Unlike the plain text messages he had sent in the past, this one was earmarked with a tiny slide icon, indicating it contained a graphic. She hesitated. It felt so wicked, yet at the same time she was delirious with curiosity.

Taking a deep breath, she poised the stylus over the slide icon. With her free hand she picked up her glass of wine and finished it off in a single swallow, while at the same time tapping on the new mail message. With wide eyes she watched as her until-now-unreal seducer's naked torso unfolded in all of its tan, lean, muscular, and forcefully rigid glory.

She reacted with a start, and for a second time that night the wineglass slipped from her gloved hand and fell to the hardwood floor, a final shattering exclamation point to the Lockes' anniversary gone astray.