

>CHAPTER 19

“Very well,” William Harrell said. “Then we have a deal.”

The group had gathered in the dining room for lunch. After the meal, the engineers excused themselves, and the three men moved into the living room to talk.

Peter and Byron sat on the sofa across from William. Isle lay on the cushion beside her father. She yawned, and the ICP chair laughed.

“I guess she doesn’t realize her name is such a big deal.” Byron and Peter smiled, and William considered them with a concerned expression. “Speaking of tired, you guys must be working yourselves to the bone with all the progress you’ve made. When do you expect to have a final design?”

Byron answered. “The hardware’s nearly complete. We’ve got agreements with suppliers for all the major components. The software’s going to take the longest.” He looked at Peter. “Six months?”

“Tops,” Peter said. “Assuming we get the engineers and support and everything we’ve talked about.”

William assured Peter and Byron they’d get whatever they needed to complete the project as quickly as possible.

Byron was pleased with William’s answer; however, there was one last thing Peter wanted to discuss. “What about the strategic alliance with Via?”

“That stays for now,” William said. “Listen, consider my position: What you’ve got is still a ways off. Keep in mind that what we’ve drawn up here today is more substantial than ICP’s current agreement with Via. Our alliance has cost us next to nothing, and both companies are enjoying its success. This is much, much bigger. We’re investing hard cash in your baby. A lot of it. I assure you, Peter, we’re both shooting for the same thing.”

Peter seemed satisfied and nodded his agreement to Byron.

“Then we’re set,” the older man said.

“Excellent,” William Harrell said. He checked his watch. “And I’d better get moving if I’m going to make my flight.”

The trio rose and together they strolled to the front door, Isle squirming in Peter’s arms. Byron called to Grace that William was leaving, and she came out to say good-bye. She collected Isle from Peter, the men shook hands, and William departed.

“See,” Byron joked. “The big guys aren’t all so awful after all.”

“I like him,” Peter said.

“Everything go well?” Grace asked.

“Like a charm,” Byron said with a kiss to her cheek. “And we’ve got a hell of a lot of work cut out for us. Let’s hope we don’t have any setbacks.”

Grace withdrew a Post-it note from her sweater pocket and handed it to Peter. “You got a call while you were talking,” she said.

“Thanks, Grace.” He was plainly disappointed it wasn’t Kate’s number written on the Post-it. He didn’t recognize the caller.

“I’ll call back later,” Peter said as he slipped the note in his pocket. He clapped Byron happily on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go tell the guys the good news.”

“My God, Matthew, what happened?” Matthew’s secretary said as she rose from her chair. “Laurence came running through in tears, grabbed things from your office, and left without a word. She looked really upset.”

“She got sick all of a sudden,” Matthew said, still fuming from Greta’s unexpected visit and too preoccupied to worry about Laurence at the moment.

“I was about to come get you. Hank Towers just called an emergency executive staff meeting. They’re in there now waiting for you.”

Matthew looked at her with a puzzled expression. What the hell would warrant an emergency meeting, he wondered as he charged down the corridor to the boardroom. He went inside.

The entire Via executive staff was seated around the table. “What’s going on, Hank?”

“Close the door, Matthew,” Hank said gravely.

Matthew shut the door and took his seat at the head of the table.

The room was silent as Hank slid a single document in front of him. Picking it up, Matthew noticed everyone else had received a copy as well. A quick scan was all it took to get a reaction out of him.

“Son of a bitch. They’re finally going through with it.”

Hank nodded, and the tension in the room lightened a little now that their most senior executive had been informed of the news.

“How did we get this?” Matthew asked.

Hank answered him. “It’s not supposed to hit the wire

until tomorrow; however, one of our developers who also writes for the PCSoft platform was kind enough to fax a copy to Al,” Hank said, indicating Alan Parker, vice president of engineering.

Matthew reread the headline again, aloud this time. “PCSoft and Future Processing announce plans to merge into a single company: FutureSoft.”

It was incredible. The two companies already owned each of their respective markets—mainstream software, and the processors to run the software. Together, they would completely dominate all aspects of the desktop and portable computer market, including handhelds. On top of that, it was no secret both companies were making incredible headway in the server business, which was making a dent in the pocketbooks of mini and mainframe computer makers.

“Bastards,” Matthew said with a disbelieving shake of his head.

“The biggest deal in our industry’s history,” Hank added.

Matthew looked around the table at the dispirited faces. Most looked defeated. And he wasn’t far behind them.

As the company’s head he knew they were waiting for him to say something. He cleared his throat and mustered his best tone of authority.

“The news will obviously have a major impact on our business,” Matthew said, knowing it was a gross understatement. “While the At Hand PC Plus is selling well, it has only just started to reach its stride.”

“And we have the ICP strategic alliance to thank for that,” Hank said for Matthew’s benefit. The others nodded appreciatively.

However, Matthew felt no sense of glory for his hand in the alliance. The mention of ICP made him suddenly nervous. He returned to his estimation of Via’s position.

“We’ll need at least a year’s worth of the kind of sales

we're seeing right now if we want to capture even a third of the PCSoft-compatible market."

Nods. A few spirited assertions around the table that maybe they could do it, keep the sales going strong. This was in turn countered by a more realistic prediction, that they were through.

Matthew glanced at Hank, who'd begun tapping his pen on his knee, ignoring the desperate discussion circulating around the table. He looked deep in thought.

Someone joked that at least it couldn't get worse.

"Actually, it could," Alan Parker said, and everyone stared at him. He looked at Towers. "I was going to wait till the shock of this blew over, but we might as well get it out in the open now. All right, Hank?"

Towers nodded but didn't bother to look up. Matthew had seen him like this in the past, at his most intense, quietly working through a multitude of possibilities.

"It's about Peter," Parker said. "There's a rumor going around. A couple of our engineers heard it from their former colleagues who left to join Peter at whatever it is he's up to. They wouldn't give any details, but apparently they've lined up a meeting with an official from ICP. They're meeting today, in fact."

Matthew felt the blood drain from his face. An official from ICP? Was it possible that William Harrell had turned to Jones for inspiration after he, Matthew, had pulled the plug on the final stage of their deal?

Hank Towers leaned forward in his seat. By the look on his face everyone could see that the vice chairman had something to say. The room quieted down, and Matthew held his breath.

"That's it," Hank Towers said calmly, "ICP." He looked at Matthew. "Don't you see? It's quite simple."

"I'm not sure I follow, Hank."

"But of course you do, Matthew. Think about it. ICP. We're already in bed with them with our strategic alliance. We're selling more units than ever, and each puts

a nice royalty in ICP's pocket. And their take is higher still on the units their own people sell, which as we all know outnumber our sales two to one."

Matthew knew where Hank was going with this, but no one else in the room seemed to make the connection until the co-chairman spelled it out for them. "We invite ICP to buy us."

Matthew burst out laughing, faintly aware of the hysteria mingled in with the eruption.

Hank Towers frowned and scanned the table. "Anyone else think that's so funny?"

Most were still too shocked to respond.

Towers continued. "Imagine it. We've already proven we're more effective as a team. ICP made a grave mistake years ago when it didn't buy PCSoft. Eventually, they went from the number one desktop computer company to just another PCSoft-compatible manufacturer. But we're proprietary. We use the Tangent CPU instead of Future Processing's. And ICP's total business is larger than either of them. In a Via-ICP scenario, we're suddenly playing the same ball game. Huge company, competing standard. We all know we have the better product. With ICP's worldwide force, we could triple our business by this time next year."

It wasn't until the last line of Hank's impassioned discourse that everyone in the room grasped the big picture and what it might mean to each of them personally, where it mattered most—in the wallet. An ICP acquisition would mean greater wealth for all of them, including Matthew Locke.

Yet he was the only one in the room who did not look visibly dazzled by what Hank had proposed.

"Don't you see, Matthew?" Hank said.

"It won't work."

"Of course it will."

"But our culture," Matthew ventured, grasping at straws. "ICP is as big as big business gets. The employees will never go for it."

“Nonsense,” Hank said, angered by Matthew’s obstinate attitude. “We said the same thing after Peter left, and business kept right on going. I say on the contrary. When word gets out tomorrow that PCSoft and Future Processing intend to merge, I guarantee our employees will rally. They’ll have to. Otherwise, there’re going to be a hell of a lot of smart former Via employees looking for jobs next year, because by then this newly created Hard-Soft or whatever the fuck it’s called will have run us out of business.”

Matthew stood up and stalked over to the window. “And you believe ICP will say yes if we ask them, just like that?” Matthew asked, snapping his fingers to accentuate his point.

“No,” Hank said honestly. “I don’t believe anything in business happens ‘just like that.’” He didn’t bother with the finger-snapping part. “But I think there’s a good chance of it.” He turned to the others. “Am I alone in my assumption?”

The executives voiced various issues and considerations, and someone asked about the Peter Jones and ICP rumor mentioned earlier. Hank turned to Matthew.

“Good point, don’t you think, Matthew? I mean, no one misses Peter more than I. However, I doubt you share in the sentiment. Surely this rumor’s got you sweating a little.”

Actually, a lot. Matthew could hardly take any more of this. Peter Jones. William Harrell and ICP. A PCSoft and Future Processing merger. He’d fucked up royally. Of course he thought what Hank was proposing was brilliant. It was genius. And it had been his idea in the first place. Well, William Harrell’s too. But did he believe that William would simply welcome him back into the original deal with open arms? He doubted it. Especially now that this Peter Jones factor had entered the picture. Matthew recalled all too well how interested William had been in Jones, constantly worrying and wondering about what he was up to. And if the rumor

was true, he was in fact finding out today, possibly at this very minute.

Matthew turned and faced the room. "I don't think William Harrell will go for it."

Hank glanced from Matthew to the others, trying to gauge their collective frame of mind. He gave an easy shrug. "All right, then. Let's conduct an impromptu vote. All in favor of pursuing the ICP acquisition angle I've put forth, raise your hand."

In two seconds every available hand raised except Matthew's.

Hank Towers nodded his gratitude around the table and looked at Matthew. "You want to make the call or should I?"

Matthew faced Hank with a defiant glint in his eye. "And if I don't go along?"

Hank spread his hands and shrugged, considerate enough not to answer the question aloud. He was obviously outnumbered. If he didn't go along, they would simply call the board together and conduct another vote, just as they had over Peter Jones. And this time Matthew would emerge the loser.

So although Matthew believed the chance of getting William to reconsider a merger was next to impossible, he lifted his hand to indicate aye anyway.

The room burst into applause.

"Good, Matthew," Hank Towers said politely. "Now go land us a deal."

After the restaurant fiasco Greta was not up for the trip to the bank to complete the transaction.

She still couldn't believe Matthew had been keeping a mistress. It caused her to reconsider her own situation with Gregor. To think that her morals had kept her from meeting him face-to-face all these months, while Matthew was banging his young press chief. She'd truly

underestimated him, she thought, pouring herself a huge tumbler of wine.

She drifted through the lower floor of the mansion, deciding which things she would immediately take with her, and which would stay. Yes, it was time for a change. A big one. She made a few mental notes as she wound her way back to the kitchen, refilled her glass, then headed upstairs to her private room and Gregor.

He was of course waiting for her, looking decidedly anxious when she popped open the live view window screen.

“Did you get it, Gret?”

She sipped her wine and nodded her head.

“Excellent. The whole amount?”

“Double,” she said. She unfolded the receipt and held it up to the camera.

“I didn’t believe you’d do it,” he said, and something in his tone made her sit up a little.

“What do you mean by that? Of course I would. And now more than ever. I found out Matthew’s been having an affair.”

He nodded impatiently. “And the transfer into my account went through no problem?”

His neglect for what she’d said about Matthew surprised her. “Gregor, I’m exhausted. I’ll do it first thing in the morning. Didn’t you hear what I said about Matthew?”

He looked disappointed. “Tomorrow? Why? There’s no problem is there?”

“What difference does one more day make? Did you hear what I said?”

He changed his pitch, as easy as throwing a switch. “Gret, I’m sorry. It’s just that I want us to get this over with, that’s all. Yeah, I heard. And I’m sorry. Now do you see what an asshole he is? Just like I’ve been saying, from the very start.”

She sipped her wine and let out a tired sigh, unable

to disagree.

“Anyway, Gret, I’ll show him.”

“We, darling.”

“I meant to say we. We’ll show him.”

She changed the subject. “How did it go? Did you pick one out yet?”

He brightened. “Two, actually. A twenty-four-footer and a thirty-two-footer. Beautiful decks on both, though the smaller one is actually priced higher. Both are in really beautiful shape.”

“I can’t wait, Gregor.”

“Me either,” he said.

“And you think you’ll finally be able to write? I mean, once we sail off into the proverbial sunset?” She laughed drunkenly at her own joke.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I’ve got the outline pretty much done, just a few final twists to work out. I can’t wait to get out of here and get started.”

“And you still won’t tell me what it’s about?”

He considered her for a moment, then shrugged. “All right, I guess I can say a little about it now that I’m almost ready to start. It’s a mystery. Based in Silicon Valley.”

“Ooh, that sounds interesting, Gregor. Have you thought of a title?”

He nodded. “*Web of Deception*.”

“Very mysterious. I like it.” She toasted him with her tumbler as a curious thought crossed her mind. She gave him a mischievous look. “Will I be in it?”

“You bet you *will*, Gret. You’re gonna be my heroine.”

The cocksure manner of his vow had an arousing effect on her. “I can’t wait,” she whispered, then leaned