

>CHAPTER 11

Greta's memory of what exactly happened the other night was vague.

She knew a few things for certain. Or as close to certain as possible. That her behavior with Gregor had been questionable. That she'd made some sort of promise to him, the specifics of which she couldn't entirely recall. That she'd emerged from the guest room hours later with her black silk dress draped over her shoulder, and that Matthew hadn't even noticed because he was still downstairs working. And that she'd received a package from Gregor, just as he had promised she would. She hadn't mustered up the courage to open it yet. Or do much of anything since.

The next morning she'd awakened briefly to Matthew's activity, in from his jog and then his shower. She supposed now that she was still drunk at the time, pretending to be asleep as he dressed and packed for his trip to New York. She dimly recalled waiting for his clean aftershave smell to come close, a good-bye

kiss on the cheek. Either he'd skipped it or she'd fallen back asleep, because the next thing she knew it was late morning, and he was long gone.

At noon she'd put on a robe and ventured downstairs. She remembered eating a cold leftover squab at the kitchen window, then returning to the bedroom with a bottle of wine, which she polished off through the afternoon, alternately crying and drifting off to sleep. She couldn't bring herself to go into the guest room and contact Gregor. She could only cry and drink and doze. Later that evening she returned to the kitchen. She found frozen lasagna in the freezer. She washed down three Tylenols as she waited on the microwave, promising herself that tomorrow morning she would get it together, clean up, no more wine, start anew. Retreating once more to her bed, she pulled the shades and climbed under the covers.

Monday morning rolled around but she hadn't felt like getting up. Sometime in the early afternoon Dolores, the housekeeper, had knocked gently on the bedroom door to check on her and give her a FedEx package. She'd asked Dolores to leave the package at the foot of the bed, where it still sat. She said not to bother making anything for dinner, and gave the housekeeper permission to leave early if she felt like it.

Anguish, mental exhaustion, nausea, and headache kept her in bed until now, early Monday evening. Matthew was due back tomorrow afternoon, and she would have to pull herself together by then. And Gregor? What was she supposed to do about him? She knew now that she was genuinely attracted to him, yet at the same time she felt horrible, torn between her commitment to a husband who no longer needed her, and a man she knew only by his online persona. And don't forget the other, she guiltily reminded herself. The photo. The image was burned in her memory, where it stirred up an endless stream of vivid fantasies.

When was the last time she'd fantasized about Mat-

thew? She couldn't remember. Yes, she loved him. And she couldn't help but wonder if her unusual attraction to Gregor was simply a reaction to Matthew's rejection. Maybe. And that was what hurt the most, his rejection. That she'd really lost him.

And thinking this, it was impossible not to acknowledge her own, more personal loss. She moaned at the irony of it, of having lost the upper hand that had originally drawn Matthew to her in the first place. God, so many years of suffering. And not just after the accident. Even beforehand things had been less than perfect. Particularly where his unconventional sexual tastes were concerned, how he preferred mutual masturbation to intercourse, which he always complained was too tiring.

She lay there trying to count how many emotional ups and downs she'd pulled him through over the years. When his self-confidence would flag over this marketing campaign or that, or when he'd had such a hard time deciding whether he should make the move to Via. But no more. He came to her no more. Not for bolstering his ego, or even for his singular style of sex.

And that was the crux of it, wasn't it? In the last twenty-four hours she finally admitted it to herself, the reason. The accident. That was when their break had happened. She heard his voice in her head, so many promises, new beginnings, a change that would turn everything for the better. After the accident. After they moved here. After his plan was under way. After last week's introduction of the new computer. After, after, always after. How many times he'd promised it would all begin soon, Greta, soon.

Now what? she wondered. She would have to face Gregor eventually. If not in person—never that—then with an E-mail message. Yes, that was what she would do. She would write him. Apologize for the other night. She wasn't sure if she had anything to apologize for, but she would do it anyway. And she would thank him for

his kindness and then get his address to return whatever it was he'd sent her.

To meet him in person wasn't an option. Not because she was considering committing adultery, but because she couldn't bear the heartbreak of feeling more for him than the thrill she already felt. Of falling in love, and then losing him the way she'd lost Matthew. All because of her deformity.

The thought of losing touch with Gregor, even as an acquaintance, made her heart ache. Her experience with the At Hand PC had changed her life. She'd originally hoped learning how to use the computer would bring Matthew closer. But the opposite had happened. It was as though he'd found a surrogate companion for her, something to keep her entertained without bothering him. Her plan had backfired on her, and perhaps the best thing would be to stop using the computer after she sent Gregor her good-bye message.

She wiped her eyes and warily climbed out of bed. She might as well do it now. But first she would clean up. She'd gone all day without a drink and was feeling somewhat better, though her head still hurt a little. She eased into the shower and let the hot jets wash away her aches and pains. Yes, saying good-bye to Gregor was the right thing to do. And enough with the masquerading too, she decided while creaming her bare hands with lotion. For the first time since the accident she stood up from her vanity without the protection of a fresh pair of gloves.

She slipped on a clean robe, picked up Gregor's box, and set it at the top of the stairs for a moment while she went to the kitchen to select a bottle of wine and a glass. Just one glass, she vowed, to help ease her nerves. She struggled with the opener for a moment, then found it was much easier this way than with the gloves. Back upstairs she went to the guest room and set down her glass and the bottle, then returned for Gregor's box and stuck it in the clothes closet. Tomorrow morning she

would call FedEx to pick it up.

She sat down to her At Hand PC Plus, connected to World Online, ignored Gregor's six new E-mail messages in her in-box, and began composing her farewell letter.

She never finished it. He was there, online, waiting for her. He bombarded her with a stream of apologies and questions, and she listened, watching line after line scroll by, her heart beating fast, challenging her resolution to end her affair with him . . . if that's what it was.

Eventually he got to the box, and asked if she'd opened it.

"I can't, Gregor. I'm sending it back."

"Greta, no. Wait. Please, listen."

"No, Gregor. I can't. I may have gone too far already. I can't even remember." She eyed her wineglass and decided to leave it where it was. It had gotten her into too much trouble already.

"But Greta, we had a deal."

She apologized again, but he persisted.

"Greta, I want you to see me again, now."

She typed with trembling hands, recalling the photo of his naked torso. "No, Gregor. We can't. I can't."

"Just listen. See the little eye icon in the corner of your Chat window? That's the 'live view' feature. Click it."

"No."

"Yes, Greta. Just do it. I'm presentable. I swear."

Her resolve wavered. She took a sip of wine, just a small taste. Maybe seeing him would make it easier to stop seeing him, she rationalized.

She clicked the eye icon.

And there he was, framed in a small window in the corner of the screen. The resolution was a little blurry, and she leaned in for a closer look.

"Greta?"

She jumped in her chair. He had said her name. Not by typing, but with his voice.

She typed: "Your voice, I can hear you."

"Yes," he said, nodding on the screen. Her first impression surprised her. He was not quite as attractive as she'd pictured. His face was rather longish, with mussed dark hair hanging nearly to his eyebrows. Plus, he had one of those raffish goatees, which she wasn't fond of. He cocked his head to one side.

"Hello, Greta."

"So there you are," she typed. He smiled, and her impression changed a little. He looked so young and earnest, concerned for her.

"Now will you open the box?"

"It's one of whatever you've got there, isn't it? So that you can see me, too?" She glanced at her left hand on the keyboard.

"Yes. Will you?"

She hesitated. "You won't like what you see."

"I bet I will."

"I bet you won't. I'll prove it." She steeled herself against a sudden wave of sadness, tears building in her eyes. But she knew she had to do it, show him her terrible flaw. "Tell me what to do."

She retrieved the box from the closet and set it on the desk, then followed his every instruction. She connected the small egg-shaped camera to the At Hand PC Plus's rear port, set it beside the unit so that its lens was pointing directly at her. He told her to run the installer program on the included CD, and she did. He said she would have to restart her computer before the device would work.

"Come right back," he said, and she promised she would. Without giving it any thought she refilled her glass while she waited for the computer to restart. She launched World Online, and accepted Gregor's invitation to join him in a private chat. A moment later he appeared on her screen again. And so did she, in her own small window, right below his. She leaned close to

the screen to see herself and realized that she couldn't look directly into her own eyes. That it was impossible, because the camera was off to one side, rather than in the center of the screen.

"Greta, you're lovely," Gregor said softly. "Look this way, into the camera." She turned her head, stared into the tiny lens. She smiled nervously and covered her face in embarrassment.

"Say something for me, Greta. Please."

"Gregor."

"Your voice is lovely." He flashed his beguiling smile and she shook her head.

"So you see, I'm an old woman." She laughed.

"Hardly, Gret. You're lovely. Really. Would you move back a little so I can see more of you?"

She glanced at her left hand. "Yes." She laced the fingers of her left hand around the bowl of her glass and scooted back in her chair a little, providing him a fuller view. She slowly raised the glass to her lips, sipped her wine, watching her own actions in the little screen, waiting for his reaction. Tears began to well in her eyes.

But he didn't seem to notice.

"Lovely," he said.

"Look closer," she said.

His face loomed closer in the window and he squinted his dark eyes.

"Lovely."

"Closer."

"I can't get any closer, Greta."

She let out an exasperated little cry and set down her glass, then flattened her left hand over the breast of her clean light blue robe, fanning out her fingers.

"This, Gregor. Now do you see?" Her hand was trembling.

"Oh, Greta," he said, tilting his head to one side.

She studied his face, watched for signs of revulsion.

"Is that it, Greta? That's what's supposed to be so

ugly to me? Well it's not. See for yourself. Go on, Greta, look. Really look."

She blinked away tears, tried to see herself in a new light, as he was seeing her. But she could see only what she always saw, her flawed left hand as stark and shockingly off-putting as always.

"Greta, don't cry. It's no big deal."

She scoffed. "No big deal?" She stuck her left hand out in front of her, waggled her fingers. "I can't say I agree with you on that one. The missing one I mean, of course."

He was nonplussed. "How did it happen, Greta? Tell me."

"It's too horrible to tell."

He reclined a little in his chair. "Tell me."

It suddenly occurred to her that he really wasn't shocked. She was the one who was upset, not he. He truly didn't seem to care. And if he didn't care, what would that do to her plan to stop "seeing" him? She rubbed her nose with the sleeve of her robe and sipped some more wine.

Then she took a deep breath, looked straight into the tiny orb's lens, and told him everything.

"It was horrible, Gregor. We were aboard a yacht on a windy lagoon. Celebrating a new soda of Matthew's that was a big success. I'd had a lot to drink. At one point I was standing off to one side by myself. Or swaying, is probably the more accurate way to put it. I was poking my ring finger in the little hole of an empty soda can, thinking about how successful Matthew had become. How lucky I was. How we were going to start a family. I was just sort of daydreaming, I guess. It was nighttime. Apparently we were getting ready to sail some more. I remember the flashes, they were taking Matthew's picture. The flashes popped and I closed my eyes for just a second. At the same time the boat rocked underfoot. I lost my balance and reached out for the rail. I couldn't see. The flashbulbs had blinded me for

a second. The can was still dangling on my finger when I finally got hold of the rail to stop myself from falling. I felt rope and metal and the worst pain all at once. I'd grabbed between the support line and the rail. The can was caught in between. I think that was when I started to scream. I was leaning over the rail, trying to free my hand. And then the boat lurched forward, and I went over. My finger didn't come with me. Matthew was standing at the rail screaming hysterically. Someone jumped in. It was dark but somehow I saw the blood anyway, everywhere. I remember reaching out for the white life preserver, the blood so dark against it. Then seeing what had happened. Really seeing. The bright white nub of bone, the rest gone. The next thing I remember I was in the hospital, my left hand bandaged so I couldn't see it. I thought it was just a bad dream. But it was really gone. It's really gone."

Her gaze was fixed on her left hand and where her ring finger used to be. A strange sense of contentment washed over her, and she was surprised by her dry eyes.

She looked up and faced him.

He pressed his fingertips together in a prayerlike position, touched them to his lips, and softly said her name. He moved his face up to his camera and looked her in the eye. His nose was slightly crooked, she thought, as he whispered that he wanted her now more than ever. That she was beautiful and none of it mattered. Not her hand, not her marriage to Matthew, not any of it.

He asked her to slip off her robe.

And she obeyed.

Afterward, they talked. About how long it had been since she'd felt this way, and about Matthew and his obsession with Via. This interested Gregor. He was very curious about Via. He told her he was a big fan of the company, that he had scraped together enough to

upgrade his own At Hand to the Plus. He asked her more about the deal she'd mentioned the other night, and she said she couldn't recall what she'd told him. He pressed for details, saying that as an At Hand enthusiast he was worried about the fate of the company with Peter Jones out of commission. The mention of Peter's name incited her to tell Gregor all about Matthew's secret deal and why it was justified.

And then, as though the mention of his name had summoned him, she heard Matthew calling her name. She looked over her shoulder, aghast.

"Gregor, he's home!" she hastily whispered to her lover. "He wasn't due back until tomorrow. But he's home already. My God, I have to go."

"Greta?" Matthew called again. Judging by his voice he was on his way up the stairs. "Are you up there?"

"In here," she called back, her voice unusually cheery. She turned back to Gregor. "Go now, go. I'll see you tomorrow. Go." Gregor seemed at once amused and shocked. She couldn't tell, and right now it made no difference—Matthew had reached the top of the stairway and was coming down the hall. There wasn't enough time to disconnect the small egg-shaped camera. She looked over her shoulder and smiled at her husband, trying to gauge whether he could see it.

"Just doing some online shopping," she said, quickly twisting around in the seat. She snatched the camera and drew it into her robe, to hide it between her legs. For a freaky instant she watched in horror as her own viewer window followed the camera's every move on its way to its hiding place, the folds of her robe, a flash of pink flesh, pubic hair, then darkness. For a split second she caught Gregor's astonished reaction before she fingered the Power button, making it all go away.

"All done," she said, turning to face Matthew just as he reached the doorway. His suit was rumpled and his tie was loose. He'd picked up his mail from the kitchen table and was casually flipping through it as he checked

in with his wife.

"You're home early," Greta said.

"We finished sooner than expected, so I grabbed the next flight out." He frowned. "Are you feeling all right? You look flushed."

"I'm fine."

His eyes lingered on her for a moment before drifting to the open box on the floor. She held her breath.

He was about to ask her about it, but then he noticed the half-empty bottle of wine and his expression changed, as though it explained her reddened cast.

"Anyway," he said, glancing at the letters in his hand, "I've got a few things to do before bed. See you in a bit." He turned and headed back downstairs.

She extracted the camera from between her legs and unplugged it. She tossed it into the box and hid it in the closet, then moved to the window and looked outside at the dark ground below.

A moment later Matthew's office light switched on. She watched his elongated shadow on the lawn as he moved to his desk.

She let out a gigantic sigh of relief, for once grateful that her husband had chosen his work over her.

William Harrell rose from his reading chair and stretched. He'd spent all evening with the binder Matthew had brought him.

The strategy was perfect. Locke had put together a plan that would let William eventually stick it to his dual nemeses, PCSoft and Future Processing. By the time he retired, Via would be a subsidiary of ICP, earning him new respect and putting him back at the forefront of the industry.

He reflected briefly on how Matthew's attitude had changed since they'd first devised the deal. His once-agreeable unfamiliarity with the business had turned to an edgy self-confidence that bordered on arrogance.

Not inappropriate for a man of his position and stature, William thought, but worth keeping an eye on just the same.

Of more concern were Matthew's obviously adversarial feelings toward Peter Jones. While William had every intention of following through with their deal as planned, he was nevertheless disappointed to hear that Jones was keeping such a low profile. It raised a dim concern in the back of his mind, not unlike his old curiosity about Jones, before the deal was even conceived, when he had kept a casual but envious eye on Via's and the young upstart's every move.

He wondered: Could Jones become a potential threat to the deal if he were to resign from Via and go off on his own? Harrell knew the young inventor had substantial financial reserves. Combine that with the venture capital he could secure by simply picking up the phone, and Jones would easily have the necessary resources to become a serious player again. But William had been in the business long enough to know that reputation went only so far. That even Silicon Valley's wunderkind would face major obstacles at this stage of the game. The biggest obstacle would be Jones himself. He was not an organization man, which was why he'd hired Locke in the first place. And this insight gave William Harrell a certain sense of security, however short-lived.

Shutting off his reading lamp, he was momentarily startled when the phone rang. He glanced at the wall clock. It was nearly midnight, and he answered curtly.

"Billy, did I wake you?" a croaky voice said.

"Who is this?"

"I knew it. Working late as usual. How's the ol' boss?"

"Byron, for Christ's sake. I see you're still an insomniac. How the hell are you? How's Gracie?"

"She's fine. We're great, staying on for an extra while up here in Maine. Sailing's been good. Couple more weeks left."

They chatted briefly and eventually Byron got to the reason he was calling.

"I need to ask a favor, Billy."

"Shoot."

"I'd like you to send me some of my research papers from my office." As the most prominent inventor in ICP's history, Byron was granted lifelong privileges in the company, including an office suite that was cleaned every day in case he should ever decide to drop in and roll up his sleeves again.

"Sure thing. Which documents?" William smiled to himself. The esteemed founder's son was apparently experiencing a flare-up of postretirement blues. Perhaps he just wanted to reacquaint himself with his past accomplishments. He was, after all, getting up there in years. Harrell still considered him his closest business ally and friend. He grabbed a pen and slid his notepad closer.

"On the shelf right behind my desk, there's a fat binder called 'Advanced Intelligent Agent Design.' -"

"Got it. Can I have Barbara send along anything else?"

"No. I mean, I don't want her to send it to me. It's going to a friend."

"Fine. Let's have it." He heard papers shuffling on the other end.

"Here it is: Forty-two Inlet Drive. Camden, Maine. Zero four two eight eight."

"You got it, Byron. I'll have Barbara express it out tomorrow and you'll get it the next day. Oh, wait a second. Who's the addressee?"

"Peter Jones."

William's eyes shot to the framed photograph of his deceased wife, Martha, a serene smile on her lovely face. He blinked a few times and his mouth was dry when he spoke. "You know Peter Jones?"

"Yep, new buddy of mine. I know you know who he is, Billy."

“Of course,” William said, staring at his At Hand PC Plus. He made an effort to sound matter-of-fact. “What’s he up to these days?”

“Oh, a little of this and that. We’re kicking around some ideas.”

“Interesting. Something you can tell me about?”

“Hell, I don’t know. It may be nothing. But it may be something, too. Listen, I don’t want to talk your ear off. It’s late, and you’ve got a real job to go to tomorrow.”

“No, I’m wide awake. I was just reading, actually.”

“Well, if you’ve got a few minutes.”

“I do for you,” William said, seating himself in his desk chair. He reached over and straightened Martha’s photo.

And for the next forty-five minutes he listened, not