

# **PART IV**



## >CHAPTER 17

Strolling into the bank, Greta sneered when she saw the long line of waiting customers. She settled her sunglasses in her hair and sighed loudly as she joined everyone else in line, fishing through her purse for a stray form left over from a previous visit.

Finding none, she decided it didn't matter. She had no idea what kind of form she would have to fill out for the kind of transaction she was here to complete. She looked impatiently at her watch, eager to get the whole business over with.

Glancing around, she spotted the branch manager on his way through the lobby, hands full with paperwork. She managed to catch his eye, and the smartly dressed middle-aged man approached with a smile.

"Julian, how are you?" She touched him lightly on the arm.

"Well, hello, Mrs. Locke. How are you?"

She leaned close to his ear. "I was fine until I walked into this. It's becoming so difficult to bank these days."

Taking advantage of her impairment, she fluttered her left hand in the air. "Oh well."

The manager's eyes widened for the briefest instant, startled by her hand. He'd never noticed it before. Until Gregor, she never would have left the house without her gloves. But all that had changed. And to her surprise, she discovered she could sometimes work her impairment to her advantage. Like now. The manager silently gestured for her to follow him.

She knew what was going through his head. That she was Mrs. Matthew Locke, whose accounts and balances were significant, and so she deserved special treatment. He led her to one of the desks near the front of the bank and asked her to make herself comfortable, then excused himself for a moment. She smiled gratefully and busied herself by cleaning out her purse, picking through discarded chewing gum wrappers and old receipts.

A few minutes later the manager returned and seated himself behind the desk. He gathered up the small pile of litter she'd collected and tossed it into the wastebasket. Claspng his hands atop the desk blotter, he asked how he could help her.

She laid her checkbook on the desk and opened it. "I'd like to transfer some funds into a friend's account."

His expression flattened a little, as though he'd been expecting a large deposit instead of a withdrawal. "Of course. How much would you like to transfer?"

"Fifty thousand."

"Very well." He twisted sideways to access his computer terminal. "And from which account?"

She slid the checkbook across the desk. "This one." She withdrew a Post-it note from her purse and placed it beside the checkbook. "Into this one."

He tapped the keyboard and a moment later the account information appeared. "Oh," he said with a frown. "Mrs. Locke, this is a joint account."

"Right. And I'm the other half of the bargain."

"Correct," he said politely. "However, it appears Mr.

Locke, who is actually the account's primary holder, recently put a limit on the amount you may withdraw."

"That son of a bitch," she said, loudly enough to draw a few stares.

The manager lowered his voice. "I'm afraid you can withdraw only up to five thousand dollars, Mrs. Locke."

She clucked her tongue in frustration. Then she got a bright idea: "Wait. How about I write ten checks?"

He smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid the amount is absolute, versus per transaction. The maximum is set to a per-month schedule."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you may withdraw up to five thousand dollars each month, but no more." He slid the checkbook back to her side of the desk. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Locke. Would you like to transfer that amount, then?"

She tapped her fingernail against her lips. "There's no other way?"

He lifted a finger. "There is." He opened one of the drawers and tore a small slip from a pad and set it down on top of her checkbook. "With this you can withdraw the entire amount."

"Wonderful," she said brightly, without bothering to interpret the title. She started filling in the amount line.

"Yes, but Mrs. Locke, you see here"—he leaned over the desk and traced the bottom line with his pen—"two signatures are required. Yours, and Mr. Locke's, authorizing the amount."

"Oh." She blew out a defeated sigh. "And that's the only way?"

"I'm afraid so. In fact, Mrs. Locke, the bank normally requires that both parties are present for this sort of thing." His tone betrayed a subtle air of unpleasant familiarity with accounts and arrangements such as these. He lowered his voice. "But I'm willing to pardon that policy for you, Mrs. Locke. Just have him sign this, and if you can get back here before three we put the

transaction through today.”

She rose and dropped the form into her purse, thanked the manager, and promised to return before three. To do so, she'd have to drive all the way down to Via to get Matthew to sign the form. But not before she gave him an earful, of course. How dare he put a limit on her spending.

Climbing into her burgundy Mercedes SLK230, she checked the clock. Providing she caught Matthew during lunch, she'd have just enough time to make it back to the bank. Tearing out of the parking lot for the highway, she pictured the reaction her surprise visit would elicit.

She was raring for a good scene.

“That’s a good girl,” Peter said, cradling the tiny Isle in his arms. He checked her bottle. “Almost done.”

Today marked her third month in the world. She had been home with Peter for half that time, deemed healthy enough to leave the hospital. She weighed a scant six and a quarter pounds. Her eyes were curious and alert, the same sapphire color as her mother’s. The satiny whorls of hair growing in were so bright blond they were almost white, just like both her parents’.

Sitting with his baby daughter in his lap, Peter considered everything that had happened since her birth. He reflected on how after the breakup with Via he'd felt like an infant, weak, helpless, so vulnerable to the vast forces of the big world around him. When he'd needed taking care of, Kate had been there for him. Now she was gone, and here he was taking care of Isle, and she, to his surprise and thankfulness, was taking care of him too, like an angel descended, put on this earth to draw him out of his previously selfish ways to focus on the needs of another, one small life totally dependent on him.

Grace padded into the living room to check on father and daughter. She took one of Isle’s wee hands into

her own. “Go ahead, Peter, I’ll finish up with her. Your demanding partner is growling for you.”

“Okay, shrimp, over you go.” He gingerly passed the bundled infant to Grace and planted a light kiss on both their foreheads. “You’re both angels.”

From the back of the house they heard Byron shouting for him. Peter shared a laugh with Grace, then headed back to work.

The Holmeses had been a godsend since Isle’s birth. They came out to California without hesitation, and he set them up comfortably in one of the upstairs guest rooms. Grace was all too happy to help with Isle, while Byron and Peter had resumed their project. Peter hadn’t seen or heard from Ivy, and she refused his calls at the detoxification clinic where she was recovering from substance abuse.

Byron and Peter and their small team worked around the clock on the design they’d settled on. Isle’s arrival had brought with it a second surprise, in the form of Ivy’s ingenious software. Indeed, her ISLE program had provided the missing link, giving Peter and Byron the distinct difference they’d been searching for.

Peter wound his way to the back of the house and Byron eagerly waved him over. He held a large device, the latest version of their as-yet-unnamed invention. It was rough and unfinished, an unattractive box and touch-sensitive liquid-crystal screen, with wires and components dangling from every corner.

“Get a look at this.” Byron turned the device to show the top edge. “John just got the microphone squeezed in. Go on, tell it you want to make a date.”

Peter cleared his throat. “Computer,” he said, saying the keyword the ISLE speech recognizer listened for to carry out spoken commands. “Lunch with Byron on Friday.”

As Peter spoke, a small ear icon flashed at the top of the display to indicate the device was listening.

The screen came to life, revealing a month-view cal-

endar that quickly zoomed in on the upcoming Friday. In the 12:00 slot a line of text appeared: "Byron Holmes/Lunch."

The device's tiny speaker sounded: "*Lunch with Byron Holmes, confirmed. Is there an agenda?*"

Peter gave Byron a quizzical look.

"A little bonus Rick threw in this morning. We figured most people might want to add a description or reminder to dates or meetings."

Peter gave an appreciative nod, then answered the device. "Yes. Discuss computer enhancements and—"

The device interrupted. "*Computer,*" it said, "*is unrecognized.*"

Peter was puzzled. "What happened?"

Byron scratched his head and chuckled. "Well what do you know. We never considered that."

Peter didn't follow, and said so.

"Just that, what happened. If we call the computer 'computer,' then we can't use that word when it's listening to whatever you tell it."

"Ah," Peter said. "Right." He thought about the problem for a moment, then sat down to the keyboard and modified the device's preference settings.

The device was connected to a nearby At Hand PC Plus computer, which handled the processing. Eventually the code would be transferred onto the solid-state chips used in the final product. However, at this stage all of the coding was done on the At Hand.

Peter finished typing and sent the code to the device in Byron's hand.

"What'd you do?" Byron said.

"Changed its name. Since the word 'computer' won't compute, I've given it a unique name that is unlikely to come up in an everyday context."

"Gotcha," the older man said. "Ready?"

Peter nodded.

Byron touched a stylus to the screen and selected a command. A moment later the device said, "*Please*

*name me.*”

“Pip,” Peter said, loud and clear.

A moment later, it said, “*Hello, this is Pip, at your service.*”

Byron looked at Peter. “Pip?”

“From Dickens’s *Great Expectations*. One of my all-time favorites.”

“Then Pip it is.” Byron laughed. “Let’s give it a try.”

They repeated the scheduling test and “Pip” pulled it off without a hitch.

“Hey, you guys,” Peter called over the room’s partition, “great job.”

John Dulin and Rick Caruso stood up from their workstations to look over the temporary office partitions dividing the room. Both young men wore tired but appreciative expressions. They were Peter’s two favorite engineers. Both resigned from Via the moment Peter invited them to join him and Byron.

Byron asked the engineers if everything was set for the demonstration, and they assured him they were ready. The older man rubbed his hands together. “We’re gonna knock his socks off.”

“We’ll see,” Peter said, unable to mask the skepticism in his voice. It wasn’t the device he was concerned about; ICP was the last company he had ever imagined he’d meet with to discuss a potential business relationship. Byron argued that Via had become more profitable since aligning itself with ICP, and Peter grudgingly agreed. But the real source for his change of heart was rooted in the prospect, however remote, of outdealing the man he’d come to think of as his nemesis, Matthew Locke.

“Can you do anything about that sour face?” Byron said jovially. “Don’t forget this man is first and foremost a friend. And a smart guy. You’ll like him, I promise.”

“We’ll see,” Peter repeated. “And since he’s due here in ten minutes, I’m going to check on Isle real quick.”

He headed back to the front of the house to find Grace sitting on the sofa reading a book. Isle lay sound asleep

at her side.

“Any calls?” Peter whispered.

Grace looked at him with a tight smile and shook her head, knowing whom he was hoping to hear from. They were all waiting to hear from Kate. But she, like Ivy, had not taken or returned Peter’s calls since that day at the hospital. He knelt before Isle to watch her sleep, relishing the beauty of her serene face.

Grace set down her book. “Petey, you know you can call her.”

He shrugged. “I’ve tried. She won’t call me back. One of her assistants asked me to please stop calling. I sent her flowers with a letter asking her to just come up for a visit. I tried to explain everything, but I don’t think she wants to hear it. I think I’ve lost her for good, Grace.”

She placed a warm palm on his shoulder. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” she whispered. “You know, after Byron had his heart attack, I almost left him.”

Peter looked up, surprised. “How come?”

“His pride,” she said with a purposeful nod of her head. “I don’t have to tell you how stubborn he is. And afterward, he felt so incapacitated by the fact that he couldn’t do anything for himself. He was coming up on his retirement when it happened, which was already enough for a man like him to face. Anyway, it was as though he had turned against me. He was bedridden, so he needed me, but he resented me just the same, because he was so absolutely dependent on me. I’d set up his room with all his favorite things, maps and model ships, books he loved. But all he could do was quietly hurt me.”

Peter thought about this for a moment. “But it’s not the same.”

“Isn’t it? Didn’t what happened between you and Ivy happen because you knew in your heart that you were going to lose control of Via?”

It had never actually occurred to him quite like that,

yet it only took an instant to realize it was true. He stared at her, startled by the acute appraisal.

“And maybe, Peter, you thought in the back of your mind that you would somehow lose Kate, too. Both of the things you loved.”

Peter gently brushed his fingertips across Isle’s soft hair. What Grace said made total sense, yet it wouldn’t bring Kate back to him now.

“Listen, I know my husband better than anyone. And I know when I see someone who’s like him.” She lifted Peter’s chin to make him look at her. “I made a decision many, many years ago to stand by him, till death do us part. We came close to breaking that promise, but then he told me one simple thing.”

Peter made a face, like tasting something bitter. “I have a feeling I know what he said.”

“Then why don’t you say it yourself?”

He hesitated. “I’m scared.”

“And so was he. But when he told me, when he came right out and said it, I understood. Yes, it’s different. Infidelity is difficult to forgive. But if you tell her the truth, the way you just told me, she just might give you a second chance.”

Peter looked at Isle. “I don’t know, Grace. It’s so mixed up. The baby and the project, our visitor today. I’m not sure now is the right time. Everything is so up in the air.”

Grace gave him a skeptical look. “And if she were back in your life, wouldn’t all those things seem a little more tolerable?”

They would. But if he’d learned anything these past few months, it was that he’d been an extremely selfish person who’d always gotten what he wanted. Sure, most of it came from hard work, a keen vision, perseverance. But he’d be kidding himself if he didn’t acknowledge the orphan in him that he’d never really grown out of, and maybe never would. The child dropped down in

an unfair world, an unloving world, wanting only what most everyone else had, a chance at a life with loving parents, a real home. Since he could never have those things, he determined early on to always get the things that were in his power to get. But to think of Kate that way, as a thing he could just reach out and take, the way he'd gotten so much else, wasn't fair. She meant everything to him, and he couldn't honestly say he deserved her anymore. Yet even these reasons were minor when he considered what was really stopping him from calling Kate.

The possibility of rejection, that she wouldn't want him back.

As though reading his mind, Grace clasped Peter's hand in her own and gave a bracing squeeze. "Isn't she worth fighting for, Peter?"

He nodded. "You're right, Grace. I'll do it. I'll call her later today."