

PART V

>CHAPTER 21

Matthew hadn't slept all night, yet he did not feel tired. If anything, he felt wide awake, ready to roll.

He threw off the covers and rose from his bed. It had become that, his bed, after the freak accident with Greta. But today that event did not trouble him the way it had over the last two months. No, today was his day, and no one could take it away from him.

He strolled unhurriedly downstairs to the kitchen, passing many packing boxes along the way. Even these didn't affect his excited mood today, the most important day of his career. Nearly three years of sweat and frustration had gone into this moment, and it would mark his greatest achievement.

The emerging dawn filled the kitchen with a dull gray light. It looked like rain. He opened the refrigerator and considered making himself a big breakfast, but then decided against it. He had no appetite. Instead, he poured himself a glass of juice and sipped it as he looked out the window and pondered his future.

His presence would be required in both New York and California. He hadn't decided yet which would be his primary residence. Perhaps a high-rise apartment in Manhattan, with a pied-à-terre in San Francisco. The hour-long commute down to Via would be inconsequential, since he'd have his own chauffeured limousine to shuttle him back and forth. His elation was complete. It was still too early to shower and change, so he strolled to his office to run through his speech once more, then checked his E-mail.

Just as he turned on his At Hand PC Plus the telephone rang. He answered before the second ring.

It was William Harrell, who had flown in last night for today's big announcement. Their dealings with each other had been cordial and professional. The men exchanged greetings, and William invited Matthew to join him for an early breakfast before the announcement. The ICP executive named a restaurant near Via.

"Anything I should be concerned about?" Matthew Locke said.

"Just a couple last-minute details to go over," William said, promising to explain everything over breakfast.

They hung up, and Matthew turned off his At Hand. His E-mail could wait.

When she heard the garage door close, Greta Locke climbed out of bed with a groan. She too hadn't slept all night. And like her husband, she was excited, despite her aches and pains.

Her left collarbone had healed nicely, but it still hurt when she arose every morning. The broken bone was the least disagreeable of the injuries she'd sustained in her tug-of-war with Matthew two months before. She'd fractured her skull and suffered a concussion which, the doctors informed her afterward, could have turned into a coma.

Poor Gregor was in a complete panic by the time

she'd reached him, two weeks after the accident. Her hospital stay lasted nearly a month, but fortunately her private room allowed her to set up her At Hand and modem to stay in touch with Gregor.

When she finally reconnected with him online he was in a state of shock. He thought she'd dumped him, and it was easy to see why he would think so. The money she'd promised to wire into his account never showed up, and then she'd vanished from World Online. She explained everything, and assured him she would be fine. She detailed the ensuing involvement with the lawyers, the difficult position Matthew had gotten himself into, and the excellent position she was in.

In the one and only conversation that she'd had with Matthew after the accident, she had agreed not to move out until today, when the deal was finally complete. He'd promised to make it worth her while, and the divorce papers would be ready any day now. He'd reactivated her full access to their combined bank accounts, and yesterday she left the local branch with a Coach weekender packed with a hundred thousand in cash and traveler's checks. Half of it would take care of the boat Gregor had picked out. She'd wired him ten grand already to put down on the vessel, and the owner had let him move his things aboard. She would hand over the remaining fifty thousand today, and then they would be on their way to Baja.

She unlocked her bedroom door and made her way downstairs. She'd taken to locking the door every night since she'd returned from the hospital. She didn't really believe Matthew would harm her, but then there were a lot of things about Matthew she hadn't believed. Which was why she'd purchased a handgun as well, just in case. She kept it by her bedside, able to sleep better knowing it was close at hand.

In the kitchen she fixed herself coffee, then headed back upstairs to shower and change. It was dark outside, and she made a mental note to pack a rain slicker. Her

bags were few, all set to go down by the front door. Since she wouldn't be needing her car anymore she'd arranged for a limousine to take her to San Francisco's Marina district, where Gregor was waiting. She was giddy with nervousness. It would be their first face-to-face encounter. She already liked the way he looked, and he swore she was the one for him, but she was nervous just the same.

She had promised to check in with him this morning, before she left, to make sure everything was set. She turned on her At Hand, pleased with the knowledge that after today she would no longer have any use for it.

Gregor was waiting for her, just as he had promised.

"You got the money?" he said.

"Of course, darling. I can't believe it's finally happening," she said.

"Me either," he said, smiling anxiously.

"Are you nervous, too?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "You all set to do what I told you with your computer?"

She hesitated. "Are you sure I have to? I mean, what's the danger?"

"It's just a precaution. We had some pretty intimate talks and peep shows over the wire. But this will ensure there's no trace. No leftover E-mails or pictures of me you might have snapped off, that sort of thing. Trust me, it's best this way, Greta."

"I trust you. You're right. It's just that, well, if it weren't for this silly computer, I wouldn't have ever met you."

"Yeah, but you're about to meet the real thing, and isn't that better?"

"It sure is. I'll do just like you said. Erase the whole thing. I have the little disk to restore it right here."

"Good. When does your car arrive?"

"Half an hour. I'd better do this now so I'm not late."

"And you got my E-mail with the directions to the

Marina?"

She nodded.

"Well, I guess that's it then. Okay, Gret. See you in a little bit."

She paused, waited for him to say it, and when he didn't, she did.

"I love you," she said, and smiled for the camera.

"That's my girl," he said, waved good-bye, and vanished from her screen.

My God, she thought, this is really happening. She glanced at the locked Coach bag full of cash and traveler's checks beside the bed, then picked up the floppy disk and inserted it in her computer's disk drive. She restarted the computer and a moment later it asked her if she was sure she wanted to erase the hard disk and reinstall the system software and applications. She clicked the Yes button, then let the At Hand do its thing while she packed her toiletry kit.

It wasn't until she was downstairs and waiting by the front door for the limo that she remembered the directions. She checked her rain slicker pocket, but it was empty. She thought for a moment and tried to recall where she'd put them. Gregor had E-mailed the directions last night, and she'd read them and then—

Dear God, she had printed them, hadn't she? She raced upstairs to her room.

The printer tray was empty, but somehow this didn't come as a surprise. No, she knew it would be empty when she recalled the events of last evening. After opening his E-mail she had signed off and, thrilled this was finally happening, she'd gone into the bathroom to draw herself a hot bath, forgetting to print the directions.

Confirming what she already knew, she checked her computer and the E-mail he'd sent her was gone, erased from her hard disk along with everything else. No traces, just like he had promised.

Her heart thudded in her chest and she forced herself

to calm down. She sat on the edge of her bed and tried to think of what to do, how to recover the lost directions.

And then she remembered: Previously read E-mails remained on the World Online system for a few weeks before they were permanently erased. She knew because she would sometimes reread the love letters and poems he'd sent her. She raced downstairs, praying that Matthew had left his At Hand PC Plus home.

Luckily, he had. She turned the computer on and whispered for it to hurry. She launched World Online and a moment later she was back in business. The At Hand announced that she had new mail, and this surprised her—Gregor was the only person she ever E-mailed. She double-clicked the in-box and a moment later she realized her mistake. She'd gotten so used to just turning on her computer and connecting to World Online, that she'd forgotten to change profiles so that it would know it was she, rather than Matthew, logging on this time.

As she moved to close the E-mail box, one of the waiting items caught her eye. When she read the subject heading she nearly fainted.

It read: **YOUR WIFE'S CUNT**

The message was marked with a little slide icon to indicate it contained a picture.

She stared at the screen in horror. The message was from a someone named "SFScooper," and it took her a moment to recall where she'd seen that name before. She looked around the little office in frustration, and then, as though picturing herself in a dream, she remembered.

It was here, right here. In this office. The first time she'd ever used the computer and gone online. That rude person who had offended her, who had called Matthew a bastard. She swallowed and double-clicked on the message.

The text appeared, a string of profanities and accusa-

tions, threats and assurances of revenge.

Much worse was the picture that unfolded beneath the body of the message.

She gaped at a freeze-frame version of herself, captured the instant after she'd unfolded her light blue robe and exposed her most intimate secrets.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please find your seats," the announcer's voice boomed through the bustling auditorium.

The hall was already jammed to near capacity with thousands of Via employees dressed casually in T-shirts and jeans or shorts. The front rows were reserved for VIPs and the press. On stage, a bright circle of light shone on the empty podium.

Backstage, William Harrell parted the curtain an inch and peered out at the talkative crowd. Hank Towers squeezed in beside him for a look.

"I've never given a speech to so many people dressed like that," William remarked. He stepped away and rearranged his necktie.

Hank laughed. "You look like you gained twenty pounds," Hank said, making a private joke about what he knew William was hiding beneath his suit.

William grinned. "That crowd is about to witness the world's fastest weight-loss program."

A production assistant asked the two executives to take their places. The show was ready to begin.

The announcer's voice filled the great hall: "Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome Martin Cohen, vice president and general counsel for Via, Incorporated."

Dressed in a dark business suit, Martin Cohen stood before the podium and greeted the audience. Overhead, the Via logo splashed onto the projection screen. Cohen customarily opened the company's quarterly meetings before turning them over to the company's chief. After

some general commentary, he moved to today's order of business.

"Earlier this year we entered into a strategic-alliance agreement with International Computer Products." ICP's logo materialized alongside Via's on the overhead screen, and Cohen continued. "Thanks to that alliance, sales of the At Hand PC Plus increased to record numbers. However, with the recent merger of PCSoft and Future Processing, which together form the company FutureSoft, our sales have slowed considerably."

A grumble of concern rippled through the audience.

"We all want to succeed. And what we have to announce today will see to it that we do. Quite possibly beyond our wildest imaginations—and we all know we've got some pretty wild imaginations here," he quipped, and the audience responded with nervous laughter. "Without further delay, I'd like to turn over the meeting to the man who helped make our strategic alliance a reality, William Harrell, chairman of International Computer Products."

A worrisome murmur filled the huge auditorium as William strode onto the stage and stopped before the podium. He thanked Martin Cohen, and then thanked everyone in the audience.

"I have to admit," William began, completely at ease, "I've always been envious of you sneakers-and-jeans folks out here in California. I look out there, and I see a sea of beachwear."

There was more nervous laughter, and William knew that the crowd was thrown off by his presence. Normally Matthew Locke would be onstage after Martin Cohen opened the quarterly meeting. Something suspicious was up today, and this crowd sensed it.

William quickly pressed on. "And maybe that's part of your secret," he said, as he casually moved away from the podium to stand at center stage. "Maybe the environment you have out here is what makes it possible for you to invent brilliant products like the At Hand PC

Plus.”

On the overhead screen an older photo of the original At Hand team appeared, with a younger Peter Jones kneeling in the center of the group, proudly holding up an original At Hand PC. The audience applauded with pride and appreciation for their company’s legendary founder and product team.

William continued. “The fact is, I’ve always been jealous of Via and the At Hand. Jealous that we, the big guns, hadn’t invented something as spectacular. And it makes me uncomfortable.” He yanked at his tie, surprising the audience. It was all part of his prank, which he hoped would ease the initial shock of what he was going to announce.

A striptease song piped in through the loudspeakers, and the audience watched with wonder as William shrugged off his business jacket and began unbuttoning his dress shirt.

“In fact, it makes me really hot under the collar.” He unzipped his trousers and shoved them to the floor, revealing faded jeans. “Itching to just let myself go, get in touch with my more creative side.”

He tore off his dress shirt and flung it aside, then raised his arms to offer a full view of his spanking new Via T-shirt with its colorful roadway-and-horizon logo.

The audience broke into applause and cheers as William sauntered back to the podium. “Now, dressed like this, you’d think I could probably dream up some of the amazing products you folks are famous for, right?”

“Right,” a chorus of voices shouted, playing along.

He shook his head. “Wrong. And that’s what makes Via so special. Its people. You. You are Via.”

The audience quieted down at the somber tone in his voice.

“Which is why today I’d like to help you continue to be the special company you are. The extraordinary people you are. So you can keep on building the amaz-

ing products you build.”

He took a deep breath and revealed the deal. “Today, I am excited and proud to announce a very special marriage—the merger of Via and ICP.”

While he’d expected a certain level of surprise from the crowd, nothing prepared him for the mayhem that exploded throughout the audience.

Acting fast, he raised his palms to try to calm the crowd down. “Wait, please.” He took a step closer to the outraged congregation and begged for quiet. “Let me explain. There’s more.”

A pen flew over his head, and several floppy disks whizzed straight for him.

The crowd rose to its feet in angry protest as William lifted his arms to protect himself from the onslaught of shouts and projectiles flying at him.

As the limousine pulled away from the Lockes’ front gate Greta spotted Matthew’s car racing up the hill. She absently wondered what he was doing back so soon before her mind returned to her own troubles.

She was in shock. Seeing herself like that, so vulgarly exposed, had absolutely devastated her. She’d just stared at the screen, trying to understand and piece it all together. Small fragments drifted through her mind, but she was too stunned to fathom the whole picture just yet. Operating like an automaton, she’d proceeded to sign off from Matthew’s account, then back on with her own. She found Gregor’s directions to the Marina, printed them out, and left the whole mess just as she’d found it. It did not occur to her yet that Matthew would see it.

She’d walked out of her husband’s office in a daze, unsure what to do next. The limousine arrived, and her first reaction was to send it away. There was no way she could go now. But as she sat on the bottom step and struggled to understand, it occurred to her that if the one

photo existed, then it was likely that there were more.

This SFScooper, who might or might not in fact be Gregor, might have further intentions to exploit her picture in ways she didn't want to consider. She had no idea who SFScooper really was or why he had chosen to surprise her husband with the photos. But she had to find out. Her own uncertain future depended on it. My God, she thought, if photos like that were so easy to send around, God only knew where else they might appear. She'd calmly asked the driver to wait while she carried her bag of money upstairs to her room and retrieved a few things.

She looked at the black Coach bag at her feet, hefted it to gauge if it was heavy enough. It felt right. And so did her plan. Whatever Gregor's part in this was, she would find out. Her mind raced with vengeful fury, but she refused to let herself fully face the fact yet that the man she'd come to believe was her lover had lied.

Turning onto Bay Street, the driver informed her they were coming up on the Marina. The forty-five-minute ride had gone by in a flash. It had started to rain, and she was grateful for it. Her slicker made it easier to conceal what she was hiding in her pocket.

The chauffeur turned into the parking lot alongside the San Francisco Yacht Club, and before climbing out she asked the driver to leave and come back for her in a half hour. She handed him a hundred-dollar bill, and he promised to return.

She carried the Coach bag in one hand, while the other she kept in her raincoat pocket, ready. She had memorized the boat slip number, and as she neared it Gregor—or whoever he really was—emerged with a big smile on his face that faltered as she got closer. He warned her to watch her step on the slippery dock. She put on a smile and declined his offer to take the bag, assuring him she could manage. She climbed aboard the boat, noticing his suspicious expression.

"You're nervous," he said.

She nodded. He was older than she had expected, or than he'd said. She guessed maybe thirty-six. It was interesting how she'd thought she'd gotten a clear picture of him on the computer screen. But it had been so small, so grainy.

"Me too," he said. "I can't believe you're here."

"Me either," she said seriously.

He was a little heavier than she thought, and his tan did not hide mildly pockmarked cheeks. His eyes were yellowish, a little bloodshot, and when he came closer she smelled alcohol on his breath. Or maybe it was seeping from his pores. Either way, it made her feel nauseous.

"You look fantastic," he said, reaching out a hand to her.

"You don't," she said with a nervous laugh, like she'd made a joke.

"But where are your bags?"

"I'm traveling light today, Gregor. Or whatever your name is."

He looked at her funny, and she could see that somehow he knew he'd been caught. Still, he tried to recover.

"What do you mean?"

"Fuck what I mean. What do you want?"

"Greta."

"Yes, Greta," she said sarcastically. "And you are?"

"Look, it doesn't have to be this way." He wiped the back of his hand across his wet brow. "Let's go down below, talk."

"You first," she said.

He glanced at the bag.

"Oh no," she said, "not until I'm through with you. Move it."

He bristled. "Hey, don't talk to me like that, Greta."

She drew out the small handgun in her left hand, careful to keep it low.

He lost the tough guy act and looked up with terrified

eyes. "Let's not do anything stupid."

"Too late. You already did. And now we're going to do a little undoing. Let's go." She waved the gun, her hand nearly steady.

He turned and climbed down the steps into the main cabin.

Keeping the muzzle pointed at him she followed, glancing around quickly to find what she was looking for. There it was, on the counter that he'd set up like a desk.

"All right, a couple things," she said. "First, turn that thing on." She waved the gun at his At Hand PC Plus.

"What for?"

She let out an exasperated sigh and grabbed one of the pillows from the bench seat. She held it against the gun.

"I don't have a silencer, but I've seen it done like this in the movies, and I'm willing to try it. Now, turn the fucking thing on. And take off your clothes."

His tan face was pale as he followed her orders. When he was down to his briefs she started questioning him.

"Who are you?"

"Just a writer."

"Who is this Mr. Cooper? Is that your name?"

"Cooper?"

"Yes, Cooper. SFScooper."

"No. It's my profile."

"What does it mean?"

"San Francisco Scooper."

"Am I missing something?"

"From when I worked at the *San Francisco Examiner*. You know, scoop. Scooper. As in a reporter getting a scoop."

"I see. How stupid."

He made an angry face, formed a profanity.

"Ah, ah. No more potty mouth. I already saw what you sent my husband."

His not-so-great-in-person face registered understanding, how she'd figured him out. His shoulders slumped as he turned to check on the At Hand PC Plus. His ass was flabby, and the sight of him held none of the virtual attraction she'd previously felt. Or thought she'd felt. That first, tantalizing photo he'd sent was obviously a fake. Of course the fact that he was a liar and probably a thief helped make him less attractive too.

"What's your real name?"

"Joshua."

"All of it."

"Ellis. Joshua Ellis."

She thought for a moment. "Why do I vaguely know your name?"

"Because your husband fucked me. He was going to hire me to coauthor his autobiography, but then he changed his mind. So I was getting back at him."

"Through me."

"Hey, I lost my job because of it."

"Doesn't sound like you much cared for it anyway, budding novelist that you are."

"That part's true, at least."

"Good for you. But your memory of me, at least whatever you have left of it, we're going to erase."

"I was only kidding. You're not really in the book."

"I'm not talking about the book," she said. She smirked when he cupped his hands over his privates. "So shy all of a sudden. Well, let's get this over with."

He looked at her, not knowing what to expect next.

"Shoot yourself," she said calmly.

"Greta, wait." His voice cracked.

"I don't mean with the gun, you idiot. With your camera. Full frontal, with your face please. Give me a few. And grab yourself in a couple of them."

He spent the next five minutes pleading with her not to make him do it. She showed him that the gun was loaded and the safety was off. Her red hair had been blown wild by the wind on deck, and he didn't need

further convincing. He took four photos in all, and she asked him to put them on a disk for her.

“I only have Zips,” he said.

“I’m easy. And while you’re at it you’d better bring out all your backups too.”

He did as he was told, withdrawing a pile of Zip disks. He handed them to her, along with the one containing his new pictures.

“Good. Now, stand over there.”

She waved the gun and he begged her not to shoot. She kept the muzzle pointed at him while she quickly checked the fore and aft windows to see if anyone outside would hear.

She came forward with the pistol extended in her left hand, while in her right she held the pillow.

He raised his hands protectively and started to cry as a stream of urine rained all over the freshly shampooed cabin rug.

She shook her head disapprovingly. “That’s gonna cost you,” she said.

She pressed the gun into the pillow and fired three times, astonished by how quickly and quietly the whole ugly affair terminated.