

>CHAPTER 18

“Matthew, it’s all so positive,” Laurence Merrill said with smiling allegiance as she closed the copy of the *Wall Street Journal* on his worktable. “You’ve got the press in the palm of your hand.”

Matthew appreciated the way that sounded. The *Journal* had run a profile on him, highlighting how his strategic alliance with ICP had dramatically improved Via’s market position in so little time. He ignored the part where they pointed out it was actually Peter who’d invented the company’s breakthrough product, the At Hand. What mattered most to him were sales, and they were way up. As for his other biggest concern, he and his coauthor were almost finished with the first draft of his autobiography.

The only disturbance in his life right now was the unpleasant business with Greta. Well, at least they’d managed to reach a sort of peaceful coexistence at home, going about their own business without upsetting

each other. As far as he was concerned, he could live like that for a long time and be reasonably happy.

He smiled gratefully at Laurence, and not only for her compliment. There was more to his evident self-satisfaction than her kind words and undying loyalty. She'd been his constant companion through some of his career's most challenging events, lining him up with just the right publications and speaking engagements, and landing him favorable coverage such as today's *Journal* profile. Indeed, for the first time in his marriage, Matthew was genuinely smitten by another woman. He didn't know if she felt the same attraction for him, and he intended to find out soon enough.

"How about lunch?" he said.

"Sure," Laurence said. She clasped her lovely hands together. "You decide."

"Sushi?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not a big fan of raw fish." She gathered her notes together and filed them away in her leather portfolio.

"You just have to know what to pick," he said. "Come on, you'll love it."

Matthew informed his secretary he was going next door for lunch, and a few minutes later they entered the restaurant. A Japanese hostess greeted them with a small bow and led them into the dining area, occupied mostly with Via employees. He waved his greetings to several tables and quietly asked the hostess if she could please seat them in the back. She led them to the rear of the restaurant with its cozy private rooms, screened off with teakwood partitions.

"This is more like it," Matthew said, kicking off his shoes. Laurence slipped off her heels and placed them alongside Matthew's, outside the sliding rice paper door. They sat across from each other in the sunken pit. The hostess handed over menus, then excused herself. The door whispered closed, and they were alone.

Matthew reached over and closed her menu. "How about I order?"

She gave him a doubtful look. "I don't know. I'm not much for exotic surprises."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing," he said, and gave her hand a small squeeze.

She looked at him with an uneasy smile, not quite sure how to respond to his forward manner.

"Amazing!" William Harrell said excitedly as Pip retrieved a contact name he had asked it to find in its sample directory. He turned to Peter. "And what did you say ISLE stands for again?"

"Intelligent Speech and Language Environment."

"Right," William said. "Tell me more about the recognition interface."

"It was what really shifted our focus on the whole idea," Peter began.

Byron, John and Rick were seated around the table as well, quiet while Peter described the design.

"We'd already decided on a palm-size form factor, as well as integrating the intelligent agents at the OS level to achieve all the no-brainer synchronization magic we showed you earlier."

Harrell gave an appreciative nod. "An excellent implementation, and notably more useful than our own SoftLink utility."

Peter frowned at the mention of the product Via and ICP had developed together under Matthew Locke's tutelage. Byron urged him to go on.

"Anyway, we wanted more. And when we encountered the ISLE software, the pieces suddenly fell into place."

William nodded again. "I'll grant you that. But do people really want this sort of interface? In tests we conducted at ICP, we found that though users often ask

for speech recognition, few actually use it after they get through the gee-whiz stage. Plus, it's very difficult to control, and accuracy tends to be a problem."

Peter agreed on all counts. "However, ours isn't like existing speech-recognition designs," Peter said. "We've figured something out, then acted accordingly. It was pretty simple, really. See, when people think of speech recognition, they naturally think of dictation. Dictating letters, for instance, orating a book report, or just talking into the computer. But our research revealed that people don't speak the way they write. Which means they don't type the way they speak either. Think about it. You're writing a letter or a memo, and you type a line. You pause. Backspace over some of it, rewrite the sentence. Go back. Look up at what you've written, shift back to the beginning and switch this line for that. It's no wonder speech recognition has so far failed as a viable input means and user interface."

Harrell gave a thoughtful nod. "And you've somehow solved this problem?"

"No," Peter said simply. "We've decided to ignore it. Instead, we're going in a different direction."

"Yet speech and language are integral to your design?"

"Absolutely," Peter said with conviction. "But instead of me telling you all this, why don't we show you instead. Guys?"

The engineers brought out some additional hardware, then turned the table back over to Peter.

He picked up the latest version of their crude little device and turned it on, flashing that same self-confident smile Harrell remembered from the cover of *Newsweek* a few years ago, when Peter Jones was riding at the height of his success. In the back of his mind, William interpreted the expression as a positive sign that Jones was back in the saddle again.

Peter picked up the stylus and pointed it at William. "This is gonna totally wow you."

And for the next two hours, William Harrell was totally wowed.

Greta Locke pulled into Via's parking lot fifteen minutes after her husband had strolled through on his way to lunch next door with Laurence Merrill. Which, Matthew's secretary informed Greta, was where she would find him now.

She went inside the restaurant and scanned the tables in the front room. Conversations suddenly quieted when the diners noticed her. It gave her no small pleasure to know that they all knew who she was. She'd of course participated in all of Via's major functions, often onstage at Matthew's side as he wished the employees season's greetings or congratulated them on a particularly profitable quarter.

Not finding him in the crowd, she remembered the private back rooms, where she and Matthew had dined with some of the other executives and their wives on previous occasions. Halfway across the main floor she was intercepted by the smiling hostess, who asked if she could help her.

"I know my way around," Greta said without slowing down.

She rounded the bend and paused. She considered going down the row until she found them, but then had a better idea. Strolling along the line of closed doors, she observed the shoes set before each room. She spotted Matthew's casual loafers at the end, alongside a pair of not-too-shabby heels. Bally, by the looks of them.

She eased up to the paper partition and listened. Yes, definitely Matthew's voice. Interested by the exchange, she hesitated before going inside.

"Here, try this one."

"Oh no, I don't think so."

"Come on, just a little bite."

"I think I'll stick with the cooked ones."

"These?"

"Mmm, yes. I like those better."

"Here we go."

"Oh, no. You don't have to. I can feed myself."

"Open wide."

"Please, Matthew. Don't."

Which sounded to Greta like the perfect time to slide open the rice paper door and drop in on the party, changing her voice to imitate the woman. "*Please, Matthew. Don't!*"

Her sudden arrival so startled the pair that what happened next struck Greta as almost comically absurd, though none of them would remember it as funny.

Greta watched with astonishment as Matthew inadvertently plunged a bright pink cooked prawn into the young woman's mouth. It appeared he'd been caressing the nape of her neck with his free hand, while she seemed to be pushing him away. Shocked at being caught with his hand on her, Laurence gasped a great intake of breath, which managed to draw the rather large prawn down the wrong pipe.

Her face registered the shocked expression of a choking victim, and she gestured at her own throat with what Greta, despite the urgency of the situation, couldn't help but notice were distinctly gorgeous hands.

Acting fast, Matthew struck the girl sharply on the back and a moment later the prawn flew out with great force, striking him squarely on the chest before falling into his lap.

Seeing that the girl was out of danger, Greta shook her head in disgust as Laurence struggled to extricate herself from the suddenly cramped quarters. Greta pointed her left index finger at her. "Sit. You're not going anywhere till we're through."

Laurence was gasping and shaking. Exasperated, she returned to her cushion and looked up at Greta with plaintive eyes. "Mrs. Locke, this isn't what you think."

"Oh, I think it is, dear. Just shush please, this is between my husband and me, thank you very much."

Matthew was scowling angrily, no sign of guilt on his face. "Close the door, Greta."

Laurence tried again to rise and explain herself, but Greta cut her off. "If you don't shut up and sit down like a good little mistress, I'm going to take that chopstick and poke you in the eye."

Unwilling to test her luck, Laurence sat back and, except for a few gulps of water, didn't open her mouth again until the whole ordeal was over.

A moment later the hostess slid open the door and poked her head in to offer Greta a menu. "Shoo," Greta said, wagging her four-fingered hand at the demure woman.

Matthew asked his wife to lower her voice and sit down. "We were just going over some notes, Greta. This isn't what it looks like."

Greta dropped down onto one of the free cushions. "No, of course not." She opened her bag and fished out the bank form and a pen. She set the withdrawal form on the table, crossed out the number she'd originally filled in, and doubled it.

"This, on the other hand, is exactly what it looks like. Sign it." She slapped the pen down beside Matthew's tray.

Matthew made a face. "This is for a hundred thousand dollars."

"Very good, you can read. And it's going to double again if you don't sign it."

Matthew stared at his wife in disbelief. He'd come here with the intention of feeling out Laurence's attraction to him, and right at the crucial moment Greta appeared, just as he'd placed his hand on the back of the young woman's lovely neck. It didn't look good. With Greta's previous threat of divorce, she could easily construe the situation to seem as though he was actually

having an affair, despite the fact that he, unfortunately, wasn't.

Unable to think of a way out, he picked up the pen, signed on the X, and shoved the document back to her side of the table. He crossed his arms and stared at her in stony silence.

Greta collected the form and pen with a triumphant grin. She dropped the things into her purse and snapped it closed. Rising to leave, she suddenly remembered her manners and graced Laurence with a warm smile.

"It was nice to meet you, Ms. Whoever-you-are. And oh, here's some free advice: In case you haven't already discovered firsthand, he likes it better when you let him do it himself. Good luck." She giggled and quickly turned and fled, before Matthew could catch her in his lunging grasp.

She swept past the mute diners, positively certain they'd heard every word. She didn't give a damn. At least not at first. But as she climbed into her car and saw Matthew's girlfriend run past in tears, her triumph faltered.

The reality of the situation hit her like a blow to the stomach. How all this time she had been wrong about Matthew. Wrong in her assessment of his obsessive love affair with his work. Because what she had just witnessed made it obscenely clear: Matthew had actually been capable of loving more than only his work.

And he had chosen to share that love not with her, but with another woman.