

## >CHAPTER 14

The following morning William Harrell scanned the important newspapers on his limousine ride to work. All reports on yesterday's strategic-alliance announcement were positive, and Harrell was pleased to see that no one had pursued the disheveled West Coast reporter's legitimate accusation of an impending merger between the two companies.

He stared out the window as they rolled through Central Park, fondly recalling when he'd first devised the deal. At the same time, his mind wandered to the late-night conversation he'd had with his old friend Byron Holmes four months ago. William had been troubled when Byron had mentioned Peter Jones's name, but by the time he'd hung up he'd felt better. Jones remained an enigma to William. A creative curiosity. He made a mental note to check in with Byron in a few months to see how the pair were coming along with their project.

Right now he had other things to think about, like the impending merger. After yesterday's announcement

he'd called together his senior staff and revealed his intention to acquire Via. His senior counsel foresaw no FTC objection, since ICP's current portable devices were merely clones running PCSoft's OS. This fact excited William's highly competitive nature. What was so attractive about Via was its proprietary operating system software. It was theirs, and theirs alone. And soon it would be his.

And eventually, when Via was firmly ensconced in ICP's organization, he intended to license Via's operating system to clone makers, just as PCSoft had done. But this time he would be on the receiving end of all those royalties. It was all supposition, of course, but after yesterday's successful announcement and flood of advance orders, his dream was closer than ever to becoming a reality.

The limousine abruptly halted in a knot of traffic. Craning his neck to see up the block, William spotted a long string of trailers, and lots of official-looking men and women running around with walkie-talkies, clipboards, and anxious faces. He'd seen this sort of thing enough to know it was a film production, which New Yorkers looked upon with a mixture of admiration and frustration. His driver announced that he would attempt to get him to work another way, and William told him there was no hurry.

He opened his briefcase and withdrew his At Hand PC Plus. He set it on his lap and popped in the cellular modem card. The configuration had proven useful for weekend jaunts to his quiet retreat in the Adirondack Mountains, making it possible for him to get work done during the chauffeured ride there and back. He launched his E-mail program, and a few moments later he was connected to the company's server. Having already checked and dealt with the brunt of his E-mail over breakfast, it came as no surprise that there were only a few new messages, including one from Matthew Locke. He selected it, and while the message downloaded he

plucked a tissue from the armrest dispenser to dust his screen. Drawing the tissue away he scanned the E-mail message—and froze.

His chest tightened and he experienced a strange tingling sensation in his left arm, the kind of feeling he'd heard other men say occurs just moments before suffering a heart attack.

He gripped the armrest tightly and struggled to catch his breath as he read the message.

**TO: wharrell@icp.com**

**SUBJECT: JONES RESIGNATION & THE DEAL**

**William, I'll get right to the point: Yesterday's unveiling of the SoftLink program and our strategic alliance opened my eyes to the fact that what we announced is exactly the right thing for Via and ICP.**

**As such, I am asking that you honor my response to the press, and we do not move forward with the final merger stage of the deal. Instead, Via and ICP shall proceed as described yesterday, in a strategic-alliance pact.**

**Furthermore, Peter Jones today officially resigned from the company, and sold off more than two-thirds of his shares. His decision assures my position at Via's helm, which I have come to appreciate.**

**As far as I am concerned, the deal is done. While the outcome isn't exactly as we'd originally planned, we both emerge victorious.**

**I look forward to our two companies working together.**

**—Matthew**

William let his At Hand fall to the floor as he slumped into the seat back. His breathing was coming in short gasps, startling his driver enough to pull over and stop the car. He asked his chief if he was all right; he was ready to dial 911. William waved the tissue at him and asked him to go on, that he would be fine in a moment. The driver did as he was told, keeping a worried eye on William in the rearview mirror.

But William was anything but fine. He was utterly shocked and infuriated by Matthew Locke's message. In one fell swoop the son of a bitch had torpedoed the deal. Harrell looked out the window and shook his head in stunned amazement. His driver had backtracked through Central Park to break from the film traffic, and a nauseating sense of *déjà vu* set in when William realized here he was again, zipping along the same tree-lined course that had given root to the deal in the first place. Fucking Locke.

His mind immediately shifted into a defensive position. He considered the full weight of Matthew's selfish turn. Yes, both companies would benefit from yesterday's announcement, Via more than ICP. The real win for ICP, and for William personally, was in the merger that would have enabled him to retire with the satisfaction of having stuck it to PCSoft and Future Processing.

He considered his company's current line of portable computers and their dependence on the world's leading processor and software companies. Lessening that dependence was what had motivated him to pursue Via, which six months earlier couldn't possibly have competed against the dynamic duo. But yesterday's strategic alliance with ICP gave Matthew and Via just the fighting chance they needed, and William knew he would look like a fool if he were suddenly to pull the plug on the alliance.

More than once there had been rumors of a PCSoft/Future Processing merger. Both companies had at various times over the last decade entered into very brief

discussions with William about working more closely together, each unsubtle in its genuine interests. Acquiring one company or the other was an option, but the price for either would be extraordinary. And a merger? Certainly not on William Harrell's watch. Both companies were enormously successful, and headed by extremely capable chiefs. No, William was not about to join forces with either of them.

He supposed his only option now would be to approve the accelerated development of his company's long-delayed BPX computer. Despite the assurances of his technology adviser, the BPX wasn't nearly as compelling as Via's At Hand PC, especially now that the Plus was rapidly gaining market share. Damnable Locke. William had underestimated him. How could he have missed the double cross? Had there been any hint of it?

He recalled their meeting of four months ago, when Locke had brought him the detailed strategy report. He thought about how perturbed Matthew had become when the conversation had turned to Peter Jones. For Christ's sake, William had been so worried about Jones and his next move, he'd never once considered the sort of reversal Matthew had just pulled. The audacity of it. The unabashed ego. Did Locke suddenly fancy himself of Jones's caliber? Of his, William Harrell's, caliber? And who was he kidding? Hadn't his own bruised ego, for fucking up by not buying PCSoft when he'd the chance, fueled his revenge? Motivated him to concoct the deal in the first place?

He swore loudly in disgust and stamped his shoe onto the open At Hand PC Plus on the floor, cracking the screen and keyboard. It was a childish act, but it felt good all the same. His chauffeur cautiously asked if he would perhaps like to go to the doctor or back home. William apologized for the outburst and asked the chauffeur to circle the park a while longer. He wasn't ready to go to the office just yet.

Feeling a little less bombastic, he looked at the

smashed At Hand on the floor and sighed. He picked it up and turned it over. A couple of keys fell out like broken teeth. The trackpad dangled and swayed by its slender ribbon cable, a hypnotist's watch. He angrily flicked it with his finger but it didn't break off. He flicked it again, harder, but it still held fast. He laughed in spite of himself, and dropped the whole mess onto the seat beside him, looking once more at the trackpad.

He stared out the window and worked through the possibilities. A minute later he turned back to the smashed At Hand PC Plus. He picked it up in one hand and wrapped his other hand around the hanging trackpad. He gave a hard yank, and the flat device ripped free. He tossed the computer aside and turned the trackpad over in his palm.

And then it occurred to him—a possibility so obvious he'd nearly missed it.

Dialing his secretary on his mobile phone, he had a moment to remember a question he had once posed to himself: Without Jones, could Via manage to hold on to its prized disposition? The answer to that question was still beyond him, but maybe not for long.

When his secretary answered he explained that his computer was on the blink, and asked her to look up a phone number for him. He wrote down the number, thanked her, said he would be in a little later than usual, then hung up. He assured his driver that he was feeling better now, and asked him to keep driving around the park.

He observed the trackpad in his palm once more before closing his hand around it. He gave it a little shake for good luck, then dialed up his oldest friend in the business.

Peter stared absently at the clock on the yellow cinder-block wall. The red second hand crept slowly around the face, and it was the only thing he could concentrate on.

The smell of the place made him feel ill, and he wasn't interested in any of the worn-out magazines piled on the end table beside his hard orange plastic chair.

He shifted his weight, tried to find a more comfortable position. It was impossible. He'd been sitting here for hours, dozing on and off, staring at the clock. The red hand continued its agonizing clockwise passage, and he prayed for it to go even slower. Time itself had never seemed so precious. Each second offered more hope, a greater chance of survival for his unborn baby.

His baby.

At first he had refused to believe the doctor, insisting there'd been a mistake, a mix-up, that he and Ivy Green were merely acquaintances, nothing more. They double-checked Ivy's admission form and explained what she had put down. That he was the only man she'd been with in more than a year, and afterward there hadn't been any others. The doctor offered to conduct a simple blood test that would settle the matter, but Peter declined.

It was his baby, and he prayed she wouldn't deliver it. Not just yet. It needed more time. Weeks, if possible. The physician told him the survival rate for a twenty-eight-week infant was roughly ninety-five percent. He assured Peter that even if she were to deliver prematurely, the baby would most likely come out fine. Still, the longer she could hold off, the better.

Sitting there watching the clock, he thought back to their night together. She'd been so desperate and edgy. He remembered the white powdery circles around her nostrils. When he inquired about her state of mind and general health, the doctor said she was weak and had admitted to using drugs during the pregnancy. They'd administered medication that was supposed to postpone labor, to try to keep the baby in the womb for as long as possible. With her weakened condition working against them, the chances of the drugs doing the job were slim. They could only wait and see.

And so he sat waiting in the uncomfortable sitting area away from the general maternity ward, where anxious relatives talked nervously among themselves as they sweated through the hours. Peter was the only person seated here, in the neonatal care ward. He stared at the clock once more, wondered what he would do if the baby was born today. Or next week. Or whenever, for that matter.

Even if they were successful in postponing the birth, there was no running from the fact that he was about to become a father. What the hell would he do? And Ivy? Would she expect him to marry her? Naturally his thoughts drifted to Kate.

He thought about their talk a few months ago, the evening they'd dined with the Holmeses for the first time. Asking if she was ready to think about marriage. About adopting a baby of their own. Christ almighty.

At around noon, another doctor introduced himself and sat down to speak with Peter.

"How's she doing?" Peter asked, but by the doctor's expression he could tell something was wrong.

"Not like we hoped. The medications slowed her contractions, but she broke water and we're going to have to induce labor now. You need to sign some authorization forms."

He nodded, too fatigued to ask any questions. The doctor promised they'd do their very best and then hurried through the metal double doors at the end of the hall.

A nurse returned with a clipboard and a stack of paper. She flipped through the documents, pointed out where he was to sign. She offered to bring him a soda or coffee, but he declined.

With nothing left to do but wait, he returned to his hard seat, stared at the clock, and wondered about the unexpected new life that was about to enter his own.

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Grace Holmes answered on the second ring and greeted William warmly. He asked if Byron was in, and a moment later Byron was on the line shouting a hearty greeting. They chatted briefly, and Byron commented on yesterday's big announcement. "Quite a shocker."

"Indeed," William agreed. "And how are things coming along up there?"

"Oh, not bad. You know, too cold to fish or swim, so we mostly sit around the house and play poker, eat our strained veggies."

William laughed politely, but it was evident he had something on his mind, and Byron called him on it.

"You're right. I'm actually checking up on your hobby, as you called it."

"Well now, that's more like it. Got your curiosity aroused, does it?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"It's good stuff, Billy. Though we've hit a bit of a snag."

"How so?"

"Peter had to go back to California. Had some business to deal with."

"His resignation?"

Byron scoffed. "That's not even out to the press yet. How the hell did you hear already?"

"Inside source."

"Well, it's true. He's dumping most of his stock, putting a big chunk into our project. I'm matching him dollar to dollar, of course."

"So you guys are serious?"

"Oh yes. More than ever, after yesterday. Peter was damn upset about the deal you guys announced. Nothing personal, you understand. It's Locke. A lot of sore feelings on that front."

William couldn't agree more; however, he kept his own disappointment in Locke to himself. Instead, he stuck to his real interest. "Listen, I'd like to ask a favor."

“Anything.”

“Let me have a look.”

Byron whistled into the phone. “I don’t know, Billy. I mean, far as I’m concerned you’re always welcome. But I can’t say Peter will feel the same way.”

“I can respect that. However, I can and do respect him, too. I assure you we wouldn’t have done yesterday’s deal if it weren’t for Jones’s past efforts and vision. It was all because of his genius. Tell him that.”

Byron thought for a moment. “Let me talk to him, Billy. I can’t promise anything.”

“That’s all I’m asking, my friend. When does he get back?”

“That I don’t know. He’s got some personal business to sort out. Could be days, could be weeks. Months, even. I’m waiting to hear from him myself so I better get off the line.”

“Fair enough,” William said. He thanked his friend and hung up the phone.

His chauffeur smiled at him in the rearview mirror and commented that he was looking better, more like his old self.

William smiled agreeably and told the driver he’d had enough of Central Park for one morning. “Time for me to get back to work.”