

## >CHAPTER 10

“Mr. Harrell, Matthew Locke has arrived.”

“Send him in, please,” came William Harrell’s voice over the intercom on his secretary’s desk.

Matthew was surrounded by the opulence afforded only by companies at the highest reaches of the Fortune 500. Plush carpets, rich wooden desks, fine art originals, and a staff that addressed one another as Mr., Ms., Mrs., and sir. The overall effect provided a sobering contrast to Via’s compact, Herman-Miller partitioned offices, open-air buildings, and first-name protocol. Matthew could hardly believe that less than three years ago he had occupied a Manhattan office not unlike this one, so expansive it seemed more like a penthouse apartment than a place of business. His office at Via was barely larger than any other manager’s, just enough space to move around in.

He’d felt queerly out of place entering the massive ICP building, surrounded by such abundance and magnitude. He’d even forgotten how long it took for

elevators to climb tall buildings; Via's biggest structure was only three stories high, and most everyone used the central atrium staircase to travel between floors.

William Harrell's secretary rose and escorted Matthew into the chairman's office. Matthew pulled his sleeves and straightened his suit, mindful of yet another difference between West Coast Wizardry and starchy East Coast Business. Indeed, California had affected him more deeply than he'd realized.

He carried his briefcase and a large binder containing all of Via's product plans, financial summaries, and forecasts, as well as the strategy he had worked on two nights ago—his and Greta's anniversary night, he dryly reminded himself. Anyway, he'd brought along his new *At Hand* to polish the strategy on yesterday's flight out, then printed the final document on a portable printer in his hotel suite.

The binder felt heavy in his hand. He had come to think of it as his clay, molded into the shape of the new Via, a onetime grassroots company turned serious. Since last week's introduction of the new Plus model, Via's stock had climbed six points, and the reviews were positively glowing.

It was all very exciting. So much so that it had seeped into last night's sleep, a shadowy dream in which he was cast as a double agent, transporting a covert document to some untold organization. Showered and neatly turned out with his briefcase and the binder, he'd strolled out of the hotel with the feeling that he was holding his fate in his hands. His life, and the lives of so many others, would now change irrevocably. And then a macabre thought entered his mind, a dim leftover from his exotic dream: the cyanide pill. At least that was what he recalled from the spy novels he'd read, that the agents hid a cyanide pill in a molar, to bite down on in case a situation turned hopeless. Striding down Park Avenue he laughed at himself for trying to remember if that was how the dream had ended. It was unclear—and prepos-

terous, he told himself as he made his way downtown to ICP's headquarters.

As Matthew strolled into William Harrell's office with the binder firmly in hand, his mind flashed again with murky snatches of the dream. He shifted the binder under his other arm so that he could accept Harrell's outstretched hand as the two met in the middle of the office suite. They exchanged a hearty greeting, and Harrell asked if he would like coffee or some other drink. Matthew declined, and moments later the secretary returned with a tray of beverages anyway—coffee, tea, sodas, and pastries—then silently departed.

"Let's get started," William Harrell said. "I got your E-mail, and I'm pleased to hear everything went well with your executives and board. It hasn't been all smooth sailing on my end. My advisers went ballistic when I revealed our alliance plan. They'd been on me to build something to 'blow the hands off Via,' as my tech adviser put it. To his dismay, I've informed my executives that we'll pursue a strategic partnership with you." Harrell eyed the binder. "Is it all in there?"

Matthew was pleased with Harrell's disclosure. It meant that Via and he were even more valuable to ICP now than when they had first met to secretly discuss the deal. He briefly considered the irony of the arrangement; he now had ICP in the palm of his hand. He gave the binder one last heft, weighing its import, before turning it over to Harrell.

"It's all here," Matthew said. "The complete strategy."

Harrell opened the binder in his lap and began flipping through it, getting the gist, smiling at what he saw. He looked up.

"Oh, yes. This is a trade, after all." He picked up a folder from the table and handed it to Matthew. "Here are all the file compatibility specs for the PCSoft OS extensions, as well as all the popular applications."

Accepting the slim folder, Matthew's spirits dropped a notch. The folder carried none of the weight of the

binder he had just turned over. No girth, no satisfying heaviness in his hand. In fact, it was of little personal use to him. He would hand it over to Alan Parker and his engineering organization, and they, in conjunction with ICP's team of engineers, would turn it into a graceful suite of software tools that would make the At Hand PC Plus compatible with the millions of desktop computers running PCSoft's OS and applications. Still, the actual exchange felt oddly uneven, though he knew that was hardly the case.

William slipped on a pair of eyeglasses and read a section with interest. "Tell me more about how you plan to handle the actual announcement when the software is ready."

Matthew stood and slipped his hands into his pockets. "In approximately four months we'll announce both our strategic alliance and the compatibility software around which it's based. Our statement will detail Via's new direction into Big Business, while yours, I suggest, focuses on Via's advanced technology. How Via's comparatively lean organization and extraordinary design enables ICP to offer a broad alternative to the PCSoft and Future Processing way of doing business. It's going to knock their socks off."

Harrell grinned broadly. "It'll give me no small satisfaction to stick it to those two. And this is only the small stab. The big jab comes next. Where are you on that?"

Matthew seated himself again and leaned forward with his elbows on his knees. This was his favorite part. "Here is where timing will matter most. Assuming things go as we planned—that ICP's co-selling position substantially drives up At Hand PC Plus unit sales—we'll then begin the merger process. This would occur somewhere between six and twelve months after the strategic alliance announcement. ICP will reveal its move to standardize on the At Hand PC platform for its handheld line, and our companies become one."

William snapped the binder closed. "Excellent."

Matthew nodded his agreement.

"It's exactly how I envisioned it, in some ways better," Harrell said, and was pleased to notice that Matthew had caught the subtle ambiguity in his comment. "You've managed to smooth the transition with the alliance aspect, so that the merger unfolds a little at a time. In stages."

"That's the idea. But you said 'in some ways.' Meaning what?"

Harrell removed his eyeglasses and sipped his coffee. "Meaning exactly that. In some ways, our plan is progressing better than I ever imagined. For instance, your idea to slap a 'Via/ICP SoftLink' logo decal on every At Hand PC we sell creates the unconscious impression for the user that our two companies fit nicely together."

Matthew nodded in agreement; however, his concern was obvious. "But in other ways, you're not as pleased?" In the back of his mind he knew what this was leading to. For months he had absently wondered how long it would be before the subject came up. He locked eyes with Harrell.

"No, not exactly." Harrell set down his coffee cup. "I mean Jones, of course."

"Jones?" Matthew said, trying to sound surprised. "What does he have to do with any of this?"

"That's right. Precisely what I've been wondering. What *does* he have to do with any of this?"

"Your point?" Matthew said, unable to hide the defensiveness in his voice.

"Jones himself. Have you been in touch? Has any of your staff heard from him? A phone call? E-mail?"

"No. He's in self-exile."

"I see." Harrell stood up and strolled to the window to stare out over the neighboring buildings.

Matthew turned on the sofa and slung one arm over the side. "Why do you ask? Is there a concern?"

Harrell kept his back to Matthew. "More a curiosity, really. How he's spending his time. What he's planning

on doing. Whether or not he'll return to Via anytime soon."

"I can't say," Matthew said; then, in an effort to assure Harrell, he added, "but he still holds a large amount of Via stock. So technically, he's still with us."

"Mmm. But will he be with us when we reveal our alliance? When we proceed with our merger? I have to admit that he, more than the products themselves, motivated my initial idea for the deal. I'd always hoped to get Jones as well."

"And as we had discussed more than once, the chances of that were fifty-fifty, at best. His taking off as he has was no surprise, when you recall the way he responded after I tried to feel him out on the idea of compatibility and aligning ourselves with ICP."

"Yes," Harrell said calmly, turning around. "Yes, indeed we did. And you're right, Matthew. I'm merely pointing out that the ideal outcome would be for Jones to stay with Via. Paints a rosier picture, don't you agree?"

Matthew didn't respond.

"Think you can convince him to come back?"

The thought had never crossed Matthew's mind. He was perfectly content with the distance Peter had put between them, and had adjusted accordingly. "I can't say."

Harrell moved over to the sitting area and eased into one of the facing chairs. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see. Anyway, you needn't worry, Matthew. It's not going to change our arrangement."

"No, of course not," Matthew said with a forced smile. Inside, he was furious with jealousy and loathing for Peter. When would Harrell and the rest of them think of Via as *his*? And when they merged, would people still refer to the former Via as "the company founded by Peter Jones"? It made Matthew's blood boil, but he forced himself to hide his feelings. It wouldn't look good to come undone over Peter in front of Harrell. After all, it was this very office Matthew intended to

eventually occupy, and control was everything.

Harrell picked up the binder again and opened it. “Anyway, I’ll need to read through this and then we’ll talk again about some of the finer points.” He glanced at his watch. “When do you fly back?”

“I’m scheduled on a flight out tomorrow morning. But since we’re finished already, I think I’ll change it to tonight.” He stood and collected his jacket, and Harrell rose as well to see him out. The executives shook hands, and William wished Matthew a safe return trip.

Pressing the Down button at the elevator bank, Matthew noticed that his hand was a little unsteady. Harrell’s piqued interest in Jones had gotten a hell of a rise out of him.

“Come on,” Matthew whispered angrily, pressing the Down button again. After what felt like an eternity, the elevator arrived. He let out a grateful sigh, pleased to be going home sooner than expected.

He boarded the elevator and pressed the Ground-Floor button, impatient for the first time at the thought of how much longer it would take to complete the deal. He counted down the levels as he descended, wishing things would move faster.

“Hey, where are you off to so early?” Kate said, lifting her head from the pillow.

Peter nearly tripped himself up as he worked on his jeans. “Uh-oh. I woke you. Sorry, I was trying to be quiet.” He zipped up the fly and knelt beside the bed. Her hair lay spread around the pillow, and he combed it with his fingers. He kissed her lightly. “Would you mind taking a rain check on our trip to Boston?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head, then settled deeper into the bedding, trying to hide her face.

He touched her chin and tilted her face to him. “Hey, what’s the big grin for? I thought you wanted to go to Boston.”

She lifted her hand from beneath the quilt and gently knocked her knuckles on his head. "Circus is in town."

He looked embarrassed by the fact that she could read him so easily. "Well, I've been thinking."

"Mmm-hmm."

"After talking to Byron the other night and all. You know, outside on his dock."

"Thinking, huh? Like when I kept trying to talk to you yesterday at the park, and you were off in outer space? That kind of thinking?" She laughed.

"Yeah, I guess then too," he said. "I don't know, it's weird. This concept that just sort of popped into my head. I want to talk with him about it, see if he can help me think it through. There's something missing, a link I guess."

"Sounds to me like you're going to be busy. Maybe I'll head down to Boston myself, then back to L.A. That okay with you?"

"Yeah, sure. If it's cool with you." He locked his hands behind his blond head and looked at her with those intense blue eyes. "I just have to talk to him about this."

She was overjoyed, and she told him so. "Petey, I'm ecstatic you don't want to go to Boston. Go talk to Byron. I'll be back next weekend. If, that is, you still want to see me." She pretended to pout.

He gave her a funny look. "You're such a goof sometimes." He kissed her again and went back to dressing.

She laughed at him. "Hey, who's calling who a goof?" She tossed a pillow at him. "You're all inside out, Einstein."

"Huh?" He looked down at his shirt and saw that he had put it on inside out and backward. He pulled it over his head and put it back on. "What would I do without you?" He leaned over and kissed her good-bye.

"Don't mention it," she said. "Knock 'em dead, champ."

On his way out he stopped in the kitchen to leave her a yellow Post-it note. He drew a smiley face and wrote, "I'm a lucky guy," and stuck the note on the coffee machine, where she was sure to see it.

His mind was racing as he quickly covered the short distance to the Holmeses'. With tourist season over, the town was cool and somber. A few cars belonging to the last vacationers and winter holdovers remained. Fewer boats bobbed in the lagoon, the rest transferred to winter storage until next season.

As he set foot on the Holmes front lawn he ran into Grace as she was coming around the side of the house, carrying a sizable potted plant. "This one isn't going to make it, I'm afraid."

"Bummer," Peter said sincerely, and Grace agreed. "Is Byron here?"

"Out back." She smiled and lowered her voice, as if to reveal a secret. "I'm glad you came by. He's been mumbling about some idea he says he wants to tell you about. He'd planned on dropping by your place today, after he finished up with the boat. He'll be glad you're here."

Peter thanked her and trotted around the house to the dock. He spotted the top of Byron's white-haired head above the *Net Work's* side. He greeted the older man as he climbed aboard the boat.

"I see you got your tennis shoes on," Byron said, looking up from his work. He made a few last wipes with an oil rag over the vessel's teakwood bulwarks. "Good. You're ready to sail."

"If you say so."

"I say so. You saved me a short walk, you know. I was going to come over to see you." He replaced the lid on the oil and placed it and the sodden rags in a plastic bag. "Here, stow this, son," he said, tossing the bag to Peter and directing him to the open bin inside the cabin. Peter took a moment to appreciate the boat's impressive inte-

rior, crafted from fine teakwood and brass fixtures. The effect was clean, elegant, sharp—much like its captain, Peter thought.

“Cast off,” Byron ordered, indicating the boat’s mooring lines.

Peter hopped to the deck and unwrapped the lines from the cleats. The engine churned to life.

“Now give us a good shove,” Byron said.

Peter heaved his weight into the vessel, then jumped aboard. Byron applied power and the boat lurched. They motored for the inlet, the water ahead rolling in small swells.

“Is it going to be windy enough?” Peter asked, shading his eyes to observe the ocean that lay a half mile out.

“Here,” Byron said. He handed over a pair of spare sunglasses.

Peter put them on and looked again. He spotted a few craft in the distance, whipping along at a respectable clip with their sails fully puffed out.

Byron eyed the younger man’s shaky legs. “Sail much?”

Peter shook his head. He leaned against the side and gripped the rail with both hands, anchoring himself as he watched Byron handle the wheel.

“Your legs’ll settle down in a minute.” Byron pulled his pipe from his shirt pocket. With his elbows he steadied the wheel, while at the same time he expertly applied his windproof lighter to the pipe’s bowl. He nodded his head at Peter’s knees and chuckled. “Just go with the flow, son.”

By the time they reached the quicker ocean Peter was able to stand up straight. And just in time, for Byron began shouting orders to bring up the sails. Peter followed with coltlike shakiness, slipping a few times, but equal to the task. Within minutes the mainsail and jib were fully swollen in the eastern breeze.

Byron cut the engine, and Peter was immediately

enraptured by the silence, by the power of the wind as it pushed the sleek vessel along quickly and quietly. It was a blissful sensation, but before he could just hang back and enjoy it, Byron had him back to work.

“Here,” the older man said, stepping away from the wheel. “Hold it where my hands are.”

Peter placed his hands beside Byron’s and braced himself. His body gave a small jerk when Byron let go, and Bryon returned his hands and helped Peter find his grip.

“That’s it. Just keep her steady,” Byron said, and released his grip with an approving nod. He headed back to the cabin and disappeared for a moment, then reemerged with two cans of Heineken. He popped the lids and handed one to Peter. “Top of the mornin’ to ya.” He tipped his head to Peter, then took a long swig from his can.

Peter made a queasy face. Definitely not his idea of morning juice, but what the hell. He took a small sip, and it tasted surprisingly good, despite the early hour.

The two men shared a few minutes of silence. Eventually, Peter spoke up.

“So, I’ve been thinking.”

Byron squinted at him. “Mmm. Me too.” He turned to the distant shoreline and sipped his beer. “You first.”

Peter nodded. “It was about what you said the other night. About our differences. The good ones.”

Byron took a thoughtful suck of his pipe and nodded agreeably.

“And I started to think about your experience with big-system stuff,” Peter went on. “And what I know about small systems.”

Byron let out a great plume of smoke, listening with keen interest.

“And it really hit me more than ever how the two are coming together, the way you mentioned. Via’s handhelds are helpful, but they’re not tightly integrated into the bigger systems the way they could be. I don’t just mean dialing up and connecting. I mean more. As a

genuine extension of the desktop and online systems. But more actively than the way portable devices today behave. More . . . proactively.”

“Mmm-hmm,” Byron intoned, encouraging Peter to continue.

“Imagine, say, a handheld that goes the extra mile. But different from everything out there. No compromise. Reengineered from the ground up. Sure, all the obvious stuff—fast processor, memory, connectivity—but then some. Truly handheld. I mean, this small.” Peter traced a rectangle in the palm of his hand. “About the size of a wallet. Maybe it even flips open, like a cellular phone. Net-ready, from E-mail to pocket-size Web and newsgroup browsing. From huge databases to desktop syncing of all your important stuff, contacts, schedule, messages, the works. But a whole new interface. A whole new design, unlike either Via’s or PCSoft’s PortaPC OS. I mean really revolutionary. A no-brainer. You plunk it down and it does what you want it to do, and then some, anticipating your next move by learning from your past actions. By knowing you better and better the more you work with it.” He paused, winded, to gauge the older man’s reaction.

Byron took out a key and worked off the pipe’s metal wind cap. He checked the tobacco, then leaned over the side of the rail and carefully rapped the pipe against his weathered palm, spilling the black ashes into the ocean. He returned the pipe to his shirt pocket and pushed his sunglasses up on his nose, then took a swallow of his beer and looked at Peter.

“You’re talking about intelligent agents. Little software helpers that run in the background and pay attention to what you’re doing, what you’re not doing, then act on their own, on your behalf.”

“Yes, exactly. We only started scratching the surface of agent technology at Via. It was never at the front of our design. We worried about the hardware first, then the OS and the applications. It’s that kind of think-

ing that probably cost us the market. PCSoft works the other way. They do the software, and leave the hardware up to everyone else. But even PCSoft, as far as I know, hasn't really taken agent technology anywhere. Yet. You see what I'm saying?"

"Hell yes. And the bugger of it is, it fits in nicely with what I've been knocking around." Peter was impatient to say more, but he kept quiet and let Byron talk. "I'm tired of all this bellyaching over the Net. It's the world's greatest source of information, yet getting what you want out of it is a bitch. Some sites are trying to make sense of it for you, but none with any genuinely uniform method. Sure, they're all talking about it, and eventually they'll get there, but it's going to take time. And I started wondering, what better venue than those handy little computers you know how to build. Yet even those are too damn complicated. It needs to be simpler. Especially on an accessory handheld like you describe, keeping it in sync with your desktop system, so when you come back with it everything gets put back in order—Web sites you visited, E-mails you picked up or sent, new contacts. But in the blink of an eye, with no fuss."

"Yes, exactly," Peter exclaimed with a pointed finger, which inadvertently caused the boat to lean. He quickly returned both hands to the wheel and got her under control again. He carried on some more, and Byron jumped in intermittently, sharing his own ideas on the subjects and concepts they covered. Eventually they took a breather, and Byron went below for fresh beers. He handed one to Peter.

"I didn't realize you kept up on all this stuff," Peter said, popping open his second can of beer.

"Hell yes. What, you think a guy like me retires and then just unplugs? Not a chance. Fact is, I've got a report on various agent technologies, back in my office in New York."

Peter gave a reflective nod of his head. "You know, it looks like you were right. I mean, that we have more in

common than I figured.”

Byron shrugged and focused on the horizon for a minute. He seemed suddenly serious when he turned to Peter again. “I guess it’s time I fess up.”

Peter looked at him with questioning eyes.

Byron sniffed, and adjusted his sunglasses. “See, I’d been watching you in that café ever since you first showed up. I knew who you were, saw the way you looked. And the way you didn’t look, too. At anything around you. It was written all over your face that you wanted to be left alone. I’d read the news, knew everything that had gone on at your company. So I waited. Until the other day, when that new Plus model was introduced. Hell, I figured there was no better time to throw a drowning fellow a line. Since the first time I saw you I’d had this feeling we’d maybe enjoy a sort of meeting of the minds. Like we are now.”

Peter smiled, moved by the older man’s humility and frankness. “So what do you think? Want to check out some of this stuff we’re talking about, the two of us?”

Byron scratched his ear and grinned. “Sounds like I’ve got me a new hobby.” He raised his beer. “Partners?”

Peter touched his can to Byron’s and smiled.

“Partners.”