

## >CHAPTER 6

Returning by limousine to his palatial home, William Harrell proceeded directly to his impressive home office. He powered on his Via At Hand PC and reflected on his day as he waited for the system to start up.

Word of the coup at Via had spread like wildfire over the company's E-mail system. It was the top story on all the afternoon business wires and news programs. Wall Street reacted negatively to the news, sending Via's stock on an eight-point plunge by the close of the day.

Because of the Via shake-up, William Harrell's afternoon meeting with his two most senior advisers had been extremely trying. His advisers saw Via's suddenly vulnerable position as a huge opportunity for ICP. They suggested to Harrell that he immediately accelerate the development of the BPX ultraportable computer, which was currently in the proof-of-concept stage. His marketing expert produced hastily composed figures and charts projecting the potential market share Via might achieve if it proved successful in getting its rumored At Hand

PC Plus to market in the next three months. He asserted that ICP's window of opportunity to announce its own competitive product was small, and they had to act fast.

Ordinarily, Harrell would have agreed wholeheartedly with his advisers, and approved the additional budget and manpower required to speed the BPX to market. To his advisers' astonishment, however, he objected, saying that the company would continue with its plan to upgrade its current, more conventional BP portable model.

What his advisers had revealed was exactly what he and his secret partner, Matthew Locke, already knew, and were betting on. His advisers had no way of knowing that their fears of Via's cutting into ICP's potential market share would hardly be a worry in the not-too-distant future. On the contrary, it would be cause for celebration. The deal was under way, but ICP's part in it was a secret, and would remain so for the time being, until the next phase was complete.

Sitting at his antique desk, Harrell smiled when he imagined how his advisers would react if they found out he was using an At Hand PC at home, instead of ICP's more traditional clone PC. He started the At Hand's E-mail program. More shocking, he thought, would be the dinner conversation he and Matthew Locke had had here in his home, a little over two years ago. They would have thought him mad.

And at the heart of the matter, he was, but not the sort of mad associated with insanity. Rather, his was the get-even kind of mad. The type of anger that can force a man in William Harrell's position to think very hard about his competition and how to crush it. And he wasn't thinking of the tiny Via, either. His sights were set on a more formidable nemesis: PCSoft. And to a lesser, but no less meaningful, extent, the software giant's partner in global PC domination, Future Processing, which manufactured the CPUs that ran PCSoft's PortaPC operating

system. Together, they ruled the computing world.

It was William Harrell's greatest ambition to challenge that reign, and eventually topple it. But despite ICP's size, he knew he could not do it on his own. He would need a partner.

And in Matthew Locke, he had found it.

He owed it all to that squash match with Rolland Worthy, when the International Foods chairman had mentioned that Locke was being pursued by Via. Instead of returning directly to his office after the game, he asked his driver take a slow spin around Central Park. Flipping through news channels on the limo's portable TV, Harrell paused on a commercial that never ceased to amuse him in its audacity. It was for the Remington brand of electric shaver. The commercial in which Victor Kiam says he liked the product so much, he bought the company.

And then it hit William, the germ of the deal. He picked up his car phone and dialed Matthew Locke's office at International Foods. Locke was away on business in California, his secretary said. Thanks to Worthy's disclosure, William knew why Locke was out west—he was being interviewed by Peter Jones for Via's number two spot. William asked the secretary to please have Locke call him as soon as he returned, and he did. Harrell invited him to dinner later in the week, and spent the next few days formulating his pitch. He knew it was a long shot, but he was enthused just the same. He was grateful too, for the idea was the first diversion powerful enough to distract him from grieving over the loss of his wife, Martha, who the year before had finally succumbed to a dreadful battle with cancer.

The two businessmen sat with cocktails in Harrell's library. Locke said frankly he was puzzled by Harrell's invitation, and wondered if it had anything to do with

Rolland Worthy. William admitted that Worthy had told him about Locke's trip to California to interview for the CEO job at Via. As the two men carried their drinks to the dinner table, Locke joked that he wasn't interested in interviewing for the same spot at ICP.

Harrell's response surprised Matthew. "That's not exactly what I had in mind. Yet." They sat down to the meal, served by Harrell's butler.

"I'm not sure I follow," Matthew said. "Via builds portable, proprietary computers that aren't compatible with the best-selling clones running the PortaPC operating system—your own computers included. Those aside, ICP's real business is in mainframes. Communications. The heavy stuff. Why the dinner? To size up a potential rival? I can't see how Via or I would concern you that much."

Harrell cut into his steak. "First, let me ask you something. Is there any real chance of you going to Via?"

"I'm seriously considering it."

"Clever of Jones to think of you. He's got something up his sleeve, doesn't he? Something he thinks might be a big hit with consumers. Which is obviously why he's calling on you, a champion in the market."

"Thank you. And yes, he is up to something. Maybe big."

Harrell set down his knife and took a sip of wine as he pushed his plate aside. "I'm going to be frank, Matthew. And if what I have to say does not interest you, I'll understand. All I ask is that you entertain the idea."

Matthew Locke nodded noncommittally. He felt no obligation to stop eating while the other man talked.

"A few years ago I made the biggest blunder of my career when I didn't buy PCSoft. As you know, we built the first PC. And then the first laggable PC. Both outfitted with a Future Processing CPU. We'd contracted PCSoft to write the original operating system, and we sold a shitload of PCs. We were number one in the business. But it never occurred to us, to me, that the OS

would end up being what really counted. We're a hardware company. We think in units. PCSoft wanted us to buy them. We didn't. Two years later, when the cheap clones started eating our business, I realized what a terrible mistake I'd made. Now look at us. We're number five in PC sales. You're right, big hardware is our mainstay. But that may not always be the case. The smaller PCs are beginning to take over on the server side of the Web. And while we and a few others own that market right now, PCSoft's next-generation OS is being taken very seriously. So they not only have the PC market, they're also making a huge push into the server and big-business MIS side too."

Mathew had forgotten his meal. He was intrigued by this elder executive's grasp of the industry. However, being brand-new to it himself, he did not see how Via fit into any of it, and said so.

"That's the kicker," Harrell said. "Which is where you come in. And my secret plan, for lack of a better term. To make ICP the PC giant we once were."

"But I still don't see how—"

"Exactly. And neither will the competition. Surprise is the element. And here's how: you, Matthew Locke. While Via may not be the market leader in portable computers, they are by far the most innovative. I've toyed with the idea of spinning out a Via-like group of rebels here at ICP, but the board wouldn't buy it. They figure we count our losses, toe the PCSoft line, and keep licensing the OS for our systems just like everyone else. But I want to change that. I want to have our own OS. I want Via."

Matthew stared in disbelief. If he understood Harrell correctly, he was proposing that the two enter into a high-stakes business game, a big-league version of Monopoly, but with real billions of dollars instead of play money. It was insane. Bombastic. And utterly compelling.

"Why me?"

Harrell stood up and wandered over to the liquor cabinet. He poured two glasses of Scotch, and suggested they continue the conversation in the library. They sat in stately leather armchairs. Harrell sipped his Scotch and sized up Locke over the rim of his glass.

“I’ve done my homework. Matthew Locke: youngest vice president in International Foods history. And one of the youngest ever VPs in the Fortune 100. Accountable for ten times as many millions as your closest peer. The feather in your cap? Orange Fresh. The fastest-moving soft drink brand in history. Brilliant.”

Matthew acknowledged the astute assessment with a small tilt of his tumbler. “But computers are a whole different game. Who’s to say I’ll have the same success?”

Harrell brightened. “Ah, but there’s Peter Jones. Smart, innovative. But a dreadful exec. Which is why he needs you. To run the business, while he invents the products. It’s a marriage made in heaven.”

“I’m not so sure. He’s got very strong ideas, possibly the strongest I’ve ever encountered. Why don’t you just offer to buy his company?”

Harrell chuckled. “You know what he calls us? IC-Pee-Pee. He’s gone on record saying that we’re so big we piss all over ourselves like a puppy when it comes to thinking small. And he’s right. Which is why I want him, and his company.” Harrell waved his glass expansively. “Say you accept the job. You go in there, learn the business, learn from Jones. And at the same time, you work on him. Subtly at first. Small suggestions. Ideas on how Via might consider partnering with ICP. Start with compatibility. Move on to licensing. Small steps. Until eventually, we merge.”

Matthew’s mind was racing. He had a million questions. But before he could speak, Harrell leaned forward in his chair and gave the final push.

“Look, Matthew. I’m just a few years from retiring. To this day, everyone in the company, the industry, still thinks me a fool for not having bought PCSoft when I

had the chance. And they're right. I was a fool. I made a terrible mistake. And because of that mistake we, once the leader in the PC business, are at their mercy. For now, it's small-scale numbers on our bottom line. But the public perception has us down as a loser. And the future? The PCSoft server software is moving in at an unprecedented rate, so God only knows.

"But I know one thing. By the time I retire, I want ICP to be well on its way to commanding the fastest-growing market, the micro-notebooks, handhelds and palm-size devices. I believe Via can get us there. And with your track record, I believe you can get us there.

"I can see what you're thinking: What's in it for you? Let's just say when I retire, you could very well find yourself sitting in a very powerful position. So, what do you say?"

"Yes," William now whispered to himself, years later, as his E-mail program revealed the message he'd been waiting for from Matthew Locke. He read it quickly, and was mildly concerned by how it ended. The news reports had been vague about where Peter Jones ultimately fit into today's upheaval at Via. According to Locke, the chances looked slim that Jones would agree to stay on in a development role. While losing Jones had always been a possibility in the deal, it was one that William Harrell sincerely hoped to avoid.

As he moved to turn off the computer, he paused to consider his fingertip resting on the At Hand PC's trackpad. It amazed him that a device could evoke such a feeling of continuity, repose. That a computer could look so gorgeous, unlike anything ICP or any other PC company had ever created.

It caused William Harrell to wonder: Without Peter Jones, could Via hold on to its prized disposition?

It was a disquieting question.

Peter groggily awoke to a familiar, comforting scent. He threw an arm over his eyes to block out the overhead light and lay there listening to her moving around in his room, opening and closing his closet and drawers.

His head was pounding and he moaned.

“Hey, you,” Kate said tenderly.

He uncovered his face to find Kate crouched before him. He propped himself up on one elbow, then plopped back down on the pillow, too dizzy to rise just yet.

“How you doing?”

He shrugged and met her eyes. He had to tell her. He knew it was best to just come out with it. Get it over with. Let the last twenty-four hours go down as a complete failure. He propped himself up again, shook his head, unable to speak.

“It’s okay. I’m here now.”

He nodded, looked past her, and saw the luggage.

“What’s all that for?”

“We’re going away for a bit.”

He yawned. “We are?”

“Yep. To the Maine house for a little while.”

“Okay,” he said, offering no argument.

She rested her cool hand on the back of his neck and kissed his forehead. “But first we’re going to give you a good hot shower. Come on.” She gently helped him up and out of the room.

In the bathroom she went about undressing him while he held on to the towel bar to keep from tipping over. She turned on the shower and dipped her hand in the stream and adjusted the temperature.

He thought of Maine. The sun. The sea. The distance. It was a brilliant idea. And once they arrived, maybe then it would be easier to tell her. He looked at her. Yes, he would definitely wait to tell her.

“Kate?”

“Hmm.”

“You’re an artist.”



“Mmm-hmm.”

“Well, I was wondering. About when you’ve created something. When it’s something really good.”

“Like a CD? Or, let’s see, a handheld computer?”

“Yeah. Like those.”

She helped him over to the shower, and he paused before stepping in.

“So when it’s all done, you have it to hold in your hands, and you’re really finished with it. You can keep going back to it, but no matter how great it is, it’s history. So I want to know: Do you ever feel when it’s like that, done, you’ll never be able to do it again? Anything ever again?”

“All the time, love. All the time.” She took his chin in her hand and kissed him lightly on the lips. “But no matter how impossible it may seem, it comes back. If you did it once, you can do it again.”

“Promise?”

“You know it.”

“Good. Will you come in here with me?”

“Yes.”

