

PART I

>CHAPTER 1

The deal was in motion.

As he guided the BMW Z3 roadster onto Highway 280, Matthew Locke felt as though his mind were spinning as quickly as the wheels that propelled him forward.

Appraising his position, he quickly cut over to the fast lane. He briefly wondered why the traffic was so light, then shrugged it off. He had more important things to think about. Bright sunlight and warm air rushed through the open windows as he gained speed and set the cruise control at seventy miles per hour.

Then Matthew noticed the clock, and realized that, for the first time in as long as he could remember, he was two hours ahead of the nightly 280 rush. His workday had ended sooner than usual. There was nothing more for him to do except wait for tomorrow to come.

Still reeling from the confrontation, he took a few deep breaths and tried to relax. He wasn't recovering from the sort of unpleasant agitation brought on by fear.

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No, this was the sort of nervousness that comes from excitement. The useful, energetic kind. The kind that Locke so fondly remembered feeling more than twenty years ago, those nights before facing a final exam he knew he would ace.

Admittedly, there was maybe the smallest tinge of anxiety mingled somewhere in all of that good nervous energy. While he was always ready for a good contest or debate, he had little tolerance for unreasonable opponents.

Like Peter Jones.

Matthew had tried one last time to compromise with the stubborn founder of Via Computer, Inc. Unfortunately, the outcome had yielded exactly what he'd expected.

Nothing.

Matthew did not want things to end this way. Not exactly, anyway. But there was no alternative. It was ridiculous. The conflict that he'd just left had been more like a vicious counseling session between a distressed married couple, instead of the calm, civil encounter you'd expect between the two most senior executives of one of the decade's most innovative companies.

Thinking back on it, he'd hoped that casually dropping in on Jones, unannounced, the way he used to, would make it possible for the two to simply talk out their differences, like reasonable men. But even as he'd set out on the short stroll between his building and Jones's, he began to have doubts.

Halfway there he stopped abruptly, right at the core of the Peter Jones legacy. He looked around and observed the sprawl of Spanish-style, single-story buildings, each painted white and topped with a red tile roof.

What Jones had started nearly a decade ago in his college dorm room had blossomed into the cluster of buildings spread all around Matthew. And even farther, to offices and factories throughout the world. And here he

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was, caught in the middle of it all, ready to turn Peter's world upside down.

The sun beat down on Matthew's wavy black hair. He was tall and lean and dressed in casual khaki slacks and a faded blue Polo shirt. For an instant he felt unusually out of place, an imposter.

It had to be done, Matthew reminded himself. Business was business, and that's what he knew best. It was why Jones had hired him in the first place. Keep that in mind, he thought as he straightened himself up and resumed his step along the gently curving sidewalk, making his way to what employees solemnly referred to as the Epicenter.

He reached Peter's building just as a small party of engineers was heading out for a break. Matthew held the door for them, nodding his greetings as they passed by, and went inside.

Peter's friendly secretary, Ben, cut short his phone conversation the moment he saw Matthew approaching. To be polite, Matthew asked if Peter was in. But before the secretary could respond, Peter's own voice answered from behind, "No."

Matthew turned just in time to see Peter's office door slam shut. He complimented Ben on his striking new haircut, then knocked gently on Peter's door.

"Nobody's home," Peter said from behind the closed door. "Please leave a message at the tone. Beep."

Matthew was not amused. He glanced at Ben, who merely shrugged. Matthew went inside, closing the door behind him.

Peter sat typing furiously on his keyboard, his back to Matthew. He'd been through this little routine with Peter too many times to count. He would wait.

The office was small and sparsely furnished, with a simple overstuffed sofa and industrial gray carpeting. Peter sat before his computer at an expansive Scandinavian table. He wore faded Calvin Klein jeans, a gray

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Armani A/X T-shirt, and Teva sandals. He hummed to himself as he typed away, pretending Matthew wasn't there.

"Nobody's home," Peter eventually repeated over the sound of his clicking keyboard.

It was astonishing, Matthew thought, how Peter had changed. How everything had changed.

The feeling of a troubled father-and-son relationship was stronger than ever. With no children of his own, Matthew had, in the course of their working together, come to care deeply for Peter. He would be lying to himself if he didn't acknowledge the fact that he put his own career first. But unlike former business relationships, this one had turned very personal, and pleasantly so. As the more mature of the two, it was his duty to be firm, to put things in order, even if it meant dealing harshly with the younger man. While Matthew wanted what was best for himself, he wanted what was best for Peter, too. Indeed, Peter's cooperation would benefit them both more than if they remained at odds. And that was what he had come here to communicate. Though whether he would get through to the customarily petulant young founder was another story.

Having waited a reasonable minute or two for Peter to finish up whatever he was typing, it was time to get down to business. Calmly, Matthew said Peter's name.

The room fell silent. With an elaborate sigh, Peter slumped his shoulders. Since Matthew, now sitting on the white muslin couch, obviously wasn't going away, he might as well deal with him. He turned around.

Matthew corrected himself. One thing certainly had not changed: Peter's eyes. A brilliant shade of blue, certain and sharp, they had earned Peter the nickname "Laser Gazer," which no one ever dared say to his face.

Matthew met the infamous gaze and was almost able to hold it before wavering. Two years in the younger man's company and he had never been able to completely hold Peter's stare for more than a few beats. It was unsettling.

And stupid, Matthew privately admonished. Christ, he was exhausted by these ego games. He cut to the chase.

“I’m not here to waste your time, Peter. Or mine. But I figure it’s only fair to warn you about the board meeting. Unless you and I can come to some sort of agreement, right now, on how we’re going to run the business, you’ll leave me no choice but to propose some drastic changes tomorrow.”

Peter simply sat there and went on drilling him with his look, unfazed by anything Matthew had said. Unwilling to play the stare-down game anymore, Matthew glanced at Peter’s computer screen.

For some reason his curiosity about what Peter was working on got through to the younger man, who abruptly shifted in his chair, blocking Matthew’s view. When he turned back around, the screen was dark.

He gave Matthew an insincere smile. “Hey, for once we agree on something. Yeah, there’ll be some changes tomorrow, Matthew. You can count on that.”

The gravity in Peter’s tone went unnoticed. Matthew was instead considering what he’d briefly glimpsed on Peter’s screen before he’d dimmed it. It appeared to be a drawing, with little connected boxes. Probably a sketch of a new system or peripheral design, Matthew guessed. His frustration flared anew. It was precisely the sort of thing Peter should be concentrating on—working up new designs—while letting Matthew worry about running the business.

“Anyway,” Peter said. “I’m tired of talking.” He flicked away a shock of bright blond hair from his brow. “I know all about your plan to suggest a reorganization, Matthew. What, you’re surprised? Did you think I wouldn’t find out? I know everything that goes on here.” He made a disgusted noise. Then, to signal the end of the discussion, he took a pen in hand and directed his attention to a blank legal pad. He began spiraling the pen around and around, from the middle of the page outward.

“Peter, listen to me. It’s not too late. The reorganiza-

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tion is only one possibility. If you'd just hear me out. I don't think you realize the severity of things around here. How bad it's gotten. You have to face the facts."

Peter was unmoved. He started humming to himself as he spiraled the pen wider and wider.

"The board is pissed off about schedule slips. There's the battery problem. The budget overruns. The handwriting recognition? Christ. It's become fodder for Leno and Letterman. And with the weak sales—"

That got Peter Jones's attention. He leaped to his feet, rigid with anger.

"Look, Matthew, don't fucking come into my office and tell me how to run my company. You don't know the half of it. I've wasted way too much time with you. Just leave me alone now."

Matthew held his place. "Peter, please."

"Out. Now."

It was hopeless. Matthew could see there would be no getting through to Jones. "Okay, Peter. You win." He rose to leave.

The room was still and Peter stood there breathing hard, working his menacing gaze.

Matthew turned to the door, then paused. He looked at Peter but said nothing, held the stare until finally, for the first time in Matthew's career at Via, Peter relented.

"What now?"

"That's all I want to know, Peter. Just that. What. I don't want to argue. I just want to know what."

"What's what you want to know?"

"What went wrong, between us."

Matthew steeled himself for more flailing. However, Peter's reaction surprised him as his fury abruptly gave way to a sort of melancholy.

Unable to look at Locke anymore, Peter lowered himself onto the sofa and casually crossed one leg over the other, and held the pen bearing the Via logo by each end between his fingers. Emphatically, yet softly, he explained.

“I don’t know why I get worked up. I guess it’s because I wanted to believe things could work out. But they can’t, Matthew. They won’t. Because you don’t understand. Don’t get it. Oh, I think you’ve tried your best, but it’s not first nature to you. You just don’t comprehend the meaning of inventing products like Via’s. Yes, you’re comfortable with marketing and trends and statistics, I’ll give you that. But in the long run, the products are all that really matter. That they are true to the visions that inspire them.” He slipped the pen into his pocket, his eyes drifting across the room to rest on his docked At Hand PC Plus prototype, his latest invention. “My visions are my products.”

And then Peter sat there for a few moments wearing a rapt, slightly smiling expression, departed to a place where everything was sharp and clear, where he could see things no one else could see.

The only thing Matthew saw was a man gone—off the deep end, perhaps. Talk about virtual reality, Matthew scoffed to himself. In his estimate, Peter had lost touch with Via’s business reality a long time ago. And while they’d had their share of arguments in the past, Peter had never seemed quite so unhinged. So out of touch. It was sad, really. But at the same time, Matthew felt relieved. After witnessing Peter like this, in his strange far-off state, any doubts Mathew had about proceeding with his plan were long gone.

Peter blinked. He was back. He looked at Matthew with clear eyes. In a tone that was at once condescending and perplexed, he said, “What is it that you see, Matthew?”

The car phone jingled, snapping Matthew back to the present—and sparing him the effort of an answer.

After Matthew Locke left his office, Peter Jones readjusted the brightness knob on his monitor and went back to work.

He moved the pointer to a series of connected rec-

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tangles, and highlighted the name inside the uppermost box. He pressed the Delete key. “Matthew Locke” disappeared. Peter frowned at the literalness of this small yet meaningful act, of deleting from his computer the man who had become a threat to its promising future.

He typed in his own name, and reworded the title below it. “Acting President and CEO.” Beneath his new box were many others, each labeled with the corresponding division’s vice president. Peter’s name appeared beneath one of these lower boxes as well, as “Vice President, At Hand PC.”

It was that simple. A click here, a little typing there, and voilà, a resolution to a problem that had gotten out of hand. But that didn’t mean it felt good.

The man Peter hired two years ago to run the company’s day-to-day business had failed. For all his management strength, Matthew did not fit into Via’s culture the way Peter had hoped he would. Looking back, he distinctly recalled the moment when he first began to doubt Matthew’s value. It was when Locke had casually asked Peter if he’d ever considered building a computer that would run PCSoft’s popular PortaPC operating system. Peter had just stared at him, as though he were joking. And then, as if that suggestion were not enough, Locke had gone so far as to speculate on the feasibility of aligning Via with a potential heavy-hitter partner—perhaps the world’s biggest computer company, International Computer Products.

How dare he propose Via abandon its founding vision of putting powerful personal computers into the hands of the individual, in favor of selling out the company to the hugely impersonal ICP and its uninspired line of products.

Ludicrous. And Peter had merely brushed it off as naive. Now he only wished he’d paid greater attention to Locke’s intimation. No wonder their friendship—if that was what you could call it—had fallen apart. Until their disagreement, they had spent nearly every Saturday

together, going for long walks or drives to discuss technology, culture, trends, product concepts. Then suddenly Matthew was no longer home on Saturdays when Peter would drop by. Peter had felt wounded. He'd become closer to Matthew than to any other male acquaintance he'd ever known. Or so he believed. However, when he thought about it, he realized that he'd been the one doing most of the talking when they were together. He'd foolishly confused true friendship with what was proving to be a sort of clandestine counterintelligence gathering, Matthew now poised to take everything he'd learned and use it against Peter. In truth, the two men were as different as night and day. Had he really believed they would work well together? That they enjoyed more than a business relationship? All right, maybe he was being a bit melodramatic, overly suspicious—or maybe he was just more hurt than he was willing to admit—but whatever the excuse, he knew he couldn't let his disappointment cloud his view. Via was his life, and to lose it would be a mockery, like being publicly executed, a fate far worse than losing the only real paternal friend he'd ever known.

With their “training” sessions no longer of interest to him, Peter had devoted himself fully to completing the At Hand PC Plus. Once it shipped, it would put to rest once and for all the criticism the original At Hand PC had received. The original At Hand was the result of three years of hard work and engineering magic. It was compact and thin and easy to transport, and its battery lasted for days on a single charge. In its simplest configuration, the device was about the size of a slender hardback book, and almost as light. It fit easily into a briefcase, and worked as either a traditional notebook computer, or as a keyboardless “slate” device. Its built-in modem made it easy to access the Net, as well as to send and receive faxes. Users interacted with the At Hand by either drawing and jotting directly on its color active-matrix display, or by using the roomy keyboard

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and trackpad that gracefully slid out from the unit's underside. Despite its handwriting-recognition flaws, the At Hand's flexibility drew considerable praise. Back at the office, users had the option of turning it into a powerful desktop system by simply snapping on a variety of components. All the right accessories were in place. Expanded keyboards. Mice and trackballs. Monitors. Printers. Scanners. CD-ROM drives. Stereo speakers. Network connections. Every peripheral available for ordinary PCs.

Peter clicked the Print button. His laser printer hummed, and moments later the new company organization chart rolled out.

Nowhere in the drawing did Matthew Locke's name appear.

Matthew reached for his ringing car phone. Was it Peter? If so, he could turn around at the next exit and be back in no time. Though he had every intention of proceeding with his plan as it now stood, he would nevertheless give Peter until the last minute to see things his way.

"Peter?"

"Matthew, it's Eileen." His secretary. "I called Peter's office. Ben said you left ten minutes ago. What happened?"

"The usual. It's like talking to a brick wall," he said. "If I have any important—"

"You do. Two. Janice Lane called to say she's accepted the offer to coauthor your autobiography. She informed *Fortune* this afternoon that she would be taking a leave of absence for the length of the project. I sent her the background reading you wanted her to catch up on. Second, Laurence Merrill. You were scheduled to go over tomorrow's meeting. She's in your office now, holding on the line." His secretary said good-bye, then put through Matthew's public relations chieftain.

“Hi, Matthew. I’ve prepared a short press release to send over the business wire after tomorrow’s board meeting.” She spoke quickly, considerate of his time. She read the brief statement, and his heart quickened as she read the last line.

“- ‘Relinquishing his role as chairman, Via cofounder Peter Jones will stay on board as the company’s leading visionary, focusing on advanced technologies and future product designs.’ Does that work for you?”

“Sounds fine.”

“If you’d like to conduct phone interviews with key press contacts, I’ll need to know now so I can make arrangements.”

“Pick the ones you think are best.”

Before taking her call he’d been eager to be alone to review his plans—but now, he felt oddly unwilling to end their conversation. Something about her voice had a soothing effect. Her words, spoken so decisively and with such assurance, eased his anxiety.

“When this settles down, let’s spend some time together to work on my strategy for the press. A mission statement, reflecting our new, more mature perspective.”

Laurence gave a lighthearted laugh. “Boy, you never slow down. Always thinking one step ahead.”

Her laughter caught him by surprise. Until now, Laurence Merrill had conducted herself in a strictly businesslike fashion. In light of the seriousness of the company’s current state of affairs, her easy manner was a welcome breath of fresh air. He hadn’t heard laughter, or laughed himself, in a long time.

“Just the nature of the business,” he said. “Anyway, thanks, Lauri.”

“You’re welcome. And by the way, I’d never noticed the picture on your desk here of you and your wife in the Alps. It’s lovely.”

His buoyant mood took a sudden nosedive with the mention of his wife, Greta. It also reminded him that he

was only minutes from home. And once there, he could forget getting any serious thinking done.

He thanked Laurence again, then snapped the phone back into its cradle and settled into the comfort of the car's sculpted leather seat.

Tomorrow's meeting. The press. The future. There was so much to think about. And there was nothing he enjoyed more than pondering every angle, every detail. He couldn't wait to get all of it down in the autobiography he'd agreed to write.

He'd confided to his editor the changes that were about to occur. She had been overjoyed—the new developments would make the book more compelling and dramatic for readers. Indeed, the way Matthew saw it, tomorrow's showstopper would go down in high-tech history as merely the first in a series of thrilling chapters chronicling Via's return to the forefront of the industry. It was all part of his divine plan.

He'd spent the last six months analyzing and plotting its current phase. All the pieces were in place. Dissolving the executive staff's confidence in Peter as a leader, while building its trust and gaining its loyalty for himself as company president and CEO, had been a delicate undertaking. The first part, to gain immediate support upon arriving at Via, had gone smoothly. He had quickly become a credible and qualified champion of Via's proprietary platform—a status he admitted he could not have attained without Peter's focused coaching and friendship.

Just a year ago a *Fortune* cover touted Peter and Matthew as "The Brains and Brawn of Silicon Valley." The jocular photo of the pair was similar to that of a Hollywood buddy film promotion poster.

On the left stood Peter, wearing his customary jeans and an emerald cashmere V-necked sweater, the sleeves pushed to the elbow and his arms folded across his chest. Of slight build and tenuous stance, his physical composure was that of a lanky high school student.

Yet his eyes revealed more. They were the eyes of a man wise beyond his years, whose mind operated at a cycles-per-second rate equal to ten brains (or so the story went). He was thirty-one at the time.

Matthew stood beside Peter with one arm hanging loosely over the younger man's shoulder. He wore khaki pants and a chambray work shirt with the sleeves, like Peter's, rolled to the elbow. His thick, dark hair was a stark contrast to the subtle but noticeable creases in his face, especially around the hazel eyes. He stared into the lens with the burning determination of a college graduate who, diploma fresh in hand, sprints eagerly toward the Challenge. He was forty-four.

Tensions began to surface around six months after the cover story hit newsstands, when the newly introduced At Hand PC met with only mild commercial success. Though the device's aggressive use of breakthrough technologies had won industrywide accolades for Peter and his team of engineers, buyers were dubious—and with good reason. The device's not quite-ready-for-prime-time handwriting recognition drew harsh criticism for its inability to interpret anything but impeccable penmanship. Peter's well-publicized dream, of making the At Hand PC the hottest-selling portable computer for the masses, turned into a bitter irony as the device's notorious misspellings got nightly laughs on *The Tonight Show*. The At Hand snatched a paltry slice of the fastest-growing market in the computer business, while software giant PCSoft's portable operating system, PortaPC, running on devices offered by the clone makers, steadily gobbled up the largest wedge of the pie. To make matters worse, there were few applications available for the At Hand when it was introduced, and those that developers had promised were late.

As sales showed no sign of picking up, the pressure on Peter's team intensified. Enhancements that would significantly improve the handwriting recogni-

tion, among other things, were behind schedule. With so many obstacles to overcome, Peter ran for cover, leaving Matthew to contend with Via's share-sensitive executives and board members. He assured them that Peter would come through with the promised improvements, and his methodical East Coast style had an interesting effect on the anxious principals: They believed him. Tomorrow he would test that confidence with an ultimatum.

In the solitude of his car, the plan seemed like the only natural solution to curing Via's stalled condition. Still, there was no guarantee that tomorrow's decision would swing in his favor. He reminded himself of his discussion with Laurence just minutes ago, the over-and-done-with tone of her voice as she'd read his statement on the other end of the line. He felt his spirits lift.

And he felt something else lift, too. His mind's eye fixed on the image of the young and attractive Laurence, her hand clasped around the telephone's handset, her words forging a new alliance between them. He pressed his palm to his groin. He knew when he'd interviewed her for the position that her attractiveness might become a distraction. A temptation. Only once had he seen a pair of hands as beautiful, and those were his wife's.

Were.

And thinking this, his daydream quickly petered out. He took the Woodside exit, then turned onto the rustic road that wound its way up to his home. He downshifted and navigated the steep, twisting grade. As if commiserating with the machinery that helped him get this far, he let out an exhausted sigh.

On either side of the road he passed enormous gates fronting the estates of Silicon Valley's most powerful executives—including Peter's mansion, which Matthew didn't bother to look at as he passed it. More than six months had gone by since he last visited Jones's home.

And ever since Greta told him last year that Peter was no longer welcome in their home, Matthew and Peter spent less and less time together.

As much as Matthew hated to admit it, Greta had been correct. Had he ignored her, he might never have distanced himself far enough from Peter—out of his power of persuasion, as Greta liked to call it—to a place where he would realize his own power.

He made a mental note. When all of this was settled, he would do something especially nice for her. Unless of course she'd already taken care of herself.

Collecting a few technical reports to go over at home, Peter decided it wouldn't hurt to check on the status of a few last hurdles facing the At Hand PC Plus project team.

Ambling through the cubicle-filled office, he exchanged passing greetings with several of his favorite engineers. He worked his way to the rearmost corner office, occupied by John Dulin, and parked himself in a chair.

"How's it coming?"

"It's coming." John lifted his soldering iron and blew away a trail of smoke. "I think I've got this battery situation licked once and for all." Not one for idle chatter, the engineer returned his attention to the electronic components scattered about his worktable.

"Let's hope so." Peter glanced at the pile of batteries stacked beside an exposed At Hand Plus chassis. Each cell was charred with a caramel-colored resin. After the At Hand began shipping, a few retailers reported that some units were overheating and smoking. It turned out that the At Hand's internal battery was situated too close to the charging unit. The operations department came up with a quick fix—a small insulated barrier that had to be squeezed into place by hand during the otherwise automated production process. As though the handwrit-

ing-recognition debacle weren't embarrassing enough, the press had had a field day with this latest unfortunate development. Joshua Ellis, a hack high-tech reporter with the *San Francisco Examiner*, broke the story with the headline "Via's Fiery Fumbled Fingers At Hand." Christ, Peter couldn't wait for the At Hand PC Plus to ship. He'd show them all.

Peter had the utmost faith in John Dulin, who had been with Via since the beginning. He was confident that John would fix the battery problem. The obvious solution would have been to install a small cooling fan inside the computer. However, Jones wouldn't permit it. He intended for the At Hand to be the world's most quiet and unobtrusive mainstream computer ever invented. Tech journals pointed out that it couldn't be done, that you *had to* cool the unit's hot-running processor with a microfan. Peter countered with his standard reply: "Anyone who says something can't be done only says so because they aren't smart enough to figure it out." Put to the challenge, Dulin, after two sleepless nights of sustaining himself on soda and popcorn, delivered, revealing a design that cooled the machine by natural convection.

Peter leaned over John's shoulder for a closer look. "I'd sure hate to see us go back to the drawing board on that sweet little battery charger." The engineer assured him that the problem would soon be history. Not entirely convinced, Peter stayed right where he was, hovering like a hawk.

Dulin stopped what he was doing and set down the soldering iron. He made an elaborate show of retrieving his portable CD player and headphones from a nearby drawer. He looked at Peter with tired eyes. "How about a little faith here, huh?"

Jones raised his palms and grinned. "All right, all right. I'm outta here. I just wanted to make sure you were coming along okay, that's all." He left the engineer with his head bobbing through curling smoke trails.

These were the little triumphs that excited Peter. Achieving what others said was impossible. It was no secret that the engineers were the only people in the company for whom Peter felt genuine admiration and respect. And secretly, awe. They were the conveyors of his visions, the ones who turned his radical ideas into real products.

Making his way to the front of the building, he swung by the software testing lab. Inside, a dozen engineers each sat before a Plus prototype, putting the new system software enhancements through their paces. The group was oblivious of his presence as screens scrolled and flashed, styluses scribbled and tapped, speakers chirped, and printers cranked out performance results.

Satisfied that everything was going according to plan, Peter exited the building and hopped into his black Z3. His natural appreciation for all things elegant and functional had inspired him to make BMW the company car of choice for senior executives. They picked the model, and Via picked up the lease. The only rule—an unspoken one—was no one could pick the same model as Peter Jones. There had been a single exception, however, when Matthew had ordered a Z3 for himself. They weren't exactly alike: Locke had chosen silver and preferred to drive with the hardtop on, while Peter always zipped around with the top down. Nevertheless, the executive staff wondered how Peter would react. To everyone's surprise, Peter had been flattered. For a while, anyway, until things had fallen apart between them. Now he wondered if Matthew had chosen the car only to imply that he and Peter were somehow equals. He'd thought they were, but sadly he'd been wrong.

He felt foolish now for having nearly lost control when Matthew had come by to try and talk things over. But at the same time, he didn't know how else to act or feel. He was ill-equipped for this sort of corporate maneuvering. All his adult life he had dealt squarely with his employees, his peers, his critics, and his competitors. Sure, business was war, but somehow Peter had

always managed to play by his own idealistic rules. No one knew—or thought he knew—better than Peter what was right for Via. Until now. It wasn't fair.

Speeding down Orchard Avenue, he passed the large, modern three-story sales and marketing building, where Matthew and the other senior executives were stationed. Peter kept his office with the engineers, far from the ritzy corporate offices. Though his title was chairman, his paramount job was to create Via's computers. And to do that he belonged in the trenches, with his team. Especially now. The last place he wanted to sit was across the hall from Matthew Locke.

He zoomed out of the complex's main gate and headed for Highway 280. Waiting for the on-ramp traffic signal to change, he glanced in his rearview mirror at the Via logo glinting in the golden afternoon sunlight, atop the corporate building. The logo depicted an abstract highway lane stretching into a far-reaching, rainbow-hued horizon. He adored his company's name and logo. *Via: by way of, through*. Together, they epitomized everything he strove for in his life's work.

Accelerating onto the highway, he felt a small gush of pride as he stole one last look at the emblem. He'd paved a path that had put the world's most truly personal computers into so many hands, into so many lives. He enjoyed a good measure of self-satisfaction at this achievement, not to mention the riches that flowed to those who helped make Via the legendary company it was today.

And though he was uneasy thinking about tomorrow's disagreeable business of ending the Via journey for one man who'd lost his way, Peter could already sense the relief that would follow. After tomorrow's meeting, he would be back in the driver's seat, on his own.