

# **PART II**



## >CHAPTER 7

Eating breakfast in the nearby café had become part of Peter's morning routine. The waitress greeted him as he sat down with his usual pile of newspapers. She brought him a cup of coffee, a scone, and a glass of orange juice.

For years Peter had retreated across the country to the quaint town of Camden, Maine, popular in the summer with executives and their families from the eastern cities. He was grateful for the privacy that his vacation home provided. He'd let his hair grow longer, and maintained a close-cropped bright blond beard. With his deep tan he looked more like a surfer than a high-tech legend, and over the past three months he'd been recognized by only a few executives around town. Today, however, anyone reading the *New York Times* would see a small picture of him on the front page of the business section. It was one of the older stock photos, maintained by Via's public relations department and distributed to news agencies upon request. Beside it was a more recent photo of

Matthew. Any local readers who suspected it was Peter they'd spotted skulking around town would have no doubt now. And after finishing the story, it was entirely possible they might feel a pang of sympathy for him.

VIA UNVEILS IMPROVED  
HANDHELD COMPUTER

San Jose, CA – Via, Inc. today announced a more powerful version of its handheld computer, the At Hand PC Plus. The device offers a faster processor, more built-in memory, an external CD-ROM drive, a modem, and a brighter display. Analysts say the computer's most significant improvement is its handwriting-recognition software, which advance testers report is "99 percent better than the original; it's incredibly accurate." Most blame the original At Hand PC's clouded handwriting-recognition software for the product's stymied sales.

No pricing information was announced; however, sources at CompuStore, the nation's largest computer dealer, report the new At Hand PC Plus will retail for the same price as its predecessor. The company plans to upgrade existing At Hand users "at a very low price."

Industry watchers are calling the introduction of the new model a feather in the cap for Via chairman and CEO Matthew Locke, who three months ago wrested power from the company's cofounder, Peter Jones, in a boardroom showdown.

"The At Hand PC Plus demonstrates Locke's ability to manage a high-tech company," said Elizabeth Leahy of Quest Market Research.

"We're very excited about the At Hand PC Plus," Locke said in a telephone interview. "We were caught in a perception problem. While the handwriting input method is only one way to work with the At Hand PC, early reports led potential buyers

to believe that the unit didn't work. That wasn't entirely true then, but it is especially untrue now. The handwriting recognition is solid, fast, and accommodating of everyone."

In his new role as Via head, Locke reorganized the company's formerly separate engineering groups, consolidating resources on the completion of the At Hand PC Plus, "speeding the new and improved model to market three months ahead of schedule," according to company spokesperson Laurence Merrill. To enlist the support of software developers, Locke took to the road with early prototypes of the At Hand PC Plus. The company said three times as many applications will be available for the At Hand PC Plus by the end of the quarter.

PowerBase Software president Andrew Davidson believes today's Via introduction will make the At Hand PC Plus more appealing to buyers. "Via really delivered with the new [At Hand PC] Plus. We're ecstatic. It's got more room for bigger applications, which means our corporate clients can now consider it over the less-remarkable clones." PowerBase is the leading developer of large-scale database software. "We were frankly worried when Peter Jones departed," Davidson continued. "But Locke came to our offices in person with his engineering managers and showed us what they had. We jumped on it and we're now about 90 percent complete with our ProBase client software, which we ported over from the PCSoft version. I think Locke will do all right in his new role."

According to Merrill, Jones is "on sabbatical" in New England. A source close to the company said that Jones was offered a "visionary-at-large role" after being ousted by Locke and the company's board of directors. However, Via officials declined to comment on whether Jones intends to return to the company in a nonmanagement role which ren-

ders him essentially powerless. “Matthew Locke and the rest of the executive staff are eager for Peter Jones to return after his vacation,” Merrill said.

Jones could not be reached for comment.

Peter folded the newspaper and sipped his orange juice. The news of Silicon Valley felt very far away. Everything felt very far away. He closed his eyes and turned his face up into the warm sun.

A moment later a shadow moved in front of him, blocking the sunlight.

“Think you’ll go back?”

Peter Jones opened his eyes to find an elderly man before him, a copy of the *Times* tucked neatly beneath his arm.

Peter eyed the stranger. “I don’t know.”

The man placed his large tanned and weathered hand on the back of the vacant chair opposite Peter. “Okay if I join you?”

“Sure.” Peter leaned back in his chair and watched the man settle down with an appreciative sigh. He removed his cap and signaled the waitress with a wave and an easy smile. Then he fixed his attention on Peter.

“Congratulations on the new product,” he said. He unfolded his newspaper and laid it over Peter’s copy. “Your whiskers threw me for a second or two, but I used to slack off on my shave now and then. Though not because I was trying for a low profile, nothing like that.”

“It wasn’t my product,” Peter said, stroking his light beard unconsciously.

The man drew a pen from his pocket, lifted his thumb and winked one eye shut to look Peter over like an artist gauging his subject. “Hold still. I want to get this right.” He then proceeded to draw a mustache and beard on Peter’s newspaper photo.

Peter was amused.

“Well,” the man went on, taking up their conversation without looking up from his sketch, “you weren’t there for the big show. But it is your product, just the same. Congratulations, son.”

Peter shrugged and did his best to smile appreciatively.

The waitress arrived and greeted the man with familiar warmth. The man shoved the newspaper across the table for the waitress to see. “What do you think? Resemble our man here?”

She viewed the photo and smiled politely, unaware that she was looking at the same person. She seemed to take it all in stride, as though the stranger joked like this all the time. “Let’s see. A mineral water and a bagel, very lightly toasted, with just a smudge of low-fat cream cheese, right?”

The man smiled graciously. “Precisely, my dear. Thank you. And anything for you, Mr. Jones?”

“I’m fine, thanks.” Peter sipped his coffee, while his companion closed his eyes and turned his smiling face into the sun. Looking at him, Peter felt a dim recognition. Had he met the man before? There was something about the cynicism in his eye. The way he had addressed Peter so frankly. Like he knew the business. Resting as he was, it was plain to see that he was well into his retirement years. Maybe seventy-five years old, Peter estimated.

The waitress returned with the man’s breakfast. “Here you are, Mr. Holmes.”

Peter heard the name but didn’t make the connection. Not right away, anyway. Instead, he was distracted by the man’s eyes. Open as they were, he suddenly looked ten years younger. The stranger’s gaze fixed on Peter.

“Isn’t easy walking away from something you’ve given birth to.” He squeezed some juice from the lime slice floating in the glass.

The statement was phrased like a question and Peter felt oddly compelled to respond. “No. It sure isn’t.” It

was the first he'd spoken of his departure to anyone but Kate.

Except for her weekend visits from Los Angeles, he'd been alone the past three months. He'd spoken with hardly anyone, and then only when necessary. Ordering meals in restaurants. Paying for goods at the general store. Picking up his bundles of forwarded mail at the post office. He'd forgotten how good it could feel to talk to someone, even a stranger. Especially a stranger. But at the same time, Peter sensed that this man wasn't just any stranger.

"I hear you," the man said. "Same thing happened to me, sort of. Gave them fifty years of my life. Started when I was twenty. Not all that different from you. Yes sir, I remember how it felt."

"How's that?"

The man's voice turned solemn. "Like somebody chopped a chunk of my heart off." He gave Peter a searching look, his lively blue eyes full of understanding. "Sound about right?"

Peter looked into his empty coffee cup and nodded. They sat in silence while the man munched on his breakfast and sipped his water. He finished half the bagel, then pushed the plate aside and rubbed his hands together.

"Son, you're a bright boy. I know all about you. How old can you be, thirty?"

"Thirty-three."

"Hell," the man chuckled. "When I was your age, I was just warming up."

Peter crossed his arms and considered the man. What had the waitress called him. Mr. . . . ?

"Yes sir. Same age, in fact, when I invented a new system design. Sucker became the standard for the next many, many years." He sipped more water, jutted out his lower lip. "Still is."

"And what design was that?" Peter said. And then suddenly he knew. Before the man even answered, Peter deduced that there could be only one computer that had



been around that long.

“The 990.”

Peter tossed his head back and, for the first time in months, he laughed. Of course. Byron Holmes, inventor of ICP’s 990 series. The mainframe design around which ICP had built its business. Byron Holmes, son of Jonathan Holmes, founder of ICP.

“What’s so damn funny?”

Peter touched the man’s arm. “No, no, not funny. Crazy. That the two of us would meet like this. Please, go on. What did you do after the 990?”

“Revise, revise, revise.”

“I bet. Things sure moved slower back then, huh?”

“Back then? You make it sound like ancient history.” Peter could see that Byron Holmes was enjoying this as much as he was. “You kids from the Valley think your teensy computers are going to replace our big machines very soon, don’t you?”

Peter picked at his half-eaten scone. “I wouldn’t know. I’ve pretty much dropped out of the game.”

Byron Holmes rapped his fist on the table, causing Peter to jump in his seat. “Now that’s a load of crap and it doesn’t fly with me. The sour-face routine.”

“Well, it’s true,” Peter said, meeting Holmes’s intense stare. “I made that company what it is. And then it was taken away from me.”

“That’s craziness,” the older man said with a dismissive wave of his hand. He scooted his chair closer. “Boy, I’ll tell you something. After I made the 990 what *it* is, they moved me into top management. Sure, it was my dad’s company. But I had the right education for it. Double master’s, the hardware, and the business side. So I could have done it if my heart had been in it. But it wasn’t. All I wanted to do was make those big, beautiful machines. And management knew it. They suggested a ‘change.’ So eventually I stepped down, and they moved in another fellow. I felt like I’d maybe made a mistake. But in the long run, it was the right thing to do. Now he’s

the head honcho. And we're old friends to this day."

Peter's expression registered disbelief. "And you just sat back and let him make all the important decisions? Decide the fate of your products?"

"Damn straight. And I stuck around for a long time. Oh, I had a nice title, vice chairman, but I really only worried about the machines. I spent years evolving the 990 into the design it is today, which will probably see them through the year 2010, maybe a little longer."

"And then you just left? Retired? The way you talk about it, it sounds like it's still in your blood. Like you're still at it today."

"Had no choice. Heart attack. Makes a man reconsider things." Holmes paused and scratched his lightly sunburned nose. "Anyway, me and my wife have been enjoying ourselves like youngsters ever since. Not bad for seventy-four years young, you think?"

"I'm impressed," Peter said. "But it's not the same. I could run the company. With all due respect, you inherited yours. But I started mine from scratch. I know it better than anyone. They just didn't give me a chance."

The older man discounted the younger with another grandly dismissive wave. "Nah. You'll come around eventually. Can't have both, you know."

"I could."

Holmes's tone turned serious. "Listen, that's just pure, one hundred percent poppyshit." He poked a finger at Peter's shoulder. "You need to squeegee all that anger out of your system. Get over your hurt feelings. Then pick yourself up and get back out there. Do something bigger, better."

Peter was about to object when a handsome woman carrying a bag of groceries arrived at their table. She wore a light summery outfit and a wide brim hat. Byron brightened at her arrival.

She graced Peter with a warm smile. "Is this old man filling your ears with World War II stories?"

"I haven't even gotten to those yet." Byron stood

up, took the bag from his wife, and introduced Peter. "He's the boy who invented those pesky little computers everyone's running around with these days. He's also the best conversation I've had in a while. Mr. Jones, it's been a pleasure."

"Likewise."

The two men shook hands.

"We're not done with our discussion, Mr. Jones," Byron Holmes said with a pleasant smile. "How about you drop by our house for dinner, Sunday night?" He patted his shirt pocket for a pen.

"Thank you," Peter said, "that's very kind. But I've been pretty much sticking to myself. I'm not exactly the best company right now."

"Nonsense." The older man scribbled the Holmeses' address on a paper napkin. "Eight p.m."

Peter relented. "I'll be there," he said. "But I have a friend coming. Would it be all right if I brought her?"

"Can she dance?" Byron said.

"No, but she can sing."

Grace Holmes shushed her husband and smiled apologetically at Peter. "Of course," she said. "Please, bring her too."

The couple said good-bye and strolled off holding hands, leaving Peter to reflect on the encounter.

It wasn't completely unusual, since Camden was where many men like Byron Holmes spent their summers. Even so, it had been quite a kick to shake hands with the man whose surname was synonymous with the world's first tabulating machine. Small world, Peter mused. But then he modified his assessment, reasoning that he was from the small world, while Byron Holmes was from the big world. Yet as Holmes had pointed out, in the long run it didn't matter how big or small your brainchild. When it's yours, it's yours, and no one can ever take that away from you.

He looked at Holmes's fleeting sketch of him and smiled. For the first time since being forced from his

company, Peter Jones felt the smallest flicker of optimism.

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Greta read the *Times* coverage of Via with interest and frustration. Sipping her morning tea, she scrolled to the bottom of the Web version of the story and smirked at the mention of Peter Jones. While she was absolutely thrilled the pest was no longer on either her or Matthew's mind, things hadn't exactly advanced as she'd hoped they would.

Her progress with the At Hand PC was nothing short of prodigious. And Matthew was impressed. However, her expectation of recapturing his full attention now that Peter Jones was out of the way went unsatisfied. It seemed like Matthew spent more time in the office than before the boardroom coup. He'd become obsessed with the development of the At Hand PC Plus. He'd promised to get her one of the new models for herself, and at least that was something pleasant to look forward to. No one was more surprised than she by her interest in the computer. It had begun to change her view of not only Matthew's business, but the world at large, as crazy as that sounded.

She'd fallen into a satisfying routine of sorts, settling down before the computer each morning with her tea. First, her horoscope and the top news stories. Next, the arts and entertainment sites. Depending on what she read, her interests then sometimes shifted to the online shopping districts, to browse a favorably reviewed book, or perhaps to select an especially well received wine highlighted in one of the fine cuisine sites.

But she never spent more than an hour or so on this part of her routine. No matter how compelling a particular news story or topic, her anticipation to get to the really interesting stuff always won out. She still felt a little naughty about it, as though she were somehow

deceiving Matthew or being unfaithful. It was ridiculous, and she knew it. But at the same time, it was all so new, so *liberating*, that she couldn't help but feel she was doing something not quite right.

She closed the Web browser and switched over to the World Online chat groups. Checking her list, she saw that several "friends" were logged on at the same time. She still thought it strange to think of these people as friends. She had never met any of them in person. Yet in some ways she felt closer to some of them than the "real" women friends she'd made here in California. Most of her "real" friends she saw only at functions or dinner parties, the occasional baby shower. She never felt like she fit in. Most of the Silicon Valley wives bored her. Most had impressive educations, impressive estates and belongings, and flawless plastic surgery. They behaved like an elite sorority, to which Greta wasn't welcome. Her lack of a college degree probably had something to do with it. But in the company of so many seemingly perfect women, Greta became all the more aware of her shrouded imperfection. The gloves helped to cover it, but she believed they all knew what she was hiding. It was so embarrassing.

She glanced at her gloved left hand resting on the At Hand PC's keyboard. After the initial struggle she'd regained almost all of her impressive typing skills, making small adjustments to the keystrokes as necessary. Her friends on the other side of the screen knew nothing of her imperfection, and that was fine with her.

Also fine was the good friend she'd made, who greeted her now.

"Morning, the Gret One!" her friend typed.

"Hi, Gregor," she responded.

"We have to stop meeting like this. ☺"

He'd taught her how to use the At Hand's special function keys to create expressions of happiness, sadness, indecision. It was a whole new way of commu-

nicating, and she'd begun to express herself like never before.

"Down, boy. I've already told you I'm a married woman!"

"⊗."

"Now, now. No pouting, Gregor."

"Ah, but look. You didn't say happily. Happily married."

"Nice try. Well, maybe not *perfectly* happy today."

"Oh?"

"It's nothing. My husband is a very busy man, as I've mentioned. That's all."

"Mentioned, yes. But you've never said what it is that keeps him so busy. Are you sure he's not . . . Well, it's really not my place to suggest such a thing."

"Having an affair? Heavens no. No, the love of his life is his work. And today is an important day for him. Big news."

"Such as?"

Greta hesitated before going any further. She'd had only that one horrible encounter online, the first time she'd used the At Hand PC, with that Mr. or Mrs. Cooper person, whom she'd never again run into. She'd met Gregor during her second day online, when she'd nonchalantly dropped in on the Northern California Adults forum. He sent her a welcoming message, to which she politely responded. They chatted briefly, and when she realized he was trying to figure out if she was single, she immediately told him she wasn't. Even so, he remained the gentleman. And over the last three months she had grown quite fond of him. And she supposed she trusted him. It wouldn't hurt to tell him a little more. She typed:

"You said you use an At Hand PC too, right?"

"I love it. It's great. And I positively can't wait to get the new one they announced today. It's so cool!"

"Yes, well, that's what my husband does. He works for Via in an important position."

“I’m impressed!!!”

“So is the press, by what I’ve read. So that’s good. But Gregor, I have to admit, the company really does work its employees hard.”

“But from everything I’ve read, the employees love putting in long hours.”

“Hmm. I suppose. I don’t love it, though. I think it’s unhealthy.”

“☺. Poor Gret One. How about a hug.”

“You’re sweet. Thanks. I’m just feeling sorry for myself. Maybe after today, with the new computer done, my husband will finally take a breather. Plus, our anniversary is coming up in a few days, so maybe that will help things along. Anyway, enough about me and my life. How about you? How is your book coming along?” He’d revealed that he was working on a novel; however, he was very secretive about the details.

“Up and down. I hate the freelance crap I have to write to pay the rent. I wish I could afford to just write the novel. And then there are my medical bills, from throwing out my back at the gym that time. The doctor says I could fix it with this new microsurgery they do, but who can afford it? I told you I don’t have health care, and with this preexisting condition I can’t get coverage to take care of it. I know, I know, drag out the violins. . . .”

“Poor Gregor. Well, you won’t tell me a bit about your book, but from the way you write here I have a good feeling about it. You have a way with words.”

“Thank you, Gret One. And now will you finally tell me your real name?”

“Not a chance. I’ve probably said too much already.”

“Nah. You’re safe with me, Gret. Or is it Gretchen? That’s the most obvious guess.”

“No.”

“Hmm. Greta?”

She paused.

“Aha! Greta. Well, Gret One, your real name is

lovely.”

“Wise guy! Okay, is yours really Gregor?”

He paused.

“Aha yourself. Gregor. That’s a lovely name.”

“Gregor and Greta. ☺.”

“Right. The two Net addicts who should be busy doing other things than talking online.”

“You’re right. But Greta, if I may say something: I’m very happy I know you.”

“You too, Gregor.”

“I mean, really, really happy. ☺ ☺ ☺.”

“Me too.” She felt herself blush. She was flattered and touched, and even a little excited. She couldn’t remember the last time a man had spoken to her this way, least of all Matthew. “See. There you go. So smooth with words.”

“Well, I mean it. I’m sorry. You probably think I’m coming on to you again. Don’t worry. I promised you I wouldn’t try to pick you up.”

She didn’t know what to say.

“Uh-oh. Now I’ve blown it. I’ve offended you.”

“No. Just . . . I don’t know how to say it so I will just say it. Thank you, Gregor. You’re kind. And if things were different . . .”

She pressed the Send button, but then instantly regretted it. It wasn’t right to lead him on. She was a married woman. He was a single man. She had no idea what he even looked like. He had no idea what she looked like. It was crazy. And thrilling. She looked at a photo of herself and Matthew, on the bookshelf beside his desk. They were both smiling. It was at least ten years old. She turned back to the screen.

“Greta, I’ll just say this once. I’m here if you ever need me. For anything. To talk to. Or meet F2F sometime for coffee or a drink, or whatever.”

“F2F?”

“Face-to-face.”

She looked sadly at her gloved left hand. And she won-



dered: Would she have been unfaithful to Matthew by now if she didn't have her handicap? Then an even more disturbing thought entered her mind: Would she even be considering it if her hand hadn't been destroyed? It was one of those unanswerable questions, impossible to consider the one without the other—which was exactly how she felt about her once-perfect pair of hands.

"Greta, are you there?"

"Yes. I'm sorry. And I have to go now, Gregor."

"I've upset you. ☹️."

"No. You've just caused me to take stock, that's all."

"I hope you like what you see."

"Not exactly."

"Oh, Greta. I'm so sorry. I've messed up. Listen, I bet you are beautiful. I can tell by the way you talk."

"Thank you, you're very sweet, Gregor. But you can't tell such a thing by how someone types."

"But I can! I can tell. What do you think of me?"

She felt suddenly nervous. "I don't know."

"Come on. Try. I'll help you. I'm thirty yrs old. Dark brown hair. Nice smile. Gray eyes. And, let's see . . . I work out at a gym."

"So you're Tom Cruise. And I'm Nicole Kidman."

"Perfect match!"

"You're crazy."

"About you, Greta. 😊"

His unbridled sentiment startled her and she touched her hand to her chest. She'd gotten into a conversation she couldn't get herself out of now. The troubling thing was that she felt unusually attracted to him. With the few specifics he'd given her she formed an abstract picture of him in her mind. A young man. With a lovely smile. And a nice manner. And his lips? Enough, she told herself, feeling silly all of the sudden. This was getting out of hand.

"I really must go, Gregor. I'm sorry."

"Same time tomorrow?"

She paused. "Yes."

"All right, great. But wait. One more thing. Close

your eyes for a second.”

“My eyes?”

“Yes.”

“But how will I see the screen?”

“Just do it.”

She closed her eyes, waited a moment, then opened them.

“Kiss.”

“Oh,” she whispered in surprise, unconsciously touching her gloved fingertips to her lips.

Without another word she disconnected from the service and sat there for a long while, considering his final word and the oddly stimulating effect it had on her.