

>CHAPTER 8

Matthew Locke sat in his office and shuffled through a pile of transparencies, arranging them in the correct order. Today was an important day, and he wanted everything to be just right. He'd gotten his hair cut yesterday, the occasionally unruly black waves clipped a bit closer than usual. He wore neatly pressed khaki pants, a striped oxford shirt, burgundy loafers, and an irrepressible grin. Everything had come together perfectly over the last three months, and he was ready to move on to the next phase of his plan.

He looked through his office window to the opened boardroom door. Outside, the executives milled about the table piled with breakfast foods and beverages. He thought back to the last time they had all been called together like this, when they'd voted Peter out of the company. The contrast was obvious. But he warned himself against overconfidence. What he was about to propose would come as a surprise to the attendees.

His intercom beeped softly and he looked at his secretary, Eileen. She tapped her wristwatch. It was time.

He collected his presentation materials, thanked her, and nearly collided with Hank Towers, who was just coming out for seconds. They exchanged a pleasant greeting as Hank refilled his cup of coffee. Matthew waited for the vice chairman and then followed him back inside, relishing the quiet impression it would give the others: the company's two senior executives coming in together.

Matthew picked up at once on the good-natured feeling in the room, as the members of the board and executive staff finished their muffins and casual conversations. He set his transparencies beside the overhead projector and took his seat.

Hank raised a hand for quiet. "Before we get started, I just want to offer a word of congratulations, Matthew. Yesterday's unveiling of the At Hand PC Plus was a huge success. Dealers are falling all over themselves to get their hands on as many units as possible. Congratulations." The others around the table followed with congratulations, and someone clapped. Another pair of hands joined in, and then another, until the entire room was applauding his success.

He swept the table with a warm smile and thanked them, adding that the real congratulations should go to Alan Parker and his team of engineers for pulling off the job sooner than expected. No one mentioned Peter's name or contribution to the project. And that suited Matthew just fine.

Martin Cohen stood and announced the agenda, a copy of which rested before each person. The last item on the list was Matthew's presentation, titled "The Whole World in Your Hand: Opportunity Knocks."

The group spent ninety minutes covering the usual business, and then Matthew was up. "Should we take a break before I start?" He knew the title of his presentation had them all intrigued. This would be the first time

anyone but Peter Jones had presented a major company strategy for Via. No one stood or motioned for a break.

“Good.” He strolled over to the light switch and dimmed the room’s overhead lamps, then returned to the table and turned on the projector. He showed the first slide, the Via logo.

“At Via,” he began, “we’ve focused on the individual. One person, one computer. Truly personal computing. True to our company’s corporate culture, which prizes the individual.”

He changed slides, revealing a pie chart highlighting Via’s share of the handheld market. Via’s take was a mere sliver when compared with the rest of the pie, colored largely by the PortaPC standard owned by the combined efforts of PCSoft and Future Processing. He paused for a moment to let the image sink in.

“This is what we’re up against. While the At Hand PC Plus is a far superior product to the clones, they nevertheless dominate the market. This is due in large part to their compatibility with PCSoft-based desktop computers. Exchanging documents and E-mails between the desktop and PortaPC systems is easy, because they share exact or custom file types. One look at this chart is all it takes to see that we’re merely a bit player in the larger scheme of things.”

None of this was new to anyone around the table; however, it was important to reiterate before making his next point. He settled his next slide on top of the one already in place. The huge PCSoft/Future Processing section of the pie was now cut up into several smaller slices.

“But when you look at it this way, we’re not so tiny after all. Many of the various PCSoft-compatible hardware makers are smaller than we are. The company owning the largest slice of the PortaPC handheld market is, of course, ICP.” He took a sip of water, then continued. “International Computer Products is everywhere. There is hardly a big business, organization, or

government in the world that doesn't use an ICP mainframe or minicomputer for its processing. Which is why we need them."

Matthew's true meaning of this last went unnoticed at first—until he projected his next slide, which showed ICP and Via together sharing the single largest slice of the handheld market pie. Chairs squeaked as several of the executives leaned forward to settle elbows on the table. A questioning murmur rippled through the room.

He felt momentarily overcome by a profound feeling of power. Here he stood in the position that for the last decade had been occupied by Peter Jones, famous for his resentment of ICP and every other player in the PCSoft/Future Processing game. Yet with that one slide, it was plain for everyone to see that Matthew felt differently. As did everyone in the room. The murmur was building to a disconcerted chatter. He knew they would be surprised. And he also knew that it was up to him to turn that surprise into understanding. He spoke quickly.

"Please, before you jump to any conclusions, let me explain." Several executives voiced questions and concerns. Matthew lifted an open palm. "Please," he repeated, his voice rising slightly.

Hank Towers suddenly rapped his knuckles on the table. "Come on, people. Let's have quiet. Go on, Matthew."

"Thank you, Hank," Matthew said. He placed the next slide. The illustration showed the At Hand PC Plus alongside a row of popular PCSoft applications.

This time it was Hank who abruptly interrupted, his voice bordering on outrage. "Wait a minute, Matthew. Are you suggesting we build a clone, like everyone else?" The room erupted again with urgent questions.

"No, Hank. Not at all. Please, if you'll let me just explain."

Hank lifted a hand in apology. "I'm sorry. All right, no more interruptions, I promise. Go on."

Matthew tried to lighten the moment with a small

chuckle. A cold sweat broke on his back. He silently sucked in a deep breath, then pressed on with his plan.

“Am I proposing we build a clone? I wouldn’t think of it. Rather, I’d like you to imagine something. Imagine if the At Hand PC Plus were compatible not with PCSoft programs, but with the data they create. The word-processing documents. The spreadsheets. The E-mail messages. Contacts and schedules. All of the information created by the most popular PCSoft programs.”

He flipped the next slide into place, depicting a PCSoft word processing document on a clone screen, and the same document on the At Hand PC Plus screen. He spoke calmly and clearly as he voiced the first tangible piece of the secret deal.

“My suggestion is this: that we align ourselves with ICP to create the translation software to enable people to use the At Hand PC Plus as companion to their PCSoft-based desktop computer. I’ve had preliminary discussions with ICP’s chief, and he is willing to proceed. A strategic alliance between our companies would mean we bundle the ICP-created translation software with every At Hand PC Plus, giving us instant credibility with the large corporations that have so far resisted our product. And while ICP would continue to sell its own PCSoft-compatible handheld device, we also discussed the possibility of ICP co-selling the At Hand PC Plus as well, earning a royalty for each unit they ship. If the numbers are good enough, our strategic alliance could eventually mean that ICP would label their own version of the At Hand.”

The room was dead quiet as the full weight of Matthew Locke’s extraordinary proposition settled in. He quickly returned the combined ICP/Via slide to the screen, illustrating the huge chunk of the action that his idea projected. He noticed the sharpening looks around the table. He perceived in their calculating expressions their underlying interest: sales. Which would mean higher stock prices. Which in turn would translate to

greater riches for every one of them. As Matthew had anticipated, it always came down to the bottom line.

And so it came as no surprise that the first person to speak up was Hank Towers, the company's largest shareholder.

"It's brilliant," Hank said.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, Hank," Matthew said, shaking hands with Towers, the last person to leave the boardroom. The door silently swung closed behind the cofounder, and Matthew dropped heavily into one of the chairs. He crossed his hands behind his head and let out a huge, satisfied sigh. He closed his eyes and spent a few moments basking in the good feeling of his accomplishment.

He'd done it. The hardest part, veering Peter Jones's once-loyal followers toward ICP's wide-reaching arms, was over. With the support of the board and executive staff in the bag, the launch phase of the deal had finally moved into the open. He felt enormous relief, more confidence than ever. William Harrell would be equally delighted with his success. Their success. Things could not look brighter. The rewards would be astronomical.

At the sound of the door he opened his eyes. He smiled at the sight of Laurence Merrill.

She looked so refreshing in her light linen suit. Her straight honey-colored hair framed an intelligent face. She was carrying a bundle of press materials against her chest, and his eyes shifted briefly to her hands.

"How did it go?" Laurence asked.

"Great. Really great."

"That's wonderful, Matthew." Her enthusiasm was genuine. It was one of the things he liked most about her. "Ready for our meeting?"

"Absolutely." He rolled out the chair beside him. She seated herself and moved in closer to the table, and he edged a little nearer, very interested in what she had

brought.

“First, let me give you a quick update on the autobiography project. Janice Lane would like to speak with you by phone this weekend about her next step, starting the actual first draft. She’s read everything available on Via, and the articles about you and your career. She’s also finished interviewing most of the friends and peers you suggested. And gone through all of the brainstorming notes you sent her. She sounds very enthused.”

Matthew nodded his approval. He made a mental calculation, counting out the next nine months. The autobiography’s publication date would coincide almost exactly with the final stage of the deal. It would be perfect. He would become the most talked-about businessman, sought after for all the important magazine covers. All the interest and publicity would serve as free advertising for the book. And this realization so pleased him that he almost blurted it out to Laurence. But he caught himself. Only he, his wife, and William Harrell knew the full extent of the deal.

Laurence spread out the materials she’d collected. “I got everything you asked for. ICP’s employee handbook. Current and past annual reports. Day care center guide. Conduct manual. Ads. Banners. Brochures. And even these temporary tattoos they put in with the computers they sell to the education market for grade-schoolers. They sure are a big company. And I had to be pretty sneaky getting some of it. How does it all fit in with your strategy?”

He began sifting through the various articles. “Perception. I want to understand ICP’s corporate culture inside and out. You know how Via employees feel about ‘Big Business’ and companies like ICP. I’ve got to convince several thousand rebels that aligning ourselves with ICP will only make us more successful.” He paused for a moment to glance at his wristwatch. “We’ve sure got a lot of ground to cover. How about we order in some lunch?”

She looked relieved. “I was afraid you were going to skip it. Yes, please. I’m famished.”

“Me too,” Matthew said, stealing another look at her loveliness.