

> CHAPTER 23

Matthew Locke sat at the breakfast table with his head in his hands. It was over. His work. His career. His marriage. He'd lost it all.

He rubbed his wet face and nose on his sleeve and made a retching noise when he looked at the vulgar color-printed picture of his wife, wearing a wanton grin and little else. The sender promised there were more where this one came from, and threatened to distribute them freely over the Net if he didn't pull out of his autobiography book deal at once. Which after today didn't matter anymore anyway. That, along with everything else he'd worked for, was history. He looked at the first draft of the completed manuscript lying on the table and thought of all the talk that had gone into it. Beside it were two documents. One was his "package," the other the lawsuit.

Three hours ago he'd been on top of the world. He should have known something was up when he spotted Peter Jones's Z3 in the parking lot of the restaurant where

William had asked to meet him. He hadn't immediately connected the two. It wasn't until he went inside that he saw them sitting together, along with Hank Towers, and an older man who looked remotely familiar. Matthew didn't catch the older man's name as he excused himself and said their business didn't concern him.

Hank Towers invited Matthew to sit down, and he felt Peter Jones's eyes on him, but he refused to look at anyone but Hank. There was obviously some mistake, and he said as much.

Towers addressed him calmly and with sympathy. "We've got a couple of changes in today's program, Matthew."

Matthew balked with indignation and demanded to know what was going on. Diners at nearby tables could not help but stare. Many of them were Via employees, which Hank graciously pointed out, asking Matthew not to make things more difficult than they already were.

Matthew went on sputtering questions without waiting for answers. He pointed an accusing finger at William and threatened revenge. Eventually he ran out of breath.

Hank extracted two documents from his jacket. He placed the first one in front of Matthew, who blinked when he saw the word "severance." He scanned the page quickly, shaking his head at the part about taking only a fraction of his granted stock options. Hank indicated the big X at the bottom, and asked him to sign it.

"I won't be driven out!" Matthew shouted.

Hank said he had no choice. The board had voted, and the deal was done. Before Matthew could protest again, Hank produced the second document. This one was the kicker, and it totally floored him.

He sat there for what felt like a very long time, and eventually Hank asked that he try to pull himself together.

Matthew lifted his head and finally looked at Peter, who stared back with no emotion in his eyes. How,

Matthew wondered, could he just sit there like that? His voice was a disbelieving rasp when he finally addressed the younger man.

“Why? Why didn’t you just go along with me back when I first started thinking in this direction? It would have been the same, the same outcome. Why, Peter?”

Peter shook his head. “Sorry, Matthew. But it was never that simple. . . .”

But it could be now, Matthew thought, sitting at the breakfast table and staring at his severance package agreement letter—and the second document they’d handed him, asserting he’d sexually harassed Laurence Merrill.

He was not a crying man, and he didn’t cry now. The wetness around his eyes had come from sweat rather than tears. He was sweating all over, his palms especially, coating the gold band he held in one closed fist.

He was completely spent, used up. Alone. There was no one for him now, he thought. He’d lost his wife, too. Poor Greta. He’d destroyed her that night of the accident, on the yacht. He squeezed his fist tighter around Greta’s wedding band. He’d furtively rescued it from the vessel’s shifting deck in the middle of the chaos, and had kept it hidden in his briefcase ever since.

Greta. She was the only person who’d ever truly adored him, and he’d driven her away, into whatever it was she’d found to replace him, online sex and pictures.

His dream had become a nightmare. He wondered how to do it, which way was best. He was sure he had a gun somewhere in the house. Maybe Greta had left some pills in the cabinet upstairs. Another option was the damn car in the garage. He could do that, or maybe drive it off the highway. He folded his arms and lowered his head, considered his options.

Sometime later he awoke to the sound of the doorbell.

“Leave me alone!” he screamed, certain the press had heard the news and was now scaling the gate in hopes of snapping off some pictures of the stunned ex-everything.

But it wasn't the press, his housekeeper Dolores informed him.

He leaped up from his chair, sending it sprawling. As Matthew rushed down the foyer his resolve finally broke and the tears streamed down his face.

He shot back the dead bolt and swung open the door for his sobbing, soaking wet Greta.

She stood helplessly before him and he reached out and grabbed her left wrist and drew her back inside, fumbling with her hand and the moistened gold band until it was firmly seated around her middle finger.

He kicked the door shut and they fell into each other's arms. They remained like that for a very long time.