



## CHAPTER ONE

**I**F IT WERE UP TO DIANA, THERE'D BE WEATHER. RAIN, SNOW, EVEN the occasional hurricane. But climate was one of those things that were out of her control in this always blue-sky world. The terrain, on the other hand, was her choice: a replica of a spot in the Swiss Alps at the base of Waterfall Pitch with the towering North Face of the Eiger looming overhead.

Nadia, Diana's alter ego in the virtual reality of OtherWorld, was barely visible standing at the base of a cascade of frozen water sculpted against the nearly vertical slope. Diana zoomed in on her avatar, who wore wraparound sunglasses, a fitted black leather jacket with a zipper and upturned collar, slim jeans, red boots, and a red newsboy cap. In the real Swiss Alps, she'd have lasted about thirty seconds in that outfit; the bitter cold turned any exposed bit of skin pink, then red, then white. Diana recalled the stillness into which tinkling cowbells and voices from the valley below had risen like whiffs of smoke.

Waterfall Pitch had been nearly unclimbable—every place—

ment of ax or crampon risked fracturing the ice, sending chunks crashing down on climbers below. The challenge had only added to the thrill.

With a gentle touch, Diana twisted her 3-D mouse with its oversize trackball to crane the angle of view and take in the pristine beauty surrounding Nadia. In this version of reality, you didn't have to wait days for clouds to shift. It took only seconds for the computer's vector graphics engine to rez, revealing the Eiger's tip.

Diana twisted the view downward. Even though she knew this was artificial reality, a place she'd created herself, fear flickered in her chest and a tremor passed through her as icy crevasses below came into focus. She forced herself to look, picking once again at the unhealed wound as she remembered Daniel's last echoey cries. Reaching out with trembling fingers, she touched the frame of her computer screen. It calmed her to trace the boundaries of the image.

Diana had made it back. Daniel hadn't.

She pulled up on the mouse and nudged the space bar. Nadia rose into the air, landed on a narrow outcropping near the top of the peak, and stared out at the void. At her desk, Diana crossed her arms and hunched her body to staunch the shudders of pain that rippled from her core.

With a *ding*, a text message popped into a corner of the screen.

**JAKE: RU there?**

Where else would she be? Diana swatted away the message with a click of the mouse. She had a timer ticking down in the corner of the screen, reminding her of their meeting with

MedLogic. It wasn't for another twenty minutes. Whatever Jake needed from her could wait.

Diana typed /pray. A single violin keened the opening of Pachelbel's Canon, and her avatar dropped to her knees and lowered her head. The somber, stately notes stepped down the scale, stepped down again, and then melodies intertwined and the pace quickened as more violins joined in, their melodies swirling and circling one another.

Diana splayed her fingers and rested them on the screen. *Rest in peace.* The words repeated themselves in her head, a chanting counterpoint to the music.

A discreet buzzer sounded a fifteen-minute reminder. With a few clicks, Nadia was home. Pixel by pixel, a virtual room resolved itself around her. It was identical to Diana's real office in the house where she'd grown up in a Boston suburb, right down to the brightly colored Peruvian weaving that hung on the wall. Nadia's "office" was much neater, though, and its plants were green instead of brown.

Diana shot a note to Jake, telling him that she'd be ready. Quickly, she put the finishing touches on their presentation and dragged files for the meeting across the screen and into Nadia's briefcase. She was scrolling one last time through her notes for the meeting when a Klaxon sounded. **INTRUDER ALERT** flashed in the corner of the computer screen.

Diana's heart lurched and her breath caught in her throat. She swiveled to an adjacent monitor. Live video feeds from cameras stationed outside her compact ranch house showed a brown UPS van parked out front, a hulking shadow on this bright sunny day. A uniformed man had just breached her electronic fence and was on his way to her front door with a good-size package.

Diana took a deep breath and steadied herself against the edge of the desk. The alarm continued. The doorbell rang. The meeting buzzer went off—ten-minute reminder.

“Shut up, all of you!” Diana screamed. She hit a button to silence the Klaxon. But there was no button to slow her heartbeat or erase the sick feeling that had invaded her gut.

She turned back to the video monitor. At the front door, the deliveryman peered up at the camera from under the brim of his cap. She recognized his face. Wally. She’d never caught a last name.

Through the speaker came his voice: “Package for ya.”

She knew that her house appeared to be empty; every shade was drawn and the car that she hadn’t driven for months, Daniel’s Hummer, was locked in the garage. Soundproofing kept what little noise she made inside from leaking out. If it had been anyone else, she wouldn’t have answered the ring. But Wally would know she was there. She never wasn’t.

Diana sighed and pulled over a microphone. “Hey, Wally. Whatever it is, can you just leave it for me in the bin?”

“Come on, Lady Di,” came his tinny voice. “This one needs you to sign.”

She hesitated. Glanced at the clock. She had a few minutes yet before her meeting. But time wasn’t really the issue.

“You can sign it for me, can’t you? I’ll never tell,” she said.

“I’m not going down for forgery just so’s you don’t have to take a breath of fresh air. It’s a beautiful day, trust me.”

But could she trust herself?

She watched Wally in the fish-eye lens. He was holding the package over his head, showing it to her. “Hey, you ordered it. Did you think it was going to transport itself inside? You just let me know when you’re ready.”

She stood, exasperated, knowing from past experience that he wasn’t going to give up. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

She left her office, pulling the door shut behind her, and continued through the living room and on to the front hall. Heart pounding, she peered through the peephole in the door. Wally's eyeball seemed to bulge back at her.

"Anyone else out there?" she asked.

"Uh, hang on, I'll check . . ." He withdrew from the eye-hole for a moment. Then returned. "Nope, just me. The duke and duchess send their regrets."

A comedian. Diana swallowed a nervous laugh and patted her pocket, feeling for her Xanax, her magic tranquillity pills.

She threw two dead bolts, removed the security bar, and entered a twelve-digit pass code into the alarm. As she opened the door, she felt as if an abyss opened in front of her, like an elevator door sliding open into an empty shaft. She grasped the door frame with both hands.

Wally flashed her a crooked-toothed grin. He was well over six feet, and looked as if his arms and legs were made from the limbs of slender saplings. He touched a long index finger to his cap. "You're lookin' spruce."

Diana looked down, taking in her matted furry slippers, sweatpants, and an oversize Smashing Pumpkins T-shirt, black with a silver ZERO printed across the chest. Her face grew warm, and she tried to run her fingers through the tangles in her long dark curls.

"Here you go," he said. "For Nadia Varata." He held the clipboard out like bait, just beyond her arm's reach. "Russian?"

"Pardon?"

"Varata. Sounds like a Czech or Russian name."

"I guess it does," Diana said. What it was, was pure nonsense—Varata and avatar were anagrams, just like Nadia and Diana.

The air within the door frame seemed to quiver like the

surface of a pond. She'd have to reach through in order to sign.

"Polish?" Wally said. She could almost see the word floating toward her, the *P* and the *O* round and buoyant. He wagged the clipboard and called past her. "Yoo-hoo, Nadia! You hiding her in there?"

Diana forced in a breath, leaned forward, and swiped the clipboard from him. It was warmer outside than in, unusually so for March. Another sign of global warming?

The screech of car tires on the street pushed her back. Relief washed away the panicky feeling as soon as she recognized the gold Mini Cooper that had come to a halt behind the UPS van.

Panic flared again—wasn't Ashley in Los Angeles on business?

Wally turned to look. "Toy car."

Diana drew back into the dark coolness of the doorway and scrawled a hasty signature on the form.

Ashley climbed out of the car and clattered up the walk on spike heels, bangle bracelets on each arm, heedless of any anxiety her unexpected appearance had generated. She hugged a grocery bag, and her enormous purse swung from her shoulder. In her other hand, she carried an incongruous, corporate-looking computer laptop case.

Diana heard the Klaxon going off again. Intruder alert, indeed. Diana felt a twinge in a spot behind her right eyeball, a headache starting to bloom.

Ashley's denim skirt ended a few inches below her panty line, which, in turn, was a few inches below the ends of her long blond hair. Her western-style shirt clung to her considerable anatomy. She'd gotten breasts from Grandma Highsmith. Once upon a time, everyone said Diana had inherited Grandma H's sheer nerve, verve, and stubbornness.

"Well, look at you! You're out!" Ashley said. She set down

her computer case on the front steps and tossed back her tresses like she was auditioning for a L'Oréal commercial. She gave Diana a juicy smack on the cheek.

"Ick," Diana said. She hated to admit it, having Ashley there calmed her jitters. But it didn't keep the ache in her head from starting to throb.

Wally's gaze shifted back and forth from Diana to Ashley. "I'm guessing here, but this isn't Nadia."

Ashley smiled at him and winked. "You think?"

"Behave yourself," Diana said.

"You sure do sound alike," Wally said. His speculative glance wandered from Ashley to Diana and back again. "And except for the hair and—" His gaze drifted down a notch or two.

"The attitude," Diana said. "Not to mention the accessories."

"Sisters?" Wally asked.

"Got it in one," Diana said. Inside, the phone rang. In seconds the meeting reminder would sound again too. "Thanks." In a single move, she pushed the clipboard back at Wally and took the grocery bag from Ashley. "I gotta go."

Ashley appraised Wally, narrowing one eye. She rummaged in her purse and came up with a sleek, brushed-steel business-card holder. Opening it, she offered him a card. Wally took the card with his teeth and transferred the package into her arms. Then he reached two fingers into the pocket of his shirt and pulled out a slip of paper, scrawled on it, and handed it to Ashley. She tucked it into her purse.

"So, are you in or out?" Diana asked Ashley. With her free hand she picked up Ashley's computer case.

"Well, duh. In." Ashley stepped inside and pushed the door shut. She glanced at the label on the package and shot Diana a sharp look. "So who's this Nadia Varata?"