

## >CHAPTER 4

William Harrell plodded through his morning in the usual fashion. Three meetings. Fourteen phone calls. Then on to his daily correspondence.

He kept a constant eye on his E-mail, awaiting confirmation from his secret partner. He knew it wasn't likely to come until early evening, but he kept checking anyway, in case the plan had gone awry.

At eleven-forty-five he left ICP headquarters for a ten-block ride to an exclusive men's athletic club. The membership list read like the Fortune 100. One of the club's perks was its "random matches," which pitted high-level executives from dissimilar industries against one another in squash and racquetball. The president of an insurance company, for instance, might be paired with the CEO from one of the major networks. Or, in William Harrell's case, the chairman of the world's largest computer company might compete with the chairman of the world's biggest food and beverage conglomerate.

Back from his workout, he glanced at the clock. In five minutes his technical and business advisers would arrive to discuss the company's portable computer strategy. He took the free time to stretch his sore arms over his head. He was back in the game again, and it felt good. In fact, better than ever.

He thought back to a particularly memorable match, a little more than two years ago, against Rolland Worthy, head of International Foods. The game had changed his life. He gave an appreciative shake of his head as he recalled the match, when Worthy had asked him:

“What do you know about Via?”

The hard rubber ball struck the wall and blasted at him. Thrown off by Worthy's unexpected question, his judgment slipped and he overextended. The ball hurtled by, costing him a point.

Worthy gave a hearty laugh. “What, I hit a nerve?”

Harrell crouched. “They're a small Silicon Valley company that makes a proprietary portable computer.” He bounced on the balls of his feet, ready for Worthy's serve.

The executive tossed the ball into the air and nailed it with his racket, then dropped quickly to a defensive stance, his actions fluid and youthful. They smashed the ball back and forth, and Harrell's fourth return forced Worthy into a corner, where he crashed, unable to save the ball.

“Gonna make it?” William Harrell joked.

Worthy rolled his shoulder and took position. “Serve the bastard.”

As the match played out, Harrell's curiosity gnawed at his game. Why was Worthy interested in Via? The older executive's timing couldn't have been more apt. Or William's worse, as his curiosity started to cost him the match and he missed one point after another.

The small competitor had in fact been the topic of Harrell's meeting prior to the match. His business adviser had assured him that ICP's new Business Part-

ner portable computer had quickly gained nearly twice the market share of Via's older Mate system. But William Harrell knew too well how a tiny company could suddenly turn into a tremendous opponent. He'd learned that lesson with PCSoft, which had the giant ICP—and every other hardware maker—in the palm of its hand, earning a healthy licensing fee for every system that shipped with its prominent PortaPC OS. William would never live down his error of not buying PCSoft when it was still a fledgling start-up company. Now PCSoft ruled the industry, from portable to desktop to the Web, and its all-encompassing eye on the future searched even further, to computers in cars, in kitchens, in classrooms, and beyond, into the heavens, to the satellites that beamed consumer broadcasts around the world. They wanted it all. And partnered with Future Processing—makers of the CPU at the heart of ICP's and everyone but Via's computers—they were well on their way to having it all. Although ICP was many times larger than either PCSoft or Future Processing in billions of sales, the public nonetheless perceived ICP as a has-been player in the desktop and portable market.

Bottom line, William Harrell admired Via. Small as it was, Via was the only competitor playing to its own tune. And succeeding at it, however marginally. Despite the fact that Via's market share was dwarfed by the installed base of PCSoft/Future Processing systems, the public revered the legendary company. And it adored Via's eccentric founder, Peter Jones.

And that was what had William Harrell so troubled. Jones had been too quiet lately. Once the most outspoken voice against PCSoft's dominant and often suspect business practices, Jones had all but disappeared. He hadn't granted a public interview in more than a year. Harrell could only guess that Jones had something up his sleeve. Possibly big. Yet at the same time, Harrell had his doubts. It was no secret that Jones was a poor chief, and that without proper guidance Via would even-

tually run itself into the ground.

So Harrell was caught off guard when, as they headed for the showers after the match, Rolland Worthy explained his interest in Via.

“This is completely off the record, my friend.” William Harrell assured the older executive that it would stay that way, and Worthy continued. “They called one of my best guys. Matthew Locke. Flying him to California to interview for the president and CEO slot.”

“Interesting,” Harrell said casually.

Worthy grunted. “As you know, I’ve been grooming Locke to take my seat when I retire in a few years. Anyway, he came to me saying he’d gotten a call from a headhunter to go out and meet this kid named Peter Jones.”

“Will he accept?”

Worthy shrugged. “Too soon to say. I think he wanted me to guarantee him my job now, retire sooner. When I told him I wasn’t ready for that, he said maybe he wasn’t either. He flew out to California this morning. What I don’t get is what would some hippie computer nerds want with a guy who sells soda pop and chips?”

Harrell knew exactly what Via would want him for: the consumer market. Yes, Peter Jones had something up his sleeve all right. No doubt something huge. And to make it fly, he was trying to lure an executive who knew the consumer market inside and out.

Despite his hot shower, William Harrell felt a chilling apprehension creep in when he considered the possibilities. Not since his wife had begun her slide into the final stages of cancer had he felt that same uncertainty about the immediate future.

But that day was history. And, Harrell mused, history was being made today, at this very moment, on the opposite coast. Indeed, Rolland Worthy’s surprise disclosure had disturbed William Harrell enough to cost him the match. But not the game. Indeed, his secret contender waited in the wings: a player who would combine

forces with Harrell and ICP to challenge the dominant PCSoft/Future Computing. The stage was set.

William Harrell checked his E-mail again. Finding no word yet, he waited. He was the leader of one of the most powerful companies in the world, a position he'd gained by operating at top speed, always anticipating the next move. But for once, he could afford to be patient.

He'd bet his career on it.

Peter charged out of the company parking lot and raced for the highway, tears streaming down his face. He was disgusted by his reaction. Instead of outrage, he felt anguish. Instead of opposition, defeat. The damage was done and he knew it was irreparable. Matthew had stolen the company out from under his nose. They had all turned against him.

Waiting for the on-ramp stoplight to change, Peter looked in his mirror at the Via logo, just as he had yesterday. The irony made his throat tighten, and he bit down on his lip to keep himself from turning hysterical. He looked away, then tore onto the highway, his foot heavy on the gas pedal.

How could he have let it happen? Missed the warning signs? Not seen that Matthew wouldn't be content with a second-place role? The tables had turned, and now Matthew was the star. He had played Peter as a pawn in a secret game of chance. And Peter had lost. Everything.

He hit seventy-five miles an hour and fantasized about cutting the wheel and ending it all in a terrific blaze. His knuckles were white. Even the car was a fucking prop. He thought of Matthew zipping around in the same model, and shouted to himself. Did Locke think it was all just a game of pretend? Take the top spot and suddenly you're an inventor? A visionary?

It was impossible to believe he was no longer in charge. He tried to picture Matthew taking over the At

Hand PC Plus project, marching into the engineering group with intricate schedules and an army of bozo project managers. And suppose Locke actually pulled it off, what then? Why, he would take all the credit for it, of course.

His stomach gave a painful heave as reality began to creep in. All he wanted was his company. His products. His life. Back to the way it was before all of this had happened. And then he remembered last night. What he had done. His heart raced faster. He'd blown it on that front, too.

Then it hit him. How any of this could happen in the first place. It was so obvious. He'd been used. They'd used him. All of them. Matthew. The executive staff. The board. They'd been using him for their own selfish gains. And when they were done with him they'd thrown him away.

His car phone jingled and he punched it, knocking it to the floor, then rubbed his eyes with the back of his bleeding knuckles.

No more talking. It was too late for that. They'd done enough damage. And he'd let it happen. Well, never again. No more being used. It was time for a change. Time to cut away from those who had stolen from him. It was the only way, he decided, and pressed harder on the accelerator. And after what he'd just been through, it would be easy.

He would start with Ivy.

"I think he answered but then he hung up," Matthew's secretary said as she put down her handset.

"Forget it," Matthew said. He closed his office door, took off his jacket, and dropped heavily into his chair. Leave it alone, he told himself. Leave him alone. It had to be this way. There was no other way. Though he had once sincerely cared for Peter, this was business, and nobody ever said business was easy.

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He had hoped that things would turn out differently. That Peter would see the value in his suggestion to widen the business through alliances and the like. It had been a lot to hope for. Too much, really. Peter Jones was a renegade, and his unwillingness to change had cost him his company.

Matthew turned around in his chair to face his docked At Hand PC computer. His. He closed his eyes and let the thought fully sink in. He was dizzy with a strange mix of elation and remorse. The first phase of his plan had worked. They had chosen him to run Via, and Peter could no longer stand in his way. He was free to move on to the next step, and while this was what he'd wanted, he felt terrible when he pictured Peter's expression as he stood at the boardroom door looking back in disbelief, unable to speak.

He opened his eyes and stared at his At Hand PC's monitor, animated by a screensaver of spinning Via logos. He tried to envision a new logo. One that merged Via's far-reaching vision with the rock-solid might of the world's largest computer company.

The perfect design eluded him for the moment. He was getting ahead of himself. In time, though, all in time. He looked at the clock and calculated that it was going on 6:00 p.m. in the East. He scooted forward and moved the At Hand's mouse to wake it up. He loaded his E-mail program. He had worded the message a thousand times in his head over the last two years, never entirely sure how it would turn out. Until now.

He typed:

**TO: wharrell@icp.com**  
**SUBJECT: Status**

**I have been granted full support by the board and executive staff to take over all senior management responsibilities at Via, including the development of the At Hand PC Plus, which will be ready for release**

in three months.

**Peter Jones has been chartered with overseeing the development of future Via products. It is unclear at this time whether he will accept his new role.**

**We will proceed, and succeed, regardless.**

—Matthew

He clicked the Send button and let out an exhausted sigh when the message vanished from his screen. At the same time there was a soft knock on his door, and he turned around to greet Laurence Merrill.

“You okay?” The young corporate communications officer looked at him with genuine concern in her eyes.

“I guess it’s the suddenness of it all.” He wiped his shirtsleeve across his brow. “It’s still sort of a shock.”

She nodded sympathetically. “Your statement’s out to the press.” She handed him a printed list. “Here are the journalists you’re scheduled with.”

He scanned the list. “Half of them were in the running for the bio coauthor job.” He stopped on one name. “How come Ellis is crossed out?”

“I called each of them this morning to say you’d chosen Janice Lane of *Fortune* to coauthor your autobiography. They all took it like pros, and wished you and Janice Lane the best of luck. Except Joshua. He was pissed. He was sure the job was his, so he quit the *Examiner* yesterday. Not very smart. Anyway, shall we get started?”

Matthew briefly considered calling the dejected journalist to offer a word of consolation, but then decided against it. He had more important calls to make. He went back to the first name on the list, a reporter at the *Wall Street Journal*. He picked up the phone and dialed. And in the moment it took the journalist to answer, the reality finally set in: This was his first call in his new

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role, as Via's most powerful leader.

He was greeted warmly, and given the benefit of the doubt.

For now.