

PART III

>CHAPTER 12

Four months after Matthew Locke handed over his strategic-alliance binder to William Harrell, the two men were meeting again in Manhattan, this time backstage at Lincoln Center to announce the real thing.

Seated in the audience were executives from both companies, industry partners, analysts, customers, and the press. The two executives shook hands, and Harrell wished Matthew luck before leaving to find his front-row seat.

Waving away the makeup attendant, Matthew listened to a few last-minute pointers from Laurence Merrill. “Make sure you remember to smile,” she said, trailing behind him as he made his way through the rear hallway. He waited at the curtain’s edge, and Laurence flicked a lock of hair from his brow.

A production assistant wearing a microphone headset informed Matthew that he was on in one minute. Laurence wished him good luck and then hurried back-

stage.

The music dissolved and an announcer's voice greeted the audience as an enormous screen descended from the ceiling. The colorful Via logo filled the screen, and the announcer boomed: "Please welcome the chairman and chief executive officer of Via, Incorporated, Matthew Locke."

Applause sounded as Matthew Locke strode onto the stage, traversing the distance to the podium with clear composure and self-assuredness. He graced the audience with a sweeping smile, then focused his attention on the center of the auditorium, just like Lauri had suggested. He felt incredibly at ease and confident, energized by the thousands of faces awaiting his announcement.

He wished the audience a good morning, then went immediately into his presentation. "As you know, Via is synonymous with empowering individuals with powerful handheld computer technology," he began.

After his first minute into it, numerous attendees throughout the audience leaned to one side to comment on his style. Or more correctly, his lack of style, nothing at all like that of the charismatic Peter Jones, who was notably absent. Today's announcement marked Locke's first major public appearance at the company's helm. He was a dry speaker, but the audience listened patiently as he continued, giving him the benefit of the doubt. The At Hand PC Plus had sold well through the last quarter, and analysts were once again giving Via a thumbs-up.

"Many of you today are in fact stowing a Via handheld in your pack or briefcase. But not as many of you as we would like. It would be naïve of me not to acknowledge that many more of you are carrying a competitive PCSoft-compatible portable, running on a Future Processing-equipped clone."

In response to this last, an informally attired band of rowdy Via loyalists shouted boos, and both the audi-

ence and Matthew chuckled good-naturedly before he went on. His voice rose, and his expression turned serious.

“We’d like to turn those numbers around, so that by this time next year, Via’s popularity in the handheld market will find us well on our way to surpassing the installed base of PCSoft-compatible devices.”

The Via logo shrunk in half and slid to the left of the screen, making room for ICP’s logo. The audience stirred, just the sort of reaction Matthew had hoped for. He smiled broadly and gave them the news they had come for.

“Today, it gives me enormous pleasure to announce that Via has entered into a strategic alliance with the world’s largest computer maker, International Computer Products.”

The crowd was dead silent for a few beats, and then suddenly a burst of applause erupted throughout the room. Matthew Locke was overcome by a sudden wave of heat, a head-to-toe sensation of absolute power. The first stage of the deal was out in the open now, and the audience’s reaction was overwhelmingly positive, even though he had yet to spell out the details. After a full minute of applause he lifted his palms in a gesture for silence. The room quieted and he pressed on.

“Now, rather than me stand up here and describe what our new strategic alliance is made of, we’ve decided to let some of Via’s and ICP’s largest and most enthusiastic customers tell you in their own words, in the following short film. Thank you.” He moved to one side of the stage, where he would have a clear view of the presentation as well.

The houselights dimmed and the pair of logos faded to black. A moment later the screen came to life again, as an attractive woman from a large insurance firm described how the new Via and ICP SoftLink program would enable the At Hand PC Plus to integrate

with her firm's installed base of ten thousand PCSoft desktop systems. Cut into her explanation of her company's business and handheld computing needs were various animated graphics illustrating her points. A PCSoft spreadsheet document zipped across a LAN to an adjoining At Hand PC Plus, where moments later the same work sheet appeared, with all of its formulas, styles, and fonts intact. She ended by saying her firm had placed an order for three thousand brand-new At Hand PC Plus handhelds for the company's field agents. She held one up and the camera zoomed in on the left cover of the device to highlight the new "Via/ICP SoftLink" logo decal. The audience applauded enthusiastically.

The film continued to roll, and so did Matthew's charged-up feeling. Letting some of the two companies' most loyal customers in on the announcement last month had been risky, requiring them to sign nondisclosure agreements that attempted to keep the cat in the bag until today's announcement. Miraculously, not a single leak had slipped to the press. He stole a quick glance offstage and smiled when he caught Laurence's thumbs-up gesture, then returned his attention to the screen.

The presentation highlighted three other companies and their intended uses for At Hand PC Plus and PCSoft integration. At the sound of crashing cymbals, Matthew returned to his position at the podium to applause. He let the praise go on and on, making no move to stop it this time. He nodded his gratitude, gushing with pride and satisfaction.

When the audience quieted down he thanked them for their enthusiasm, then provided additional details not described in the film. "ICP will begin immediately co-selling At Hand PC Plus computers loaded with the new SoftLink compatibility software. For the first time in history, two former rival groups—Via salespeople and ICP salespeople—will share and support the same

customers.

“It is important to point out that this is a nonfinancial agreement, and represents the first-ever strategic alliance between our companies, making it possible for Via to continue to develop the world’s most advanced handheld devices while enjoying a new role as ICP’s desktop companion of choice, ahead even of its own PC Soft-compatible handheld computer.”

His presentation went on for another ten minutes, and ended with more spirited audience approval. With a final word of thanks, he went backstage, where he joined William Harrell and Laurence. Together, they headed to one of the theater’s private meeting rooms to participate in a press conference, where they would answer questions posed by an invited group of journalists.

Inside, Matthew Locke was greeted by Janice Lane, whom he’d chosen to coauthor his book. She’d recently begun the early chapters, describing Locke’s youth, his college years, and his first job as a summer intern at International Foods. Matthew was pleased with his choice of coauthor. The whole business of “writing” his autobiography was less complicated than he would have guessed. It seemed like every high-profile executive was doing it these days, and the only part he disliked was the long interviews Lane conducted with him, recording his every memory and opinion. Still, it beat the time-consuming task of writing it himself, that was for sure. And the advance had been worth it: a million for him, and three hundred thousand for her. His esteemed publisher had had a string of best-selling business biographies, and it was doing everything possible to make his name a household word by the time the book appeared in stores next year with an enormous first printing. All parties concerned were hoping for another *Iacocca*, the best-selling business bio in history. It was a gamble, but today’s announcement would go a long way toward achieving that goal.

Matthew and William took turns answering questions from the group of well-known business and high-tech reporters. Having dealt with most of them in the past, both men addressed by first name those journalists who had been benevolent or evenhanded in their portrayals of them in the press. It was not until they took their first question via satellite that the gathering turned unpleasant for Matthew.

Via usually announced new products in San Francisco's Moscone Center. However, both companies had agreed that today's announcement would be best served closer to Wall Street, on ICP's broader turf. To accommodate its West Coast loyalists, Via rented the Moscone auditorium for the occasion, beaming today's live presentation to the packed audience via satellite. Afterward, a small faction of California-based journalists was invited to participate in the press event.

Laurence acted as the go-between, seated between Matthew and William. A large-screen television was set to one side of the table, enabling the men to address the West Coast reporters.

First up was Joshua Ellis.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," Ellis said, wearing a skeptical look. "My question is for Mr. Locke. Hello, Matthew."

Matthew was momentarily caught off guard. For the life of him he could not remember the reporter's name. Noticing his pause, Laurence covered the tabletop microphone with her palm and leaned over to whisper the journalist's name. It was obvious to everyone seated in the room that Locke didn't recognize the reporter, and a few chuckles made their way to the microphone.

On the screen, it was also obvious that Joshua Ellis had heard the laughter. His expression tightened and his cheeks reddened.

"Joshua, of course," Matthew Locke said, trying for an amiable tone. "I'm sorry, I didn't recognize you at first with your goatee. Welcome. Who are you here

for?"

Ellis seemed no less at ease. "*Wired* magazine, thank you." More soft laughter arose from the seasoned East Coast newspapermen and -women. Matthew kept a straight face as Laurence prompted the tan and youthful Joshua Ellis to ask his question.

"Would you confirm that today's strategic-alliance announcement is only the first stage in a larger move that will occur by this time next year?"

Locke's heart speeded, but his face betrayed no emotion. He nodded firmly to acknowledge the question, and leaned in to the microphone.

"I'm not sure I understand what you're getting at, Joshua." His tone was agilely patronizing, prompting more laughter in the room.

Ellis fumed. "On the contrary, Mr. Locke. I should ask you what you are getting at. Quite literally. A source extremely close to the company has informed me that you intend to sell Via to ICP in the not-too-distant future. Is Peter Jones just going to sit on the sidelines and watch his company go to the highest bidder? And while we're at it, where is Jones today? You didn't mention him once in your presentation. Pretty odd, considering he's still one of the company's largest shareholders. What's really going on, Mr. Locke?" He put a particularly bitter inflection on Matthew's surname.

Matthew's immediate reaction to Ellis's accusation was an amused, showy glance to William, as though they shared some private joke. As though the suggestion were so absurd it was laughable. Out of this world. Insane.

In fact Matthew was stalling, searching for the right words. Inside, his pulse was racing, his mind reeling. Ellis was of course dead-on in his accusation, and both Matthew and William knew it. And at the same time, both knew with absolute certainty that they were the only men privy to this fact. Yet Ellis had nailed it. But

how? It was very possible that Ellis had posed the same question to a member of either company's executive staff, whose sloppily worded response he then construed to imply what he had suggested.

But whether Ellis was merely posturing before his peers or was somehow actually onto the secret plan, Matthew knew he had to be very careful in his response. And credible. If the other journalists remotely suspected there might be some truth to Ellis's question, then the deal would be in serious danger. Christ, Ellis was even correct in his estimated timeline. Indeed, the next year would be absolutely crucial to the deal's eventual fulfillment.

And then the correct response occurred to him. In those few seconds between the question and his answer, his whole worldview turned inside out with blazing clarity.

Yes, he knew what to say, and just how to say it. Hearing the words in his own head nearly caused him to burst out laughing at the pure irony of what he was about to proclaim. It would be lost on everyone—and William Harrell in particular. It was a completely unexpected turn, but he knew once he said it he would be able to pull it off.

He looked straight into the camera and gave his reply.

"Joshua, what you've suggested is absolutely, one hundred percent untrue. I can assure you, right here, right now, that Via would never put itself in a position of being sold to ICP, or to any other company. I give you my word."

His delivery was pitch perfect, his eyes unwavering through the entire response. Joshua Ellis's own gaze burned.

From the corner of his eye he sensed the other journalists nodding in agreement, or shaking their heads in pity at Ellis's farcical theory. Indeed, they believed what Matthew had said. And he was not in the least bit surprised by their reactions, because he believed it

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himself. Completely. Because Matthew Locke had told the truth.

And no one was more surprised by this fact than Matthew himself.