

>CHAPTER 13

The second person most surprised by the day's business developments was Peter Jones, but for a different reason.

"That's right, as much of it as I can sell," Peter said into the telephone. His voice was highly agitated. "FedEx already left with my resignation. Locke and the board will get it first thing in the morning. Okay, Ben. Thanks. And take care of yourself." He hung up and looked at Byron with a mildly disbelieving expression.

"You sure you want to do that?" The older man sat before a large worktable, turning his coffee mug in his palm. He was worried about Peter.

"Absolutely. For Christ's sake, Byron, they're in bed with ICP now." He batted his hand at a copy of the *Wall Street Journal*, which featured a headline announcing the unexpected Via and ICP alliance.

"Hey, don't forget that's where this old-timer got his start."

Peter ran a hand through his newly close-cropped

hair. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. I don't mean to disparage you or where you're from. You know that. I'm just astonished that Locke actually went through with what I would never agree to. To sell out."

Byron scoffed in a friendly way. "That's not what I'd call it. The way I see it, he's upping Via's market. He'll probably triple it by the end of the year. From an outsider's point of view, it's a damn clever maneuver."

Peter crossed his arms. "Yeah, well, good for him. That's all the more reason why it's time for me to say adios and cash in my stake. Besides, it looks better to investors if I match their potential investments with my own money. You know, I'm in the mood for a little shopping spree. I've decided to move ahead with those acquisitions we talked about, the Web browser, the compression routines, and that awesome little LCD display we saw last week in Boston. And definitely that knockout handwriting-recognition kernel. It's way better than what we had at Via. Let's see, those couple goods should cost me, what, about sixteen million? Yes sir, I'd say it's a good time to sell."

Byron tried to maintain a stern look, but it was impossible. "Well, I guess that's settled, then. So wipe that snarl off your face and let's get back to work." His fondness for Peter was strong, and they had become close in the few short months they'd been working together.

They'd turned the Holmeses' basement into a lab and workroom. Scattered all around were diagrams and circuit boards, tools, and foam models sculpted to depict different handheld computer designs.

Peter went over to the models and picked one up. It was about the size of a man's folded wallet, only thicker. He seated himself at the huge worktable and turned the model over in his hand.

"That one still bothering you?" Byron said.

"Yeah. I'm just not sure why." Peter tossed the foam mock-up onto the table and picked up another, this one no larger than a checkbook. He flipped it open and pre-

tended to type on the tiny keyboard. “Very cramped.” He picked up a pencil and pretended to scribble on the model’s “screen.” “And really hard to write on it this way.” He tossed it aside and went back to the first model. “I sure like the way this one feels. But with no keyboard, it’s got to depend wholly on the handwriting recognition. I’m not sure people will go for that as their only option. What do you think?”

Byron fished his tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket and slowly went about packing his pipe. He sucked a few glowing tokes, then shook out his match and turned his head and exhaled a plume of smoke. He clamped down on the pipe to free his hands, and slid a blank index card front and center. He drew a few rows of circles along the length of the card, filled in some letters of the alphabet.

He gestured for the smaller model, and Peter handed it over. He turned it lengthwise in his palm, then held the index card along the bottom edge.

“How about something like this? Lid acts as a keyboard. Granted that handwriting software you’re buying is so good they’ll probably never use it. But it’s there, for the holdouts.” He folded it over and turned it around in his hand. “Plus, it doubles as a lid to protect the display, so you really could put it in your pocket, just like a wallet.”

Peter nodded. “Yeah, that’s good. With a rotation routine, you could reorient the screen this way,” Peter said, snatching the model out of Byron’s hand. “Face up, like this. And I bet that’s how most people would use it. We could even hinge the lid so that it flips all the way around.”

Byron plucked the model from Peter and picked up the index card again. “Like so.”

“Exactly.”

“And then hit the Reorient button again,” Byron said, turning the mock-up lengthwise in his palm, “and you get the wider display for the baby Web browser she’ll

have in her.”

Peter nodded his agreement. “But there’s still something, I don’t know, missing. I mean, most handhelds have keyboards, or the option to attach one. And a stylus, like ours here. So we’re doing what everyone else is doing. Which is fine if we can pull off everything else we think we’re going to do. Especially the no-brainer synchronization routines. But is that enough? Are we missing some obvious idea, some new way to use these things that no one else has thought of?”

He stood up and casually settled his hands on his hips, frowning at the make-believe devices scattered over the table. “That’s what’s bugging me. That we’re not thinking differently enough from everyone else.”

“A new paradigm,” Byron said, deep in thought.

“Or whatever you want to call it. I mean, sure, these are good,” Peter said, waving a hand at the table. “But good enough? Good enough to really challenge the way everyone thinks of handhelds? Enough to make them buy one of these instead? I’m not so sure.” He gave a frustrated shake of his head. “There’s something missing. And we’ve got to think really hard about what it might be.”

At the sound of footsteps both men turned to watch Grace coming down the steps carrying a lunch tray. “Time for a break, boys.”

“Ah, relief.” Byron stood up and rubbed his hands together. “Honey, we got any vinegar for those fries?”

“Coming right up.” Grace set the tray on the table and started up the stairs.

Byron picked up a hot French fry and shook it at Peter. “Now, give it a rest and eat, and I promise while your stomach is working your brain’ll take care of the background processing.”

“Do you always think with your belly?” Peter laughed, picking up a sandwich.

The telephone rang.

“I’ll get it,” Grace said, coming back down with the

condiments. Byron gestured for the bottle of vinegar.

"I got it," Peter said, going to the wall phone. "Holmes residence." He wiped his lips on his sleeve. "Hey, Ben. What's up? Wait, let me guess, the market crashed and my stock's worth squat." He looked at Byron and Grace and rolled his eyes.

"His secretary," Byron whispered to his wife, identifying the caller. "Or former secretary I should say, as of tomorrow. Our boy here has just resigned from his own company."

The couple abruptly started at Peter's surprised shout.

"What?" His eyes were wide with panic. He gave Byron a stricken look and the older man put down his sandwich.

At the same time, Kate's voice called out from upstairs. "Anyone home?" Peter had been expecting her to arrive in town today.

Grace started up the stairs and met Kate just as she was coming down. Seeing Grace's concerned look, Kate asked if everything was all right. "I think it's something with Via," Grace whispered.

Kate silently mouthed hello to Peter, and he gave her a weak smile. Whatever it was, it didn't look good.

"All right," Peter said into the phone. "I'll get there as soon as I can." He returned the handset to its cradle and stood facing the wall.

Kate moved to him and put a hand on his arm. "Petey, what is it?"

He turned around, his face slack. He stuck both hands on his head and averted his eyes, looking at the table with its scattering of notes and models.

Byron stood up. "Son, is everything all right?"

"Peter?" Kate said. "What's the matter?"

Peter let his hands fall heavily to his sides. "It's something back home."

"Your stock sale?" Byron said.

Kate looked from Peter to Byron. "What stock sale?"

Peter shook his head. "No."

"You're going to do it, babe? Sell your stock?"

Peter nodded.

"That's great," Kate said, taking his hands in hers. She felt the smallest flinch in his fingertips. "So what's the matter?"

Unable to look her in the eye, he focused on their joined hands. "Something happened back home. I have to go back. Right now." He forced himself to look at her. An old line went through his head, like the lyrics from some downhearted song. But this was a line of his own making, not from any of Kate's music. He let go of her hands and turned to Byron. "I have to get to the airport. Right away. Will you take me?"

"I'll go back with you," Kate said. "Let's go."

Peter didn't move. "No, Kate. I have to go alone." A voice in his head screamed for him to take her by the hand, go upstairs, and sit her down on the sofa and tell her the truth. What had happened those few months ago. How it happened. Why it happened. And what it had, or hadn't, meant. Until now.

He squeezed her hand tightly, but that was all. Once again he couldn't bring himself to tell her. Not yet. He knew this time there was no getting around it, he'd have to tell her before it all came out, but this wasn't the time or place. He had to leave, right this minute, and after the immediate crisis was dealt with he would tell her everything. "Kate, I have to do this alone. I'll explain everything when I get back. Please, you have to trust me on this."

Kate met his conflicted eyes with suspicion. He'd never done anything like this before; they'd always been so open and honest with each other. And now, for the first time in all their years together, he saw doubt in her eyes. Mistrust.

Grace discreetly nudged her husband to intervene.

"Okay," Byron said, setting his gentle hands on the couple's shoulders. "Go get your coat, son. I'll take

you.” He gave Kate a reassuring wink.

“Don’t you want to pack some things?” Kate said.

“There isn’t time.” He looked at her once more with distressed eyes. “I’ll call as soon as I can.” And then he turned and headed upstairs, leaving Kate to stand there in utter confusion.

“Back in a bit,” Byron said. “Don’t eat all my fries.” He kissed his wife on the cheek, then turned and put an arm over Kate’s shoulder. “Whatever it is, it’s going to be okay.”

He said good-bye and went after Peter, who had quietly stationed himself at the top of the stairs, one ear turned toward the basement. The distant line danced again in his head, threatening to upset the recovery he’d achieved since that foreboding night and the day that followed it.

Heading for the airport he was silent, and Byron did not press him for details.

On the plane he could do nothing but stare out the window and listen to the reproachful voice in his head as it repeated the lame excuse over and over.

He’d prayed he would never have to say it aloud.

It was the wine.

Greta Locke was riding high. She raised herself from the exercise bike’s seat and pedaled harder, faster, glancing at her white-knuckled fists. Since her intimate online rendezvous with Gregor, she had held firm in her decision to give up the gloves. Admiring Gregor’s body as she did, she threw herself into a daily workout routine. He was younger than she and reasonably attractive, from what she could tell. The exercise bike had firmed her formerly limp thighs and tightened her rear and her upper arms. Though they had not yet met in person—or “F2F,” as Gregor liked to say—their special affair, as she had come to think of it, had turned serious.

They got together online every morning, and Greta no longer hid her video camera device from Matthew.

When he asked her about it one day, she said she liked to take snapshots of herself to include in the letters she sent back home. He'd smiled at that and then went back to his own office, satisfied. She knew Matthew had sensed the change in her. She didn't believe he knew she was having an affair, and an unusual one at that. Nor did she feel guilt anymore about her online liaison with Gregor. But that was only because they hadn't met in person to consummate their feelings for each other. And that was just the way she wanted it, until she was sure about a few things.

She saw by the bike's timer that she had two more minutes. She pressed harder, her breathing heavy but controlled, her heart rate registering right where it should. A light breeze from the open window cooled her sweating face and torso. Her coppery hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She glanced at her At Hand PC Plus on the secretary desk. Matthew had since brought her a printer, monitor, mouse, and keyboard. She had turned the guest room into her combination exercise space and home office. And, she thought pleasantly, her secret love nest of sorts.

The timer beeped and she let out a great, energized shout. She maintained a slow pace for another minute to cool down, then hopped off the unit. She admired her physique in the full-length mirror mounted on the closet door. Not bad. Another month or two and she'd look like one of those sprightly TV fitness chicks she stretched out with every morning. Dabbing her face with a towel, she clicked the At Hand's mouse and connected to World Online.

Still no Gregor. He'd mentioned last night that he would be busy in the morning, and probably not online until noon or so. She looked at the clock: eleven-fifteen. She disconnected from World Online, snatched her water bottle, and headed into the master suite to shower. Seeing the king-size bed stirred little feeling in her. Since the "first night" with Gregor, she'd been

sleeping in her own room. Like the rest of her changes, Matthew had not objected. If anything, he was probably glad, she thought. Which was just as well. This way, he would be better prepared for what she was going to hit him with.

She wasn't sure if she would really go through with it, and she would have a better idea in a little while, when she made the call she had promised Gregor she would make.

She jumped into the shower, picturing Gregor in her mind as she soaped her body. God, he made her feel so good, so wanted. It was torture not being with him. But no matter how out of hand her marriage had become, she wouldn't let herself be unfaithful to Matthew until she was absolutely certain.

Drying off, she looked at the clock and wondered if Gregor had come online yet. She hurriedly threw on a pair of cotton slacks and a light silk blouse. She generally skipped the bra when she was expecting to see Gregor. Unless of course he asked her to wear one, in order to see her remove it. He'd asked her to do a number of things she'd never before imagined.

Stationed at her computer, she took a moment to study her left hand. It really wasn't so awful after all, but she would never have thought that if it weren't for Gregor. It gave her much pleasure to traipse about without gloves in front of Matthew. She especially liked to do little things that encroached on his comfort level, like offer to refill his empty coffee cup, or waggle her four fingers good-bye when he left for work. He would inevitably avert his eyes, but this no longer hurt her the way it once had. Gregor, on the other hand, never averted his eyes. Like now.

"Well good morning," Greta said to his slightly grainy video image.

"Hey."

"Just hey? Why so glum? Are you all right?"

"Yeah, sure. I'm just pissed off. I got fired off this

feature story I was working up for a magazine. Said if I couldn't substantiate my premise then I've got no story. Jesus, Gret. I hate this fucking work anyway. I wish I could just write my novel." He let out an exhausted sigh and massaged his neck.

"Poor baby. I wish I could be there to do that for you."

"Yeah, me too," Gregor said, without his usual enthusiasm.

Greta had never seen him so down. "Gregor, what can I do to help? Tell me."

He managed a small smile. "You make that call yet?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I was waiting for you. I got an idea. With the two phone lines in my room here, I can call him while you're here. I need the moral support. Okay?"

"I guess, yeah. I still feel kind of funny, though. Like, I don't know, maybe you think I'm some sort of gigolo or something."

She laughed. "Hardly, darling. We've already gone over this. Think of it as an arts grant, like the universities and foundations give away. You're an artist, Gregor. And you need to be able to work on your novel instead of suffering through these articles you don't even want to write. Right?"

He nodded. "Gret, you're so nice to me."

"Ditto. Now let's make the call. You ready?"

He moved closer to his screen, suddenly very interested. "Do it." He watched her pick up the handset and dial. "Hey, open one button there, would you?"

She waved a hand at him in mock surprise, then undid the top two buttons of her blouse. She blew him a kiss and turned her attention to her phone call.

"Yes, this is Greta Locke. I'd like to speak with Mitchell, please." She glanced at Gregor. He'd taken off his shirt and tie, giving her a nice view of his impressive pecs and abs. They both knew this was a serious call, yet they were behaving like love-struck teens. She looked

away when the attorney came on the line.

“Mitchell, hello. You too. Fine. Yes, he’s fine, thank you.” She hesitated. “Actually, Mitchell, things aren’t exactly fine.”

She glanced at Gregor framed in the little window on her At Hand’s display. He’d quit playing around, and was listening intently to her side of the conversation.

“I’d like to ask you a few questions,” Greta said. And for the next few minutes she spoke without pause. When she finished, the attorney asked her to clarify a few points.

“No,” she said, “I don’t know if it’s what Matthew wants. We’re going to discuss it. But I think it’s what I want, which is why I need to understand certain aspects now, before I talk to him about it.”

She listened some more, tipped her head into her free hand as she nodded to what the lawyer was telling her. “I see. Okay, then. No, I can’t think of anything else right now, just those few—”

“Pssst.”

She looked up.

Gregor was waving for her attention.

“Mitchell, can you hold on a moment? Thanks.” She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece and held the handset away as she leaned close to the At Hand’s built-in microphone, mounted in the upper lid. “What is it?” she whispered, a bit testy.

“You didn’t ask him about the main thing.”

She registered surprise at having forgotten to cover this point with the lawyer. She moved the handset to her ear again. “Hi, Mitchell. One more thing, about the half-of-everything law. I’m vaguely familiar with it. I don’t mean to sound, well, presumptuous. But it is important for me to know where I may stand, should we decide to move ahead with this.”

She listened, and as the attorney explained she looked at Gregor, who appeared to be holding his breath. She nodded slowly. “I see,” she said, her voice barely audi-

ble. "Thank you, Mitchell. Yes, I will. We will. You too. Bye."

She hung up the phone and dropped back in her ergonomic office chair until she was staring straight up at the ceiling, her mind suddenly blank. The attorney's words had overwhelmed her, and for the briefest instant she forgot that she wasn't alone in this.

"Greta?" Gregor said, rousing her attention. "What did he say?"

She straightened in the chair and met the camera's indifferent eye with her own vacant gaze.

"He said it's the law," she whispered in disbelief.