

>CHAPTER 2

As it turned out, Matthew Locke's estimate of his wife was right on the money. As usual, she'd already rewarded herself.

He found Greta in the living room, fussing over the largest crystal bowl he'd ever seen. She was facing away from him and didn't notice him coming in. He stood watching as she carefully inched the bowl this way and that on the waist-high black lacquered pedestal.

She wore designer jeans and an oversize saffron sweater that drooped past generous hips. Her hands were covered by a pair of delicate silk gloves, her copper hair pulled back in a medium ponytail that accentuated her look of concentration. He knew her so well. And by the looks of things, she was having her doubts, not quite sure she'd made the right decision.

He strolled into the room. "It certainly is striking."

She turned at the waist, careful not to let go of the bowl. Her knitted brow relaxed and her expression gave

way to the mischievous smile that generally followed only her naughtiest, most extravagant purchases.

“Darling, I didn’t hear you come in. You’re home early.” She leaned over and pecked his lips. She made one final adjustment to the bowl, then stepped over to the wall switch to turn up the overhead halogen lamp. The bowl twinkled and glittered, casting prismatic sparkles in every direction.

“I was in the city getting my hair done, and I just happened to stop by Gump’s,” Greta said, lifting a glass of white wine she’d started. The emporium was San Francisco’s infamous toy store for the wealthy. “It’s a James Houston original. Just look at that engraving, Matthew. That detail.” She clucked her tongue in appreciation.

Matthew leaned in for a closer look at the half dozen salmon circling the bowl’s rim. The illusion was impressive: The fishes stirred up a spray of tiny air bubbles in their struggle against an invisible current. He had to admit, the piece was breathtaking.

“I was going to wait until after tomorrow to show it to you, darling,” Greta said. “But I know everything is going to work out just the way you planned it. Anyway, when I saw it I just had to have it. Such brilliance.”

“How much brilliance?” he asked, with a quizzical grin.

“An absolute steal, Matthew. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you.” She raised her glass and toasted the bowl. “Now, let me fix you something to drink.”

He decided not to press further. If it made her happy, then he didn’t care what it cost. It was one of the give-and-take aspects of their marriage that he had come to accept. His money for her pleasure. It was the only way he knew how to satisfy her.

Her newest thing fit in nicely among the living room’s other precious objects. The Hepplewhite antiques with their forged hearts, the Wyeth, the small but valuable collection of first editions. And, as always, vase after vase of fresh flowers, brightening each of the mansion’s

thirteen additional rooms, every one as carefully and exquisitely decorated as this one.

Matthew leaned in again to inspect one of the salmon more closely. He admired the way the creature labored majestically against a powerful, unseen force, compelled onward by an instinct to fulfill its obligation. It was that way in business, he reflected. The journey hard and strenuous, the instinct to always keep moving forward the same. Pure and simple.

He frowned at his choice of word, *simple*, and the sudden and undesirable effect it had on his mood. Once more his thoughts returned to Peter Jones. Like an unwelcome visitor, Peter's excited voice invaded his mind. *If you get simple beauty and naught else, you get the best thing God invents.* It was a quote from the poet Robert Browning, one Peter often recited during design meetings.

Matthew's self-confidence began to waver. Not completely, but enough to make him feel uneasy. Christ, how he couldn't wait for tomorrow to get here, and be done with it.

He straightened up and looked around the room. So much material worth. And all thanks to Via. A fact the press never let him forget. Practically every profile written about Via or Matthew carried the obligatory line or two describing his compensation package. The four-million-dollar salary. The stock options worth ten times that, give or take a few million. He was set for life. Yet this assurance no longer mattered the way it used to. There was more to it than the money, more than the position he currently held. Owing again to Peter, he, like the thousands of dedicated Via employees, had fallen under the young founder's Byronic spell. How Via, unlike any other high-tech company, really put people, the end users, first. How this charter developed the Via customer base into the most loyal in the business, if not the largest. To be at the top of so humane a company was an uncommon experience for Matthew, and it felt

good. Special. Powerful. And staying in that esteemed position all depended on tomorrow, and what would follow over time. Tomorrow was everything. He positively believed his life depended on emerging victorious from tomorrow's board meeting. Otherwise . . .

Otherwise what? Would he die? He nearly laughed out loud at his own sense of melodrama. No, of course he wouldn't die. Not literally.

Yet when Greta returned, holding out his gin and tonic in one gloved hand, he wasn't so sure. In a way, a large part of him had died several years ago, after her accident. Sometimes when he looked at his wife's gloved hands he felt as though more of himself were falling away, bit by bit, until one day he would feel completely lost with her. On the whole, however, he had become adept at ignoring both, her hands and the intense feelings they stirred in him. Or no longer stirred. Sadly, they were one and the same.

Yet he was not a man without passion. His work at Via had become his real passion in life, his salvation, his means of giving and expressing himself in a way so unlike his former, material picture of success. In that past life, as he had lately come to think of it, his public image—one of Manhattan's industry movers and shakers, the successful, happily married business leader—was important to cultivate. But here, in California and at the freer-spirited Via, none of that seemed to matter. And that suited him fine. His calling had changed, and he had changed with it. Indeed, tomorrow was only the beginning.

Interpreting her husband's reflective expression as consent, she graced him with a warm smile, the devilish look gone now that they had passed the money part of her latest acquisition. He accepted the cocktail, tasted it, and planted a grateful kiss on her forehead.

Greta touched his arm. "Come take a load off."

He followed his wife to the brocade settee and sank

into the soft cushions. He eased his head back and rested his eyes.

“Is everything all set, darling?”

He nodded.

“Good.” Greta Locke took an appreciative sip of her wine. “I’m telling you, Matthew. I can’t wait for you to be able to relax once this all settles down. It feels like you’ve been at this for ten years.”

From her tone he knew there was more to her sympathy than just his own peace of mind. He also knew what he should say to include her in the future she envisioned. Instead, he said: “He says I don’t know what I’m doing. That I don’t have a clue. No guts, no vision.” He opened his eyes. “Unless I’m completely overlooking something, I don’t think he realizes what’s going to go down tomorrow.” Matthew looked at his wife.

“He deserves it.”

Matthew shrugged, not wanting to cover the same well-worn ground again with her.

Greta loathed Peter. After their first dinner together, during the recruiting visit to get acquainted with Jones and the West Coast, she had complained about his conduct. How he would excitedly tug on her husband’s arm when describing his computer things, or when Matthew’s observations harmonized with Peter’s own thoughts. And Matthew hadn’t been much better back then, either. The countless evenings he would arrive home from work with Peter said this, Peter said that.

But the thing Greta despised most, Matthew knew, was what she had called their “play day.” Every Saturday, like clockwork, Peter would be at the door before she was out of bed, calling on Matthew. Off they would go, sometimes for the whole day. Matthew would return bursting with new ideas, retreating to his home office to make notes or search the Web for details on the subjects they’d discussed.

Until Greta had had enough. One morning, while

Peter was waiting in the entrance hall for Matthew, she wondered aloud from the top of the stairs when the last time was she'd spent a Saturday with her husband, just the two of them. After that Peter stopped coming to the front door. Instead, he took to waiting outside the gate. "Like a mongrel," Greta observed after reading an article about Peter Jones that revealed he was an orphan. Well, that explained everything, she told Matthew. Peter Jones saw him as a father figure, it was so obvious. That Matthew might see Peter as a son never really occurred to her.

When she commented one evening that his growing attachment to Peter was causing him to lose track of why he had come to Via in the first place, Matthew took offense. He countered that the time he spent with Peter was necessary if he ever wanted to realize the deal at its best. Greta sneered at that, pointing out that even she could see that Jones would never go for Matthew's plan, no matter how friendly they became. Matthew eventually agreed, yet he was resistant to adjust his fondness for the younger man.

So Greta made it easy: She forbade him to invite Peter into their home. How Matthew was to accomplish this without offending Peter was his problem. No more Saturdays. From now on, she demanded, he would spend Saturdays with her, even if it meant working in his home office all day. It was for his own good, she insisted.

And in the long run, Matthew reflected as he finished off his gin and tonic, she'd been right. Had Greta not intervened, he might never have brought up his transformation plan with Peter Jones. She had also been correct in how Peter would react to the suggestion. There was no chance in hell Peter would consider making Via's products more compatible with the competition's. . . .

His wife's touch startled him back to the present.

"Poor darling. So tired." She brushed a wave of dark hair from his forehead. The fabric of her glove raised a chill on the back of his neck. He moved her hand to the

sofa cushion, patted it to keep it there. Then he set his empty glass on the coffee table and locked his hands behind his head.

“Did I mention the *Fortune* writer accepted the offer for the autobiography?”

“Terrific, Matthew. I think. Unless it’s the one I’m thinking of. You interviewed so many candidates I’ve lost track. Not that man who kept calling day and night, is it? Which one was he? He was so horribly nerdy. Jonah something-or-other. Sort of seedy. And bitter, was how you put it, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Joshua Ellis. Very bitter. And disreputable, I found out. And no. It’s not him. It’s the young woman. The one you said had suspicious eyes.”

“Mmm, her. Well, she did look at everything so suspiciously. She did, Matthew.”

“That’s why she’s a journalist, Gret. It’s her job.”

“There are going to be a lot of disappointed runners-up. You considered how many? Six or ten different writers?”

“Something like that.” He shrugged. “Anyway, business is business. And they already know that, they’re writers. My press chief said she’d contact them to say I’ve gone with someone else. Anyway, we won’t get started with the interview sessions and actual writing for months. For now this *Fortune* writer will go over piles of background material, that sort of thing. Which is just as well. I mean, it’s not as though I don’t have enough to worry about. Maybe I said yes too soon to doing this book thing. You think?”

“Shhh, relax. Just take it easy, Matthew. You’ll be fine after tomorrow’s over, darling, I promise.”

He smiled appreciatively and looked once more at the crystal bowl. A golden ray of setting sunlight cut into the object from the French paned windows overlooking the valley. The reflection was so brilliant it hurt his vision to contemplate it for more than a few moments. He rested his eyes again and briefly considered what he

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could promise her in return.

Unable to think of anything new, he turned his thoughts once more to himself.

Arriving home, Peter was greeted by a vigorous piano sonata and a vibrant hum that rose and fell in perfect time with the music. He moved toward the pleasing medley, winding his way through the more or less empty mansion to the large sunny parlor in back.

Moving toward her he smelled the sweet fragrance of her long white-blond hair, brightened and warmed by the sunlight streaming in through the open windows beside her.

His shadow gave him away and she turned and greeted him with an appealing smile. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, her sapphire eyes lively.

He casually rested a hand on her shoulder, a simple expression of admiration for her talent. "That was wonderful. It's like this entire house comes alive when you play."

She turned a cheek to his hand and closed her eyes. He waited a moment before easing his hand away. He knew better than to touch her, to encourage her, yet somehow he hadn't kept himself in check.

She stood and stretched, a long and luxuriant reach, tanned shoulder blades showing through her flowery sundress. He took her seat and folded his hands together over one knee, turning his attention to the windows and expansive view of the verdant hills and distant Stanford campus. He spied the crown of Hoover Tower poking through the far-off treetops, and recalled his first encounter with this beautiful young woman, three weeks ago.

He'd had the honor of giving the commencement speech to the Stanford graduating class. At the reception that followed, she introduced herself. Her name was Ivy, and he was charmed at once by her easy comfort with him. It usually went one way or another. Many

were so impressed or intimidated by his reputation and wealth that it was impossible to get past all of that and into comfortable and interesting conversation. But on rare occasions, such as this one, new introductions were a pleasure, the meeting of two vigorous minds.

He took an instant liking to her when she described the speech and language interface she was developing for the At Hand, whose intuitive design, she all but gushed, had inspired her to begin the project in the first place. That touched him. He asked her where she saw the program eventually going, and she said she wasn't sure. She had no agenda for the summer, and had halfheartedly committed to a cross-country road trip with friends for lack of a more tempting course. Feeling a sudden compulsion to help, he offered her the opportunity to continue developing the speech and language component at his home office. She arrived the next day with a duffel bag, some books and clothes, a few Zip disks, and a backpack.

Peter regularly had houseguests. Most were students who, like Ivy, had taken him up on the generous offer to use his thoroughly equipped computer lab. While he never gave it much thought, he supposed his goodwill had something to do with being raised in an orphanage. Except for his work and his lover, Kate, when she was in town, his life was surprisingly spare. Though he needed a fair share of quiet time to think, he didn't enjoy being alone, and having bright young minds around kept things interesting. In exchange for the agreeable feeling of companionship the students added to his life, Peter had helped a number of them get a practical start in the business. In return for his hospitality, he asked only that they pick up after themselves and respect his private things. He allowed them to come and go for as long as they liked, and his doors were never locked. He left it to Alice, his live-in maid and cook, to stay on top of the various artists-in-residence.

It was Alice who now appeared in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. She was a small, voluble

Spanish woman who wore her black hair pulled into a tight bun. She graced him with an affectionate smile.

“Good evening, Mr. Petey.” She turned to Ivy. “I finished preparing your meat and spices. You better start cooking if you want the flavor best.”

Ivy thanked Alice, then took Peter’s hands in her own. “I’m making you a special Mediterranean dish tonight. A little something for letting me crash out here with you.”

“Great,” Peter said. His voice sounded strange to him as he casually withdrew his hands and picked up some notes Ivy had been working on. He didn’t have to look up to sense Alice’s eyes on him. He knew what she was thinking. And he was thinking the same thing. It had happened a few times in the past, when his hospitality would take an unexpected, and occasionally unpleasant, turn. Once, a couple of young men had taken off with some computer equipment and a platinum pocket watch Kate had given him. And then there were the women.

If he’d learned anything from his experience with women guests, it was that it was best to keep his interest focused on their work, not them. But with any highly artistic person, the two were often difficult to separate. He glanced at diagrams and charts, yet didn’t really see any of them. “Hey, it looks like your research is really coming along.”

“Sure is,” Ivy said with evident pride. She gave his hand a playful tug. “Come on. I’ll give you a quick demo of the latest module before we eat dinner.”

As she led him out of the parlor, Peter met Alice’s concerned eyes. She was all too familiar with the course the woman’s stay was taking. He countered with an expression that he hoped passed for utter helplessness, and followed Ivy’s lead just the same.

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Staring at himself in the bathroom mirror, Matthew

blew a long sigh. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt like this, both exhausted and keyed up at the same time. Squeezing some toothpaste onto his toothbrush, he observed his wife in the reflection, through the partially open doorway. He turned on the faucet and continued to watch her as he brushed his teeth. She was seated at her vanity and taking in her own reflection, about to begin her nightly ritual.

The procedure held an ironic fascination for him—but only at moments such as this one, when he could behold the process unnoticed. What fascinated him most was the way she performed the entire routine without ever once looking directly at her hands. He wondered if that was what continued to draw his curiosity. The possibility of perhaps one day catching her looking at what she was doing. Really seeing. And maybe catching him as he caught her. Would it change anything? He couldn't say, either way. Which was the problem. Neither he nor she ever spoke about it. So he just kept watching and waiting, wondering each time if it would ever change. Tonight was no different.

Observing the back of her head, with its coppery hair piled neatly on top, he could tell by its tilt that she was inspecting her face. The faint, fine lines around her eyes, her lips. At the same time, he watched her hands go to work. Removing first one glove, then the other. Her right hand reaching for the crystal lotion dispenser. Pressing out a copious portion of the creamy substance. Drawing both hands together, methodically working the lotion between them. Firmly, assuredly. Until the drying friction slowed them down. And now the finish. Sliding open the top vanity drawer to retrieve a fresh set. White silk. Exclusively tailored to her specification. The left momentarily at odds with the right. Until she had them on, everything in place, creating the illusion once more. A perfect pair of hands.

But a gloved pair, nevertheless. Matthew was unable

to see past that fact. How could he, when it was so apparent? He snapped off the bathroom light.

Greta had climbed into bed, the sheet and blanket folded just below her breasts. “Well, well. Your business pajamas. I love those on you.” They were Matthew’s favorite pair. Light blue, pinpoint oxford cloth, the same material he preferred for his tailored shirts.

Matthew smiled uncertainly, unsure of her sincerity. Maybe it was just more of the same guilt, an unflattering reminder of his “all business” nature, both in and out of bed. He settled on top of the blanket, sealing her in on her side. He clamped his hands behind his head and stared at the ceiling, his mind working over the possibilities of tomorrow’s meeting.

Greta turned on her side. “Darling, don’t keep thinking about it. Try to relax.” She stretched over him to turn off his bedside lamp, her breasts grazing his chin, then settled herself gently on his chest.

The valley shone into the room brightly through the row of windows beside the bed. Millions of orange and yellow dots of light, far in the distance, shimmering in the unusually balmy late spring night. They lay there in silence for a while.

Her voice was quiet when she finally spoke. “Matthew, I’ve been thinking. About what you do. How involved in it you are. And everyone else but me, it seems like. It’s everywhere I turn. I just feel so left out.”

For Christ’s sake, he wasn’t up for this conversation again. Especially not tonight.

“Greta—”

But before he could protest, she got the rest out. And what she had to say surprised him.

“Would you mind if I sit down with your computer tomorrow? Just for a bit. To try to write a letter or something?”

He was positively relieved. “Of course not. That would be fine. I’m happy to hear it. It’s easy. Just click on the little Via roadway logo in the left corner to get

started. Like I showed you that time, when I first brought it home. It's all there. The word processor. And the Web. Just be careful not to throw away any of my things. Better yet, why don't you create a folder for yourself. Call it Greta's Things or whatever you like. Your own little storage space."

"I don't know. You know I'm all thumbs with this computer stuff. I mean, I know its not going to bite me or anything. That it's just like you always say, an appliance."

"Just like I always say."

"Yes. Well, I'm sorry, Matthew, for not being more curious sooner. I guess I was always so interested in all the other things in our life that I never really paid attention to what you're so interested in."

"I've never expected you to become a nerd, darling. But I have to admit I'm pleased to hear this. It's never too late to learn, to try new things."

"No time like the present, and all that."

"You got it. So just do it, Gret."

She shook her head and laughed at her own anxiety. "You're right of course, Matthew. So all right already. I've waited long enough. I'll try, then. I'll learn."

"You do that." He kissed the top of her head.

"Now I'm excited. Thank you, darling."

She kissed his neck, eased her gloved hand down his torso. He sighed through his nostrils and closed his eyes.

But it was no use. He remained unresponsive.

He turned his head to look out at the shining valley, and patted her hand.

"Let's go to sleep."

Seated atop a stool at the console range, Peter watched with mild amusement as Ivy bustled about the kitchen. She left a mess in her wake, yet had the meal under control. A pot of fragrant lamb stew bubbled lazily on the

stove. In the oven, two small pizzas baked away.

He'd taken pleasure in watching her roll out the dough and work it into small rounds. She'd topped each with an assortment of fresh vegetables and spices. He appreciated how she would suddenly stop talking to concentrate on the recipe, then pick up again where they'd left off. Although she had been his guest for nearly a month, this was the first opportunity he'd had to really get to know her.

Misunderstandings with female guests in the past cautioned him from getting too close, but she was so interesting, and her company was a welcome relief from the residual distress he'd felt after his afternoon with Matthew Locke. And from thinking too much about tomorrow's board meeting, which at the moment seemed a million miles away.

She stirred the stew with a wooden spoon, drawing out a taste to test the flavor. She frowned.

"Not quite there." She pointed the spoon at a row of spices out of her reach. "More cayenne."

He grabbed a small jar filled with yellow powder.

"That's curry. Next one over. Right."

He handed her the jar, watched her sprinkle a good measure of the spice into the stew. Her lively dinner preparations brought a rosiness to her face that, with her white-blond hair, made her look as though she'd spent the day at the beach. She wore tattered, oversize jeans cinched at the waist with a rainbow-pattern bandanna, an oversize white dress shirt with no bra. When he realized he was staring he thought of something to say.

"So you do this often? Cook up gourmet meals after a day of coding?"

That amused her. "Yeah, right. You kidding? I've spent the last semester holed up in a dorm room with a hot plate and instant noodles."

"You make it look so easy, like second nature."

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's simple. You just follow the directions. I guess I'm just a quick study." She

held his gaze until a bell chimed. “Pizza’s done.” She grinned with evident pleasure, breaking their link.

Peter felt an irregular but not unpleasant stirring in his chest. Careful, he warned himself, watching as she slipped on an oven mitt and bent to retrieve the appetizer. He knew he should look away, yet he was unable to. Her baggy shirt shifted at the collar. Something about her neck caught his eye, but before he could give it a second thought his attention was drawn elsewhere. Her breasts, he observed, while not large, were ample enough to illustrate gravity. Reaching inside the oven she made a quick inhaling sound as a small burst of heated air struck her face and set dancing a few stray wisps of her fine hair. An instant later a delectable aroma wafted his way. He swallowed.

She shifted to one side, and he glimpsed her neck once more—and his throat tightened. Rising with the tray in one hand, she used the other to brush her hair out of her face, giving Peter the opportunity to fully see, just for an instant, the inside collar of her shirt.

Which wasn’t her loose shirt at all, but his. He knew his own name when he saw it. And that’s what he’d spied on her collar. No, his collar. The small identification label, put there by the dry cleaner, bearing his name. His heart stirred anew, not so agreeably this time.

Setting down the hot tray, Ivy smiled at him. Then frowned.

“What is it?”

He was momentarily dumbfounded. He tried to form a response, but managed to get out only a small nervous laugh.

She looked genuinely worried. Not guilty. Or even remotely aware of what he had seen or might be thinking.

He lifted a hand, made an exasperated wave. “Wow, sorry. I just zoned out there for a second. It’s work, I guess. Big board meeting tomorrow. Change in the air. That sort of thing. I’m fine. Sorry.”

She looked at him funny and blew a wisp of hair away from her brow, then shrugged it off.

“So where’s your cutter thing. For the pizza.”

“That drawer.” He pointed, and she turned around.

His finger froze in place when he noticed the jeans, with their familiar rips where his own knees had over time worn through the denim. They were his. She was wearing his pants, too. His heart did another flip-flop.

She returned to the counter with the pizza cutter in one hand. She looked at his pointing finger.

“Um, I got it.” She wagged the circular knife at him.

He wondered if she’d gone through his closet and helped herself to anything else. He watched her cut the pizzas into quarters. Her feet were bare. She wore no jewelry, no wristwatch. He came up with a possible explanation: After the demo of her software that she’d given him earlier, she’d showered and had no doubt discovered she’d run out of clean clothes. She’d probably asked Alice if she could borrow some of his old things until she had a chance to launder her own clothes. She had, he reminded himself, arrived with very few personal effects, only enough to fit into a large duffel bag. Simple as that.

“Here.” She slid a plate across the butcher block counter. “Eat.”

It was probably nothing, he decided. He’d overreacted. Hell, if he still found himself wondering about it later, he would just ask her. It was no big deal. Still, it had given him a small scare . . . a normal response when he considered his history with women guests, he supposed. They just never worked out. The temptation to become more than acquaintances always seemed to get in the way. And while he and Kate had no hard rules in their relationship, they had made a deal of sorts: that if either had an affair, they would tell the other. So far, neither had had anything to say on the subject. He was pretty sure he wanted to keep it that way. Right now, he was starving.

He picked up his pizza and took a bite. "Delicious. I can't believe you don't do this all the time."

She stopped chewing. "I could," she said brightly, and a moment later she blushed, as though she'd said something to embarrass herself. "I mean, eat like this every night. But who has the time, right?"

Peter nodded and picked up another slice. He was thirsty.

"Wine. That's what we need."

"Red will go great with the stew," she suggested.

"Red it is." He got up and opened a nearby cabinet, revealing a floor-to-ceiling wine rack. His fingertips lingered on a particular reserve. He deliberated for a moment, considered tomorrow's board meeting. Then he selected a younger, less consequential vintage.

He opened the bottle and filled two glasses. He handed one to her, and for an awkward moment they stood there, unsure what to say next.

Ivy lifted her glass. "To new friends."

"New friends." He put a small emphasis on the last. They clinked their glasses, and Peter looked into his wine to avoid her eyes.

She savored the wine's good flavor for a moment, then set her glass down. "Let's eat." She filled two bowls with stew, he sliced a crusty loaf of bread, and they went into the dining room with the meal. He started to go back for the wine.

She waved a hand at him. "Sit. I'll get it."

When she returned he noticed she'd topped off her glass.

They ate in silence for a while, both pleased with the delicious stew. Eventually, they picked up their earlier conversation.

"So what made you choose Stanford?" he said.

"This course they have. VTSS, for Values, Technology, Science, and Society."

"I've never heard of it."

“It’s been around for a while.” She set down her fork. “It’s an interesting mix.”

“Sounds like it. What do you like best about it?”

“The overlap, definitely. How one affects and impacts the other, and so on. The kinds of interactions you must think about all the time.”

“Me?”

She snorted. “Sure, you. I mean, come on. Your work, your computers. They’re founded in science and technology, right? And haven’t they affected our society? Changed our values?” Her eyes glimmered with emotion. “You’ve democratized computing for the masses. Put it into the hands of the people. Given them a choice, an alternative to business as usual. I mean, consider the alternative. The only choice would be Future Processing—equipped clones running PCSoft’s ugly operating system. And imagine if those rumors always floating around ever came true. If the two merged? Talk about world domination. It’s scary to think what it would be like if you didn’t exist. People wouldn’t be able to choose for themselves. But thanks to you, they can. No more Big Brother, brother.” She gave an appreciative nod of her head, then went back to her meal. “Anyway, that’s what the course was about. I dropped it.”

Peter sat with his fork hovering over his plate, ignoring this last, still absorbing everything she had said. He was speechless, yet she didn’t seem to notice. He set down his fork and refilled their glasses. He sipped his wine and studied her over the rim of his glass, as though he were seeing her for the first time. He felt the beginnings of an agreeable emotion crystallize. Which, in turn, raised a warning flag. Thin ice ahead if he didn’t watch himself. Friends, he thought, silently repeating their toast. Just friends.

“Did you hear me?”

He’d lost track of what they had been talking about. “Where were we?”

“I said, that’s what the course *was* about. I dropped

it.”

“But you sound like an expert on the subject. Why the change of heart?”

She gave a nonchalant shake of her head. “Music. Voice. This speech stuff. That’s what I told you when I first met you. Remember?”

In fact, he did not remember. Moreover, it suddenly occurred to him that he didn’t even know her last name. She’d been staying in his home for the last few weeks, yet he only knew her as Ivy. He worried sometimes about how he could completely miss certain points, obvious things others would probably pick up on at once. Had it affected his business sense? In the back of his mind, he wondered.

“I’m sorry. I don’t remember, actually. Your last name, either. Did you even say?”

“My God, you’re right.” She finished off her wine. “I see what you’re getting at.”

“You do?”

“Sure. You’re thinking, how could I ask if you remember that I dropped that course to get into this linguistics programming stuff when you don’t even know my last name. I mean, it’s not like we’re old friends. Like you are all up on my life or whatever.”

He went to take another sip of wine . . . but then decided to hold off a bit.

“Anyway, it’s Green. Ivy Green. Can you stand it?”

“It’s certainly, ah, earthy.”

“Very funny. But you’re not completely off. I mean, the only green I think Rick and Jeannette had in mind when they named me was reefer.”

He burst out laughing. “Why’s that? And how come you don’t call them Mom and Dad?”

“Oh, please. To hear them tell it? I’m like this post-sixties-rehash baby. The latter part of the ‘Give-Peace-a-Chance-If-It-Feels-Good-Just-Do-It’ set. They met at Woodstock, both of them really young. No kidding. A few years later, they just did it, made me, at some rock

reunion or something. How it felt, good or not, I never asked.” She paused for a moment when she saw Peter’s amused reaction.

“Quit laughing,” she said, laughing herself at the absurdity of her story. He apologized and made a valiant attempt to wipe the smile from his face. “Anyway, they moved to California. Lived at the corner of Haight and Ashbury for a few years. Later, my dad ‘accidentally’—his term, I swear—started his own herbal tea company. Yes, it’s the brand you’ve got in your kitchen cabinet. They moved to Mill Valley. That’s where I grew up, with parents who told me to call them by their first names, so that our household would always be on equal footing. Or some shit like that.”

“Sorry. I’m not laughing at any of it. Honest. It’s just the way you tell it. It sounds very funny.”

“Yeah, well. No problem. I’m still amused by them, to tell you the truth.” Yet she didn’t look amused, Peter thought, noticing the way her lips pursed, almost a pout. “Anyway,” she said, blowing out a long stream of wind. “I think I’m a little smashed. Pardon me for a second.” She excused herself from the table.

He hoped he hadn’t offended her. Anyway, he wasn’t going to worry about it. Nor was he worried anymore about the fact that she’d borrowed his clothes. Rising from the table, he realized that Ivy Green presented no real threat. If anything, the opposite was true, as her mention of the late sixties aroused his longing for Kate.

He strolled to the adjoining living room and put on one of her CDs, then returned to the dining-room table and poured himself a little more wine. He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes and let Kate’s soft and folksy voice carry him away.

Peter had met the vocalist at a Sierra Club luncheon thrown in his honor, after Via had donated a batch of computers to the environmental organization. Kate McGregor, the “softly outspoken” folk rock star, was the keynote speaker. He’d found it difficult to follow

her speech, but not because she didn't have anything interesting to say. He caught himself trying to catch her hazel eyes when she would glance in his direction, and he was mesmerized by the way she occasionally pushed back her brown hair with its premature streaks of silver.

By the end of her impassioned twenty-minute oration, Kate McGreggor had captured Peter's heart like no woman ever had. Words to describe her flooded his mind. Intelligent . . . pure . . . true. And uncommonly attractive. What you see is what you get, he surmised. After lunch had finished up, she sang. Her voice was enchanting and perfect, and he knew he had to meet her. He introduced himself. At first she seemed reticent to stray beyond courteous chitchat. He guessed that her opinion of him was perhaps influenced by his participation in an industry notorious for its less than admirable track record with the environment. And maybe the eight-year difference in their age had something to do with it too. He didn't care. And when he invited her to visit Via the next time she was in the San Francisco area, she hesitated. He persisted, and eventually she relented. Arriving the following month, she surprised him with a special gift. A bottle of wine from her parents' obscure Oregon vineyard, where she'd grown up. He was touched by her thoughtfulness, and he made her promise to be the one to share it with him when the company turned ten. After a long day of satisfying conversation, their attraction for each other was evident. And remained so, to this day. They were two people comfortable with themselves and each other, despite the huge contrast in their celebrity status. Kate maintained her home in Los Angeles, where she was constantly at work on her music or involved in various causes that benefited from her renown. She stayed with Peter between recordings and projects, sometimes for weeks at a time. Her independence meshed perfectly with his own, creating a foundation for what had become a lasting relationship that was coming up on seven years.

The distance imposed by their careers generated a constant longing that kept their affection fresh. At times it was difficult to be so far apart, and he wished they could be together more often. Especially tonight, as his thoughts returned to tomorrow's board meeting.

His afternoon altercation with Matthew Locke flared in his mind's eye. It was ridiculous. And after tomorrow, it would all be taken care of. He was sure of it. Or as sure as he could be, in light of his conflicting feelings of betrayal and impending loss. And stupidity, he grudgingly admitted to himself. For not having realized sooner that things were not really as they appeared. With a sudden start, he wondered: Was he losing his touch? His acute perception and attention to detail, for reading complicated situations, reading others? He opened his eyes.

Ivy sat across from him sipping a cup of coffee, staring at him coolly. Had she made a pot? He hadn't heard her in the kitchen. He'd obviously nodded off after she'd excused herself. How long had he been snoozing here, with her watching? It was time to sober up.

"I could use some of that." He went into the kitchen and came back with a steaming cup. Unable to think of anything else to talk about, he realized how tired he was. He thanked her again for the wonderful meal. She assured him it was no problem, and they sat there quietly sipping their coffee, Kate McGreggor's music drifting in from the adjacent room. Eventually Ivy spoke.

"So, I've been wondering. Is it true?"

"What's that?"

She waved her spoon vaguely in the direction of the other room.

"That you two are, like, totally lovers."

"True, very."

She nodded and started playing with an open packet of Equal. "In everything I read, *Vanity Fair*, *People*, they say you'll probably get married. To her, I mean."

He knew the right thing to do would be to agree

with the speculation. Yet at the same time he hated to bend the truth. People in business had called him many things, but none could ever say Peter Jones was a liar. It simply wasn't his way. So he answered honestly.

"I don't know. It's a tough question to answer. We're both super-busy people. She's always recording or involved in things. And I've got Via."

On saying his company's name, his voice suddenly sounded funny. Not a crack, nor a tremble. Just a faint rise that lifted his curiosity. What he said about himself and Kate was true, absolutely true. But that wasn't what had gotten the small rise out of him. No, it was Via, he realized with concern. But that was true, too. He did have Via. It was his. At heart, anyway. And after tomorrow, it would be all his once more. Yet for some reason that he didn't understand he felt an uncomfortable tightness in his chest, a small bloom of dread.

And what Ivy was doing with the little blue Equal packet didn't help him feel any better, either. She'd dumped the sweetener onto the dark mahogany table and was now dragging the straight edge of the packet through the small white pile of grains, cutting out line after line of the substance, as though sharpening her technique for the real stuff.

The act had an unsettling effect on his changed mood. He'd had enough conversation for one night. He needed some sleep. Tomorrow was a big day. Wrap it up, he told himself.

"So, yeah. Marriage is a real possibility." There, he'd told a small white lie. In light of the way Ivy's own mood had shifted, it was the right thing to do. "Well, it's late."

This got through to her. A sudden look of embarrassment crossed her face when she realized what she'd done with the packet of artificial sweetener. She leaned forward and blew away the lines, then casually brushed up any remaining traces of the substance with her fingertips and briefly touched them to her lips. Her saw

her tongue dart out, and he looked away. This small, unselfconscious act somehow challenged his estimate of her, that she posed no threat. Or did she?

She apologized with a laugh and he said it was nothing, unable to look at her. He picked up his coffee cup and moved into the kitchen.

She came in behind him, carrying their empty wine-glasses. They steadily clinked together in her hand, a fragile ringing sound as though she were trembling, yet she didn't seem to notice. "How about some more wine?"

He rested his hand over the glasses, silencing them. "I've had enough. And I've got to get some sleep now. Thank you again."

As he moved to go, she moved too, gamely narrowing the already small space between them.

"Listen." He shoved his hands in his back pockets. "We can't. Please."

For a moment she didn't move as she weighed his sincerity; then all at once her shoulders slumped and she pressed herself against the doorjamb, giving him room to pass.

Careful not to brush into her he slipped by and moved to the living room to turn off the stereo. He hesitated, and decided to leave it on, allowing Kate's sonorous voice to prevail a while longer. He loaded the multidisc tray with four more of her CDs and pressed the random button. On his way upstairs he said nothing when he passed the kitchen, where Ivy was busy loading the dishwasher.

Inside his bedroom, he closed the door, tossed his clothes on the floor, and dropped down onto his futon. He rolled to one side and lit the single candle he kept there for moments when he felt like this. He wouldn't go so far as to say he practiced yoga, or that he meditated, but both had some influence on the relaxation technique Kate had shown him not long after they'd met.

He set the candle at the foot of the futon and bunched

up a pile of pillows behind him. He settled back and slowed his breathing in an effort to get his busy mind to do the same. Before long his eyelids fluttered, and the first falling sensation of sleep engulfed him.

But not for long. He started at the sound of her foot-falls.

Ivy stood at the edge of the futon, between him and the candle, illuminated from behind. The outline of her willowy body showed through her sheer kimono, her blond hair encircled by a glowing halo of golden candlelight. Her voice was a whisper.

“Peter, I want to be with you.”

He remained as he was, lying back, naked, unable to move or speak. He considered explaining to her the few close calls he had had with other guests. How they had ended in tears for the young women. How in all their years together, he had never been unfaithful to Kate. How in all their years together, Via had never been unfaithful to him, and how it was the same thing. He thought this only because he wanted her, right now. He had never felt this way before, with any of the other women. This close to the brink. Something had changed. And if he could cross over like this, could Via? Would its decision makers decide tomorrow to break their faithfulness to him? He was suddenly so mixed up.

But he voiced none of these things to Ivy. Instead, he heard his own voice in his head, already forming an excuse: *I had a lot to drink . . . it was the wine*. He was not drunk, yet he was already entertaining a defense for something that had not happened. Not yet. Nor did it have to happen.

She knelt before him, and in the dim light he noticed two powdery white rings encircling her nostrils. When she spoke again her voice was deeper, more forceful.

“Peter, it’s like you’ve empowered me. Given me this whole new outlook and purpose. Like it’s my future. Let me share this good feeling. Just that. That’s all.”

Her words had a breaking effect on him. He was both

distressed and enlivened by her sentiment. He looked away. And in that instant he acknowledged his greatest fear, of losing everything so close to him. Now. Tomorrow. Beyond.

He reached out his hand and touched her neck, traced his fingertips across her smooth brow. He touched her lips and her breath hitched.

She moved over him.

They kissed.

Afterward, he felt a delirious sense of relief. As if it had all been a bizarre dream. One he was just waking from. He raised his head from the mat, and for a brief, wanting moment he saw Kate resting lightly on top of him.

Ivy stirred and lifted her head from his chest to look at him with a contented smile.

His mind collapsed. He couldn't catch his breath or move. He was momentarily frozen in place, racked by an unpleasant tightening in his stomach, remorse languidly bleeding into his heart. He wanted to turn back the clock, take back what they had done. Wanted tonight to be over. Tomorrow over. Both erased, another chance.

She sensed his unease but made no attempt to console him, and for that he was grateful. And she was grateful too, but not in the same way.

"Thank you," she whispered, then unsteadily rose to her feet and collected her kimono. She lifted a nearby comforter off the floor and dragged it over his naked torso. Then she blew out the candle and disappeared.

Unable to close his eyes, Peter lay there for hours, staring at nothing.