

>CHAPTER 20

Matthew Locke charged down the long United terminal, noticing the time as he slowed to pass through the metal detectors.

Upon leaving the boardroom he'd called William Harrell's office in New York. William's secretary kindly informed him that Mr. Harrell was away on business in California, and was expected to return later that evening. He asked her for William's flight number and departure time, thanked her, then raced up the highway for San Francisco International Airport.

He stopped before the departure screens to find out which gate Harrell's flight would be using. He was sweating, and not only from the rigorous activity. On his ride to the airport he'd begun to warm to the possibilities of an ICP takeover of Via. The more he thought about it, the more returning to the deal's original finale appealed to him.

By the time he pulled into the parking garage he decided he'd resort to begging if necessary to convince

William to agree. After tomorrow's news of the PCSoft and Future Processing merger hit the wires, an ICP takeover would be Via's only real hope of staying in business in a meaningful way. And his only hope of staying on top.

Luck was on his side: The flight was delayed by fifteen minutes. He spotted William in the departure gate's waiting area with his garment bag by his side. He was flipping through a notepad when Matthew Locke walked up to him.

William Harrell registered total surprise when he looked up. He rose to his feet and the two men shook hands. Despite Matthew's double cross, William Harrell remained the quintessential businessman, professional, courteous—and ever cautious.

He looked at Matthew with curiosity. "Flying to New York?"

Matthew gave an impatient shake of his head. "We need to talk." His tone was desperate. He seated himself in the vacant seat beside William, and the other executive followed suit.

Over the loudspeaker, an attendant announced that the flight would begin boarding in a few minutes. Matthew shot an anxious glance at the check-in counter and briefly considered buying a seat to join William on the flight, if that's what it would take. He cut to the quick.

"I know you met with Peter Jones today."

William nodded. "Smart man."

Matthew wondered if William had meant him or Jones. He let it go.

"I'd like you to reconsider, William."

William didn't understand.

"Our deal, as we'd originally conceived it."

"I see," William said. He thought this over for a moment and shook his head. "I don't think so."

Matthew pressed on. "I do. And I'm sorry for fucking it up, William. I'm truly sorry."

"Business." Harrell shrugged.

"Good business," Matthew countered. "Look, I don't know what Jones is up to, but it can't compete with what we've already got."

Harrell smiled coolly. "Don't be so sure."

Matthew didn't want to argue. Peter Jones was the least of his problems. And Harrell's as well, he thought, when he remembered the surprising news. He reached into his back pocket and retrieved the photocopy that Hank Towers had given him in the meeting.

"This may change your mind," Matthew said. He unfolded the document and dropped it in William's lap.

The executive turned his unperturbed eyes to the document and picked it up. His brow furrowed as he scanned the first paragraph. He didn't need to read the whole thing to understand why Matthew had chased him down like this. "Where did you get this?"

"One of our developers faxed it over. It's legit."

William shook his head in awe. "So, the bastards are finally going all the way. Well, I can't say I'm totally surprised. But you, Matthew, you've surprised me."

"Think about it, William. An ICP and Via merger is the only way to compete effectively."

William looked unconvinced, and Matthew glanced up anxiously as the gate attendant announced that premier passengers and those who needed assistance were now welcome to board.

"I've got a flight to catch," William said.

"Wait," Matthew said, struggling to maintain a semblance of control. "Listen, let's put aside our prior dealings for the moment and think about our companies." He quickly reiterated his points, the benefits. He expressed the Via executive staff's support.

"And your board of directors?" Harrell said, rising to collect his garment bag.

"Hank Towers phoned them on my way here. The members he reached approved the prospect, which leaves only two votes. They're already outnumbered. It's in the bag."

“Interesting, but I’m sure you can appreciate my position. This is all rather sudden. And I haven’t exactly been sitting on my thumbs since your change of heart.” He started for the gate.

“Wait,” Matthew said for the second time, gripping William’s arm in desperation. The executive frowned at the other man’s hand and Matthew let go.

“I’m sorry,” Matthew said in a strained voice. “I mean, about the deal. About changing my mind when I did. I see now that I made a mistake. Even so, we wouldn’t have gone through with it yet anyway. This FutureSoft announcement tomorrow changes everything. William, we can do it. All the way.”

William considered the notebook tucked under his arm. He stood like that for a full minute, staring at the closed notebook, thinking over his options while Matthew remained perfectly still at his side, awaiting his response. The gate attendant announced general boarding and William finally looked Matthew in the eye.

He gave a single nod. “Very well,” William said. “I’ll make the recommendation to my board. I can’t promise anything.”

Matthew let out a burst of air and grabbed William’s hand and shook it furiously. “Thank you, William, thank you. It’s the best thing for both of us. You won’t be sorry.”

William abruptly pulled free and heaved his garment bag onto his shoulder. “We’ll see,” he said.

Matthew stepped aside as William joined the line to board the aircraft. When he reached the gateway he handed the attendant his ticket and turned once to give Matthew a small wave good-bye.

Peter picked up the handset to call Kate at her studio, as he’d promised Grace he would. But then he remembered the Post-it note she’d slipped him earlier, and decided to stall a little to take care of this call first.

He dialed the number, and a moment later he was greeted by the receptionist at the firm Williams and Williams.

Peter glanced at the note. "David Williams, please."

The attorney promptly came on the line, and Peter introduced himself.

"Thank you for returning my call so quickly, Mr. Jones. I'm representing Ivy Green, who's retained our firm to reclaim her rights to ISLE, which I believe is currently in your possession."

Peter made a disbelieving sound and dropped down on the sofa. "That's an awfully insensitive way of referring to our child."

The man on the other end chuckled. "Oh no, Mr. Jones. I'm sorry for not making myself clear from the start. I'm representing my client's interest in the ISLE software. My apologies."

Peter was relieved. "It's okay. I've been pretty much expecting this call for a while now."

"Good. That will help. But you are correct in the other as well, Mr. Jones."

"The other?"

"Yes, the baby. My partner, Linda, would like a word with you on that matter after you and I are done."

Dropping his head back on the sofa, Peter sat and listened as Mr. Williams presented his case. Fifteen minutes later, the lawyer transferred the call to Ms. Williams, who spent the next forty-five minutes presenting her case, which was a little more complicated. Child custody always was, she informed Peter.

By the time he hung up he was numb. In less than an hour the life he'd managed to somehow get back on track, however shakily, had just derailed. The past year's upsets suddenly seemed trivial by comparison, and never in his life had he felt so utterly hopeless and defeated. Just when he'd finally begun to accept that he'd lost everything he'd ever really cared about, the tables turned once more. On the contrary, he still had

plenty more to lose, most of all hope.

He stared with desperate longing at the phone on the table beside him. The only person who could help him pull himself together was Kate, and he needed her now more than ever. But how could he call her, after the lawsuits he'd just been hit with? It would only underscore her reason for leaving him in the first place.

He sat alone in a quiet state of shock and absently wondered if this marked the last of his punishment for his past mistakes, or if he would go on paying forever.

After his jolting turnaround victory at the airport, Matthew began to interpret the reversal as a sort of omen. The mark of a new beginning. A signal to reevaluate his life and make adjustments wherever necessary. Including his marriage.

He wound his way through the mansion in search of his wife. There was so much to tell, so much to celebrate. He found her in the living room, crouched among several cardboard boxes.

She saw him come in but made no effort at civility. He knew she was upset about what had happened at the restaurant, and he couldn't blame her. He had only himself to blame, for so many of their problems. And that was why he needed to talk to her.

"What are you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?" she said without bothering to look at him.

"Packing."

"Bingo."

"Why?"

She blew a strand of hair out of her face and looked at her husband. "Why do people usually pack, Matthew?"

"Are you going somewhere?"

"I am," she said as she poured a quantity of puff balls into an empty cardboard box.

Matthew came over to lend a hand by holding the box's flaps apart. "When?"

"Very soon. And I can do this, thank you." She waited for him to remove his hands from the box before proceeding.

"Greta, I'm sorry."

She stood up and lifted her wineglass, sipped from it while judging the box's dimensions and whether or not it would do.

"It wasn't what you think."

She shot him a warning look, unwilling to get into this conversation.

"Listen, I've got good news," he said, trying a different angle. "We're back on track. I mean the deal. William Harrell's agreed to take it all the way, like we originally planned."

"How nice for you."

"And you, Gret," he said, reaching for her wrists. "You too."

She looked down at his hands and then back at him. "Get your hands off me, Matthew."

He let go, and she went back to adjusting the amount of puff balls in the box. Glancing at the large crystal bowl, she wondered if perhaps she should hire a professional for the job.

"Greta, please. I want you to hear me out. I've done some serious thinking."

"Hooray for you."

"I mean it. There's a lot for us to talk about. What you saw at the restaurant was just bad timing. It's really not what you think."

"Horseshit," Greta said, getting worked up.

"I swear, Gret. She's just my assistant. Or was. She quit this afternoon. My secretary called me in my car to say so. I guess we really upset her."

"We?"

"Well, me. I tried to call her and apologize."

"A lover's quarrel. Poor dears."

"Greta, no. I've never laid a hand on her."

"Really? My stupid eyes, I should get them checked. I thought for sure that was the nape of her neck you were caressing with your hand."

"I mean, you know."

"No, Matthew. I don't know. It's been far too long. And anyway, I don't care who you fuck. It doesn't matter anymore. Now leave me alone." She turned to the large crystal salmon bowl and hefted it an inch off the pedestal, gauging its weight. God, she'd forgotten how heavy it was.

"It does matter, Greta." Matthew was suddenly interested in the beautiful object as he went on with his chatter. "Because it's all over. ICP is going to buy Via, and if everything goes as planned, I'll wind up in the top seat after William Harrell retires. He's pissed off at me, but I think he'll come around. And that means we'll eventually be back in New York. We can live wherever you like. Manhattan. Connecticut. Anywhere you want, Gret. I promise."

She paused and gave him a knowing look. "Ah, now I see. Surely you'll need a wife if you're going to become ICP's big shot. And hey, might as well stick with the one you've already got, save yourself some money that way, cheaper to keep the young thing in an apartment."

His shook his head in frustration. "Greta, don't talk like that. I know you're mad, and you have every right to be. But please, try to hear what I'm saying. I'm sorry for having caused you all this grief. I really am. And I want to try, Gret. I really want to try to make things work."

She went for her glass and then decided against it. He'd already succeeded in upsetting her, but she wouldn't let herself get wound up. She'd had enough drama for one day, and she'd made up her mind. She was leaving, and that was final.

With a bracing breath she hefted the crystal bowl off the pedestal.

"Wait," Matthew said, hopping over to grip the crystal bowl's rim.

The halogen lamp above cast a bright beam into the sparkling object, highlighting its preciousness and vulnerability.

Greta gasped in fright as the bowl wobbled uncertainly and she nearly dropped it. "Let go," she said firmly.

He left his hands where they were and looked at her with an almost wistful expression. "Gret, remember the day you brought this home?"

She considered his squashed thumbs pressed firmly on the other side of the bowl. The piece was too valuable to risk losing, and she set it back down on her side. God forbid she lose it.

Matthew let go as well and knelt down for a closer look. He shook his head in awe. "Look at it, Gret. I mean, really look at it." He focused on one of the engraved salmon, frozen in time.

She stepped back and waited for him to finish with this nonsense. When he kept on rambling about the gracefulness of the salmon's purpose, she finally grew impatient.

"All right, Matthew, that's enough. Yes, they're magnificent. Now please, let me finish." She reached for the bowl.

And he reached too, resuming their tug of war.

"Greta, it's almost over." His voice cracked. "Don't you see? The struggle's finally over. Think back, when you came home with this bowl. To celebrate the first stage of the deal coming together. Our plans coming together. And it's finally going to happen. It's all working out for the good, just like it was supposed to."

"Let go of my bowl," she said anxiously.

"Greta, no. Please. Don't do this. Don't take it. It means everything to me. To us. We can fix it."

"No, damn you. It's mine. And I'm taking it. Let go."

He pulled a little on his side, and she pulled back with

equal force. "Where?" Matthew laughed. "Where do you think you're going, Greta?"

"Away," she cried, tugging harder while he tugged back.

"Away where?"

"Mexico. On a yacht. Now let go, Matthew."

He burst out with laughter and leaned his face in to hers. "Like a Carnival Cruise, Gret? For unhappily married women?"

"No, Matthew. With a lover. A young, capable lover."

That got through to him. He tightened his grip on the bowl and pulled harder, his voice taunting. "So you're the one fucking around, then?"

"No. Not yet. But I will be. You can count on it. Now let go." Her fingers were cramping and she could barely hold on any longer. If she released her side he would drop it. "Please, Matthew," she begged, painfully close to letting go.

And this awareness suddenly dredged up a more painful anxiety. That were it not for her missing finger, she might have possessed the strength to hold on a little tighter, a little longer. And this thought gave way to yet another sudden insight, her understanding complete. That were it not for her missing finger, an imperfection so minor to most people, none of this would be happening in the first place.

Tears streamed down her face and she hysterically begged him to please, please let go.

Unfortunately, he did.

What followed lasted only seconds, but to both it felt as though time had slowed to a crawl.

With Matthew's side released the force of Greta's pull drew the enormous crystal bowl into her chest, propelling her backward.

Realizing what his letting go had caused, he dove forward to try and get his hands around the bowl again. His fingers grazed its cool surface and he grappled to get a

hold on the object.

As Greta flew into the wall, her face instinctively registered an awareness that she would have to let go of the bowl in order to throw out her hands and break her fall. Her stunned gaze shifted to her own hands and she couldn't believe what she saw, how almost perfect they were, how strong they held, but by the time she let go, it was too late.

Her head hit first, the center smashing squarely into a framed picture of their wedding day. The glass shattered against her skull, leaving a splatter of blood between their photographed selves. Her shoulders connected next, flattening into the wall with a terrible cracking sound.

Her eyes widened and matched Matthew's own shocked expression as he flew through the air, straight for her. He squeezed his hands together in a last attempt to save the bowl.

It eluded his grasp and landed on the hardwood floor just as Greta's rear hit the ground.

She bounced once, but the bowl didn't.

It shattered, blasting shards of precious glass in every direction. Matthew squeezed his eyes shut as a storm of bits flew into his face. He landed with a crushing smack, crying out in pain as hundreds of sharp points chewed into his chest.

Then, dead silence.

He lay there for what seemed an eternity, afraid to open his eyes, until finally he had the courage to do it. He let out a grateful cry; his vision had escaped the shrapnel.

Then he saw the blood, and he panicked. Glass crunched under his hands and knees and elbows and he struggled to extricate himself from Greta's tangled legs and the bloody bits and shards. Blood gushed from his palms and he tried not to scream.

And then he looked at her, and he did scream. He

grabbed the closest cardboard box and tore off a flap, no longer aware of his own pain or bleeding. He tossed the flap over the broken glass between her legs and knelt before her, shouting her name. She didn't respond.

He squeezed her cheeks between his bloody palms and lifted her face. Her eyes were closed and he shouted for her to wake up, to look at him. He struggled to remember what he'd learned in high school. He clumsily pressed his hands to her chest and tried to make her breathe, put his lips over hers and blew.

He cried in agony and shouted for the housekeeper, not sure whether she was even in residence. He whispered Greta's name over and over as he drew her limp and bloody head against his chest, his own head twisting from side to side in a frenzy as he searched for the phone.

He spotted the cordless handset beside one of the boxes and snatched it up. He promised his Greta that he would fix this, he would fix everything, whispering her name again and again as he dialed.

Waiting for help to come on the line he shook his head sadly and cried at the dazzling array of broken bits that lay beneath them, searching in vain for a larger shard, one that might contain a hopeful fragment of the salmon.

He found none.

Peter stood beneath Hoover Tower on the Stanford campus, exactly in the place where he and Ivy had first met. It was her idea to meet here, to discuss the terms of her cases against him.

Waiting for her to arrive, he considered everything that had happened from the day they'd met until now. He'd gotten over his hurt and anger from being ousted from Via. He missed Kate terribly, but the work with Byron went a long way to helping him keep his mind off losing her. He adored Isle, astonished by how she

had entered his life so suddenly and become its center. She was healthy, and so was her mother, the lawyers had told him.

Peter had mixed feelings. He was glad to hear she'd pulled herself together and was well enough to now care for her baby. But it was his baby too, and he didn't want to give her up.

He thought about their night together, searched for any memory of love. Had he felt something for her? He wasn't sure. It seemed so long ago, swept aside by the events that had followed. No, he knew he wasn't in love with Ivy. But he loved his baby, their baby, and the three of them did form a family, even if Ivy might not see it that way. He'd never been a part of a real family, and the thought of his daughter going through life without both parents deeply disturbed him. Would she marry him if he asked her to?

"No lawyers?" Ivy Green said.

He spun around, and was positively stunned by her transformation.

Here was the Ivy he'd first met, youthful and vibrant, her white-blond hair pulled up into a smart bun, complexion perfectly smooth and lightly tanned. She wore loose beige jeans and a purple V-necked sweater. Her blue eyes sparkled with the iridescence of tropical waters.

She smiled and he experienced an unexpected stirring, a connection that somehow attested to the bond between them and their baby. He felt light and uplifted, forgetting for the moment that they were here to discuss serious business. He took a tentative step forward and stretched out his arms.

She took a step back and shook her head. Her smile changed from one of happiness at seeing him to one of being happy to see him looking at her as he was, with attraction and approval in his eyes. With desire. She grinned.

"Amazing, isn't it, what a little time and sunshine can

do.”

“Sure is,” he said, dropping his hands at his side.
“You look incredible.”

“I feel incredible,” she said, clasping her hands casually behind her back.

“Ivy, I’m so sorry. About everything that happened. I mean, how it happened and what you’ve gone through.”

She shrugged. “Listen, I’ve been in the desert learning how to stop apologizing. Take my advice, don’t bother.”

He ran a hand through his short hair, gestured for her to sit on the grass.

“No, I’ve only got a minute.”

“Can’t we talk a little? There’s so much I want to say.”

“Um, no. Not now, anyway. This is business, Peter. Maybe in a while, after we settle things between us.”

“But I don’t want you to be angry forever.”

“Poor Peter.” She looked sad, but not for herself.
“Look, I’m not pissed off anymore. Well, not too pissed. And I’m not sorry, either. What’s done is done. I’m definitely not having an easy time of it, but I’m on my way. All I want is to see Isle, and my other ISLE too. I want to see how they’ve done in your care.” She looked at him suspiciously.

“What?”

“Nothing, really. I guess I’m just surprised you didn’t bring an army of lawyers with you.”

He shook his head. “What about yours?”

“Don’t need them for this. They told you what I want.” She withdrew a single folded document from her back pocket and handed it to him. “It’s all here, simple and to the point.”

He eased himself down on the grass and accepted the pen she offered. He scanned the agreement, already familiar with what it spelled out. But he didn’t sign it.

Instead, he put the pen down and looked up into her eyes. “What do you feel? I mean, really feel?”

"About this? Excellent."

"No, I mean us. Me."

"You?" She turned her pretty face skyward to ponder the enormous column rising above them. Her expression was softer when she looked at him again. "I'm not sure. But it isn't anger anymore. Honest."

"No, I don't mean that."

"Guilt? Nope. I'm done with that."

He shook his head in frustration. "No, not that either." He looked at her with unconcealed interest, and she finally understood. She blinked rapidly and looked away.

He knew he'd already said enough, but he had to know. "Love?"

Her bright blue eyes glistened.

"Just sign it, Peter."

