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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "UNDO": A NOVEL ***

"Undo"

a novel by Joe Hutsko

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Thank you.

Joe Hutsko 76703.4030@compuserve.com

"UNDO" ON THE WORLD WIDE WEB

The WWW version of "Undo" is located at <http://www.vivid.com/undo.html>

(Special thanks to Nathan Shedroff, Drue Miller, and Anita Corona of San Francisco-based Vivid Studios, for kindly creating and maintaining the "Undo" WWW page; you folks are a many splendid thing.)

NOTE TO NEWTON USERS

A Newton Book edition of "Undo" is available in the Newton/PIE Forum on CompuServe (GO NEWTON), in the Newton Forum on America

Online (KEYWORD: NEWTON), and in the Newton Books Forum on eWorld (SHORTCUT: NEWTON).

(Special thanks to Patty Tulloch, of Apple Computer, Inc., for her kindness, her commitment, and most of all, her friendship. Without her assistance, the Newton Book edition of "Undo" would not have been possible.)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, companies, products, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, companies and/or products, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

DEDICATION

This novel is dedicated to the loving memory of my father

Stephen M. Hutsko

INTRODUCTION TO THE ELECTRONIC EDITION

"What a long, strange trip it's been."

— The Grateful Dead

As nearly as I can remember, I began writing this novel in the summer of '88, after leaving my job at Apple Computer, Inc., where I worked for almost four years for former Apple chairman John Sculley, as his personal technology advisor. It was a neat job title and a lot of fun, but somewhere in there I decided I wanted to become a novelist. Eight years and two title-changes later, the first novel that I set out to write, known these days as "Undo," is finally available to readers in this special electronic edition, free of charge.

Electronic books, or e-texts, have been available for some time now so this is hardly groundbreaking news. Or is it? For me, it's a pretty big deal. Primarily because the electronic books that are available to download from the Internet, the World Wide Web, and online services such as CompuServe and America Online, were published previously in hardback or paperback editions, or both. Bruce Sterling's "The Hacker Crackdown: Law and Disorder on the Electronic Frontier," for example, was first published in hardback by Bantam in 1992, then in 1993 in paperback, also by Bantam. Sterling wisely retained the electronic rights to his book so that he may - electronically speaking - do as he pleases with his work. To the best of my knowledge, Sterling is the first author to give away his published, in-print book for free on the Net.

I don't know how many people who download e-books actually read them from cover-to-cover, though I suspect the number is rather low. Mainly because the medium isn't as easy on the eyes as traditional paper-based books. I would bet that most people who download e-books - and I'm talking about novels, vs. reference works - browse them part of the way, then delete them from their computer or PDA. As for works of non-fiction, such as Sterling's book, or the enormously serviceable "Elements of Style" (which has recently appeared in e-book format), readers refer to these works on a need-to-know basis. But novels, they're another story. A novel is something you curl up with and, if it's a good one, lose yourself in, much the way Alice found herself getting lost in that fantastic looking glass. Perhaps the valuable thing about publishing a novel as an e-text is that it gives readers a taste for the story and for the author's style, so that the reader can then go out and purchase the published edition if they want to.

But let's get back to "Undo," and why making it available for free in this electronic book version is so important to me. The reason is simple: I want people to read it, and this is - so far, anyway - the only way to make that happen. For, despite the hard-fought efforts of not one, not two, but three very reputable literary agents, the book, unlike Mr. Sterling's works, has not found a trade publisher it can call home.

Why? The answer to this question is best summed up by Bantam editor Brian Tart, in his recent letter of rejection:

Ms. Juliet Nicolson
Juliet Nicolson Ltd. Literary Agency
71 Chester Row
London England SW1W 8JL

Dear Juliet:

Thank you for dropping off Joe Hutsko's ms. while you were in New York. I must say that I am impressed with Mr. Hutsko's writing and believe him to be a talent to watch in the future. His story, however, seemed to me to be a bit stale - it seems to be about six or eight years too late in the making - as I could see, and indeed have seen, this kind of corporate intrigue take place in the world of non-fiction. Because the plot was not as timely as it would need to be to succeed in the commercial marketplace, I will have to pass.

Please do keep me informed of Mr. Hutsko's projects, should he decide to embark upon writing another ms.

Sincerely,
[Signed]
Brian Tart
Associate Editor

Enc.

Give or take a few sentiments, the gist of Mr. Tart's encouraging but ultimately downer letter was repeated by all of the top trade publishing houses. A number of enthusiastic editors - in particular a young editor named John Michel, who pleaded with his senior editors to acquire the novel first at HarperCollins, then later when he moved to Crown (and who has since become a friend, so something

good has survived those battles) - tried their best to acquire the book, and in one case an offer was extended to my then-agent, but then two days later the publisher backed out, apologizing that the editor who'd made the offer was in no position to do so, please forgive the error in our ways.

The really troubling thing for me was that when I set out to write my novel, another novel called "The Bonfire of the Vanities," by Tom Wolfe, had taken the reading population by storm. Was not Mr. Wolfe's novel inspired by real-life, by the bond trading schemes that at the time were making front page news? Readers of fiction turned the book into a best-seller, and as one of those readers, I cannot say that I would have read the book were Tom Wolfe to have written it as a non-fiction title. That it was inspired by actual characters and events, and turned by Wolfe's expert hands into a compelling modern-day tale of murder and mortality, were enough to convince me that I could pull off the same sort of magic with my own "what if" scenario, swapping Silicon Valley for New York, and the personal computer business for bond trading.

That this was my first attempt at writing a novel goes a long way toward explaining the earliest rejections of the work, then titled "Silicon Dreams," by editors unlucky enough to have had it land with a thud on their desks. Somehow I'd lost sight of Mr. Wolfe's excellent illustration and found myself mimicking, all at once, the likes of Sidney Sheldon, Arthur Hailey, Jackie Collins, and, believe it or not, Stephen King (who happens to be my favorite mainstream read). With so many influences at play in the already befuddled head of an aspiring young writer with dreams of hitting the number one spot on all of the best-seller lists, you (and of course I, this much later) can understand how my storytelling ability left something to be desired.

Still, I pressed on, heeding suggestions I believed were valid (such as: "How dare you kill that character in the middle of the book just because you don't know what to do with her next!"). More than once I put the whole thing on the shelf to give it, and myself, a breather; to put a little space between us so that our respective flaws could be considered the next time around with a clearer, colder eye. Four rewrites later, including a no-holds-barred excising, I finally had a book, still known then as "Silicon Dreams," that I believed was as good as it was going to get.

And then it happened. A publisher bought it. I had the literary critic Digby Diehl to thank for this good news. At the time Digby was a book reviewer for "Playboy," and also a daily book columnist for the Prodigy online service (where I'd done a brief stint ghost writing for a highly paid high-tech analyst who will remain unnamed). Via e-mail I asked Digby if he'd read my novel and, if he liked it, to suggest editors who may want to take a look at it. Well, Digby'd read it and liked it - enough to personally pass it along to the head of a new and small-but-going-for-the-big-time publisher named Knightsbridge Publishing, an imprint distributed by the reputable Hearst Corporation. Knightsbridge was founded around the time of the Gulf War, and made its killing, so to speak, with a mass market paperback best-seller, "The Rape of Kuwait."

The deal was for both hardback and paperback rights, and the publisher himself called me to offer \$5000 for the whole package, which I came close to accepting. However, I knew that money matters were best handled by my agent - despite the fact that I had fired her a few months earlier for not having sold the novel herself. Fortunately she forgave me my actions and signed me back up, compelling Knightsbridge to increase its offer to \$25,000.

Too bad neither of us ever saw most of that money. Unfortunately, Knightsbridge went out of business - but not without first boosting my expectations through the exhilarating prepublication process. I was assigned a marvelous editor named Lynette Padwa, whose keen suggestions helped me to make the book a better read. There was even a glossy lavender and gold embossed book jacket with my photo on back atop Digby Diehl's encouraging blurb, and two months before the publication date I received my first bound galley copy, to double-check for typesetting errors before it went off to the printer. The prepublication buzz started up, and a Hollywood producer named Andrew Karsch, who'd just released "The Prince of Tides" with Barbra Streisand, was considering buying a film option on the novel to adapt for a possible a feature film or television miniseries. And just when things couldn't possibly look brighter, they did, when both Kirkus Review and Publishers Weekly asked to see advance reader's copies of the book.

And then the impossible dream turned into a nightmare. I should have known the end was near when instead of receiving the signing advance in one lump sum, as agreed upon, it was coming in smaller and smaller portions (and then only after my hounding the accounting department every day telling them my rent and phone bill were late). You see, I wanted to believe. It was difficult enough to accept that this was finally happening to me - that my first novel was about to be published in hardback to building fanfare. To think otherwise, that something might stop the novel from being published, wasn't a "happy thought," and anything but happy thoughts, my agent advised, would seep disagreeably into the novel's successful launch. But unhappy did things turn when Knightsbridge announced that it was closing

shop.

But I was not to be put off. Armed with ten bound galleys, my agent appealed to several hardback publishers...and when they all said no - in almost every case for the same reasons Brian Tart at Bantam gave us - we tried paperback publishers, lowering our expectations and hoping then for a paperback original deal. Twice we came close. First Ace, then Berkley, however editors at both houses met resistance from editorial boards who felt that the novel would find no audience.

Feeling dejected and down on my luck, I had to blame someone for this conspiracy, so once again I contacted my agent and told her I would be seeking representation elsewhere. This time she told me she wouldn't take me back if I changed my mind, and who could blame her. My next agent, who'd left an old and very successful New York literary agency to start her own agency, was young and fresh and building a name for herself as one to watch in the business, with editors chasing her all over the floor at the first American Booksellers Association conference she attended on her own. She had a more focused approach: Talk up the book to a few editors she knew very well and try to get something of a rivalry going for it - before any of them even read it. Brilliant thinking; this was the kind of agent I wanted on my side. Shooting for freshness, we decided to change the novel's title from "Silicon Dreams" to "Double Click," and off it went to the waiting editors. The long and short of it: Neither Random House nor Viking wanted it. Adding insult to injury, one even suggested that if I were to write a non-fiction book he would publish that. What a depressing thought.

Before she'd signed me up, my agent and I had agreed to treat our relationship as a trial agreement. After the rejection, I decided that though she was fast becoming a very hot agent, mainstream fiction wasn't her area of expertise; what I really, really needed was an agent who represented best-selling mainstream authors.

My friend Gloria Nagy, a splendid novelist with seven novels under her belt (one of which, "Looking for Leo," is on its way to becoming a CBS miniseries), put me in touch with her then-agent, Ed Victor, who is based in London, and enjoys a long client list of acclaimed literary and mainstream authors. After Gloria's introduction, I sent my novel to Ed Victor, and although he'd rejected the novel six years ago, suggesting it needed a lot of work (advice I took to heart), this time he responded positively, saying he had enjoyed it.

Yet, because his client list was so full and active, he was at the time not taking on new fiction writers. He did however direct me to an agent named Juliet Nicolson, with whom he had begun a working alliance, and to whom he would be happy to send my novel for consideration. A spirited British woman, Juliet had lived and worked in publishing in the United States for many years, and had decided to return to London to start her own agency. Several weeks later she faxed me to say that she thoroughly enjoyed the novel, and that Ed Victor lends his full support to her should I decide to have her represent me. I called her back thirty seconds later and shouted "Yes," and, another long and short of it, despite their combined efforts, their long careers of landing huge book deals, the novel "Double Click" still found no publishing house.

After sending the novel to a long list of hardback publishers, then trying, as before, to secure a paperback original deal, Juliet felt it was time to put the book away and concentrate on my next novel, which I had in fits and starts tried to get off the ground for the last however many years. She stressed that someday we would sell "Double Click," possibly after my next novel or the one after that, and assured me that this was how first novels sometimes turned out (after all, although John Grisham's blockbuster "The Firm" made him a household name, his first novel was the small-press-published "A Time to Kill," which Doubleday/Dell then rereleased to astonishing success). So I put "Double Click" away once more and went back to writing the video game strategy guides I'd found my way into to pay the rent, and that was the end of that...

For about six months, anyway.

Then I was struck by an idea: To rewrite "Double Click" just one more time, but this time around, fix the number one complaint that editors had voiced: That the story was too dated. So instead of playing out the trials and tribulations of my characters on a stage set in the by-now commonplace (and therefore, predictable) personal and mainframe computer market, I decided to shift the backdrop to a more modern setting: advanced handheld computers and pocket communicators, also known as PDAs, or personal digital assistants.

I told my agent none of this, and quietly set to reworking the plot and backdrop to accommodate my change of heart. To make the story feel fresh to me I changed most of the characters names, but other than that each of their stories and struggles remained the same. To ensure that I didn't date the story before I even finished it, I wove in a number of not quite ready for prime time technologies, including practical speech synthesis and voice recognition. The final rewrite in effect put the novel ever so

slightly into the future, and as far as I could tell squashed the criticism that the story was too stale.

Taking my agent by complete surprise, I sent her the new manuscript, which I had retitled "Undo" (a contemporary term, recognizable to readers, that represents the novel's premise and the underlying theme at play in each of the primary characters' lives - and, a little closer to home, sums up my own story in trying to turn around the mysterious forces that have stood in the way of getting this novel published). Well, she was shocked, to say the least, and complimented me on my patience and perseverance.

While my agent was busy reading and considering what to do with the new and improved "Undo," I'd begun, and have since completed, my second novel, "r.g.b." The book's first chapter, which I'd written a few years ago, was excerpted in a small literary journal called "Puck," and represents for me my "other" style of writing, which, for lack of a better word, I can only describe as more...intricate and challenging to read, less mainstream.

Which brings us to the present. Because "r.g.b." is not what my agent - make that, former agent - considers commercially viable, she has decided to drop me as a client, suggesting with a wish of good luck that I find myself an agent who wants to represent both of my "voices" - the mainstream style of "Undo," and the less mainstream style of "r.g.b."

So, here we are. My old friend John Michel has offered to help me find a new literary agent, and I'm about to begin writing a screenplay called "Misguided Angel" that I've wanted to write for years. Plus, I'm already thinking about the second screenplay I'll write after that, and the next mainstream novel, and the next less mainstream novel too. So I'm anything but down for the final count.

Have I learned anything in all these years? Tons. For one thing, my first two agents weren't so unfit after all - each did the best job she could in trying to sell the novel, and in the end even my third, highly esteemed agent met with the same resistance that the previous two encountered. Second, the publishing business is more a mystery to me than ever. That this book has not found a home has somehow turned in my heart from a troubling fact of life, to something of a testament to optimism, a proud eccentricity, a character-building battle scar of sorts. I suppose that's just how we fragile beings adapt to unrealized expectations, dashed hopes. Still, having just completed my new novel, I'm all juiced up and feeling groovy, raring to give it another go - after all, it's all anyone who decides to try to make a living telling stories can do...try, try again.

Will "Undo" ever find its way between the sheets of pulpy paper and glossy covers? Will it ever find its way onto the big screen, or, if I had my choice, the little screen? And, perhaps most important of all, does this novel really matter to anyone besides me? The first two questions I have no way of knowing the outcomes of - both are in Fate's all-knowing hands and only time will tell.

As for that last question, whether this novel matters to anyone besides me, I can only answer by saying I hope so.

What you're about to read is a novel I have labored over for a very long time. It gives me great pleasure to hand it over, once and for all, to you, gentle reader, whoever, and wherever you are. I hope you like it.

Joe Hutsko 76703.4030@compuserve.com January, 1996

PROLOGUE

It was once a sprawling flatland, dominated by fruit tree orchards and nestled safely between protective hills.

This tranquil scene slowly vanished as trees were felled, concrete poured, and new seeds planted, each the size of a large beetle and filled with thousands of microscopic circuits, sown by a new breed of farmer, with dreams of growing the future.

The new electronic produce, capable of performing millions of calculations in the blink of an eye, was harvested.

The new technology farmland: Silicon Valley.

Viewed from high above, the Valley looks like a schematic drawing of the very seeds from which it has grown, thousands of technology orchards, connected by the roads and highways etched into the golden surface of the land.

PART I

Chapter 1

As he guided the black BMW coupe onto Highway 280, Matthew Locke felt as though his mind was spinning as quickly as the wheels propelling him onward. Whether the one functioned as precisely as the other did not occur to him.

Appraising his position, he wondered why there were so few cars to contend with this afternoon. Having lived in Northern California for more than two years, he had never headed home on 280 without confronting ricocheting tail lights, jockeying for position in the fast lane. Bright sunlight and warm air rushed through the sunroof and windows as he gained speed and activated the cruise control upon reaching sixty-five miles per hour.

Then Matthew noticed the clock, and he remembered he was two hours ahead of the commuter traffic that congested the highway every day. He also remembered why.

He took a few deep breaths to relax his nerves. He had tried one last time, to no avail, to compromise with Peter Jones, the stubborn young founder of Wallaby Computer, Incorporated.

Matthew Locke did not want things to end like this. Not exactly. But there was no alternative. The confrontation that had just taken place was more like a vicious counseling session between a distressed married couple than a meeting between two senior executives of the decade's most important and innovative high technology company.

Matthew had informed his secretary Eileen that he was walking over to Peter Jones's office to try to talk with him one last time about the upcoming board of directors meeting. As Matthew neared Peter's building, his anxiety sharpened. He paused for a moment and thought about his place at that very instant, standing at the very center of the Peter Jones legacy. Surrounding Matthew were a number of Spanish-style, single-story buildings, each painted white and topped with a red tile roof. What began as a seedling idea in a garage nearly a decade ago had blossomed into the cluster of buildings stretching a quarter-mile in either direction from where he stood, and even farther, to a number of locations throughout the world. And now he was on his way to the epicenter of this campus-like complex that was Wallaby Computer. Matthew arrived from his journey west with the feeling that he had entered a fairy tale, so full of wonder was this place. But now, as he resumed his step along the gently curving sidewalk that ran up either side of the block, he felt as though the set were changing. Full of dread, he approached the end, and the beginning, of the rainbow, where he would confront the man "Time" magazine called the "Computer Wizard."

Peter's secretary cut short her phone conversation the moment she saw Matthew.

"Peggy, is Peter in?"

Before she could respond, Peter's own voice answered from behind him. "No!"

Matthew turned just in time to see Peter's office door slam shut. He knocked gently.

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

Matthew Locke was not amused. Like a father exercising his right to open any door in his own home, he entered the office.

He was met with the sound of continuous clicking from Peter's keyboard. The office was small and sparsely furnished, with simple overstuffed furniture and gray carpeting. Peter was sitting before his computer at a black lacquered desk against the wall, his back turned to Matthew. He closed the door behind him and waited for Peter to turn around.

"Nobody's home," Peter repeated over the sound of his staccato typing.

Matthew eased himself into the chair beside the couch, remembering the first time he had sat in this very office, more than two years ago, when Jones had hired him to run the company. My God, Matthew thought, how he has changed - how everything has changed.

All at once, the room was silent. Peter Jones turned around in his chair.

One thing had not changed: Peter's eyes. Deep and black and seemingly bottomless, certain and sharply focused, like the eyes of a young boy determined to win a swimming race. Matthew felt his toes

grip at nothingness inside his dock shoes, felt his feet slide silently backward a fraction of an inch across the natty carpet, as if he were taking a step back from the edge of the board for fear of diving once again into that dark pool. And with this thought came another...of water, and splashing, thrashing, losing grip... Loss. Determined, Matthew quickly sobered himself of the troubling memories that had momentarily distorted his focus.

He stood. "Peter, unless you and I can come to some understanding about how we're going to run the business, I'm going to suggest some drastic changes at tomorrow's board meeting." To avoid Peter's eyes he glanced at the computer screen.

Peter smoothly turned the screen's dimmer knob and stared at Matthew. "There'll be some changes, all right," Peter said.

The gravity of the younger man's tone went unnoticed by Matthew. His attention had been captured by what he'd seen on the screen before it darkened. It appeared that Peter was working on some sort of graphic. A drawing with little boxes. Probably a sketch of a new computer design, Matthew concluded. The pang of pity he felt changed to frustration when he recognized the root of the problem: Why can't he understand that this is exactly what he should be doing, designing new computers, and let me run the company?

"It's too late for any more discussion," Peter said, flicking away the shock of dark brown hair hanging over his brow. "I know all about your plan to suggest a reorganization, Matthew. What, you're surprised? I know everything that goes on here." He made a disgusted noise. Then, as if to signal the end of the discussion, he took a pen in hand and directed his attention to a legal pad. With intense concentration, he began drawing a line spiraling round and round from the middle of the page outward.

"It's not too late. That's what I'm trying to tell you," Matthew said. "I don't think you realize the severity of things around here. How bad it's gotten."

Peter began humming a tune to himself.

"The board is very disturbed about the schedule slips, and furthermore, the weak sales - "

Peter's meditation ended. The pen flew within inches of Matthew's face. He leaped to his feet. "Don't you dare come into my office and tell me how to run my company." The younger man was all tensile, his body resonating with indignation. "Now leave me alone! Just get out of here!"

Matthew held his place. "Peter, please."

"Out!"

It was hopeless. There was no way Matthew would be able to reach him. "Okay, Peter," Matthew said with a resigned sigh. "You win."

The room was silent. Peter stood there with his eyes closed, waiting for Matthew to go.

Matthew turned to leave, then paused, his hand on the door latch. He waited half a minute, until Peter opened his eyes and looked at him.

"What?" Peter asked, wearily.

"That's what I want to know."

"What's what you want to know?"

"What went wrong. Why." Prepared for more flailing, Peter's reaction surprised him.

Without looking at Matthew, Peter came toward him. He picked up the pen he had moments before used as a missile. He lowered himself down onto the sofa and casually crossed one leg over the other. He held the pen bearing the Wallaby logo by each end between his fingers. Emphatically, yet softly, he explained. "You don't understand. You just don't get it. You don't know the truth about inventing products like Wallaby's. In the long run, it's all that really matters. That the products are true to the visions that inspire them." He gently placed the pen in his pocket, shrugged. His glazed eyes drifted across the room to rest on his docked Joey. "My visions are my products."

He remained there for a few moments with a rapt, slightly smiling expression lighting his face, gone inside himself to a place where, the way he saw it, everything was sharp and clear, where he could see things no one else could see.

The only thing Matthew saw was a man gone. Gone mad, perhaps. Although they'd had arguments in

the past, Peter had never seemed so unhinged. In a way, Matthew felt relieved. Having witnessed Peter's distracted state, he was resolved to proceed with his plan.

The young founder blinked. He looked at Matthew with clear eyes. He was back. He bit his lower lip, and with an expression at once sad and perplexed, he said, "What is it that you see, Matthew? What is your vision?"

The car phone jingled, snapping Matthew out of his musing.

Was it Peter? If so, he could turn around at the next exit and be back in just a few minutes. Though he had every intention of proceeding with his plan as it now stood, Matthew would nevertheless give Peter until the very last minute to see things his way.

"Peter?"

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

"I've decided to go home for the rest of the day," he said. "If I have any calls - "

"You already do. Laurence Maupin."

"Is it urgent?"

"The two of you were scheduled to discuss tomorrow's meeting. She's in your office now, holding on the line."

"Okay. Put her on."

There was a click, then Laurence's voice. "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. "It reads: 'Wallaby Computer, Incorporated today announced a realignment of executive responsibilities. In addition to his current position as president and CEO, Matthew Locke will now assume the responsibilities of chairman of the board, and vice president of the Joey division...'"

At this last, his heart suddenly quickened. "Peter Jones, former chairman and cofounder of Wallaby, will stay on as the company's leading visionary, focusing on advanced technologies and future product designs.'

"Still there?" she asked, giving him an opportunity to comment.

"Go on."

She continued immediately. "'Locke has expressed great confidence in Jones's ability to drive Wallaby to the position of technology leader in the desktop computer and personal interactive assistant industry.'" When she finished reading Matthew's statement, she paused. "Is that suitable?"

"Yes. That's fine. Thank you."

"If you'd like to conduct any phone interviews with key press constituents, I'll need to know that now so I can make arrangements."

"No. None. What you've done is fine for all parties."

He waited to be sure she was through, then said, "Thank you, Laurence." Before taking her call he had been eager to be alone so he could mentally review his plan, but now he felt oddly unwilling to end their conversation. Something about her voice, the words about him spoken so decidedly, was having a softening effect on his anxious mood.

"Listen," he said, "when this settles down, let's spend some time together to work on my strategy for the press and Wallaby's new PR plans."

"Absolutely."

"Great. And thanks again," he said. With nothing left to discuss, he said good-bye. As he moved the phone from his ear he heard her call his name. "Yes?"

"I almost forgot," she said, slightly exasperated. "Where do you get your car serviced?"

"My car?" Matthew said, a little dumbfounded.

"Yes. My steering is making a terrible noise. It's a BMW, like yours. Well not exactly like yours. I mean, mine is a lot smaller."

"Wallaby does mine," Matthew said. "They arrange for its service, near my house. The place is called Bavaria Motor Systems, in Woodside. It's just off Woodside Road."

"Right. I know where that is," Laurence said. "It sounds more like a high tech company than a car shop, doesn't it? I'm finally getting used to all these sys's and gen's and tech's and mem's," she said with a chuckle.

Her laughter caught Matthew by surprise. Until now, Laurence had conducted herself in a strictly-business fashion. In light of the seriousness of the situation he faced with Wallaby, her easy laughter was a welcome breath of fresh air. He hadn't heard laughter, or laughed himself, in a long time. He thought of perhaps thanking her for... But for what? For laughing? Sure.

"Well, again, thank you, Laurence," Matthew.

"No, thank you," she said. "And Matthew, you can call me Lauri if you like. It makes things less formal."

"All right. Good-bye, Lauri..." And for the second time he heard her call his name as he went to hang up the phone. "Now what?" he said, affably.

"I'm sorry, Matthew. There's one more thing. The picture in your office, of your wife and her horse. Where is that? I mean, where does she keep her horse?"

"You ride? I had no idea. It's Woodside Ranch. About a half-mile north of the BMW shop. There's a turnoff, with a sign. You can't miss it. That it?"

"Yes," she replied.

"You're sure?" He laughed. "Okay, then. Good-bye." He snapped the phone back onto its cradle and settled into the comfort of the leather seat. Tomorrow's meeting. The press. The future. Laurence's certainty and control helped him strengthen his own hold on the immediacy of tomorrow's meeting, and his overall plan.

His plan. He'd spent the past six months analyzing and plotting its current phase. If the vote was successful, Peter Jones would be removed from his position as Wallaby's chairman and engineering division vice president. Company-wide responsibility would be turned over to Matthew.

All the pieces were in place. To begin with, Matthew had gained tentative agreement from Wallaby's vice chairman, Hank Towers, to consider "repositioning" Peter within the company. He had then spent many hours with each member of the executive staff over the last several months, subtly gaining their confidence as he explained his strategy for the company's future, one that would increase Wallaby's profitability and competitive position in the industry.

Dissolving the executive staff's confidence in Peter Jones as a leader, while building its trust and gaining its loyalty for himself as company president, had been an extremely delicate operation. Resistance from even one member of the executive staff could have prevented his plan from advancing to its present place.

The first phase of Matthew's plan, to gain support after his arrival at Wallaby, had been successful. He had become a credible and qualified champion of Wallaby's high technology platform of computer products, a status he would have never reached without Peter's focused coaching and friendship.

Just a year and a half earlier, "Business Week" had touted Peter and Matthew as "The Brains and Brawn of Silicon Valley." Gracing the cover was a jocular photo of the two, an insightful, undisguised shot whose overall effect was similar to that of a Hollywood buddy film promotion poster. On the left stood Peter, wearing jeans and a white Oxford shirt. His shirtsleeves were rolled to the elbow and his arms were folded nimbly across his chest. Of slight build and tenuous stance, his physical composure was that of a lanky high school student, yet his eyes had the depth of a twenty-coat lacquer finish. They were the eyes of a man older than his years, whose mind performed at a cycles-per-second rate equal to that of three men combined. He was thirty-one.

Beside Peter stood Matthew, one arm hung loosely over the younger man's shoulder. He wore khaki pants and a chambray work shirt whose sleeves, like Peter's, were rolled to the elbows. The sparse, light-brown hair, high, time-worn forehead, and the creases of his face, especially around the eyes, did not belie his age. His eyes, more gray than blue, burned with the determination of a college graduate who, with diploma fresh in hand, sprints eagerly toward The Challenge. He was forty-two.

Tensions began to surface just six months after that cover shot appeared on newsstands, when after its introduction, the Joey personal interactive assistant met with only mild commercial success. Though the device won accolades from the industry for Peter and his team of engineers for its breakthrough technology, buyers were skeptical. The dream that Peter shared with Matthew in their first meeting was to make the Joey the hottest-selling portable computer device in the world, displacing market share completely dominated by Wallaby's biggest competitor, International Computer Products.

The dream was never realized. Though users of ICP's own best-selling portable computer admitted that the Joey was technically more innovative and expertly designed, there were few key software applications available for it at the time of its introduction. At the root of the delay was a frustrating paradox: While the Joey was by far the easiest to use portable interactive assistant, it was also the most difficult computer to develop software programs for. The Joey employed a radical new method of operation and many of the software developers had trouble learning the new system. As sales of the Joey dropped off, the pressure on Peter's team grew more intense. Enhancements that would make the Joey easier to develop programs for were behind schedule, and Matthew held Peter responsible for the delays.

During this precarious period, Peter ran for cover. Embarrassed by his own shortsightedness, he left Matthew to contend with Wallaby's share-sensitive executives and board members. It wasn't unnatural for the president of a company to contend with its board of directors, but it was radically different from the way things had worked at Wallaby in the past. Peter Jones held a dual role as chairman of the board and vice president of the Joey division. Until the development dilemma, Peter had always been the primary voice in front of the board. So while Peter recovered from his temporary loss of balance, Matthew soothed board members' nerves by committing all of his energies to building a strategy that would move Wallaby back into a secure, high-sales position. He assured them that Peter was on track and would come through with the necessary improvements. He produced impressive development trend studies that described how it often took two years for a new product to gain market acceptance. His methodical East Coast style had an interesting effect on the anxious principals: They believed him. In the past, Peter has wowed them with his enthusiasm and technological prowess. There had never been cause to question the young man's business acumen; the company was less than ten years old and had been profitable for just as long. But suddenly, Peter's passionate efforts seemed empty; the numbers were declining. Those numbers needed turning around, and Matthew was the board's man. Now that he had their confidence, it was time to give them an ultimatum.

It was really quite simple. Matthew would propose that Peter be removed as the leader of both Wallaby and the Joey group. Matthew would personally oversee the accelerated development of the new Joey Plus, enforcing a strict schedule to complete its design and production in just three months. Matthew knew Peter that would be utterly shocked by his proposal at tomorrow's meeting. Though Peter would be stripped of all his power, Matthew hoped that after his feelings healed, the executive staff and board of directors would be able to persuade him to concentrate his visionary skills in a research capacity, which Matthew could draw upon when the core Joey technology began showing signs of obsolescence.

To fulfill his promise to fix the company's stalled position, Matthew intended to unify the engineering groups, ending the elitist conditions Peter had created when he began developing the Joey more than three years ago. Peter had chosen only the brightest, most proven people and moved his new team to a private building, which he had surrounded with tight security. Only the Joey team had been allowed to enter the building, a first in Wallaby history. Before the Joey project, employees had been free to enter every building. Most employees had no reason to enter buildings other than those in which they worked, but the freedom of being allowed to do so represented the company's trust in its people. Matthew, of course, was free to roam wherever he pleased, and he instantly understood the reason for Peter's rule the first time he entered the off-limits building. Peter had created a project-team paradise. The Joey engineers were supplied with exotic and luxurious amenities that Peter felt nurtured their creativity and rewarded them for their intense work.

Matthew intended to put an end to the Joey team's Club Med work environment by integrating it with the company's other engineering divisions. A newly consolidated engineering division would focus its energies on expediting completion of the Joey Plus.

In the quiet of his own car, the plan seemed logical and simple. But as he thought about tomorrow's meeting and about the confrontation that would ensue, he became aware of the dampness under his arms and his flush face.

He changed lanes as he passed the Woodside exit. High golden hills, peppered every ten or so acres with colossal mansions, passed on either side as sidled to the right lane. Passing the auto repair shop, he thought of Laurence Maupin. She had been hired into the newly created position as his personal

public relations assistant one month ago. The timing was perfect for positioning her loyalties in his favor. He had revealed to her his plan for tomorrow's meeting, and asked her to secretly prepare his press statement under the assumption that everything would go perfectly. There was no guarantee that tomorrow's board decision would favor him over Peter, yet he was betting his career on his plan. He reminded himself of his discussion with Laurence a few minutes earlier, about the over-and-done-with tone of her voice as she read Matthew his statement on the other end of the line, speaking in a nearly conspiratorial tone as she sat in his office, holding his telephone in her hand. He felt his spirits lift.

He felt something else lift, too. His mind's eye fixed on an image of the young and beautiful Laurence sitting at his desk, her hand clasped around his handset, her lips close to the mouthpiece, her words forging a new alliance between them. He focused on his memory of her hands. Was there enough time? He pressed his palm to his groin and considered opening his trousers and taking care of himself, as he sometimes did on his way home from work. Usually the act required about as much time as it took to reach the Palo Alto exit, but he had passed that turnoff miles ago and was nearly home. No, he would have to let his desire go unsatisfied...though instead of letting go, he indulged his imagination anyway, a little longer, fantasizing. Had she touched his computer while she sat there talking to him? Had she rested her soft, pretty hand on his mouse and slipped its pointer across the screen to his private folders, opened his files? The only other hands as lovely as hers were those of his wife...

Were.

And with that recollection, his daydream terminated. He had arrived at the beginning of the road that wound its way up to his home. The car's transmission automatically down-shifted as it climbed. And so did his mood. As if commiserating with the machinery that had helped him reach this point, Matthew let out an exhausted sigh.

On either side he passed huge concrete gates that fronted the estates of some of the most powerful entrepreneurs and business people in Silicon Valley, including Peter, whose home was only a half-mile from his own. It had been more than six months since he had been to Peter's home. And ever since Matthew's wife Greta had told him more than a year ago that she did not want Peter in her house again, Matthew and Peter spent less and less time together. Recently they had only seen each other in formal meetings. Looking back now, Matthew was actually appreciative for his wife's restriction. After all, had it not been for her, he might never have distanced himself far enough from Peter to get where he could realize his own power.

He made a mental note. When all of this was settled, he would do something nice for her.

* * *

Reaching for the door handle of the dark blue 500SL convertible, the parking attendant was momentarily struck with a small surprise: A rather gaudy but finely tailored purple gloved hand, wildly flapping at him like some exotic bird. Before he had a chance to open the door, the woman to whom the gloved hand belonged was climbing out of the car. She was dressed in black designer sweats and lavender sport sneakers. Purple sunglasses shielded her eyes, and a madras scarf protected her hair from the wind. As she turned and reached inside the car for her purse, the attendant understood at once, from this angle, that she was not wearing this outfit to pursue an athletic regimen. Still in his first two weeks of summer employment, he had begun to regard the ladies who shopped here with amusement and fascination. He paid special attention to mannerisms and hair color. The intended overall look sought by women like this one was, he had come to believe, that of carefree, understated elegance. Most of them pulled it off beautifully. But this one? Not quite. The gloves were definitely a first, and a definite give away. She wasn't the type, he was certain of it. Too unrefined.

Or so he thought, until she removed her scarf. He observed the loose chestnut ringlets of hair, which appeared to be her natural color. Pausing for a moment, she casually shook down the curls, which were surprisingly long and appeared soft to the touch. At the same time she pointed her face directly up into the shaft of sunlight cutting through the rows of large buildings on either side of the street, and with obvious pleasure basked in the warmth for an instant. The effect was striking, as though the rays somehow transformed her into something more attractive, which imposed a temporary snag in his analysis. Until she spoke.

"I'll be just a few secs," she said, gesturing at the store with her Chanel wallet. "I have to pick something up."

"Of course, madam," the attendant said, touching his hat. Indeed, the woman's tone was all wrong, too rough, as was her accent, or lack thereof. Yes, his initial estimation was correct. Her wealth was definitely nouveau. The worst wealth of all.

A second attendant smiled as he opened the large glass door that announced Gump's, in gold leaf lettering. Removing her sunglasses, she headed straight for the elevator. As she waited for its arrival, she lifted an antique hand mirror from a display. Taking in her own reflection, she shook her hair and checked her teeth. Her brown, Bette Davis eyes grew even more expansive at the discovery of a pinpoint blemish just above her eyebrow. She touched it and clucked. Swearing under her breath, she returned the mirror to the glass counter and replaced her sunglasses. She had to get out of these bright lights.

A bell chimed, signaling the arrival of the elevator. Turning from the counter, she noticed a small, smiling elderly woman.

"Madam, can I show you some of our other fine silver mirrors?"

Greta Locke spun to hold the elevator door open. Wearing an expression intended to come off as playful, she turned back to the saleswoman. But when she noticed the woman staring at her gloved hand holding the jutting elevator door, Greta's response was anything but playful. "The last thing I need is an expensive silver mirror to remind me to stop eating chocolate."

She boarded the elevator.

"Why Mrs. Locke, what a pleasant surprise!" said the attractive salesman, all smiles, as Greta approached. He stood before the Steuben crystal room situated at the end of the mercifully subdued second level. Behind him there stood a row of ghostly illuminated glass cases containing spectacular pieces of some of the world's finest crystal. His modest platinum name badge said he was Mr. William Armond.

"Billy," Greta said, pausing one step before proceeding past him, "there's something I'd like to see in the Houston collection."

"Of course," Mr. Armond said, trailing her. He glanced at his associate, Ms. Olson, whose territories were the Lalique and Baccarat rooms. Reluctant to catch his eye, she pursed her lips and busied herself at her desk, addressing small, golden catalogs.

Greta Locke was Mr. Armond's best customer, one of Gump's best customers, and everyone who worked there knew it. She had spent several hundred thousand dollars at Gump's in the two years Mr. Armond had had the good fortune of knowing her. Last year she had arranged a deal between Gump's and Wallaby, Incorporated, to purchase corporate gifts at a special quantity discount. A discount of five percent can be quite sizable, she noted to her husband, when he purchased eight Steuben flower vases last year as Christmas presents for the wives of the Wallaby board members, at four hundred dollars apiece.

She removed her sunglasses and studied the curves and artwork of a large bowl displayed in the glass case. She'd had her eye on it for some time now. It was a James Houston original, engraved with painstaking detail. Circling the bowl's rim were salmon swimming against an invisible current, surrounded by tiny air bubbles. The piece was breathtaking.

"Perhaps a closer inspection?" Mr. Armond said, producing a small ring of keys. But before he managed to insert the small key into the case's lock, Greta stopped him.

"Don't bother. I'll take it."

"A splendid piece, Mrs. Locke," he said. "May I have it gift-wrapped for you?"

"No," she said, "That's not necessary." Without removing her gloves, she deftly slid her credit card out of her wallet and handed it to him. "It's a gift to me. For all my hard work." She lingered behind him as he moved to his clerk's desk. "Anything new?" she asked, over her shoulder.

"There are some lovely new crystal animals," said Mr. Armond, indicating one of the other cases. The collection consisted of exquisite, palm-size creatures. A dog...a cat...a bird...a bear. All resting peacefully on a black velvet blanket.

She seemed uninterested; she'd gotten what she came for. However, as she was exiting the parlor, a little farther along the display, she saw something, reclining on a green felt pasture, that captivated her attention. Larger than the other pieces, but small enough to hold in two hands, there lay a knobby colt, its translucent mane flared back from its muscular neck, forever frozen in the wind. She thought of her own horse, a gift from Matthew when they had moved to California. Wouldn't this crystal beauty look wonderful beside her bed, on the night stand....

She remembered her car, double-parked out front. Another day perhaps, she decided, seating herself

before Mr. Armond at an antique table while he called downstairs and instructed one of the vault attendants to have the piece brought to her.

"Billy, I've worked so hard," she said, fingering her forehead above her eyebrow. "This is my reward."

"Of course you have," Mr. Armond said. "The piece you have purchased is one of a limited number created by Mr. Houston. He'll be pleased to know it will be enjoyed by you and Mr. Locke."

"People just don't know how difficult it is being married to a successful businessman. It absolutely drains a woman. I swear, I feel like half the time I do his thinking." She removed her right glove and inspected her nails, and, as the credit card machine beeped twice, she casually turned hand over, palm up, to receive the sales slip.

Mr. Armond transcribed the approval code onto the form and handed her the pen. As she signed her name, he mentally calculated his five-percent commission on the sale: \$1,200.

Ms. Olson, carrying the small catalogs in a stack that reached from her midriff to her chin, managed a polite nod as she passed.

"Darling," Greta called, pointing in Ms. Olson's direction with her index finger.

As the saleswoman turned, her expressionless face metamorphosed into a struggled smile. "Yes?"

"Can I please have one of those?"

"Madam, I am certain you will receive one in the mail shortly," Ms. Olson said. She blinked delicately, twice.

"I want it now."

Mr. Armond jumped from his seat. "Of course." He slid one from the pile. Quickly discarding the little protective jacket, he handed the booklet to Greta, who immediately began flipping through it.

"Thank you, dear," she said, without looking up.

Mr. Armond returned the addressed, empty coverlet to Ms. Olson's pile and sent her off with a grateful wink. He collected the cord-wrapped box containing her new bowl from a stock attendant, and handed it to Greta. "Anything else today, Mrs. Locke?"

"I think this is all for today."

"Always a pleasure, Mrs. Locke."

She strolled out onto Post Street, the pleasantly heavy box beneath one arm. Her car had been moved several yards up the block and into a loading zone. She waved her scarf to the parking attendant, but he was already on his way to the vehicle.

He held the car door for her, and she placed the box on the passenger seat and secured it with the seat belt. Tying her scarf, she realized she had forgotten the catalog. She had left it on the clerk's desk. No fuss. She would receive one in the mail soon anyway.

Climbing into the car, she smiled, recalling the day she drove it off the parking lot. Another little gift to herself, for all her hard work.

* * *

Now that Matthew Locke was gone from his office, Peter Jones twisted the brightness knob on his computer monitor and returned to his work.

Beneath his hand he rolled the mouse and pressed its single button, causing the screen to scroll. Small connected boxes drawn on the electronic document rolled from the bottom of the display to the top. He stopped when he arrived at the top of the chart. With the pointer he selected the uppermost box and clicked the mouse twice on the name that currently occupied it. Peter looked at the highlighted name for a moment, then pressed the Delete key. MATTHEW LOCKE disappeared instantly.

Peter smiled to himself at the literalness of this small, effortless action, of deleting from his computer the very man who threatened to ruin its bright future. He typed in his own name into the vacant box

and, beneath it, added the word ACTING before the title that was already there, PRESIDENT & CEO. Beneath this box were others, connected to the uppermost with straight black lines, each titled with the name of the corresponding division vice president. His name was titled in one of these other boxes as, VICE PRESIDENT, JOEY.

The man Peter had hired two years ago to act as his partner had failed. Matthew Locke's role at Wallaby, defined by Peter and Hank Towers, Wallaby's cofounder and vice chairman, was to act as the company's business leader and Peter's assistant. While Peter understood the power of his own vision and the importance of his skill at inventing remarkable products, he admitted to himself that he lacked the business experience to develop the company from a handful of engineers to a large and profitable organization. Which was why he had decided to hire Matthew Locke.

But something had gone wrong.

Matthew, for all of his management strength, did not fit in at Wallaby the way Peter would have liked. Looking back, he remembered Matthew's suggestion, about a year ago, that perhaps Wallaby's portable computers could become more compatible with ICP's systems. That was what had started Peter wondering if, in the long run, Matthew was right for Wallaby. Dismissing Matthew's idea as a naive insult, Peter only wished now that he had paid better attention. How could Matthew think Wallaby should abandon its founding vision of giving high technology power to the individual with a personal computer or portable interactive assistant in favor of creating mere peripherals that connected to ICP's dictatorial, impersonal desktop and mainframe computers? What's more, at about this time their friendship began to deteriorate. Up until the disagreement over the company's direction, the two had spent nearly every Saturday afternoon together, going for long walks or drives. Apparently because of Peter's reaction, Matthew stopped spending Saturday afternoons with him. When Peter would ring the gate bell at Matthew's mansion, the housekeeper would divulge that Mr. and Mrs. Locke had gone out for the day. Peter had felt wounded. Matthew had been the first person with whom he had experienced any sort of real friendship. Or so he'd thought. Scolding himself for having allowed his feelings to become personal, he displaced his hurt by pouring himself more intensely into his work, in an all-out effort to substantiate his side of the contention that had cost him his only friend.

The real challenge now was to get the Joey Plus quickly out the door and into the user's hands and, put to rest once and for all the criticism the original Joey had received. The Joey personal interactive assistant was the product of three years of hard work and engineering magic. Peter, the inventor of the original Wallaby Mate personal computer, had created the Joey as a radically different and intuitively designed portable computer. Named after the Australian word for baby kangaroo, the Joey was compact and thin and easy to transport, and it lasted for days on a single charge. In its simplest configuration, the basic Joey was about the size of a slender hardback book and almost as light, and it slipped easily into a briefcase. It worked as either a traditional notebook computer, or as a keyboardless slate computer, and its built-in modem made it easy to access on-line services and the Internet, or send and receive faxes. Users interacted with Joey using either a stylus by "drawing" directly on its color active-matrix screen, or with the full-size keyboard and trackpad that stealthily slid out from its underside. Or with a combination of both stylus and keyboard, if they preferred. That was what made the Joey so unusual and compelling - its flexibility. Especially when the owner returned with it to the office, or took the Joey home. There, the Joey attached easily to a variety of snap-on peripherals that turned the base unit into a more powerful desktop system. Expanded keyboards. Mice. Monitors. Printers. Scanners. CD-ROM players. Stereo speakers. Enhanced network peripherals. And most any other peripheral device available for ordinary personal computers.

But the machine had its faults. Though it was technically superior to ICP's portable computers, software developers hesitated to invest the costly technical and human resources required to create new programs for it. Because its design was so new and different, many software developers were fearful of straying beyond the safe boundaries of developing programs for anything but ICP's series of computers, regardless of their plain-vanilla functionality. In the few short years since they had become players in the portable computer industry, ICP had attained an installed base of millions of portable systems worldwide, which dwarfed the few hundred thousand Joey systems Wallaby had sold since its introduction. To a software developer, ICP's user base numbers were too great to ignore, regardless of what the future potential of a device like the Joey might be.

Peter clicked the print button on the computer screen. The laser printer on his desk hummed. A few moments later the revised company organization chart rolled out of the printer.

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

In tomorrow's board meeting, Peter intended to surprise the team by proposing his newly drawn organization. Peter himself would temporarily fill the president-and-CEO slot until a qualified replacement was found. Though Peter had spent little time with the members of his executive staff over

the past few months, he knew that they had faith in him. He was their leader, the company's crown jewel. In founding his company he had founded an industry, one that had made every member of his senior executive staff a multimillionaire. Without a doubt, their loyalties rested with him. Any other possibility never occurred to him; he had too many more significant issues to contend with, like leaky batteries.

Leaving his office, Peter stopped for a moment to appreciate the sharp and elegant lines of the Joey prototype resting on the shelf beside his desk. In just two months, according to his plan, the world would finally benefit from his original Joey vision: the new Joey Plus. His plan for providing the Joey engineering group with more engineers was precisely what was going to move it off his shelf and onto buyers' desktops.

Peter's secretary Peggy looked past her computer screen as she heard his office door close.

"I'm leaving for the day," he said.

Peggy had worked for Peter since the company began. She had been nineteen years old then, a year younger than Peter, and one of the first employees in the company. Like Peter, she had attained massive wealth when the company had had its public stock offering. She wore a colorful Wallaby T-shirt and jeans, and one would never guess that this young woman, worth slightly more than one million dollars, was executive assistant to the man who had started the fastest growing new market in the computer industry. However, looking at Peter's longish hair, customary faded blue jeans and Oxford shirt, would anyone guess that he was worth eight hundred million dollars?

Before heading to his car, Peter decided it wouldn't hurt to bolster his confidence in his plan by checking the status of a few key Joey Plus projects.

"How's it coming?" Peter asked, leaning over an engineer's shoulder.

"Good," Paul Trueblood answered. He blew at the trails of smoke that rose before him as he lifted a soldering iron.

"I think I've got the battery problem fixed." The engineer returned his attention to the electronic components scattered about his worktable.

"Great," Peter said, noticing the pile of tiny batteries beside the main Joey unit. Each was charred with a caramel-colored resin. In the original Joey design the battery was located too close to the power recharger unit, and occasionally the excessive heat caused the battery to leak and burn.

Peter had tremendous faith in Paul and his work, and he was one of the first engineers who had started the company with Peter. The battery problem would be fixed, and thinking about it reminded Peter of a similar problem that Paul had corrected several years ago, in the all-in-one Mate personal computer. Unlike the Joey's battery, which powered the unit away from the desktop, the Mate's battery was deep inside the computer, and its sole purpose to keep track of the date and time when the computer was turned off. During extended use, the Mate's interior would occasionally reach high temperatures, causing the tiny battery to leak. The obvious solution was to install a small cooling fan inside the computer, like every other brand of computer had. But Peter wouldn't allow it. They said it couldn't be done, that you couldn't build a computer without putting in a small noisy fan to keep it cool. "If they say it can't be done, that's because they're not smart enough to figure out a way to do it," was Peter's standard reply. That was how Peter Jones challenged his engineers to do the impossible. After two days of no sleep, and having sustained himself on soda and popcorn, Paul had revealed to Peter a design that would cool the machine by natural convection.

Peter leaned in over Paul's shoulder for a closer look. "I'd sure hate to see us go back to the drawing board on that sweet little power recharger..." he said, hanging a mild warning in the burnt-smelling air of the engineer's office.

"No problem," Paul said, and blew out a breath that hinted mild frustration. Not catching the drift, Peter stayed right where he was, perched over the engineer like a hawk. Paul set down the soldering iron and retrieved a Walkman from his drawer. Loading a tape into it, he held the headphones just above his ears and raised his eyebrows at Peter, as if to ask if he had any more comments.

"All right, all right," Peter said, grinning behind raised palms. "Just making sure we do it right." He left the engineer with his head bobbing rhythmically through little smoke clouds. It was little triumphs like this that excited Peter, doing things people said couldn't be done. The engineers were the only people in the company for whom Peter felt any admiration and respect. And, secretly, awe. They were the conveyers of his visions, the ones who possessed the power to turn his radical ideas into real products.

He swung through the software testing lab. Several test engineers, each seated before a prototype Joey Plus, were running system software programs through their paces. The inhabitants were oblivious to his presence as screens rolled and flashed, styluses scribbled and tapped, speakers chirped, and printers printed.

Satisfied that all was rolling according to plan, Peter exited the building and climbed into his BMW coupe. His natural appreciation for simple and beautifully designed products had prompted his decision to make BMW the company car for senior executives. When Matthew had gone out and ordered the exact same style and color coupe for himself, Peter was flattered. Until their friendship curdled. Now he'd begun to wonder if Matthew had only chosen the car because he was trying to prove to the executive staff that he and Peter were in some way equal.

As he drove down Clyde Avenue he passed the many single-story stucco buildings that comprised Wallaby's international headquarters. Eventually he passed the larger and more corporate-looking three-story sales and marketing building, where Matthew and the other senior executives resided.

Peter preferred to have his office among his engineers rather than on the third floor of the larger corporate building. Though his title was chairman, his job was to create Wallaby's computers, and to do that, he wanted to be right in the trenches with his team. Especially lately. The last thing he wanted was to have to sit near Matthew Locke. If he had been any closer, he might have taken pity on the man he'd hired, and not gone through with his new plan to remove him from the company.

Leaving the complex, he headed for Highway 280. Waiting for the traffic signal to change, he looked in his rear-view mirror at the main corporate building with its Wallaby banner. The Wallaby logo featured a sketched pocket with a baby kangaroo, a joey, poking its head out.

He felt a small gush of pride whenever he looked at the company logo, at the thought of how many pockets he had filled with riches, in how many lives. And though tomorrow he would have to essentially sew shut one of those pockets, he was already beginning to feel the sense of relief that would come very soon, when he regained complete control of the company he had built.

Chapter 2

She stood and admired the bowl from different angles, marveling at how the spotlight shining down on it created rainbow effects and prismatic distortions. She had displayed the object on a simple, waist-high pedestal finished in black lacquer. Maybe I should not have rewarded myself so soon, thought Greta, since the board meeting that would take care of Peter Jones was not until tomorrow. What if something went wrong?

Of course, nothing would go wrong. She knew that Matthew had no choice but to pitch Peter from his position at Wallaby, and not only because she couldn't stand the precocious young founder. She smirked when she thought about the blow Peter would feel after the ax dropped at tomorrow's meeting.

The minute Greta had met him, she knew she was not going to like Peter Jones. He had taken to Matthew instantly, tugging on his arm like a child when he was excited about something, or when Matthew's observations and comments would harmonize with Peter's own thoughts. He would listen intently when Matthew talked about business and buying psychology, things she did not understand and had no desire to know more about. But what she loathed most about Peter, which led to her involvement in his destiny, was that he managed to spend more time with Matthew than she did. Matthew would practically ignore her in Peter's presence, so exhilarated was he by the young man's company. When Matthew arrived home from work, especially in the beginning, it was always "Peter said this," or "Peter did that," so full of marvel was her husband at young headache's braininess. And every Saturday, like clockwork, Peter would be at the door before she was out of bed, asking Matthew to come out and play. One morning, while Peter was waiting within earshot in the entrance hall, she loudly protested from their bedroom upstairs that she and Matthew never got to spend time together on Saturdays, as they used to when they lived in Connecticut. Afterward, Peter stopped coming to the door and took to waiting outside the gate, like a mongrel. Not a bad description, she thought to herself. Greta had once read an article about Peter that told of his life as an orphan. Obviously he saw Matthew as a father figure. Well, too bad.

Greta understood early on that Peter's attachment to Matthew could ruin everything her husband had so carefully planned before he accepted the job at Wallaby. Time was wasting, she observed; she knew that the stronger Matthew and Peter's friendship became, the farther Matthew would stray from the original plan. She had had to act swiftly, otherwise Matthew might have had a change of heart altogether.

To start the ball rolling, Greta had told Matthew that she did not want Peter in their home. How Matthew was to accomplish this without offending Peter was his problem; if he really cared about her, he'd spare her the company of the bratty wunderkind. She followed through by feigning anguish whenever Matthew mentioned Peter, and by pressuring him to get on with business: When would he tell Peter about the development strategy? Why was he stalling? She knew that once Matthew revealed his strategy, the young man would withdraw from her husband. And perhaps that was why he had taken his time - he was enjoying too much their friendship. Matthew's transformation plans were hideously contrary to Peter's renegade spirit. It had been painful to hound Matthew constantly, but she had no choice. He would never have dealt with Peter and put his plan back on track if she had not intervened. A few weeks was all it had taken to re-focus Matthew. When he explained to Peter his hopes for the company - a profound strategy for leading Wallaby into Big Business - the two men had their first falling-out, which seriously upset their formerly flawless courtship. Matthew had persisted in attempting to sway the young founder into understanding his strategy, but each time he faced argument and resistance. Greta had forced Matthew to confess that as long as Peter was in control, the secret plan would never materialize. Finally, Peter expressed doubt in Matthew's overall vision and qualifications, saying he was personally hurt that Matthew could even hypothesize such a thing for Wallaby. That said, Matthew halted his friendship with Peter, and drew heavily from his wife's support to rebuild his confidence in the secret plan.

She felt wanted again. However, her expectation of spending more time with Matthew was unfulfilled. Instead of spending weekends with her, he spent more time than ever in his little home office, next to the library. And when he wasn't holed up in there, he was constantly reading about big computers and the latest technologies, his face often closer to the pages of a book than to his wife's face when they were in bed.

After tomorrow, after Peter was truly invalidated, she knew that Matthew would start spending more time with her. She had to believe that. After all, it was she he had to thank for rectifying his temporary shortsightedness. At least that was how she saw things.

Raising a glass of wine to her lips, she heard the automatic garage door open. He was home. She twisted the knob of the recessed ceiling-mounted quartz lamp to full intensity. The salmon bowl sparkled.

He appeared at the living room entrance, hands at his sides. She pretended not to notice his arrival.

"Greta."

"Oh, darling," Greta said, pretending to be surprised.

Without remark, she quickly took in his tired expression. His eyes seemed half closed, as if the reflection thrown off by the glittering object were blinding. Studying him, she searched for the foundation of the man she had married, the man with the strong and sinewy build, the confident posture, the sharp aristocratic features. Today his cheeks appeared blanched, his stance tentative. With her glass of wine in hand, she strolled casually across the room.

"What's that?" Matthew said.

She pecked his impassive lips. "That," she said, toasting the bowl with her glass, "is pure brilliance."

"How much brilliance?"

"A steal, Darling. I got it to celebrate your success. Let me get you something to drink." She left him alone with "his" present.

He inspected her newest purchase. He had to admit, it was magnificent, and as he scrutinized it more closely, he began to forget about his labored day and the impending showdown. He studied one of the etched salmon that circled the bowl's rim. It swam against a powerful, unseen force, compelled onward with inner strength, driven by instinct to fulfill its obligation. It was that way in business, he reflected, one had to be driven by instinct and a sense of obligation, plain and simple -

But that word, simple, was like a hook that snagged his mind and reeled him from the peaceful waters that were his thoughts. Once more, his thoughts returned to the damnable Peter Jones, his excited voice raiding Matthew's mind like an unwelcome visitor.

"If you get simple beauty and naught else, you get the best thing God invents," Peter would wistfully recite, the poet Robert Browning's words, during design meetings. Forever distrusting complexity, Peter made it his utmost priority that Wallaby's products were unaffected in their design and easy to use.

Once more, apprehension washed over Matthew like a shifting tide. If only he could convince himself that everything would go exactly according to plan. It would, wouldn't it? He felt as though his life depended on it. He just didn't feel one-hundred percent sure.

"Here," Greta said, handing him a small bottle of Perrier. Taking the drink, he avoided looking at her bare hand...or at the other, which was concealed inside a silky white glove. He took a sudden and uncomfortable interest in the tiny bubbles that formed and rose in the bottle.

Greta sat on the flowery chintz settee and patted the cushion next to her. "Come."

Before joining her, Matthew twisted off the bright lamp. Nighttime descended on the salmon, their struggle temporarily suspended. He sank into the softness of the sofa and rested his eyes.

"Well? Is everything all set?"

He nodded.

"Good, Matthew," she said. "I can't wait for you to be able to relax once this all settles down." She thought of the time she would have with him after tomorrow's meeting and smiled, more at this thought than to comfort him.

Matthew frowned. "He says I don't know what I'm doing. That I don't have a clue." He stared into the bottle. "He says I don't have instinct. No vision, guts. Unless I'm wrong, I don't think he realizes what's going down tomorrow." He met his wife's eyes. His expression soured; then half resentfully, he sought her reassurance. "Have I been wrong? What if I've misread everyone's loyalties? What if he has his own plan to spring on me tomorrow?"

A voice inside Greta's head roared No! No matter what Peter Jones had up his sleeve - yes, certainly he had something - her husband's well thought out plan was more powerful. It was too late now, anyway, to start worrying about the enemy's strategy. That she never seriously considered it probably meant that her instincts about Peter were correct. He was blind to what was coming.

"No sweetheart. Don't think that way." She gently pushed back some hair from Matthew's forehead. "You're doing exactly the right thing. And after tomorrow, everything will be fine."

He offered her a dim smile, then closed his eyes.

For the briefest instant there she had felt his need for her. It had been so long since he'd called to her for help. However cursory, she had served him nevertheless. And now it was her turn, tit for tat. "Let's go for a walk down by the stables. What do you say?" She grasped his hand as she rose.

Too weary to protest, he rose to his feet and let his wife lead him off.

* * *

Walking into his home, Peter heard Ivy playing the grand piano in the drawing room. She was singing softly, a verse he did not recognize. One of her own? The pleasing sounds bellowed and echoed through the more or less empty mansion. She did not hear him enter the room.

Her fingers settled on the last chords of the score. Peter smelled the sweet fragrance of her long white-blond hair, brightened and warmed by the sunlight streaming in through the French windows behind her. Coming closer, his shadow gave him away and she turned her head to greet him.

"Hello," she said, through the last fading chords of her music.

"That was wonderful. It's as if this entire house is joyful and alive when you're playing." He casually rested a hand on her shoulders, a simple expression of admiration.

She turned her cheek to his hand, and he went to move it, but before he was able to she stood and stretched. He took her seat then, resting his hands on his lap. Looking past her and through the windows, toward the hills that rolled beyond his estate, he could see Hoover Tower in the distance, rising high above the treetops of the Stanford University campus. Three weeks earlier he had been there to give the commencement speech to the graduating class. Afterward, at the reception, a striking young girl had introduced herself. Her name was Ivy, she said, and she proceeded to tell him about the speech and language interface that she was developing for the Wallaby Joey computer. When it was finished, she promised, the interface would allow people to interact with the Joey by speaking to it, and it would reply in kind, in its own "voice." The Joey's intuitive and portable design, she told him, was what had inspired her to develop the speech recognition and simulation interface software. When he

asked what were her eventual ambitions for the project, she said she wasn't sure. She had no agenda for the summer and, for lack of a more tempting course, had halfheartedly committed herself to traveling across the country with some friends. He was intrigued by her knowledge of linguistics, particularly when she revealed that she had never used a computer until the Joey. That part was especially touching, and he somehow felt compelled to help her, so he offered her the opportunity to continue developing the Joey speech and language component in his home. The next day she arrived with her duffel bag, a couple of books, a few boxes of floppy disks, and a backpack. Peter often had guests straying in and out of his home, usually students to whom he offered the use of his thoroughly equipped computer lab. In return he asked that they respect the privilege by picking up after themselves. He let them come and go for as long as they liked, and his doors were never locked. Alice, his maid and cook, always kept herself abreast of the various artists in residence.

She appeared now in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. She was a small, voluminous Spanish woman with pulled-back black hair and a gorgeous smile. "Hello, Mr. Petey," she said with plain affection. She turned to the young girl. "I finished preparing your meat and spices." Peter looked at Alice for an explanation, and she nodded to Ivy.

"I'm making you a special Mediterranean dish tonight," Ivy said, taking Peter's hands in hers. "My way of saying thanks, for being so kind and letting me stay here with you."

"Great," he said, and casually withdrew his hands.

Usually it started out, as it had a number of times before, as a rent-free working environment. Peter received both pleasure and satisfaction from being around artists and other creative types who crafted amazing things from the technology he had invented. Except for his work and Kate, when she was in town, his life was surprisingly spare. Having the students in his home filled the spacious mansion with the lives and passionate works of others. And with little effort, he was helpful to them. In several cases the projects they worked on became marketable products, and sometimes he nurtured them in getting started as software or hardware developers by introducing them to the appropriate managers at Wallaby. But to some of the students, staying at Peter's became more than just a neat place to crash. Once a couple of young men had taken off with some of the equipment and a few of Peter's personal valuables. And then there were the girls, who often presented their own set of problems. And right now, Ivy was the mansion's sole no-strings boarder.

"Come on," Ivy said, taking him by the hand once again. "I want to show you what I've been working on this afternoon."

As they passed, Alice busied herself with a tissue in her apron pocket. Peter noted the uncertain look on her face; she was all too familiar with the course that Ivy's stay was taking.

* * *

Dressed in a violet silk camisole, Greta Locke sat on the edge of their large bed and brushed down her thick chestnut curls. As she did this she observed herself - her hair, her face, but never the movement of her hands - in the mirror above her bureau. Though it was early, she had nonchalantly followed Matthew upstairs to the bedroom when, after dinner, he had said he was going turning in early. She had a modest face that she considered robust rather than pretty. It was satisfactorily oval in shape, though a little too fleshy in the cheeks. Her nose was sized accordingly, yet if it had been a little longer, straighter, perhaps she would have been a real model - but then again, her face had never been her selling point...

While she scrutinized her complexion, her right hand, as if guided by its own vision, encountered the crystal lotion dispenser resting on her bureau. With a light press she dispersed two long, corpulent worms of Lancome lotion into her hand. Working one hand over the other with systematic precision, she performed the evening ritual without ever once looking at them. On this occasion she focused her vision, through the mirror, on the lighted bathroom doorway at the opposite end of the bedroom suite. Finishing up, working again on the familiar motions without directly needing to - without wanting to - watch what she was doing, she reached into a drawer and retrieved a pair of fine, exclusively tailored white silk gloves. Just as she was pulling on the second glove the bathroom light snapped off.

Matthew appeared, wearing light blue Oxford cloth pajamas made of the same material used to tailor his business shirts. That was her husband, she thought with a tinge of malice, all business both in and out of bed.

Greta snapped off the lighted mirror and climbed beneath the cool sheets, folded the layers of bedclothes to just below her breasts. Matthew settled on top of the sheets, sealing her in on one side,

and clamped his hands together behind his head. Straining her peripheral vision, she saw that he was staring at the ceiling.

She turned on her pillow to face him. "Darling, don't keep thinking about tomorrow." Softly: "Try to relax."

Taking her advice, she watched as the puzzled, problem-solving frown on his face slackened and was replaced by a vague yet unwavering gaze.

She stretched across him to turn off the antique bedside lamp, her breasts barely an inch from his chin. As she drew back, she gently settled herself on his chest.

Through the windows beside the bed, the valley shone brightly. Orange and yellow pinpoints of light, far in the distance, glowed and shimmered in the cool summer night. She felt a sudden urgent desire to get out of bed and close the curtains, shutting out the view of the damned valley.

Was she rushing things? First the bowl, and now making love. But it had been so, so long, she thought, in her silent agony. Matthew had simply shut off where activity between them was concerned, telling her once, several months ago, that he could not concentrate on lovemaking, not even their particular style of it, until things were working again and his plan was firmly on track. Still, they were so close, just hours away from tomorrow's big event and the unquestionably victorious outcome that was rightfully theirs.

Just a kiss. Was that asking too much?

She gently nuzzled his neck and throat, which showed minimally through the pajama top, tracing her long and delicately gloved hand, the part of her body to which he had once been most attracted, most submissive, along his upper body.

He sighed through his nostrils and closed his eyes.

Was he responding? Perhaps he too felt that he deserved to reward himself a day early, she thought with a private cheer. She inhaled deeply and pressed his shoulder with her left hand, careful to keep the sight of it from his peripheral vision. Her other hand strayed along his biceps. Raising her face, she closed her eyes and moved her lips to his.

He sniffed, and she opened her eyes just in time to see him turn his agonized face toward the window. He sneezed, twice, and she flinched with each burst, but was at the same time enormously relieved too. For an instant she had had the impression that the face he'd made had been in response to her. But it was only a sneeze. Two sneezes. Nothing at all to do with her, and so silly for her to have thought otherwise.

Or was it. There he was, gazing out the window again, as if he were counting the individual lights in the valley. She scolded herself for not having pulled the shade.

"Matthew," she said softly, meaning to apologize or assure him or -

"Good night," he said.

Or nothing.

It was useless, and so she retreated to her side of the bed and lay there in silent deliberation. For the second time today she worried if perhaps the crystal bowl she had purchased had been a mistake, her private celebration somehow jinxing the outcome of tomorrow's meeting.

They lay there like that for a long time, silent and awake but inexpressive, until, eventually, exhaustion won out and they both slept, each playing their parts in a dream that did not embody the other.

* * *

Peter sat on a stool at the island console range while Ivy prepared her special dinner. She bustled about in what seemed like a frenzy, but he understood, with some amusement, that she had the meal under complete control. A fragrant lamb and vegetable stew bubbled lazily in a large pot on the stove. In the oven, two small pizzas baked. Peter had enjoyed watching Ivy roll out the dough with her hands and shape it into little rounds. On each she had arranged caramelized onions, chopped olives, pine nuts, grated Parmesan cheese. During the preparation, she concentrated intensely on each step. A number of times she held the recipe close to her face and read a line or two aloud. At the same time she managed to engage him in interesting conversation. Though she had been a guest in his house for

three weeks now, this was the first opportunity he'd had to spend time with her. And considering his day at Wallaby, her company tonight was a welcome relief.

"Pass me that cayenne, would you," she said, reaching out with one hand.

"Which is it?"

"That's curry. The one next to it. Right."

The rosiness of her face, from all of the bustling about, against her white-blond hair, gave the effect that she had spent the day at the beach. She wore tattered old jeans cinched at the waist with a colorful bandanna, and a white dress shirt with no bra beneath. He realized suddenly that he was staring. He spoke.

"So do you cook often?"

She gave him an amused look. "You kidding. For who. I've been in a dorm, chowin' on junk food and studying for the last three years."

"Then how'd you learn all this stuff?"

"Easy. All you have to do is follow the directions. Besides, I'm a quick study." She met his eyes and held his stare, as if challenging him. Until a bell chimed. "Pizzas," she said with a delighted smile, breaking their link, which had felt to him a little weird but not exactly unpleasant. Just, well... significant. Careful, he warned himself.

He watched her slip on an oven mitt and told himself he should really look away as she bent over to retrieve the appetizer. Her breasts, he could see, were not large, yet were ample enough to illustrate gravity. They reminded him of the firm doughy rounds she had worked beneath her fingers minutes ago. As she reached inside the oven a little burst of heated air gently raised a few stray wisps of her hair, and an instant later the delectable aroma of her creation wafted his way. He swallowed.

Then something about her startled him and he felt his throat abruptly tighten.

As she was rising, holding the tray in one hand, she swept her hair aside with the other, and he had the opportunity to see, just for an instant, inside the collar of her shirt, in back of her neck.

What he saw was his own name - the code name the dry cleaner used to label his shirts. Something that felt about the size of a marble felt as though it had suddenly become lodged in his chest. A little to the left. Yes, there. In his heart.

"What?" she said, freezing in place.

"Oh," was all he could manage at first. He gave a little laugh. "Nothing, oh nothing. Sorry. I just zoned out there for a second." His lungs moved, he was breathing again.

"Hmm," she said, a moment's scrutiny, then she shrugged and transferred the miniature pizzas to the butcher block counter. "Where's the cutter thing?"

"I'm sorry?" he said. He had blanked her out for a moment, and was just beginning to recover from his jolt. The cutter thing. He wanted to be helpful, to tell her where to find it.

Until he found more: The jeans, with their familiar rips where his own knees had eventually worn through the denim. She was wearing his pants, too. The marble thing became a fist.

"You know," she said, making a rolling gesture with her hand, "The pizza cutter thing."

"No. I mean, I don't know. In one of those drawers, probably." Had she gone through his closet? Had she helped herself to anything else?

"Ah. Here we go." She returned with the instrument and cut the pizza into quarters.

Her feet were bare. She wore no jewelry, no watch. He fabricated a possible explanation: She was doing her laundry and had asked Alice if she could borrow some of his old clothes while hers went around.

"Mmm. Not bad. Here. Eat."

It was probably nothing, he told himself. He was probably overreacting. He'd ask her about it later, no big deal. Still, it had given him one hell of a little scare there. Enough, already. Right now, he was

hungry.

"Delicious," he said truthfully. "I can't believe you don't do this all the time."

"I could," she said, and stopped chewing. He caught her look, edged with some unknown meaning. "I mean," she went on, waving at the pot on the stove, "I could eat like this all the time, but who has the time, right?"

Peter just nodded. He took another bite of pizza. He was thirsty.

"Wine. That's what we need."

"Yes."

"White? Is that good for what you're making?"

"Red's better."

He went to the tall narrow wine rack hidden inside a cabinet. His fingertips lingered on the neck of a particular reserve, a special bottle. He deliberated for a moment, then selected a younger vintage. He opened it and poured them each a glass, handed one to her. There was an awkward moment, in which both stood motionless. He didn't know what to say and, gratefully, she made it easy for him.

"To new friends."

"New friends," he said, slipping in a small emphasis on the latter.

They touched their glasses together and Peter looked into his own to avoid her eyes as he sipped the wine.

"Come on," Ivy said, "let's eat." She went about filling two bowls with stew, while he sliced the crusty loaf of bread she'd set out on the counter. She carried the bowls into the dining room, and he followed with the bread and his glass of wine.

"Sit," she said, "I'll get the bottle."

He drank some more, and when she came back in he noticed her glass. She had filled it.

They ate in silence for a few moments. He told her the stew was delicious, and she said she was surprised, though she wasn't really.

"So, what made you choose Stanford?" he said.

"A course they had. It's called VTSS. Values, Technology, Science, and Society."

"I've never heard of it."

"It's been around for awhile. Interesting mix."

"Sounds like it. What interests you about it most?"

"Well, how they all overlap. One affecting and impacting the other, and so on. You sure know all about that."

"Me?"

"Sure, you." She snorted. "Come on. You know, the way the computers you invented have changed our society, that they're founded on science and technology. How they've affected people's values." She glanced up from her plate. "I mean, really, you've democratized computing power among the masses, putting it in the hands of the people. Giving them a choice, an alternative to business as usual. No more Big Brother, brother." She resumed eating. "Anyway, that's what the course was about." She spoke with the easy, unaffected confidence one acquires with experience. Yet she was only twenty-one.

He realized that his spoon was halfway between his bowl and mouth. He did not know how long he'd been sitting there like that. He set it down and poured himself more wine. He looked at her over the rim of his glass, and felt as if he were seeing her for the first time. It was an agreeable feeling, and that in turn made it an adverse feeling. Thin ice ahead, if he didn't watch himself. Friends, he repeated to himself, and don't forget it.

"Did you hear me?"

Had she said something? "I'm sorry - you were saying?"

"I said, that's what the course was about. I dropped it."

"But you sound like an expert. Why the change of heart?"

"Nah. Music. This speech stuff. That's what I told you when I met you, don't you remember?"

In fact, he did not remember. What's more, he realized, was that he didn't know her last name either. Before he was aware of what he was doing, he asked her, "What's your last name?"

She was pouring herself more wine. She stopped. Was she hurt?

She grinned. "You got me."

His expression betrayed his confusion.

"I never told you my last name!" she said, as if that explained everything. Whatever everything was. "I see what you're getting at: How could I ask if you remember that I dropped that course to get into this linguistics programming stuff when you don't even know my last name. It's because I never told you."

He went to take another sip of wine, but then decided to hold off for a bit.

"It's Green. Ivy Green. Can you stand it?"

"It's certainly very Earth conscious."

"Very funny. The only green I think Rick and Jeannette had in mind when they named me was reefer."

He burst out laughing. "How come?"

"Oh, please. Don't you get it? I'm a Sixties baby, like, 'Make Love, Not War,' 'Give Peace a Chance,' 'If It Feels Good, Do It.' Well, they did it. They met at Woodstock, no kidding, and, a few years later, they did it, made me, and got married and all. How it felt, I mean, good or not, I never asked. Quit laughing. They moved to California, lived right at the corner of Haight and Ashbury, and found peace and all that. Later, when my dad accidentally started his own herbal tea company - yes, it's the brand you've got on the shelf there in the kitchen - they moved to Mill Valley. That's where I grew up, with parents who told me to call them by their first names, so we'd get closer to where we visualized ourselves in the universe. Or some shit like that."

"Sorry, I'm not laughing at the circumstances. It's the way you tell it."

"No problem. I'm still amused by the Rick and Jeannette Show." From out of nowhere came a pout. Then: "But I'm not goin' to live my life like they did." She sniffed deeply. "Um, I'll be right back."

Had he offended her? He'd meant no harm in laughing. He was just amused by her deadpan delivery. While she excused herself, Peter got up from the table. Her talk about the Sixties had aroused some vague sentiment in him. Whatever. All of the sudden the place seemed too quiet. While she was away from the table he got up and loaded a compact disc into his stereo system. The first track was a folksy acoustic number.

Ivy returned to the table smiling. "Want more stew?"

"I'm stuffed," Peter said.

She sat down.

"Here." He poured more wine into her glass, trying for an apology if it was in fact called for. He had no idea.

The instrumental ended, then a lovely female voice filled the room with song. It was his absolute favorite. His eyelids lowered slowly, automatically, and a smile washed across his face. The artist's sensual voice had an effect on him that was like easing into a warm bath. He sat there like that for a little bit, forgetting Ivy and his dinner and everything else.

Ivy turned her head to the source of his evident pleasure. Her frown went unnoticed.

Peter had met the vocalist one afternoon at a Sierra Club luncheon thrown in his honor after Wallaby had donated several computers to the noted environmental organization. Kate Mcgreggor, the "softly outspoken" folk-rock star, was the keynote speaker. He tried to be attentive to her words during her

speech, but he constantly found himself drifting, starting at her warm green eyes, sighing when she casually brushed aside her hair, dark brown with sunned highlights and occasional strands of gray. In just fifteen minutes Kate had made an impression on him like no other woman ever had. Meanings for her wandered into his mind. Intelligent. Simple. Pure. True. What you see is what you get, he surmised. After the meal, she sang. Her voice was enchanting, perfect, and as she sang about pain and hope and love he knew that he had to get to know her personally. Immediately after her performance he introduced himself. At first she seemed disinterested. He suspected her judgment was influenced by his involvement in an industry notorious for destroying the environment. And perhaps also by the eight years difference in their ages. He invited her to visit Wallaby for a personal tour. She hesitated, but ultimately he persuaded her to accept after asking for a chance to prove that he and Wallaby were unlike all the rest. When she arrived a week later, she surprised him with a special gift: A bottle of wine from her parents' obscure little vineyard in Oregon, where she had grown up. It was a Cabernet Sauvignon, bottled the same year he had founded Wallaby. He was touched by the thoughtfulness of her gesture, and told her she had to be the one to share it with him when the company was ten years old. Her tour was scheduled to last two hours, but as Peter expressed his own thoughts and concerns about the environment, the state of education, the future, they engaged in long and satisfying conversation, and by the end of the day their attraction for one another was evident. And had remained so to this day. They were two people comfortable with themselves and with each other. She maintained a home in Los Angeles, where she was constantly at work on her music or lending her celebrity status to political causes about which she felt strongly. She came to stay with Peter between recordings and projects, and her independence meshed perfectly with his own like composure, creating the foundation for what had become a lasting and loving relationship. They had been together for nearly eight years, and the distance between them imposed by their careers generated a constant longing that kept their affection for one another fresh and alive. Sometimes, like now, it was difficult and he wished they could be together more often. Especially now, with everything the way it was at Wallaby...

And with that thought, he opened his eyes and came back around to the present, and to his guest.

Ivy was lowering a coffee cup from her lips, staring at him. Had she made a pot? He hadn't even heard her in the kitchen. In front of him sat a steaming cup of coffee. Perfect, he thought. That odd sense of dread he'd experienced earlier had returned, just for an instant, when he'd opened his eyes. He needed to sober up a little.

Abruptly she spoke.

"Is it true?"

"What's that?" he asked. He met her azure eyes with a perplexed smile. She gestured with a nod to where the music was coming from. "That you two are lovers?"

"Completely."

She nodded, added more coffee to her cup, very slowly, with considerable concentration. She emptied half a packet of Equal into her coffee. Addressing her immersed spoon, she said, "In everything I read, like "People," or that story about you in last month's "Esquire," they say you'll probably get married. To her."

"I don't know, it's hard to say" Peter said, knowing the right thing to do would be to agree with the speculation, but choosing to answer truthfully instead. "We're both very busy. She's always recording or involved in some cause or another. And I'm at Wallaby." The feeling of dread inside his heart rolled on its side. However this time, instead of striking quickly and fading away, its presence seemed to stretch out and linger as he sat watching what Ivy was doing with her half-empty packet of Equal.

She had dumped the remainder of the artificial sweetener onto the black enamel table. Using the straight edge of the little blue packet, she cut several fine, stark, parallel lines from the small white pile of grains.

Not very subtle, and not a good sign. He attempted to resume the conversation.

"Anyway, as far as marriage, we've never really discussed it seriously."

All of the sudden, he understood the feeling assaulting his senses. Trepidation.

Something - no, a number of things - were going to happen. It was as though a crystal ball had bloomed in his mind's eye, giving him a quick peek into the near future. It all came in a blurry rush, no single picture or image freezing long enough to grasp completely. But he caught the gist, just same. He would go through all the required motions, but in the back of his mind he knew he was helpless. What was coming, he realized with a throbbing certainty amplified by the wine, was only natural. Jesus, how

sick that sounded to his private ear. Still, he wouldn't give in without a fight, for that, too, was only natural. Quietly he stared at the lines she'd cut, mesmerized by their orderliness.

Ivy, too, studied the straightness of her lines, her upper lip hidden beneath the lower. She was the first to notice the silence, to sense its uneasy drift. With a great gust, she blew the white lines from the table and looked across the table at him with a renewed smile.

"Oh, hey. Sorry. I had a little skip down unhappy-memory-lane there for a second, is all. I hope I didn't upset you."

Peter looked at her. He shook his head, then rose without a word and carried his coffee cup into the kitchen.

"Hey, you want to open more wine?" Ivy was at his side, carrying their empty glasses. "I've been here only three weeks and already have a prototype of my speech interface working." The trembling of her hand caused the glasses to steadily clink together, a fragile ringing sound. She didn't seem to notice. "Come on, let's celebrate."

He rested his hand over the glasses, silencing them. "We've had enough."

She narrowed the already small space between them, and he slid his hands into his pockets, not sure what to do with them. "Thank you for such a great meal," he said, and made an attempt to get past her.

She giggled, held her ground.

He let out a frustrated breath. "Please," he said. "I've got to get to bed." There was no humor in his face.

"All right, then," she said sullenly, and pressed her back against the doorjamb, making way for him.

Just as he was about to shut off the stereo he changed his mind, and decided to leave it on. To keep Kate there with him, he thought, humming along with her voice on his way to his bedroom.

He lit a single candle and placed it on the floor beside his futon bed. Except for the thick stuffed sleeping mat, some books piled against the wall, a Tizio lamp and the Zuni Indian sculpture of a bear that Kate had given him one birthday, his bedroom was bare, like the rest of the house.

He tossed his clothes onto the floor and sat in the lotus position on the soft cotton mat. Kate had introduced him to the basics of meditation when they had first started dating, teaching him to lead himself into natural, peaceful sleep. He closed his eyes and concentrated on relaxing the muscles in his neck and shoulders. Gradually he worked his way down, through the rest of his body. His breathing slowed, and he imagined whiteness, weightlessness. The whiteness slashed into a black surface and he thought of Ivy and the dining room table, her playing with the little blue packet. He pushed this away and brought back the pure white. After a short period, the soft whispering snowstorm turned to warm earth tones, to Kate's lovely hair...

The sound of footsteps broke his concentration. He opened his eyes.

Ivy stood before him, wearing a lightweight cotton kimono. Her face glowed warmly in the candlelight. Her voice was a mere whisper. "I want to be with you."

Peter remained seated in the lotus position, unable, it seemed, to move. He became sharply aware of her delicate physique, his nakedness. He felt their vulnerable auras bending toward one another, reaching. He thought about what he'd come to realize at the dinner table, the feeling of dread inside him that seemed to suddenly threaten everything in his life. He thought of telling her about the few close calls he had had over the past couple of years, how they had ended in tears and shattered dreams for the students. He thought of telling her that in all their years together he had never been unfaithful to Kate. He thought of telling her that in all their years together, Wallaby had never been unfaithful to him, and it was the same thing. Was, he wanted to say aloud and tell her, tell anyone who'd listen, why.

But he told her none of these things. Instead he said to himself, without uttering a word, I had a lot to drink, it was the wine. But was he really that drunk, or was it something else? Something worse? That he even considered this excuse, that he was actually entertaining a defense for something that had not even happened, not yet, presaged the guilt that would follow if he were to allow them to come together. And apart. And it was all the same thing, he told himself. Today, tomorrow, and the next day and every day after that.

He considered her. She was an angel whose mission was to ease him into the hereafter. He concluded, when he noticed a powdery white substance encircling the inner edge of her nostrils, that

she was already "there," perhaps even farther, some point beyond recognition. As if she interpreted this, she brushed her nose with the back of her hand and sniffled.

"Peter," she pleaded, her voice husky, "You've empowered me. You've given me a whole new meaning. It's my future."

Somehow her words had breaking effect on him. He was both repulsed and beholden by her sentiment. By himself. He turned his face toward the window, fighting the urge to reach out and pull her down by the waist. It was not as if he were in love with this young girl. And the way she made it sound, he was acting on her behalf, like she needed him. Not the other way around. No, not that at all. He didn't need her. She was nothing to him. Just another worshipper in a long string of subjects.

And, as if to prove his cruel pretense, she knelt before him. Her soft knees touched his shins. He smelled the peppery sweetness of her breath, and his eyes lingered on her radiant golden hair. He looked into her shining, anticipating eyes.

With a deep, winded sigh that was almost a cry, he finally acknowledged his fear. It was inevitable, he told himself, as he felt himself rising. He placed his fingertips about her neck, traced his thumbs along her delicate lips, her precious ears, touched her smooth eyelids, and gently pressed them shut. Her breath hitched, and she waited for his touch to lead them farther.

He slid the kimono from her lean body, and guided her hands to his shoulders. He drew her down, guiding her to his hips. Her smooth buttocks slid along his thighs. He felt her pause as she settled onto him, over him.

They kissed.

She pulled away her lips and raised her hips.

He moved his mind to another place, into and around and between Kate's lovely, far-off lyrics. He concentrated, tuned himself to her rhythm.

Down, then up, then again, she slowly drove herself harder and harder. He matched her motion with equal urgency, little lunging lifts, telling himself at the same time that he was not participating, not really, that she was doing all of the work, it was all her, not him. Their mouths worked desperately, lunging for one another, each attempt to kiss more impossible, more desired than the last...

Spent, he felt a delirious sense of relief, as if it had all been a bizarre dream from which he had just awakened. He raised his head from the mat. For a brief, wanting moment he envisioned Kate resting lightly on top of him.

The music had ended, the silence was palpable.

His mind collapsed. He felt as if he had taken an enormous plunge backward from a high altitude, his head dizzy, his thoughts vague as he fell. He squirmed beneath the full weight the young girl lying atop him, trying to escape from what they had done. He wanted tonight to be over. He wanted tomorrow to be over. He wanted both gone forever. He wanted another chance.

Ivy stirred. She raised her head off Peter's chest and looked at him. Her face was glistening, content. "Thank you," was all she said. She raised herself from him and collected her kimono. She covered him lightly with the comforter, blew out the candle, and vanished.

He tested his defense. A whisper: "It was the wine - "

But he could not complete the sentence, for it was already done. And it was not the wine. It was another thing altogether. And he felt it now.

The little thing in his heart. The little thing that had come and gone earlier in the evening. It was back again. It lay quietly, barely perceptible, like the breathing of a tiny creature, and he had almost not noticed it. But there was no mistaking it now, and he fought to grasp hold of it, to suffocate it, but his attempts were futile. It felt as though the thing had established permanent residency.

For many hours, until his consciousness finally succumbed to mental depletion, he was disturbed by a queer premonition. That the dark, throbbing thing in his heart was determined to eat its way out, ever so slowly, boring straight through the only parts that Peter had ever loved, the only parts that had ever mattered.

Chapter 3

It was a bright, hazy morning, not yet seven o'clock, but already hot and humid, which wasn't so unusual for a June day in New York City. William Harrell braced himself for the cool comfort of the limousine's air-conditioned interior.

For twenty-five minutes he would relax in a comfortable silent plushness. He stretched his legs, lengthening his taut body until his feet touched the facing seatback. His calves responded wearily. Last evening's workout, the first in more than a week, had taken its toll. He had skipped several sessions since putting in longer hours over the past couple of days, working on the company's portable computer strategy. The break in his routine, regardless of whatever aches and pains it caused, brought him the kind of excitement on which he thrived. His regal face had the precisely aged features of a character actor cast in the role of judge, or the President of the United States. On occasion he wore glasses, when he remembered, for seeing things up close. At sixty-two, his looks suited his job perfectly.

The car briskly pulled away from the brownstone, his course and destination the same today as it had been each business day for the past fourteen years.

He eagerly unfolded the "Wall Street Journal. In the News Brief column analysts speculated as they did every quarter about changes at Wallaby, Incorporated. According to the story, sources close to the company suggested that the company's founder, Peter Jones, and its president, Matthew Locke, were not getting along as famously as they once had. There was speculation that a major, long-overdue reorganization would be announced in today's board meeting. Matthew Locke's corporate organizational changes at International Foods were revisited. A Wallaby engineer who had asked to remain anonymous was quoted: "Jones has created a rivalry between his division [Joey] and ours [Mate]." The informant went on, "It's really strange. Jones invented the Mate, yet he says that anyone who is not associated with the Joey is a bozo." The article explained that separate product divisions were precisely what Matthew Locke had earlier in his career put an end to at International Foods, when he had merged the food and beverage divisions, as well as several other minor groups, into one umbrella organization. A brief background story on the Joey discussed its sparse sales and the fact that few software programs were available for use with the computer, underscoring the analysts' predictions of a major overhaul. All of the experts agreed that the product was revolutionary and proclaimed that if Wallaby could speed Joey applications to market, it could then gain major market share and thereby disarm the older, less flashy technology of its largest competitor, International Computer Products. The consensus was that Wallaby had to get its act together if it was to have any hope of remaining at the forefront of portable computer technology innovation.

William Harrell smiled. That was exactly what he had hoped to read. He folded the newspaper and tossed it onto the seat beside him.

The car neared its destination, turning for the final stretch onto a block with the largest buildings in the city.

If everything went as the analysts predicted, William Harrell would soon begin implementing his new plan. The existing one, a conservative strategy that the company had followed for two years, would soon be replaced with one informed by none of the customary Fortune 500 company protocol. William Harrell's plan was based on a decision he had made two years ago, around the same time the press had touted Wallaby's newly appointed president, Matthew Locke, as "ICP's Nemesis."

The car slowed in front of a massive building with a black marble facade. William adjusted his tie and tugged at the jacket of his charcoal pinstriped suit. As the driver opened his door the city air hit him like a furnace blast. Towering above him were seventy-six stories of world renowned corporate power, wholly occupied by the company whose name was carved in stone above the building's entrance: INTERNATIONAL COMPUTER PRODUCTS.

He entered the building, rode the elevator to its highest level, greeted his secretary, and entered his office, on whose door a golden plaque announced: Chairman & Chief Executive Officer.

* * *

Each member of the board and of the senior executive staff filed into the Wallaby boardroom. Most of them arrived at eight o'clock sharp, avoiding the usual idle conversation that, in the past, had always taken place outside the room.

Matthew's secretary, Eileen, stood in the doorway of his office. "It's time," she said, then returned to her desk.

Matthew stood. He clipped his pen to the yellow tablet on which he'd been writing.

Eileen busied herself at her desk, arranging papers and notes. She paused and said, "Matthew, good luck."

He gave her a small nod and headed for the boardroom.

The exotic fruits, croissants, pastries, coffee, and bottles of mineral water on the table set up outside the boardroom had hardly been touched. Normally the table would be nearly empty by now, and the executive staff secretaries, disguising their cravings by pretending to go to the ladies' room, would pick over the remains once the boardroom door had closed and the meeting was underway. But today they could enjoy themselves in a leisurely fashion, for none of the board members seemed to have appetites.

The room fell from a fuzzy hum to heavy silence when Matthew entered. Immediately he saw that Peter had not yet arrived. He seated himself in one of two vacant leather chairs at either end of the long, black table. The room's amenities and furnishings were simple and high-tech. Bleached wood paneling on one wall stood in stark contrast with the deep charcoal rug. On the wall opposite the windows, a series of segmented panels unfolded to reveal a massive rear-projection movie screen. At the other end, audiovisual equipment was stacked behind hinged, smoked-glass doors. Here, encapsulated multimedia performances, new product videos, employee interviews, research and development sneak previews, and live TV spots or teleconferences were viewed with the touch of a finger. Today, however, the equipment would remain silent and cool, the master of ceremonies unaided by electronic wizardry.

The room offered a panoramic view of the Santa Cruz Mountains, which rolled northwestward toward San Francisco. The five board members and a couple of Wallaby's senior executives faced this view, while the less senior executives sat with their backs to the windows. Peter Jones had personally selected every person for his or her position in this room, most of them more than eight years ago.

Sitting here, waiting, Matthew Locke's confidence began to falter. The expressions around the table were grim, as all were aware of the forthcoming conflict. Had Matthew inspected the trashcan beside the security desk in the building's lobby, he would have found several discarded copies of the "Wall Street Journal," each affixed with a small mailing label addressed to one of the persons seated around the table. Each would have read the article predicting changes in this very board meeting, and would know that the speculations were about to be substantiated. Like the emotionally battered children of distraught and noncommunicative parents, those in the room would have to choose to which parent they would commit their trust, to the man who could best repair Wallaby and lead the company from its stalled state to a prosperous future. While he had already gained secret votes of confidence from every person present, he was nonetheless struck in the pit of his stomach by a gross realization. Here he sat among men and women expressly chosen by Peter for their roles, in this room whose design Peter had personally approved, in this building that was only one of many representing the company that Peter Jones had founded, in this little town to which he had brought international recognition. Did Matthew really believe, as he sat here waiting, that he could actually unseat Peter from this very room? From this very legend?

With an imperceptible shudder, Matthew flung this thought from his mind and replaced it with memories of the time and energy he had invested in preparation for this day.

Seated to his right and facing the windows was Hank Towers, assistant chairman, and Wallaby's primary investor. Over the past several months Matthew had spent a considerable amount of time with Hank, and he had agreed with most of Matthew's ideas about how Wallaby should be managed. He had pored over the reports and strategies that Matthew collected, giving particular attention to a recent Harvard Business School study that described a phenomenon with which every successful company must eventually contend. It stated that by the time a business is ten years old, its original founders have left. There were exceptions, of course. The founding pair of Hewlett-Packard, for example, had remained with the company for several decades and both still held directorial roles. And, a little closer to the issue at hand was ICP, which was founded in the 1930s by Jonathan Holmes, who had stayed on for half a century before turning the business over to his son, Byron. But in most cases the departure of a founder was a natural occurrence. Typically, he or she left to begin a new venture, however the second most prevalent manner of departure was less amicable; the founder was forced out of the company because he or she was hampering rather than helping the company. If anyone could appreciate this it was Hank. Three years ago he had persuaded Peter to let him begin a worldwide search for a candidate who could take his place as president of Wallaby, managing its day-to-day operations. What's more, it was Hank who had recommended Matthew after reading about him in "Business Week." The story had commended Matthew's successes at International Foods, noting that he was one of the youngest and most effective Fortune 500 presidents, and speculating that he was being groomed by International's stuffy and conservative chairman, Rolland Worthy, to take the elder's

place when he retired.

But today his reputation as the once-mighty leader of a large food and beverage company gave him little faith in his strategy, which was beginning to taste more and more stale each passing minute.

The door opened and Peter Jones entered the room. All around the table the members rearranged themselves, sitting more erect, seeming to have acquired a sudden intense interest in the figures and data and notes piled before them - anything to avoid making eye contact with the newest and final arrival. Dressed in a faultlessly fitted Armani suit, crisp white shirt and subdued floral patterned tie, Peter gave the impression of a corporate messiah, capable of both vision and leadership. He appeared well rested and cheery as he entered the room, his eyes scanning the table warmly.

Matthew's stomach flipped. No amount of planning or rehearsing could have prepared him for the aura of power emanating from his rival. Even after working with him for more than twenty-four months, Matthew still felt mildly intimidated in the young man's presence.

Peter seated himself directly across from Matthew, twenty feet opposite, and opened his smooth, black leather portfolio. They exchanged an expressionless stare, which was broken when Martin Cohn, vice president of corporate development and liaison to the board of directors, began the meeting.

"We don't have an agenda to hand out today," Martin said with uncharacteristic seriousness. "Let's begin." He nodded to Matthew, then diverted his attention out the window, avoiding Peter's puzzled expression.

* * *

Greta Locke awoke with no great desire to leave her warm bed. She had slept fitfully; Matthew had tossed and bucked through the night, and the few times she tried to soothe or comfort him, he had turned on his side with an irked sigh.

She wondered if the board meeting at Wallaby had started. It didn't matter really, everything was going to be just fine. Stretching, she sat up and adjusted her silk gloves. She leaned across the bed to the night table and opened its drawer, taking from it a fine Swiss biscuit that she unwrapped and bit into as she pulled the sheets from her body and got out of bed. She didn't feel like taking a shower, not right now, anyway. She took her silk robe from the door hook as she passed the bathroom.

Slowly she descended the stairs. With each step her mind turned over her options for the day ahead. Stanford Mall? Union Square again? Clothes? Gourmet food?

Her housekeeper, Marie, appeared at the bottom of the stairway. She was wearing rubber gloves and carrying a bucket filled with a strong-smelling ammonia solution. She greeted Greta with an obedient smile.

"Mrs. Locke, I cleaned the windows on the patio outside."

"Fine, I'll inspect them," Greta said, pivoting from the last step.

She strolled into the large black and white tiled kitchen and opened the refrigerator. As she reached for the pitcher of fresh-squeezed orange juice, she noticed an open bottle of Mumm champagne resting on the back shelf. Why not a mimosa, she decided, to celebrate Matthew's success.

She tugged the elaborate silver stopper from the bottle. It popped weakly, and the champagne fizzed lightly as she topped off her half-full glass of orange juice.

Give yourself a hand, she thought wryly, remembering back to the first time she and Matthew had toasted with drinks. This came to mind every time she had a fizzy juice cocktail. They had met at International Foods' advertising agency. She had been hired as a hand model. It was what she, Gretchen Bonner, had done before she had met Matthew. In her lovely hand she had been holding a can of Orange Fresh, a new, all-natural carbonated orange beverage. While at the agency for another meeting, Matthew had dropped in on the shoot. His eyes had locked on the beautiful hand wrapped around his newest beverage invention. He followed the hand to the arm to the body to the face. Holding his creation perfectly still in her hand, the woman glanced at Matthew and smiled. She was perfect for the part, and when the shoot was over he offered her a glass of International Foods' own brand of vodka over ice. She accepted the drink, warning him that she would become woozy if she drank it straight on the rocks. She poured Orange Fresh into the glass and took a sip. She said she liked it better that way, sweet. At that very instant, unknown to either of them, she had single-handedly

invented a multimillion dollar market segment for International Foods, for which Matthew would later garner considerable praise.

Marie entered the kitchen. Forgetting discretion, the servant allowed her critical gaze to rest for a moment too long on the open bottle of champagne in Greta's hand. Bad move.

Greta placed the bottle on the granite counter, set down her glass and, walking toward the long, sweeping kitchen windows, removed the glove from her right hand. "Marie," she called.

Marie, who had gone back to her business, faced her employer. She brushed her hand across her blinking eyes, which showed the effects of ammonia vapors.

"I think these need cleaning too," Greta said, running her index finger along the windows. She smirked.

"Of course, Mrs. Locke."

"And don't forget the outside," Greta added, picking up her drink. She gulped down half of it, then poured the remainder of the champagne into her glass. She left the empty bottle on the counter, and opened the refrigerator again and searched its open shelves for breakfast. She took a plastic container and opened it. Inside were two slices of veal left over from last night's meal. She ate one of the slices. The sauce was congealed and hardened, but the meat tasted good, and she licked the oily shine from her fingers. Her mood was returning to normal.

Greta exited the kitchen and stretched out on the couch in the sitting room. Her hand found the remote control between the cushions and she pointed the thing at the television and pressed its buttons, sipping her drink as the screen flipped through channels. Her mind flipped through its own channels, still contemplating what to do with her day.

She stopped on a commercial showing a young, laughing couple running along a beach hand in hand. It was interspersed with quick, one-second images of cocktails, dancing, dining. It concluded with the pair on horseback, galloping down the beach into the sunset, leaving her with the message: "Live again!"

She tucked the device between the pillows and set her empty glass on the coffee table; she had resolved today's activity dilemma.

In the bedroom she tossed her robe onto the bed. Hesitating, she considered showering. She decided against it; she'd only get dirty again in an hour or so. She pulled on jeans, a rugged cotton shirt, and a scarf. From the closet she collected her riding boots and a vest. She refreshed her color with a slash of blush across each cheek. Running a brush through her hair, she caught the white flash of the remaining silk glove shrouding her left hand. Casting her glance out the window, she removed it and took a pair of worn leather riding gloves from her vest pocket. She put them on, taking extra care with the left one, adjusting it carefully so that it appeared to fit naturally. There.

She backed her car from the garage and slid her sunglasses on her face and cruised down the twisting road, feeling a little buzzed as the convertible gained speed, the wind whipping all around her.

This area of Woodside was hilly and lush. Either side of the road occasionally gave way to gated driveways or hedged walls. At certain bends, off to the right and downhill, she could see the small, artificial lake resting in the middle of this particular smart-set valley. It was a short drive, her destination within walking distance of her home had she chosen to take the footpath that circled the lake.

She turned onto the long private drive. The hot pavement turned to dusty road as she approached the ranch. She passed a small stilted shed that marked the property line of the ranch. To the right, in a liberally spaced cluster, were two cottages, a ranch house, a small stable, and a second, larger double-door barn. Dressage and jumping rings were not far from these buildings, separated from the lake by a dirt path. In one of the fenced circles a trainer led a tethered Morgan colt in medium-sized circles, gently guiding the shining black animal with a long lunge whip. In another ring a young girl neatly sailed a black Hanoverian over post-and-rail jumps, under the instruction of a tall man dressed in mixed hues of indigo. Greta had never seen the man here before. From this distance he appeared lithe and attractive, and her curiosity was piqued. As if sensing her appraisal, he turned and looked in her direction. He leveled his hand against his brow to shield the sunlight. As he did this, she noticed that he was wearing an odd white garment over his right arm; it took her an instant to realize it was a sling.

She raised her sunglasses from her face and settled them in her hair. Had the man been looking at her or at something else nearby? He turned back to the rider, signing with a wave, then turned and

jogged out of the ring, disappearing into the smaller barn.

She climbed out of the car and proceeded to the massive double doors. Inside, she was surrounded on either side by large beautiful horses of various breeds. Their heads turned in her direction as she passed. Occasionally she stopped to pet a particular animal owned by an acquaintance. She grew excited by the smell of the horses, the dust, the feed, and the dryness, and was glad she had decided to come here to ride. When she wasn't shopping or doing the other things that consumed the hours of her day, this was her passion, being here at the ranch with these beautiful, powerful creatures.

Stall 28, at the end of a long row, held Mighty Boy, her four-year-old thoroughbred stallion. So black he was almost purple, Mighty Boy had been a gift from Matthew when they had moved to California.

"Hi sweetie," Greta said, stroking the animal's head. She nuzzled her face into his cheek, her chestnut hair mixing and mingling with his black mane. The horse nodded and whinnied, happy for her arrival.

"Hello, Mrs. Locke," said Jennifer, the ranch's owner. She was a solid woman with white-gray hair and eternally sun-squinted eyes. "What a happy boy he is," Jennifer said. "Everyone who sees him is in awe of his beauty."

"He is a pretty boy, isn't he?" Greta said. She paused to appraise the animal for a moment before leading him out of his stall.

Jennifer slipped Mighty Boy a treat and patted his head.
"Gorgeous day for a ride."

"Truly," Greta agreed. Peripherally, a movement caught her eye. It was the man she'd seen in the ring, dressed in denim pants and a worn denim shirt. He was walking toward them. She became conscious of her tousled hair, and tried to remember whether or not she had brushed her teeth. Yet she did not fully connect these concerns with the materialization of this stranger.

"You must be the fortunate owner of this magnificent beast," the smiling man said. His lean, strong jaw and powerful physique were matched by a robust, accented voice.

"Yes," Greta said with evident pride.

He was taller than he had first appeared when she spotted him in the ring, a hair over six feet, she estimated. He had hazel eyes, and his dark brown hair was long and thick and pulled back into a neat ponytail. She guessed he was in his mid-thirties.

"Jennifer?" the man said, turning to the ranch's owner.

"Oh! I'm sorry." The older woman placed a casual hand on Greta's shoulder. "Jean-Pierre Poitras, this is Mrs. Greta Locke." At the "Mrs." part, her voice had risen ever so slightly.

Greta offered her right hand, then realized her mistake. He laughed, and with his left hand he gestured at his slung arm. Staring at it, she saw that there was no cast. "We can use this hand," Jean-Pierre said. Before she had a chance to realize what was happening, he had her left hand in his own.

She gasped, recoiling her hand like a viper. She clasped it protectively in her other hand, as if it had been scalded.

Jean-Pierre's face mirrored her own astonished expression.
Jennifer's too.

Greta attempted to cover the awkwardness. "Oh," she said with a nervous laugh, "I'm sorry. It's just that you startled me." Unconsciously she was gently squeezing the hand he'd held, trying to imagine how it had felt to him. Horrorstricken, she asked herself, Did he feel it?

There was a long moment of silence in which everyone looked to everyone else. Finally, Jennifer spoke. "Jean-Pierre is a polo champion from Deauville, France."

Greta seized on this to move the conversation along. "Really? How fascinating. Are you playing polo here?"

He laughed at this, and everything seemed to fall back in order.
"There is no polo here. That is why I've come."

Jennifer explained. "We're considering starting a polo club right here in Woodside, Mrs. Locke. Perhaps Mr. Locke would be interested in sponsoring a player." This last comment was directed to Jean-Pierre. He arched his brows, inviting an explanation.

Instead of responding to this, Greta let go of his hand and fluttered it uneasily at his arm. "What happened?"

"Oh, this. My nemesis. Chronic dislocation. Shoulder. Worst it has ever been. I figured it was time to give my pony a rest and look into the idea of starting a club here. I need some time to recuperate." His eyes connected with hers, and for the moment that she held them, she felt as if he were acknowledging some unspoken confidence that they shared.

Jennifer spoke up. "We're delighted he's going to be staying with us for awhile." With a click of her tongue she began leading Mighty Boy along.

Jean-Pierre stopped her and took the horse by the halter. "May I?" he asked Greta.

"Oh. Why, yes," she replied.

Jennifer patted Mighty Boy's head. "Have a nice ride," she said, and walked back toward the office.

Greta studied Jean-Pierre as he led the animal from its stall with a firm but casual hand. Mighty Boy tramped along happily, unresisting, as they walked the length of the stable in silence. Outside they stepped aside to allow the young groom to bridle and saddle the animal.

Jean-Pierre plucked a pair of sunglasses from his shirt pocket. "Perhaps we can ride together one morning, Mrs. Locke?" He grinned. Perfect straight white teeth contrasted with his healthy, tanned complexion. There was something suggestive in his fixed smile.

She felt herself blush. "Perhaps," she said. She had a premonition that was not altogether unpleasant. Before she had time to let the image develop any further, she quickly busied herself with the saddle's girth and stirrups. She could feel his eyes observing her. It felt intrusive, yet, at the same time, exciting. She nullified this indulgence by reminding herself of today's board meeting at Wallaby; its conclusion would signal a new beginning for her and Matthew. She pulled her scarf from her vest pocket, twirled it, and wrapped it lightly around her neck. The lenses of his sunglasses reflected her motions, but she could not tell on what exactly his eyes were focused, though they seemed fixed in the general direction of her upper body. Her breasts. At this thought she felt a prickling beneath her skin. First chilly. Then hot.

Feeling suddenly loony and playful, she stared directly into his sunglasses, as if she were facing a small display mirror. With a bold tug she knotted her scarf and laughed, and at the same time cinched her commitment to Matthew.

His own hearty laughter joined hers, filling her with an uncharacteristic and powerful sense of triumph.

She placed her booted foot into the stirrup, and his deft attention was little surprise as his free hand solidly gripped her other boot. With a quick hoist she was in the saddle.

He stood before Mighty Boy and stroked the horse's head. "Such a beautiful creature," he said, removing his sunglasses, "should certainly be allowed to jump, to learn new things. Yes? Maybe you would like to try?" He lifted his sunglasses and held them so that their eyes connected. He held hers for more time than she should have permitted. She quickly diverted her gaze to the jumping ring. Could she do that? Wait - why was she even considering it? She told herself to get going. Besides, she had not showered, and her hair was all mussed. Hadn't she come here to ride her horse?

"I don't think I could do that," she said. "I think I prefer simply riding alone."

He lowered his sunglasses again and bowed, as if to say that was fine. For now.

"Well, then. See you," she said. She was satisfied with the way that had come out, a practiced social indifference to her tone. Pressing her heels into the horse's ribs, she trotted off past the buildings and toward the hills across the low, golden, grassy field. She let herself look back. He was still standing there, watching her ride off. She hastily returned her attention to the path.

After Mighty Boy warmed up she pushed him hard, leaning into his powerful gallop. As if testing her will, yesterday's clear, hard thoughts of Matthew's secret plan and of her celebration bowl melted away, and were supplanted by fantasy. Her heart raced, and her mind ran free with raw and fiery images of the provocative Jean-Pierre.

"Thank you, Martin," Matthew Locke said.

Peter turned to Hank Towers for an explanation for this break in custom; it was he, Peter, who always started the meeting with opening remarks. But Hank's attention, like that of everyone else in the room, had shifted to Matthew. Something was wrong, but before he could speculate, Matthew spoke.

"As we are all aware, Peter and I have been at odds about how this company should be managed."

Peter threw his pen down on the table. With an audible huff he pushed himself back in his seat with straightened arms. "What's going on here?"

Matthew ignored this and continued, his eyes roaming from person to person in careful, measured doses.

"Peter and I have very different styles and strategies, which is positioning you, the executive staff and board of directors, in the middle of our discord. The situation isn't healthy for Wallaby." He let this sink in for a moment while he got up and walked toward a pitcher of water. Slowly he poured himself a glass.

"Peter," he started, resting the glass, "I've decided to ask the board of directors to accept my resignation - "

Peter could not believe his ears, and before Matthew had even finished with his explanation Peter was already celebrating inside. Hallelujah! Here he had thought that Matthew was going to propose a reorganization, but instead he was resigning. It was priceless! Maybe, Peter thought, Matthew had realized himself that he was not cut out for high technology, and would be better off going back into the potato chip business, with its bright colored plastic bags, its brainwashing the public on the virtues of junk food, its pureeing of rotten ingredients -

" - provided," Matthew continued, "that they don't approve my recommendation that you relinquish your duties as Wallaby's vice president of Joey, and chairman of the board."

The room spun. Suddenly, all eyes were fixed on Peter. He blinked, and tried to focus on a single pair, but those glanced away, as did the next pair, and the next. He leaned back in his chair. It squeaked loudly. He looked up at the whiteness of the ceiling for a moment and let his mind drain. Suddenly he understood Matthew's little game. He laughed at the ceiling. For a split second he had actually thought it could somehow be true, that Matthew was going to resign, that that was what Matthew was trying to warn him of, threaten him with yesterday. Such was not the case. Resigning was the farthest thing from Matthew's mind. The absurdity - proposing that the board give him the boot. Admittedly, considering the rumors that were flying about a reorganization, he'd been more than a little apprehensive late last night. But upon waking this morning, he'd told himself there was nothing to fear. He was the company's founder, and he wasn't going anywhere - except where he damn well pleased. This was preposterous. It was laughable. And he laughed hard and full, his shoulders pitching a little. None of the others joined in the fun.

When he managed to get his laughter under control, he straightened up and placed his clasped hands comfortably in his lap. "Sorry," he said, squeezing his eyes shut for a moment. He gave himself a little shake, and blew out an exaggerated breath. "Forgive me for laughing, Matthew," he said with a smile, flattening his hand over his heart, "You had me going there for a second. I thought you were going to make my job easy."

His smile vanished. "But I guess you're not. So I'll spell it out for you." His face was relaxed and smooth, and he spoke coolly. "Matthew, you're not right for Wallaby anymore," he said. He let this hang in the air for a few moments. To his way of thinking, as chairman, his decision was already made. Out of courtesy he would explain to Matthew the circumstances, as a coach would after try-outs to the child who doesn't have what it takes to make the team.

"You did a good job of helping to get the organization in place for managing us through troubled waters. You created a strong sales force, and you did some other good things. I can't remember them all right now, but you did some okay things. However, were you to remain in your position any longer, this company would fail because of your weakness. You have no vision."

All this time Matthew had remained on his feet. Peter was impressed with how well he was taking it. Let's see, Peter thought, how he handles this part.

Peter opened his leather portfolio, which contained copies of the organizational chart he had prepared yesterday, listing himself as the acting president and CEO. "I think we can work out a respectable severance package, with full relocation, of course," he said, graciously, "and - "

"Peter, " Matthew said, cutting him off.

Oh wonderful, Peter thought, just what he had feared. Matthew was going to beg to stay. Yet he saw no sign of anguish on Matthew's face. Perhaps he was experiencing shock?

"You're a brilliant young man," Matthew said. "You've made this industry what it is. Were it not for you, we all know this company could never have been." His words flowed easily, without tremor.

"You had a dream to make portable computers for individuals, and you created this company out of sheer willpower and brains. Everyone here acknowledges that."

This was worse than Peter had thought. How long would he and his team have to sit through this, he wondered. Should he stop him now, and thank him? No, he told himself. Let him finish. After all, he had hired Matthew, and if anyone was to blame, it was he, for not realizing that a potato chip man could not be transformed into a silicon chip man. At this last thought he felt the start of a giggle in his chest, and he was forced to bow his head and pinch his lips tightly together to contain his laughter.

Matthew paused. What Peter didn't see were the sympathetic glances sent his way by the members of his hand-picked team. He resumed, "I was hired to complement you so that you could concentrate on developing your product ideas without the burden of managing a rapidly growing organization..."

Resigned to listening to the rest of Matthew's good-bye speech, Peter let his mind concentrate on important things. Leaking batteries, for instance. Longer screen life. Easy-to-service keyboards. Storage. Faster performance. Yes, that one was becoming more and more important. Must have faster performance.

Matthew's voice had become a faraway drone. "But I cannot do my job without having the power to fulfill my responsibilities. You have managed to create a rivalry with your once-greatest fans..."

What else? Agents. Now there was a subject he had become more and more interested in. Which reminds me, Peter thought, I've got to call the guys at MIT and see what they've come up with that we might use with the -

"[Joey Plus computer is late for delivery because of your inability to manage your organization. All that must change."

He sensed that Matthew was winding down, and focused once again on the here and now. Glad tidings, etcetera.

"So I have decided to ask each member of the board and executive staff to vote."

Peter looked at Matthew. "And what are we going to vote on, Matthew?" he asked, his voice pitched a good deal higher than usual.

"As I said," Matthew went on, planting both of his hands on the back of his vacant chair, "I cannot do my job as long as you have the final say in everything. I am asking the board and the executive staff to decide which of us will run this company. If they choose you, I will resign."

He looked around the room. Everyone seemed to think their blank notepads were fascinating.

"Matthew, now I'm getting angry," Peter said, rising from his seat. Unconsciously he began popping the button of his ball-point pen up and down with his thumb. "Can we please stop this desperate little game?"

"This is no game. I am perfectly serious. And as this company's president, I intend to conduct a vote."

The clicking stopped. "A vote? Then be my guest," he said, sweeping a hand at the mannequins seated around the table. "Go ahead, Matthew, ask. Ask everyone in this room who they want to run my company."

Hands in his pockets, Peter began to pace slowly around the room, like an impatient father awaiting the inevitable. "Wait," Peter said. "Better still, Matthew, I'll ask, okay?"

Matthew shrugged deferentially.

Peter stepped behind Alan Parker, general manager of the Mate division, the first executive Peter had hired when he had founded Wallaby.

"Alan," Peter said, resting his hand on Parker's shoulder. "What do you think about all of this? Pretty awkward, I agree. But nothing we can't take care of, right? Do I need to repeat the questions? Who do

you think should be in control here at our company?"

Parker sat upright, his attention focused on his hands, which he held tightly clasped together on the table. Normally a warm and friendly person, Parker had worked as Peter's right-hand man during the early years of Wallaby when they had found themselves a major force in the Fortune 500. He removed his glasses and brushed the back of his hand across his forehead. His dread was palpable.

"Yes, Peter," Parker said, his voice struggling against fond memories, "we did build Wallaby into a wonderful thing. And if it weren't for you, this industry would have never become what it is today. However, you and your Joey team have created a rivalry with my Mate group. My division, which provides the butter for our bread, feels that you, the very inventor of our livelihood, think the Mate, and my people who work on it, are second-class citizens."

He swiveled in his chair to look at Peter with his complaisant, pleading eyes. "Because of the way you behave I can't do my job, either. It's like you've abandoned your roots in favor of Joey, like you've forgotten all about the millions of people, the millions of children, who use a Mate computer every day. Mate is your family, and we feel abandoned."

Peter moved his face closer to Parker's. "Spare me the history, Al. Okay? I'm sorry if you're sensitive about the way things may seem, but face it, you know our future lies in Joey. What do you need to hear? What can I say to make you feel better? I think you and your group do a great job keeping Mate alive, and you can tell them I said so. I'll even tell them myself. I'll come over every other week, if that's what you want, and pat them on the back. Matthew can't do that. He can't even work a Mate computer. How the hell is he going to talk to the people who keep it alive?"

Parker stiffened. "That's not the point. Don't you see? You're doing it right now. Doing what you always do, changing and twisting things around to suit you. Only you."

In all their years of working together, Parker had never spoken to him like this. It was as if the man had suddenly aged and hardened before his eyes.

"We're not a little start-up company anymore, Peter," Parker exploded. "We're big business, and we need to be run like a big business. And that includes taking care of the people who got us here!"

An unpleasant taste shot up from Peter's throat. He already knew what Parker's vote would be. And if Parker, who was easily his least problematic executive, felt his way, what about the others?

Alan Parker narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head. His face softened, and for a moment he was once again the kind and grateful man Peter remembered. "Peter, I believe Matthew has what it takes to run this company. But I also believe you should lead our new product development - "

Peter lifted a hand, cutting the executive off. "Save it," he said, patting Parker stiffly on the shoulder. "So, everyone thinks I'm a jerk. But it was this hot-shot businessman," he said, flinging a hand towards Matthew, "who let things get to this point of confusion and misunderstanding."

Matthew stood. "Peter, I want us to work together, but for me to be able to manage Wallaby, you need to let me have the power to do what's right from a business standpoint."

"Well forget it, Matthew," Peter said. "And let's cut all this crybaby sentimental crap too, okay? Okay. Fine. If this is how you want to play the game, we'll just go around the room and ask everyone if they want me out." He leaned against the window ledge, in the exact section Matthew had just vacated. He squeezed the ledge on either side with his hands, white-knuckled, as if this would somehow anchor his place in the room.

"All right, who's next?" Peter said, his voice bordering on hysteria. "Let's see. Denise. You. Just a simple yes if you think Matthew should have final power. No drama, please, we've all got a lot of work to do today."

Denise Campbell had started her career with Wallaby as a financial analyst. Young and bright and a genius with numbers, Denise's long record of successes had recently been rewarded by Peter, who had promoted her to the role of CFO. With anguished eyes, she faced Peter. "As a publicly held company, our first obligation is to our shareholders."

Peter held up his hand again, stopping her before she could go into a long-winded justification. "No verbosity, please, just a yes or no." His eyes blazed.

She looked into her lap. "Yes," she said. "But Peter, you have to stay on as - "

Eyes closed, he turned away from her with a disgusted expression and a quick shake of his head.

Paul Crane, executive vice president of sales and marketing, was regarded by everyone for his no-bullshit manner, which he now demonstrated with a simple nod of his head.

Matthew stood off to the side, watching the process without expression. It went on like this until the entire executive staff was polled. Then Peter queried each of the visiting directors, who had flown in from different parts of the country to attend the meeting. Not a single no was spoken. When Matthew counted all but the final response, he stiffened, awaiting the finale.

Peter knelt before Hank Towers.

"Hank," Peter said, his voice a desperate croak. "You, more than anyone else in this room, know what Wallaby means to me." He drummed his chest with his palm. "You and I, Hank, we made Wallaby everything it is today. Didn't I agree with you a few years ago that we needed someone to run the company? And wasn't I supportive when we hired Matthew? We made a mistake is all, and no one gets it. But you do. I know you do."

Hank sat perfectly still, but Matthew could see that Peter's words were having an effect on him. And on some of the others. Sounds of sniffing and little coughs, throats clearing, filled the room.

Matthew's pulse quickened. Although everyone else in the room had voted in his favor, Hank could essentially persuade them all to compromise in Peter's favor, dissolving Matthew's ultimatum. If Hank did that, the plan would be off.

"Hank, you have to trust me on this one," Peter implored. "Matthew isn't right for Wallaby. If you let him have this, he'll turn Wallaby into a second-rate company. All I want is for us to be number one, Hank. It's all we've ever wanted, right?"

Matthew sweated to read Hank's expression. Had he been kidding himself into thinking he could lure Hank's loyalty away from Peter.

"Damn it, Hank, look at me. Don't you see what he really wants? He wants us, the renegades, to connect to IC-fucking-P's computers! If that's not selling out, man, what is?"

Matthew held his breath, for Peter's assessment was ultimately the motivation behind his entire secret plan. And if this revelation, however ridiculous it may have sounded, caused Hank to waver, to trust Peter's instincts, then Matthew had not a single grain of hope of ever succeeding with his monumental plan. He heard the sound of his own heartbeat squishing wildly in his ears.

Hank looked Peter in the eye, and slowly shook his head.

Peter grunted. It was a wrenching, painful sound.

"Hank, no. No, Hank. No." He spoke very slowly, pausing with every few words to catch his breath. "We did it before. And we can do it again." He planted his hands on Hank's shoulders and gave him the sort of shake one gives a drunkard. "We can run Wallaby. Until we find someone who can cut it. Hank."

Hank gently removed Peter's hands from his shoulders.

"No, Peter," Hank whispered. "No."

"Hank, this is my life we're talking about, here. You will kill me if you don't save me." Tears spilled down Peter's cheeks. "You're my only hope."

Hank rested his hand on Peter's shoulder. "Petey, we're a big company now, at probably the most critical point in all our history. You are too unfocused to manage Wallaby. Matthew can." He punctuated this last line with a squeeze. "But you've got to stay on and be the innovator. We only want you to let Matthew do his job. You'll think this is all bad for awhile, but then you'll understand. You'll be a lot happier focusing on future products." He let out a huge, exasperated sigh. "For Chrissake, Peter, we love you."

Peter slowly rose to his feet. Matthew was rounding the table, coming toward him.

"And if I don't agree to all this?" Peter said to Hank.

"I'm afraid it's the only option you've got."

Peter could think of a few others. For example, he thought with morbid pleasure, he could pummel Matthew with punches, that was one option, or he could choke him until he turned red, then blue, then black and begged for his life while everyone sat there as they had through the whole meeting, staring at their fucking yellow pads, just dying to lift their pens, Wallaby logo pens, and begin calculating what

their stock options would be worth after today's news got out.

And wasn't that what it all came down to in the end, he asked himself. Wasn't that what he'd used to lure each and every one of them there? The bottom line. Didn't they understand that for him, it wasn't the money. His life's happiness was the bottom line. And he had just lost it. With this thought a deep dread coursed through his chest. He thought of last night, and he felt a shudder, as though an ice-cold fear had poked its finger into his rectum. He felt as if he were about to defecate, right there for all of them to witness, his grand exit. He was coming apart from the inside out.

With every last ounce of strength he willed himself to stop shaking, to compose himself as best he could. He lifted his chin. "Wallaby is my life," he said, his voice high and distraught. "But as you've all determined for me, that doesn't matter anymore."

Matthew came closer. "It doesn't have to end like this," he said. "I want you to stay with me. I want you to make our future while I manage the present." He reached out to Peter.

"Don't you come near me!" Peter screamed, flinging his hands into the air. Several of the people in the room jumped in their seats, groaning in agony at what they were being forced to witness.

Their eyes linked for the last time. "You've stolen my life, Matthew." He faced the people seated at he table. But he had nothing more to say. He turned and charged for the door.

Martin Cohn leapt from his chair and started after him.

"Leave him," Hank ordered, fixing his eyes sharply on Matthew.

The door slowly and silently swung inward, sealing the new team together inside the room for the first time without Peter Jones.

Matthew couldn't see Hank's gaze. He was facing the sunlit window, staring down at his clenched fists. He willed them to relax. And as he watched them uncurl, he felt his guilt slip away. And in its place he grasped a new feeling.

Power.

Chapter 4

William Harrell worked through his morning in the usual fashion, attending three meetings, then moving on to his daily correspondence.

After eleven o'clock he left the ICP headquarters building for a ten-block ride to an exclusive men's athletic club whose clientele consisted entirely of high-level executives. Typically, the club arranged rotating squash and racquetball matches between executives in similar positions from different companies and industries. A president of an insurance company, for example, might be paired with a CEO from an advertising agency; a TV executive with a restaurant magnate...or the chairman of the world's largest computer manufacturer with chairman of the world's largest food manufacturer.

Waiting for his technical and business advisers to arrive for their two o'clock meeting, William stretched and considered the soreness in his arms. They felt now as they had after his match with Rolland Worthy, chairman and CEO of International Foods, a little over two years ago. During that match, he mused, he had felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach midway through the game.

"What do you know about Wallaby?" Worthy had asked him.

The hard rubber ball struck the wall with solid force and rebounded toward William.

His concentration and judgment were wrecked by Rolland's question; his racquet overextended. The ball hurtled past him.

"What, I hit a nerve?" Worthy laughed, arming his sweating wrinkled forehead with his shirtsleeve.

William crouched. "Wallaby is a small company in Silicon Valley that manufactures portable computers and those new small wonders referred to as PIAs, which stands for personal interactive assistant," William said flatly. He bounced on the balls of his feet, anticipating Worthy's serve.

Worthy tossed the ball in the air and pounded it with his racquet, then dropped to a defensive footing, his actions fluid and youthful.

William smashed the ball and they played out the serve, and he ultimately gained the ball after Worthy crashed into the wall.

"You okay?" William huffed.

Worthy gave his shoulder a quick squeeze where it had connected with the wall. "Serve," he ordered.

William served and the game continued.

Before the match, William had started the day in his imperturbable business-as-usual mood. He remembered the pleasure he felt upon reading his business adviser's latest market-share report, announcing that ICP had nearly doubled its total unit sales of the BP computer, compared to Wallaby's estimated total sales of its Mate all-in-one portable computer. But though sales of the BP were greater than those of the Mate, William Harrell's consummate business sense counseled against feeling triumphant. He rationalized that Wallaby was presumably up to something big; Peter Jones, Wallaby's eminent founder, had been too quiet as far as the press was concerned. Normally the capricious spokesman of the portable computer industry, Jones had not granted a public interview in more than a year, and that concerned William. Jones had something up his sleeve. Something really big. The only thing that kept William's fear of Jones and Wallaby from growing beyond a mild concern to an actual loss of sleep was the fact that Jones was a poor chief; though he was capable of creating innovative miniature computers, he was incapable of running the company. Without proper guidance and leadership, Wallaby would sooner or later fold.

As they headed from the court to the showers, William wiped his face with a towel and asked, "All right, Rolland, fess up. Why all the interest in Wallaby?"

"This is off the record, my friend. They called one of my best guys, Matthew Locke. They're flying him to California to interview for a job as president."

William felt the color drain from his face.

"Locke, as you know, is who I'm thinking about advancing into my slot when I retire in a few years," Worthy said.

"Anyway, he stopped by my house last night and told me that he had gotten a call from a headhunter and was a candidate to take the lead at Wallaby, working with some kid named Peter Jones."

William remained silent, praying that Worthy would go on and spill everything he knew about Wallaby and its interest in Locke.

"I think Matthew wanted me to tell him he was guaranteed my job when I retire. When I told him I couldn't do that, not yet anyway, he said then that he was going to fly out there to California and see what the company was all about.

"I just can't figure it," Worthy remarked. He paused and slung his towel over his shoulder. "Why would some hippie bantam computer nerds want to hire the president of a company that makes soda pop and chips?"

Harrell knew precisely why. What had he been mulling over all morning? The only factor preventing Wallaby from becoming a bona fide threat was that Peter Jones lacked the business savvy necessary to take his small company into big business. His intuition about Jones had been correct. The young man was looking to hire an innkeeper to run the shop so he could concentrate on building the nifty toys.

"You think they're going to start stuffing little computers into cereal boxes?" Worthy quipped with a chuckle as the two men headed for the showers.

Despite the hot shower, William Harrell felt washed with a chilling morbid dread. Not since his wife had begun her slide into the final stages of cancer had he felt that same feeling of helplessness that comes when loss seems inevitable.

That day was now long past. Worthy's disclosure about Wallaby had been enough to give the older man a jarring advantage that perhaps helped him win the squash game. But in the long run, William smiled to himself, the aching effects he had felt in his muscles after that game were a meager price to pay for what would be felt by the business world, thanks to the data Worthy had advanced him.

Had it not been for that squash match two years ago, he reflected, he might still be worrying about Wallaby someday becoming a serious competitor to ICP, rather than a subsidiary.

What had started as a far-out notion that night following the squash match was beginning to enter

the formative stages of reality; the brakes would come off and the wheels would begin turning after Wallaby's board meeting today. His secret acquisition plan was the first thing to come along since Martha's death that had totally engrossed him, and he had wholeheartedly welcomed the diversion as a way to overcome his grieving.

William dreaded the thought of the ensuing two hours during which his advisors would spew figures and specifications, suggesting competitive market action and reaction, while all along he had begun, more than two years ago, his own competitive market plan, its countdown to liftoff about to commence.

* * *

Peter sped away from the company parking lot and raced for the engineering building and the solace of his office.

Turning into the driveway, however, he became suddenly aware of the tears streaming down his face. Cutting the wheel sharply he vaulted off the curb, then sped down the street. His outrage toward Matthew and everyone in the boardroom for what had just gone down was not coming as intensely as he wished. Instead, he felt only anguish. The damage was done, and he knew it was irreparable. Matthew had stolen control of Wallaby right from under his nose, the ultimate irony being that Peter's plan was to propose his, Matthew's, elimination. They had all turned against him.

He raced past the Wallaby buildings and headed for the highway, his mind frantically searching for answers. How could he not have seen it coming? Where had he gone wrong? Had he any forewarning of this? Could he have prevented it from happening, or have better prepared for Matthew's evil force? Had there been, when he had first interviewed Matthew two years ago, some clue, some inkling of what was to come?

"Are you sure you'll make it?" Peter said nervously.

"I'm sure," Rick Boardman said. "But if you don't quit breathing down my neck, I'll never have it ready by four o'clock!"

Rick was Peter's most prized software engineer. When Peter had discussed with Hank Towers the possibility of hiring Matthew Locke, he learned that Matthew was a somewhat reserved person. So Peter went directly to Rick, who was the programming leader on the new Joey computer. Peter asked Rick to put together an eye-popping sight-and-sound exhibition of the prototype computer, something to really show it off.

"I just hope you can do something incredible, Rick," Peter said. He turned to leave.

"Wait," Rick said, taking the bait.

The programmer clicked the small button above the trackpad, and on the screen an image of a bag of International Foods Crunch-Munch materialized. The bag opened, accompanied by crinkling sound effects, and popcorn started exploding out of the bag, followed by animated, high-spirited peanut-people adorned in tiny colored sunglasses and striped sneakers. Each carried a little bucket. They chased after the three-dimensional popcorn puffs, splashing sounds resonating from the attached stereo speakers as they drenched the popcorn with candy coating. A baby kangaroo suddenly appeared on the scene, and the little popcorn people chased after it. The joey appeared to tear open a pocket right in the middle of the screen, then hopped inside, dropping a wink before vanishing. The peanut people dove in after the little fellow, then in the next instant they all came bursting out of the pocket with a pennant, which they unfurled: "WELCOME, MATTHEW," A chorus of children's voices screamed the same welcome and then the screen faded to black. Finally a phantom paintbrush appeared and painted the screen with the shimmering Wallaby logo.

Peter grinned with extreme satisfaction and pride. Still, he laid on a little more pressure, a little more challenge. "Hmm. I wonder if you make the last part, with the paintbrush, a little faster," he said, tracing the word "Wallaby" on the screen quickly with his finger. "Maybe you can add that part you showed me last week, too, with our little Joey pointing out the device's features with those slick animated flash cards he's got stashed in that secret pocket of his...."

Rick nodded excitedly. "Yeah, yeah, I can do that."

Peter left to the staccato sound of keystrokes and clicks, and went to his own office. Taking a folder from his desk, he lowered himself to his stylish couch, kicked off his dock shoes, stretched out

comfortably, and began sifting through the collection of articles and clippings about Matthew Locke and International Foods, which had been mailed to both him and Hank earlier in the week by the headhunter they had retained for the search.

In a "Fortune" article entitled "Big Business Chairman Hopefuls," Matthew Locke was the first person mentioned, accompanied by a half-page picture of the young grinning Ivy League executive posed before a wall of soda bottles in a super market. The article predicted that Locke was being groomed to succeed International's long-time chairman and CEO, Rolland Worthy. It described Locke's career over the past fifteen years at IF, listing the numerous successful marketing programs he had developed, all of which Peter recognized: Holy Cow ice cream, Presto Microwave Popcorn, and one of the most popular beverages of all time, Orange Fresh carbonated juice. International Foods had formerly been separated into several divisions, the largest being food, beverage, subsidiary, and services. The article explained how Locke had consolidated the food and beverage divisions into one group, and had the services divisions rolled out as a subsidiary operating unit. That way, International Foods was able to concentrate primarily on developing and marketing its mainstream products; non-retail sales were managed as a separate business unit.

Pretty smart, Peter admitted. In his head, he tried to work the formula on Wallaby's separate product divisions, Mate, and the new Joey, but did not come to the same conclusion Locke had reached. Each of Wallaby's divisions was unique from a technological standpoint, and incompatible, unlike food and beverages which, as far as Peter was concerned, were all the same. This type of solution would not work in a company like Wallaby, Peter concluded, just as he had known it wouldn't when he started the Joey project a few years ago. To create Joey, he had taken a number of his top engineers from the Mate division and moved them into their own building. There were accusations of special privileges, and the accusations were true. Peter nursed, stroked, and dined his people in the Joey building. A giant refrigerator was stocked with exotic foods and beverages, portable Walkman CD players were free, and in-office massages were provided by professional masseuses and masseurs.

Dismissing Locke's consolidation concept as impossible at a place like Wallaby, and therefore an inappropriate measure of the man's abilities, Peter skimmed more articles. He read interviews with people who had worked for Locke over the past several years. Most of them reflected on his non-sense business attitude and keen marketing abilities. One marketing analyst who had worked with Locke on International's now highly successful line of diet beverages said that Locke often had several secret projects going at any given time, and as different market opportunities arose, he called upon the brewing projects to launch major new products. The analysts and business community, and the most important group of all, the consumers, perceived the new products as brilliant and timely. Most of them, however, had been waiting in the wings, in some instances, a few years, until the right moment arrived to move them out of the marketing group and into the supermarket. One spiteful IF manager revealed anonymously that Locke had never actually invented any of the products himself. The most outstanding example was the pull-tab, which back in the early 1970s banished the need for a can opener. While Peter took it for granted nowadays that all you had to do was pop the top on a can of soda to sip its contents, he could remember back to when he was a boy, when you had to use a can opener to get to what was inside. It was this fact, that Locke was the one to introduce the pull-tab, that appealed to Peter more than anything else. He compared the metaphor to the Mate and Joey. The Mate was the first all-in-one portable computer (though inside the company they referred to it as a "luggable," rather than a true portable) that you could easily move from room to room, place to place, but it was nonetheless difficult to use; you first had to understand the utility "tool" programs that controlled the machine and its programs before you could fully employ all of its features. Getting into the Joey, on the other hand, was easy, intuitive, like using a pop-top can; all you had to do was to look at it to understand how to use it, no special tools or knowledge were required. The built-in address book and calendar and phone dialer and e-mail program all looked like, and behaved like, their real world, paper-based counterparts. Plus, it was much smaller than the Mate and truly portable, able to run on its rechargeable battery for days at a time. The trackpad interface was so intuitive that in studies Wallaby conducted with brand new users, every attendee was naturally drawn to the small black square without so much as a clue from the study group guides, their fingers sliding across its surface without any thought at all about what they were doing. Just like the soda pull-tab.

So as for Locke's reported reputation of taking credit for what others had invented, Peter felt neither surprised or concerned. It was a non-issue. He was the primary inventor in the company and everyone, including the public, knew it. Locke was being considered because of his abilities to run the business side of things, and only the business side.

Which was just fine with Peter. But what about Matthew Locke? Would he be content with a second-place role to Peter?

That question had just been answered in today's board meeting. The tables had turned, and now Matthew was the star. He had used Peter as a pawn in his own deceitful, unscrupulous game. How long had he been planning this coup?

Peter mentally lashed himself for not having taken some sort of action when, about a year ago, Matthew had suggested that Wallaby's products should be engineered to be more compatible with those of ICP. An alarm had gone off in Peter's head, but he had quieted it, tolerating the fact that Matthew did not fathom his desire to uphold Wallaby's proprietary-technology direction. In the long run, that's what it all boiled down to. Matthew wanted to transform Wallaby into an ancillary concern, its computers acting as peripherals to ICP's machines, allowing ICP to remain as the number-one portable and desktop computer manufacturer.

He felt exhausted and lifeless, disembodied, his foot heavy on the gas pedal, drawn by gravity as he raced down the highway pushing seventy-five miles per hour. Even the car was a fucking prop, Peter thought miserably. When Matthew had gotten one for himself just like it, he had told Peter it was because he valued his artistic appreciation for the machine, that he respected his passion for beautifully designed products. How many other little games of pretend had there been, when all along Matthew had been treating him like a child, playing him along and pacifying him until he could drop the ax?

His throat felt packed with cotton balls when the reality of what had just happened started to sink in. His stomach turned and rolled in mini-heaves. All he wanted to do was to make smart portable computers that made everyone's life easier. Couldn't he be allowed that simple pleasure? With this question, the weird feeling in his heart stirred. It had been dormant all morning, and he had all but forgotten about it. But now it was awake, and this time it felt a little different. A little larger, a little livelier. A little more painful.

All of Peter's work on the new and improved Joey Plus was over. Matthew had taken away the thing that was more important to him than anything else in the world. Peter could just picture it, how it would proceed from this day forward - Matthew marching into the engineering group, armed with a complicated schedule and an army of bozo project managers, all meant to scare the development team into finishing the Joey Plus. Then of course he would re-introduce it and take all the credit for Peter's hard work and vision.

How? Peter wondered. How could Matthew, the person he had sanctioned to join him in creating something so exciting and important, do this?

"Simple," Peter said aloud, at last letting himself acknowledge the underlying truth of the whole mess. "He used me."

Yes, he'd been used. But for the last time. Enough was enough. As soon as he got home, he would begin weeding from his life everyone who was using him.

His car phone jingled, and he punched it, knocking it to the floor. No more talking. It was too late for that. He gripped the wheel more tightly and pressed down hard on the gas pedal, eager to get home and begin undoing his mistakes, ditching the bad parts, nurturing the good parts. It would be just that easy.

He would start with Ivy.

* * *

"I think he answered, but then he hung up," Eileen said, holding the telephone to her ear.

"Forget it," Matthew told his secretary. He closed his office door and seated himself before his computer. He closed his eyes let out an exhausted sigh. Leave it alone, he told himself. Leave him alone, you can't get through to him, can't make him understand. It has to be this way. There is no other way.

His plan had worked. The executive staff and board of directors had faith in him to run the company after all. Peter could no longer stand in the way of his taking control of Wallaby. Now he was free to build momentum and power as he moved into the next phase of his plan. He felt a dizzying rush of elation as he fully comprehended what he'd just done. Though he had sincerely cared for Peter when they'd first met, after awhile he had grown less enchanted as he was reminded that falling for the young inventor would prevent him from ever achieving his real goal at Wallaby. He wholeheartedly

wished things could have turned out differently. But they had not. And it was over. He only wished Peter had tried harder to understand the real reason everyone in the boardroom had voted against him, even though they themselves had not yet admitted it. He had known all along that Peter would not simply bow out gracefully and accept a non-management role in the company. If only he had been more receptive to the idea of connecting to ICP's computers, this would have never happened. There was no room for being sentimental now, he told himself. Why revisit the past? But as Matthew rested his eyes, he allowed his mind to wander back anyway, letting the memory of those intoxicating early days deepen the resonance of his most recent triumph.

The airplane banked left, changing its coastal orientation, and rose through the hazy grayness surrounding JFK Airport. Destination: San Jose, California.

When the seat belt sign blinked off, Matthew eased his seat back into a more comfortable position. Sunlight broke through the grayness and the cabin was filled with sunlight as the plane climbed.

"Good morning," a stewardess said. "Can I bring you a glass of orange juice? Champagne?"

"I'd like Orange Fresh, please," Matthew said. He was certain the airline carried the soft drink-it had, after all, been his idea to test-market the all-natural citrus beverage with this very carrier before it was introduced by International Foods several years ago.

The stewardess returned with a glass of the sparkling orange beverage. She placed a napkin on the tray and then set the drink upon it.

"Do many people drink Orange Fresh?" he asked.

"It's one of our most-requested soft drinks. Though most folks don't keep it all that soft," she said with a wink.

He felt a burst of pride and love for Greta. Thanks to her, Orange Fresh had carved a new and highly profitable market niche that had earned Matthew kudos from the company's executives. Though International Foods' marketing of the all-natural refreshment ("Good for you, and fun to drink!") had created a markedly successful soft drink, a second, unexpected market had blossomed, thanks to Greta - the Sassy Screw. One part vodka, two parts Orange Fresh. The healthy soda had instantly become a popular cocktail mixer, displacing Mother Nature's own natural contender, orange juice. In its first month of sales, the product reached the magic 50 million-case mark, and the company threw a yacht party for Matthew. That day, however, had ended in tragedy. And now, as he flew to California, he hoped that maybe, if he landed this job, the loss that he and Greta had suffered that day might be amended.

Finishing the beverage, he made room for the materials he had received from the headhunter who had contacted him two weeks earlier, expressing Wallaby's interest in him. He pulled his briefcase from beneath the seat in front of him and opened it on the vacant seat beside him. The over-stuffed folder inside contained newspaper clippings, annual reports, and magazine article reprints, as well as a brochure of Wallaby's computer, the Mate.

Although Matthew knew of Peter Jones - who in the Fortune 500 didn't? - and the highly publicized invention Jones created in his bedroom while a senior in high school, he became more and more intrigued as he browsed through the clippings.

A cover story in "Time" two years earlier touted Jones as "Silicon Valley's Hottest Kid On The Block."

"Forbes" magazine listed Jones in its directory of America's richest people. An accompanying article detailed Wallaby's phenomenal growth and financial milestones, ranking it the fastest-growing company in America. When Wallaby had gone public five years ago, Jones's total worth was estimated at more than 250 million dollars, with Wallaby reporting annual sales of just over 600 million. Holding the second largest share of Wallaby stock was Hank Towers, who was estimated to be worth close to 200 million dollars. A five-year-old "Fortune" article told the story of how Towers was the man Jones first approached for start-up cash with his hackneyed portable computer design. At the time, Towers had owned a small company that built highly-specialized computers that were ruggedized for field and medical applications. Towers had invited Jones to visit him at his offices after seeing the invention, the first truly all-in-one portable computer, at a science fair. Towers, unlike some of the others to whom Peter had shown the product, hadn't balked at its radical design, nor had he laughed when Jones explained his vision for manufacturing the computer at very low cost so that millions of people could have their own portable personal computer to take with them wherever they went. Not long after their initial visit, Towers gave Jones a check for 200 thousand dollars. The rest was history.

Another "Fortune" story was the first among several of the more recent articles to raise in Matthew a curious caution. According to Nicholas Whitley, a science teacher at Sunnyvale High School, "Jones was a rebel. He never wanted to participate in what the rest of the class was focused on. He wanted to do everything himself, on his own." Whitley admitted, however, that had Jones been like the rest of the kids, Sunnyvale High would never have become, thanks to its simple all-in-one design, one of the biggest education customers of the Mate computer - or any computer, for that matter. His main concern was Jones's leadership skills: "I wonder about Wallaby's long-term success. He's a bright kid, with a knack for divining opportunity, but as a company grows, I'm wondering if he'll be able to handle it."

A month-old "Business Week" article crystallized Matthew's caution. A profile on Jones commented on his biting rivalry with ICP, the world's largest computer manufacturer. When Jones was queried about whether Wallaby was developing communications features in their products that would make them more compatible with ICP's mainframe, desktop, and portable computers, he had replied adamantly, "Never. We do it our own way. Though I would consider letting them license our operating system and hardware designs." It was that interminable audacity that raised many eyebrows about the future of Wallaby. When Matthew considered ICP's size, more than fifty billion dollars in sales, and the fact that its computers were used for almost every aspect of worldwide systemization in one way or another, a red flag unfurled in his mind. Matthew feared that he was probably wasting his time speaking to Jones about becoming the company's earnestly sought president. At the same time, though, the lure of being in a position to influence the future technology tools used by people all around the world aroused his interest. Perhaps Jones was working on something new and more powerful than ICP's own desktop and portable computers, which had quickly overtaken and then dwarfed Wallaby's market share. Many speculated that that was the case. Jones, however, had remained tight-lipped over the past year and would talk to no one about what he was working on. If the speculation was true and he got in there now, while they still had a window of opportunity, perhaps he could help Jones build a strategy that would firmly seat Wallaby as the portable computer technology and market leader, with a perpetual lead over ICP.

He loosened his tie and pushed the seat to the fully reclined position. The stewardess asked him which entree he had selected from the lunch menu, and he said he was going to pass on the meal and nap until they arrived.

He had gotten little sleep over the few nights prior to his trip to Wallaby. Two nights earlier, after work, he had gone to a local computer dealer and purchased an Wallaby Mate computer. He had worked with the machine until two o'clock in the morning. Though he read the manuals and stepped through the tutorial programs packaged with it, he found the computer difficult to use, and that made him wonder how long it would take before Wallaby's sales began to dwindle even further; its last-quarter numbers had slipped from those of the preceding quarter. Furthermore, for a portable computer it was considerably heavier, bigger, and shorter-lived in the battery department than ICP's and other, smaller companies' portable computers. Although schools preferred the system because of its rich library of education programs, the market for the Mate was closing fast. If Wallaby wanted to be successful in the future it would have to bring something radically new to the table, something so compelling people just had to have it.

The Joey came close to fulfilling that tall order, but not close enough. But it would, soon enough. It was Matthew's plan to make Wallaby more compatible with ICP's computers. If only Peter had agreed, things would have worked out better, and he would not have had to unseat the young man from the company's top position.

As he loaded Joey's e-mail program, any pain he had felt at the loss of his friendship with Peter was almost fully entombed now. With e-mail, Matthew had been able to communicate with his secret partner in Manhattan for the past two years, and he had been looking forward to this day, to sending this message, for a long time now.

He typed:

TO: wharrell@icp.com
FROM: mlocke@wallaby.com
SUBJECT: STATUS

Today I was granted full support by the board of directors and executive staff to take over all senior management responsibilities at Wallaby, including the development of the Joey Plus computer, which will be complete and ready for release in three months.

I attempted to persuade Peter Jones to accept a position within the company to oversee the development of our future products, but my sense is he will not accept.

We will succeed regardless.

—Matthew

He tapped the Send button, and a flashing message appeared indicating that the e-mail was being transmitted.

Just then, his office door opened and he spun in his seat. It was Laurence Maupin.

"Hello, Matthew. How are you holding up?"

Matthew leaned back in his seat, blocking the computer screen with his upper body. "I think I'm still in shock," he said wearily, wiping his sleeve across his brow.

"Your statement's out to the press," she said, giving the folder in her hand a little shake. She looked at him with a genuinely concerned expression. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"I think I will," he said, and offered her a grateful smile. He turned and shut off the computer, noticing before the screen went black that his message had been successfully sent.

"Good. We can catch up later," she said, touching his arm lightly.

He gathered his notes and briefcase. Exiting the building, he felt euphoric yet depleted, as if he'd just run a marathon. And he had won. The race was finished, and he had emerged victorious. His biggest obstacle had been overcome.

Unlocking his car door, he was struck by a sudden realization, and he let out a small laugh at the irony of his new position. He'd really done it. He'd really made it. And farther than he had ever imagined. To think that soda and crackers were his business just a few short years ago. It was incredible. Indeed, although he would not become the chairman of the largest food company in the world, as he had once dreamed, today's accomplishment set him up for an even greater eventual success - chairman of the largest computer company in the world.

Chapter 5

Opening the front door of his home, Peter was suddenly assaulted by a strange blaring voice and shouts of laughter. The cacophony grew louder and more vexing as he neared the computer lab.

Charging into the room he found Ivy sitting cross-legged on the floor and holding a joint to her lips. Her enraptured smile wavered when she registered Peter's expression.

Two other young people, both boys, were also in the room, both seemingly oblivious to Peter's arrival. One of the boys held a microphone with a thin cable that ran into a small black box, which was in turn attached to a Joey. The computer and a color monitor rested on a table in the center of the room, which was littered with beer cans, bottles, and junk food packages. On the monitor was a bright yellow smiley face, and as the boy spoke into the microphone the smiley face became animated and responded.

"Say cheese," the boy said.

"Say cheese," the smiley face replied, but with an unreal robotic tone rather than a natural human-sounding tone. Simultaneously, the words "Say cheese" appeared in a little balloon, like in a cartoon strip, beside the smiley face's mouth. Nicknamed "Myna Bird," the program, which Ivy had designed, was a crude demonstration of speech recognition and synthesis, which enabled the Joey to hear and speak plain English words. The microphone fed the sounds directly into the converter box and through the Joey, which interpreted them into actual text and spoken words, based on a library of words it had already learned.

"Goo goo," the boy said.

The smiley face did not reply.

"I said, `goo goo,'" the boy said again, breaking into gales of laughter.

"I said," the smiley face said, unfamiliar with the rest of the sentence.

"I said `goo' fucking `goo'!" the boy shouted.

"I said...fucking," the smiley face said.

The boy chuckled a trippy chuckle and glanced at the others - and saw that none were laughing. He turned around and saw Peter. Busted.

"What the fuck is going on?" Peter said loudly.

"What the fuck is going on?" the smiley face mimicked, deadpan, minus the fury.

The others guiltily bowed their heads, mindful of Peter's palpable anger - all except for Ivy who, turning to avoid looking at Peter directly, rubbed her nose to stifle a small giggle. In her attempt to contain her mirth, the situation worsened and her cheeks puffed and she burst out laughing.

Peter approached her with his hands on his hips.

"What's so fucking funny?"

The boy holding the microphone quickly switched it off, before the smiley face could say anymore.

"You are," Ivy said, bringing her knuckles to her face, sputtering out more giggles. "You are, love."

The boys chuckled nervously, like maybe this wasn't so bad after all.

At the sound of the sharp slap, all laughter ceased.

Peter stood there, eyes blazing at her, his hand still raised in the air.

With a vacant expression, Ivy absently brushed her cheek and tried to focus her vision on him.

"Get out," he said, turning to the others.

Ivy remained seated on the floor, stroking her face while the boys disconnected the equipment from the Joey and gathered their knapsacks.

"You can keep the beer, man," one of the boys said as he shouldered his pack. Then the pair was gone.

Alice padded softly into the room and began picking up the scattered litter. She stepped on an empty potato chip bag, which crackled noisily underfoot. Peter could see that it was an International Foods brand, one of Matthew's onetime goodies. Too bad he hadn't stayed in fucking soda pop. Any temporary remorse Peter felt for his behavior, for slapping Ivy, vanished, and his rage returned with greater force.

"Leave it, Alice. Ivy will clean up."

The housekeeper hesitated then returned the empty bottles to the table, her face flushed as she soundlessly exited the room.

Peter turned and faced Ivy from where he now stood, across the room.

"I'm sorry," she said, still sitting on the floor and now rocking back and forth with her arms wrapped around herself. "We were working on my program, and I wanted to surprise you tonight with a new dialect module I put together - "

"You have to go."

" - and I wanted to demonstrate it when you walked in, so you would be happy."

"I said leave."

Tears were dropping from her chin and she remained seated on the floor in a trance-like state. His eyes settled on the Joey's silent glowing screen, the smiley face staring at him with its stupid knowing grin. His jaw quaked as he fought back his hurt, his longing to run to her and have her hold him, to apologize and tell her about everything that had happened. He was torn.

No, not her.

Regardless of what had happened last night, he needed Kate. Not this girl, who, he reminded himself, like everyone else, was using him.

"Get out!" he shouted.

"But I love you!"

"No!" He turned and raised his hands to his head to subdue the pounding that was growing angrier the longer he stayed in this polluted room. "You used me. You even stole my clothes."

"I'm in love with you. Peter, please. I almost died when I heard you were coming to speak at the commencement. I had to sneak into the reception, just so I could see you. And then when I met you and you invited me here, I knew it was because you felt it too, the way we connected when we saw each other." She came from behind him and attempted to take him in her arms.

"Don't touch me," he said, shaking her off. He crossed the room and positioned himself on the other side, a chaise lounge between them.

She stayed where she was, hands at her sides and face all red and puffy. "Peter, I need you. I've changed my life because of you."

He looked in her direction, but his eyes were unseeing. "If you don't get out of here right now with everything that's yours, I'll carry you outside myself and throw you down the hill." His face was unmoving and placid, almost like the smiley face.

She took a step toward him, her hands twisting together, pleading. "But last night. Peter. What about last night?"

He closed his eyes and clamped his jaw. Nothing.

"Fuck you, then," she spat. But she made no motion to leave. Instead, she crossed her arms over her breasts and stood there. A sound that was both a laugh and a cry burst from her lips. "Don't you see? I did this for you, because I care about Joey, and you. Why don't you want to believe that. That's why I changed my studies, because I knew this was something important." She smacked the monitor. "You know you care about it." She pointed at him accusingly. "You said so yesterday, when I showed you how far I'd come." She made a disgusted face. She fought to hold back her tears. "But you don't give a damn. Not about anyone but yourself."

He did not respond. As she collected her things, his attention remained fixed on the computer's screen. He heard her climb the stairs and enter the guest room. There were sounds of drawers opening, the closet door sliding on its tracks. A few minutes later she came downstairs. He did not look at her.

She crossed the room and ejected a floppy diskette from the Joey, and picked up a box of floppies sitting on the table. She placed the items in her knapsack, hoisted the bag onto her shoulder, and collected her small duffel bag at the doorway. Straightening herself for a moment with her back to him, she spoke. "You're gonna regret you did this, Peter." Then she was gone.

He sat down and glared at the smiley face. It returned his gaze, passive, obedient, waiting for input. Just like everyone else, he thought morosely, it wanted something from him.

At his side he felt the neck of a bottle protruding from between the sofa cushions. He lifted it. A nearly empty bottle of wine. Red wine.

And then it hit him. The bottle was the special Cabernet Sauvignon Kate had given him on their first date, which they had vowed to drink together when Wallaby turned ten years old.

"No!" he cried, and hurled the empty bottle at the evil smiley face with its leering, shit-eating grin.

The monitor exploded in sparks and smoke, the smiley face gone forever, and the room fell into silence and he was all alone.

* * *

"Greta?" Matthew called, stepping from room to room on the lower floor of the house. He climbed the stairs. Soft, pleasant music drifted out from the bedroom. He closed in on the bathroom, and found his wife in the tub. She raised her face from some sort of picture book or atlas propped on a silver bath tray table.

He lowered himself to the closed toilet seat. "It's over," he said.

"Thank God," Greta said. She closed her eyes and stretched her right arm out of the tub. Bubbles and soapy water dripped from her perfect hand onto the floor. "Darling, would you pass me the oil please?"

He handed her a bottle of spiced bath oil. She held it there, out of the tub, until she caught his eye. She led his vision to the bottle's cap and he uncapped it and held it while she squeezed the red liquid into the water. It spurted from the bottle and he was suddenly mesmerized by the mixture as it bled into the water. He studied his wife with sullen fascination as she lay there with her eyes closed, gently oscillating her shoulders and legs, mixing up the oil and water. With her eyes still closed, she held out the bottle to him again. Accepting it, his hand touched hers for an instant. He shivered, and felt a sudden need to urinate. He could not remember the last time he had seen her other hand naked, which was presently hidden somewhere under the water in the tub. Nor could he remember the last time they had made love, though he was pretty certain it was the evening before International Foods had thrown the yacht party for him to celebrate the success of Orange Fresh. Thinking of these things, he was momentarily hypnotized by the sight of her there in the tub, moving in the frothy pink water. His mind roared with the horrific image of her as she had appeared when the accident had occurred. Underwater. Stillness. Then her eyes bulging as her head splashed up out of the sea's redness. The screaming. The flailing. The blood. Splashing -

She was flicking bath water at him. "Matthew, are you here? I said I'm happy for you. Did everything work out okay?"

"Yes. Yes," he said, blinking. A few droplets had landed on his trousers. He brushed them away and said, "He's gone. It's over. They all chose me over Peter."

"There," she said, "you see. I told you everything would work out just fine."

He thought about how she saw things. A few months ago, when he had felt doubt, she had helped him regain his focus and set the stage for today's meeting. Her persistent belief in him had finally won out, and ultimately he had believed in himself enough to begin the painstaking maneuvers necessary to topple Jones after he'd balked at Matthew's suggestion to make the Joey more compatible with ICP's computers. That, he understood now, was when it must have happened, when he had begun to live in his wife's presence without really noticing her anymore, focusing wholly on his work. The first stage of detachment had been after the accident. The second was after he had gotten his plan underway. He had finally and completely shut her out, without ever really meaning to. In both cases he had told himself that it was temporary, that things would eventually return to the way they had been. But now he understood that those times would never return. They couldn't, for it seemed all was lost on that day of the accident. He thought of the object - that was precisely how he thought of it, an object of his lost affection - which he kept hidden in the inside pocket of his briefcase. Lost. What was he going to do? How would he end up? How would they end up? He knew what she was thinking, what her own hopes were. That now that Peter Jones was out of the way, he'd spend more time with her.

Turning his wedding band round and round on his finger in his lap, hidden from her sight, he spoke. "This is just the beginning, honey," he said, cautious. "Now, slowly and carefully, I have to reveal my plan for engineering our products to connect with ICP's systems to the board and executive staff so that they believe I'm doing it to increase sales and market share." He watched her expression.

Sponging her neck, she said, "Well darling, now that that pest is out of your way, I'm sure you'll have no problem." There was an edge of warning in her delivery.

"Yes," he paused. "But there are many people in the company who still carry Peter's belief that ICP is bad and that Wallaby should concentrate on competing more firmly rather than yield to them."

"Darling, you've come this far, and you'll make it to the glorious end of your plan just fine. I just know it. Have you contacted William yet?"

"I sent him a message," Matthew said. He realized that he needed to check to see if William had received the memo and replied to it. His concern asserted itself. "William's not going to be pleased. He wanted me to exhaust every possibility to keep Peter onboard. But after seeing the way he reacted I doubt he'll stick around." Matthew stood. He had to use the toilet...but rather than use this one he wanted to use the one downstairs. "I better go check my e-mail," he said, excusing himself.

He hurried downstairs to his library office. He turned on his computer and hung his jacket over the chair. His Joey was outfitted with every add-on option, including a color monitor, a CD-ROM drive, a laser printer, and a mouse. Seeing the mouse lying there, he abruptly remembered Laurence and the thoughts he'd had of her yesterday in his car; he recalled too the image of her lovely hand clutching the manila folder less than an hour ago in his office. While the computer started up, he went into the library's small toilet. He stood before the toilet and opened his fly. At the same time he closed his eyes,

concentrating. There came no flow. Instead, he felt himself hardening in his own hand. He locked the door, dropped his trousers to the floor, and seated himself. At the age of ten, Matthew Locke had had the good fortune of discovering masturbation. It had altered the course of his life forever. For whenever he became distracted from his studies, thinking about girls instead of geometry, he had simply relieved himself. It was to this dedication that he owed his success. It had enabled him to focus all of his energies on important things. He had achieved autonomous coupling - a boy and his hand. Even in college he favored this method. Of course there had been girls, but none of them ever proved worth the time or effort. Though this was the price he paid in order to come so far so fast, he had never seemed to fully grasp its relevance until the day he'd met Greta. The instant he'd laid eyes on her, her hands, he determined it was time to think about marrying. It was important to his career, and if he was going to do it, then why not with a woman who's hands were more alluring than his own?

Were.

But hers were not the hands he thought of now, holding him, stroking him. No, the hand he imagined in place of his own belonged to another woman, a girl, really, who he told himself he must resist.

He came, and she went.

* * *

It was one o'clock in the afternoon, and Peter was in bed.

He lay there staring at the ceiling. Time didn't matter anymore. Every now and then he took a gulp of Scotch from the bottle he had opened after Ivy left. Normally he never drank hard liquor. But today it seemed like the most natural thing to do. He needed something to help him escape from his own mind, something that would inevitably force him into sleep, where he could hide, even if just for a couple of hours, from his dilemma. It was too soon to try and think things through. Through? How, he wondered, does one think through being through? With every swallow from the bottle the reality of it all slipped a little farther away.

What he wanted to know was, what would they do for the future? His instinctive reaction to anything that threatened Wallaby - in this case, his being flung from the company - provoked fear and anxiety for its future, beyond the potential misery of his personal fate.

He had given nearly ten years of his life to Wallaby. The time when it all began seemed like a lifetime ago.

He drifted.

Never socializing with the jocks, pot-heads, or any other group, Peter Jones was considered an oddball student. He had been an orphan most of his life, living in a Los Gatos home governed by an elderly couple. He was used to spending time alone, reading or going for walks in the nearby woods, imagining he was Henry David Thoreau, observing nature, lost in his own thoughts. Whenever he was forced to spend a few trial days with potential foster parents, he affected a sullen and despondent mood, saving a tantrum or explosive outburst for the last day of the test period. He had gotten by just fine on his own, and he didn't need anyone, or anything, except maybe his science fiction novels.

Clayton and Clara Dodson, the owners of the orphanage, had had their hands full with Peter. Eventually they stopped sending him off to potential homes. The youngster pretty much took care of himself and was always willing to help out around the orphanage. One day the Dodsons's acceptance of Peter went from resigned to delighted when he burst into the house and told them he had invented the world's first truly portable computer. Peter had recently begun to hang around with the "gear heads," students who were involved in clubs fostering fans of rockets, automobile engines, and electronics. At the club meetings he met several kids like himself - bright, introverted; some of them would eventually become his first employees at Wallaby, right out of high school. During his senior year, while checking out some of the other student projects an hour before the science fair, Peter met two gawky fellows who had built a device they called the All-In-One Computer. The invention was primitive at best, but all the right parts were there: keyboard, screen, disk drive. Captivated, and without a project of his own, Peter persuaded the boys to include him in their project which, five minutes before the show began, he renamed the Portable Personal Computer.

The project won first prize, and after the show an older gentleman named Mr. Towers introduced himself. He told the boys that they were on to something and that they should give him a call sometime if they advanced the design of the box. Peter shoved the man's business card in his pocket.

Peter became more and more intrigued with the concept of a computer you could take with you wherever you went. Theirs came close, but it required a wall socket to power it so the only place you could really take it was from room to room. During the summer after his high school graduation he reread all of his science fiction books featuring robots and computers as their main characters. In his mind's eye he fashioned a small computer that could be his friend, like the ones in the books. He imagined taking his computer with him for walks in the woods, telling the computer about the things he saw, and what he thought. His computer would keep these things in its memory, and the more it learned about him and the world, the more loyal and dependable a friend it would become. He would make a lot of them, inexpensively, so that everyone could afford one and use it for whatever they wanted. He envisioned the computer and how it would work, how people would approach it and work with it. When he felt he had realized the computer as clearly as if he already owned one, he sat down to start designing. But when he picked up his pen, he could do little more than sketch crude boxes with screens and keyboards. He realized that he didn't know how to design the circuits and parts necessary to actually fabricate the machine. He called the two boys from the science fair, Paul Trueblood and Rick Boardman, and invited them over to the orphanage one afternoon. When he described his idea, the boys grew excited. Pushing his eyeglasses up on his nose, Paul began rambling about how he could do the hardware part, maybe even squeeze in a modem for calling up other computers, and Rick described how he could write an integrated program for the computer so that it could do real work for people, like keep track of important names and addresses, right out of the box.

Three months later the three boys stood in front of their first prototype, the Mate, and ran their first program, an all-in-one organizer and word processor and communications program that they dubbed Easy Does It.

When the Mates development was well underway, Peter contacted Mr. Towers, the man he had met a few months before at the science fair. Towers invited him to his nearby office. Two hours later, Towers had become the primary investor in the Mate's development, and overseer of the startup of a new company.

Within a year the boys were building as many computers as they could in Peter's garage. Towers remained in the background, working deals with parts suppliers through his electronic instrument company to provide the boys with what they needed for production. Eventually they had so many orders that they had to relocate to real offices in nearby Sunnyvale. Peter moved out of the orphanage and created a minimal living space for himself in one of the building's corner offices. Together, Hank Towers and Peter, then twenty-two, founded their new company, which Peter named Wallaby, which everyone knew was an animal that had a pocket in which it carried its joey...the little friend that Peter had always dreamed of having, and knew someday he would create.

He snapped awake to a high-pitched warble. The telephone. Reaching for it, he knocked over the bottle of Scotch, spilling its contents onto the hardwood floor.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end was anxious.

"Yeah," Peter said, pressing his fingers to his eyelids.

"Peter? Are you all right? Petey?"

"Kate." This came out as a moan.

She spoke very fast. "What's happened? I caught the tail end of something about Wallaby on the CNN, something about a reorganization, and called your office, Peter, and they said they had not seen you. Peggy put me on hold and called the boardroom and they told her you had bolted and that something happened but she wouldn't tell me what. What the hell is going on?"

"It's over," he slurred.

"What's over?"

"Me. Wallaby. Everything."

"Petey, talk to me. Are you there? Petey?"

"I've been fired. From my own company."

"I can hardly hear you. I don't understand. What do you mean fired?"

"Fired," he shouted, and immediately regretted it. The sting in his head and heart diverged, spread. As if on cue, the secret thing in his heart asserted itself again. With its arrival, an abstraction formed in

his drunken mind. He thought of the word "mate." It represented the start of his life. Because of the Mate, he had met Kate. She was his soul mate, and with her he had experienced his coming of age. And wasn't she, in some ways, the inspiration behind the Joey? Wasn't their nomadic relationship what had inspired him to design a computer you could take with you when you went away? Now it had been taken from him. How long, he wondered, before Kate was gone too? The more aware he was of this feeling, of losing the things close to his heart, the more aware he became of his newest mate, the disagreeable feeling that had burrowed inside him. At this moment it was troubled, like a tiny caged creature suffering from hunger spasms, nourishment lying within its line of sight, in its owner's hand, beyond its reach, so close, yet so far away.

Kate shouted his name into the phone, breaking him out of his stupor. "Tell me what happened."

"Matthew's in control. They want me to sit in an office. Be a thinker." He became outraged by his own account. "A fucking thinker."

"Then you're not fired, right, Peter. Then you're not fired?"

"Good as. Nothin' left for me to do there."

"Baby, I'm in LA at the studio. I'm leaving right now. I'll be there as fast as I can. No more than a couple hours."

"Okay," he said softly.

"I love you."

"You too." Chest pains. He hung up the phone and picked up the bottle.

"It was the Scotch," he said to the empty room, then uttered a painful chuckle that bordered on hysteria and threatened to overtake him if he didn't get a grip. He busied himself looking for the bottle's cap, but saw that he wouldn't need it. The bottle was empty.

And so was he.

Wallaby. Kate. These things came to a man only once in his lifetime. Had become his lifetime. Once you've lost them, he reckoned as he began to drift off to sleep, you never again get, or deserve, anything as good.

Teetering on the edge of consciousness, he struggled to remember the lyrics of an old song he used to listen to, something about you can't always get what you want, but if you cry sometimes, you get what you need.

Not quite, but close enough.

And so he cried.

Chapter 6

William Harrell's meeting with his advisers had been taxing. Both had recommended that ICP begin the accelerated development of the prototype BPX ultra-portable computer - a product, were William to give its development the go-ahead, that they felt could compete directly with the advanced features of Wallaby's Joey. And, his technology adviser stressed, the BPX wouldn't suffer from the problem that currently plagued the Joey, of too few available third-party software applications. ICP's magnitude could garner pre-announcement commitment from software developers, said the adviser, to begin creating BPX programs for the computer immediately.

If he hadn't had his secret plan in place, William would have been mad not to heed his advisers' advice and implement exactly what they had presented. But he'd had it all figured out for a long time. What he wanted now, more than anything, was for them to leave his office so that he could go home and check his e-mail.

When he uttered his response, "We'll continue evolving the current BP design," he could see in their expressions that they thought he was crazy. Both stared at him with incredulity. His business adviser flapped pages of figures and charts that projected the market penetration Wallaby could achieve if it were successful in getting the rumored Joey Plus computer to market within three months. According to one chart, Wallaby could begin by tapping some of ICP's largest customer accounts, which could lead to sizable market penetration over the next three years. Within five years, another chart predicted, the Joey Plus's superior design could earn half of ICP's portable computer market share for Wallaby.

William held firmly to his decision. What they were telling him was precisely what he and his secret partner, Matthew Locke, already knew. What his advisers didn't know was that their fears of Wallaby gaining monumental market share would hardly be a worry to ICP in the not-too-distant future. On the contrary, it would be cause for celebration.

Returning to his palatial home, he proceeded straight to his impressive office. He exhaled an appreciative sigh as he powered on his Wallaby Joey and sat before it, quite literally on the edge of his seat. Matthew had sent William the computer when it was introduced last year. They had made arrangements before Matthew had moved to California as to how they would communicate the progress of their secret merger plan, which the men had originally formulated here in William's home. It would stun the business world, William reflected for the hundredth time. He'd experienced so many moments of pleasant anticipation since the course had been set two years ago.

After the jolting squash match with Rolland Worthy, William had returned to his office and had his secretary cancel his remaining meetings. He asked his driver to take him to Central Park. He intended to force himself to relax and think through the possible effects that Worthy's news could have on ICP's future portable computer strategy. During the short trip, William watched the miniature television in the passenger compartment, hopeful that the commercials and nonsense soap opera dialogue would lighten his frame of mind. Just before getting out of the car, he caught a commercial that froze him in his seat for its duration. A notion flashed in his mind. An instant later, the breadth of it nearly bowled him over in its force and irony, and he was thankful to be sitting down. The spark that ignited the idea was the infamous Remington electric shaver commercial, in which Victor Kiam says, "I liked the product so much, I bought the company." William's heart doubled its cadence, and wave after wave of adrenaline coursed through his system like gasoline spurting onto an open flame. His brain was a bonfire. Of course! That was it! He would buy Wallaby, for the very same reason Kiam had wanted Remington, because he really did like Wallaby's product so much. From his car phone he placed a call to Matthew Locke's office at International Foods. Matthew's secretary informed him that Matthew was out of the office for two days, but said that she would have him call when he returned.

In his excitement he had forgotten what Rolland Worthy told him, that Matthew was in California right now, visiting Wallaby.

William spent the next two days devising a plan. Rarely was there an occasion in which he had the pleasure of acting on impulse. Everything at ICP was planned several years in advance. The jubilation he felt over the merger idea was no less than a gift from above - the first diversion to come along that was powerful enough to ease his grieving over the loss of his wife Martha, who had passed away eight months ago, after a blessedly short battle with pancreatic cancer.

After losing Martha, William had secluded himself, inviting no one into his home. His new idea would change all that. He sank into his idea with pure obsession.

Matthew Locke accepted William's dinner invitation after returning from California. The two businessmen sat with drinks in the library. Perfunctory conversation planted the seeds that they carried to the dinner table. Once the first two courses were completed, William got the real discussion underway.

"As I told you on the phone, Rolland mentioned to me that you were visiting Wallaby in California as a candidate for president."

Matthew had his own preface: "Rolland has been my mentor at International Foods for more than ten years. I don't feel any ill will toward him for telling you, as long as you respect the fact that my trip was confidential."

"Of course," William said, and took a drink of water. Then he began. "Matthew, an unusual feeling swept over me when I heard this." Already his enthusiasm was quickening. "I realized that Wallaby must be up to something really big if they were calling on someone of your caliber. It's been a long time since Peter Jones has made any brash statements about us, the industry, or anything. Too long.

"I thought it would be interesting to meet you when you returned. You see, a plan began to unfold in my mind, one that you may find interesting." A smile lighted William's face, and he leaned forward a little. In a lowered voice he revealed the heart of the matter: "I've always had a strong admiration for Wallaby. But of course it's the sort of thing one must keep in check at ICP.

"Sure, we currently have a great portable computer. But we're not innovative the way Wallaby is. And I suspect that they're up to something new. Something exciting."

Matthew saw the purity of William's candor and honesty. His intuition was waking, and he was

beginning to understand where this conversation would take them. With this sureness, he offered a teaser.

"I don't think I'm giving away any secrets by saying yes, you're correct. They're up to something. And yes, it is something very exciting."

William pushed his untouched plate aside. The two men shared a moment of heavy silence, each considering his own tactics. Maintaining a hint of a smile, William was the first to make a move. "Matthew, I would like to suggest a possible business arrangement."

Matthew gave an agreeable nod.

"ICP is gigantic. Everything we do is planned many years into the future. Although our personal computers are outselling Wallaby's Mate system, I suspect that whatever they have coming down the pipeline will be completely unexpected and radical."

"Correct."

"Yes," William said. "That's what I figured." He paused thoughtfully. When he spoke, his voice was casual and revealing, the way a man's voice becomes when he is dead certain of the object of his desire.

"I've always envied Peter Jones and his company. But of course I've got my own company to worry about. For my own entertainment, I've been looking for some time at Wallaby as a case study. I've toyed with the idea of spinning out a rebellious group of engineers and forming a new subsidiary with the charter to build radical new portable computers. However, members of the board to whom I've casually mentioned this have not responded positively. They're focused on bigger systems and desktops, which, along with service, account for most of our business. I must concede that I understand their lack of enthusiasm. We are an East Coast company. We're buttoned-down numbers people. Out west, they do things differently. Profits follow passions."

Matthew's eyes narrowed. "I think I'm beginning to catch your drift."

"I'll get to the point, then. Wallaby's products are not compatible with our systems. Ours take a lot of time to learn how to use. Granted, Wallaby's Mate isn't a whole lot better, but there's something about it that makes it friendlier, and it's certainly easier to lug around."

"You ain't seen nothing yet," Matthew quipped.

"Right. So I'm not going to beat around the bush. I've got nothing to lose by sharing my fantasy with you." He took another gulp of water, then went for it. "Matthew, I really like Wallaby. I think it has created, and will keep creating, exciting technologies. Peter Jones has an absolute vision of what small computers should be. We at ICP can't do that. We are a big company, with big computers." William's hands unfolded before him. It was a gesture of offering. "So what if Peter Jones and Wallaby became a part of ICP, but were left alone in California to do their thing?"

Matthew was speechless.

"Say you, Matthew, were to go into Wallaby, the strong leader that you are, and begin bending Jones and the company toward becoming compatible with ICP's systems? Then, when the company is oriented in a compatible direction, so that Wallaby's computers can work with our big systems, ICP and Wallaby merge, but let Wallaby maintain its freedom as an independently operated subsidiary."

Matthew's mind raced at the prospect of this outrageous coup. If it were successful, it could be bigger than anything he ever dreamed could happen at International Foods. He had a million questions to ask, and his eagerness was written all over his face. But before he could utter a word, William raised his hands.

"Wait. Just one more thing to think about. For you it would eventually mean the opportunity to move into the highest ranks of ICP." In earnest, he said, "My expiration date isn't too far off into the future." There, William thought, he'd said his piece. He felt himself relax a little. There was nothing more he could say. While respecting Matthew's silent deliberation, he stole a woeful glance at a portrait of his beloved Martha, smiling from where she sat framed in silver on the antique china closet. I need this, my dear, he said to her silently, I need to have this.

Her sanction came out when Matthew spoke: "It's brilliant."

William breathed a silent sigh.

Matthew advanced his own view of the overall premise, and when he finished he sat back and clasped his hands in his lap, his face glowing with certainty.

Any concerns William might have had for Matthew's strategic ability and comprehension now departed. "Bravo," William said. "Of course, there's much we'd have to discuss." Then, cautiously: "And this plan must remain a secret between us. You and I will guide it along privately through its early stages, until we reach the point where a merger makes perfect sense." He studied Matthew's expression for any sign of consternation, and was pleased to find none.

"You know, its funny," Matthew said, with no hint of humor in his voice, "The big concern I've had about considering this job at Wallaby was ICP. Now your big concern and my big concern may very well wind up becoming the computer industry's single biggest concern ever."

"Quite," said William, raising his glass to toast his new secret partner.

The touch-tone sound of the computer's modem brought William back to the present.

As planned, Matthew had sent him an e-mail message that validated the decision he had voiced earlier to his advisers.

However, when he read the last part of the message, about Peter Jones's possible departure from the company, he felt a shiver. Granted, he was relieved now that Matthew had won support, and that the secret merger plan could proceed. He favored a scenario whereby Jones stayed with Wallaby and continued to lead the development of the company's future products.

Pondering this, he studied his finger on the Joey's trackpad. Sliding his fingertip across the smooth surface felt natural and intuitive, a genius design. Peter Jones's genius design. Without the trackpad, the Joey would not function as it did. Elegant. Silky. Smooth. Right.

Staring at the small flat black space beneath his finger, a dark thought prodded his sense of certainty. Without Peter Jones, could Wallaby operate as smoothly and naturally as a peripheral of ICP?

* * *

Peter blinked awake in the room's gauzy afternoon brightness.

Whiffing a good, familiar smell, he shut his eyes for a little while, listened to her moving around, moving things around.

"Hi."

He opened his eyes. Kate was crouched before him. He propped himself up on one elbow.

"Oh," he moaned, touching his fingers to his temple.

"How you doing?"

He shrugged and his eyes met hers, then shifted past her shoulder. Several pieces of luggage sat by the doorway. "What's all that for?"

"We're going away for a bit."

He yawned. "We are?"

"Yep. I'm taking you to the Maine house for a little while."

"Okay," he said, offering no argument.

"First, we're going to treat you to a nice hot shower. Come on."
She gently helped him up and out of the room.

In the bathroom she went about undressing him.

He stood before her naked, watching her dip her hand in and out of the shower, adjusting its temperature.

"Kate," he said, his voice rubbery.

"Hmm?"

"You're an artist."

"Mm-hmm."

"Well, I was wondering. About when you've created something. When it's something really good. You know, like a new CD. And when it's all done, you have it and hold it in your hands. And there it is. All said and done. You can keep going back to it, but no matter how great it is, it's past. History. So. What I want to know is, do you ever feel like you'll never be able to do it again? Do anything again?"

"All the time, love." She took his chin in her hand and kissed his forehead. "But no matter how hard it seems at the time, if you did it once, you can do it again."

"Promise?"

"You know it."

"Good. Will you come in here with me?"

"Yes."

PART II

Chapter 7

Eating breakfast in the cafe had become part of Peter's daily routine. The waitress greeted him as he sat with his usual pile of newspapers. She returned with a cup of coffee, a scone, and a glass of orange juice.

He was grateful for the privacy his vacation home offered. It was Matthew who had introduced him to the quaint town of Camden, Maine, a place popular in the summer with executives and their families from Boston, Philadelphia, and New York, and over the last three months he had been recognized by only a few executives around town. Today, however, anyone reading the "Wall Street Journal" would see on the front page of the business section a small picture of Peter's face, positioned three paragraphs below one of Matthew Locke's face. Perhaps, after giving it a little thought, the reader would realize that he or she had seen him there in the cafe or in one of the town's small shops, or walking along the inlet. And after reading the story, the next time they spotted him they might even feel a pang of sympathy.

It read:

WALLABY ANNOUNCES IMPROVED PORTABLE COMPUTER

SUNNYVALE, CA - Wallaby, Inc., creators of the first all-in-one portable computer, announced today an improved and more powerful version of its Joey computer, introduced just one year ago. Wallaby's founder, the young and mercurial Peter Jones, was the inventor of the company's first computer, the Mate, nine years ago and was the driving force behind both the Joey and the enhanced version unveiled today, the Joey Plus. The new version is easier to program, offers a faster processor, and boasts more built-in memory configuration for running more powerful software programs, which are now becoming available. It also features a slim, built-in CD-ROM drive for accessing multimedia titles and reference works, a faster 14.4K data/fax modem, and a brighter backlit active-matrix display, all for the same price as the original Joey, which the new model replaces.

Analysts view the introduction of the Joey Plus as a feather in the cap of Wallaby Chairman and CEO Matthew Locke, who took the company reins from Jones after a boardroom showdown three months ago.

"This demonstrates Locke's ability to manage a new products company," said Michael Kolohan of Quest Market Research, Inc.

"We're very excited about the Joey Plus computer," Locke said in a telephone interview. "Now there are no hurdles between developers and users in offering powerful applications that compare to those available for ICP computer users, our value-added being the easier to use design of the Joey Plus, and its more attractive, more convenient form factor."

In his new role as leader of Wallaby, Locke reorganized the formerly separate engineering groups, consolidating resources on the Joey Plus project, which accelerated the device's introduction to market by three months. To enlist the support of software developers, Locke took to the road, evangelizing with prototypes of the powerful new Joey Plus to stimulate new software development prior to today's announcement.

One developer, PowerBase, Inc. of Cupertino, California, will soon introduce a program for compound document and forms processing, and advanced communications abilities. Said Paul Kupiec, president of PowerBase, "Wallaby really delivered with the new Joey Plus. We're ecstatic, now that it's got so much room for bigger applications, which means corporate clients we could not previously appeal to are now more apt to consider Wallaby over ICP.

"We were all worried when Jones left the company," Kupiec continued, "but Locke came to our offices in person with his engineering managers and offered us an early prototype unit of the new Plus. We dropped everything and already have ninety-eight percent of our program completed, which we ported from our ICP BP version. I think he [Locke] may fare well in his new role."

Jones, on sabbatical in New England, was offered a "visionary at large" role after being ousted by Locke and the company's board of directors, according to one source. However, Wallaby officials declined to comment on Jones's plans for returning in his new non-management role. "Matthew Locke hopes that Peter will return to Wallaby soon," said Wallaby spokesperson Laurence Maupin. "We all miss him and look forward to having him back at work soon."

Jones could not be reached for comment.

Peter folded the newspaper and sipped his orange juice. The sun was hot and the air smelled fresh and clean. All around him, people in summer dress clothes walked leisurely about the village, and the news of Silicon Valley felt very, very far away. He closed his eyes...and a moment later he sensed a shadow blocking the direct sunlight.

"Think you'll go back?" asked the elderly man standing before him. Beneath his arm was a folded copy of the "Journal."

Peter eyed the stranger. "I don't know."

The man placed his large, tanned and weathered hand on the back of the vacant chair beside Peter. "Okay if I join you?"

"Sure," Peter said, leaning back in his own chair.

The man removed his cap and signaled the waitress. He fixed his gaze on Peter for an instant. "Congratulations on the new product," he said with a wink. He unfolded his own newspaper and laid it over Peter's copy. "Your whiskers threw me for a second or two, but I used to slack off now and then on the shave - though not because I was masquerading."

"It wasn't my product introduction," Peter said, stroking his light beard unconsciously.

The man pulled a pen from his pocket, then lifted his thumb and winked one eye shut like an artist gauging his subject. "Hold still. I want to get this right." He proceeded to draw a mustache and beard on Peter's picture in the newspaper.

Peter was beginning to feel amused.

"Well," said the old man, taking up their conversation without looking up from his artwork, "you weren't there for the show, but it is your product just the same. Good work, son."

"Thanks."

The waitress arrived. His portrait completed, the man shoved the paper across the table for the waitress to see. "What do you think? Look like him?"

She looked at the photo and smiled politely, unaware that it was really Peter in person and in the newspaper. "A mineral water?" she said.

"Thank you, my dear. Anything for you, Mr. Jones?"

"No thanks."

The man closed his eyes and turned his smiling face into the sun. As Peter studied him, he felt a dim glow of recognition. Had he met him before, perhaps seen a photo of him somewhere? There was something about the cynicism in the man's eye. No doubt he was a former businessman well into his retirement, for with his eyes closed, he looked maybe seventy-five.

"Here you are, Mr. Holmes," the waitress said.

With his eyes open, however, the man suddenly looked ten years younger. Pouring the mineral water over the ice cubes in the glass, he fixed his gaze on Peter. "It isn't easy walking away from something you've given birth to, is it?" He squeezed some juice from the lime slice floating in the glass.

"No. It sure isn't," Peter said. Except for Kate's weekend trips away from Los Angeles, Peter had been completely alone for the past three months in Maine. During this period he had spoken with hardly anyone, except when necessary - ordering food in restaurants, paying for goods at the general store, or collecting his bundles of forwarded mail at the post office. He had forgotten how good it could feel to talk to someone, even a stranger. Especially a stranger. But Peter sensed that this wasn't just any stranger.

"Yep. Same thing happened to me. Gave them fifty years. Started when I was twenty, not that different from you. Yes sir, I remember how it felt."

"How?"

"Like someone ripped my heart out and chopped a chunk off it." For a few moments the man's gaze turned introspective as he poked at the lime in his drink. "Sound about right?" His lively blue eyes revealed sympathy, understanding.

This man knows, Peter thought. He managed a small smile and a nod.

"Son, you're a bright boy. I know all about you. How old can you be, thirty?"

"Thirty-two."

"Hell," the man said with a guffaw, "when I was that age I'd just got going."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Peter considered the man with curiosity and puzzlement. What had the waitress called him?

"Yes sir. That's how old I was when I invented a new system design that went on to become our standard for the next many, many years." He took another sip from his glass. "Still is," he said, jutting his lower lip out proudly.

"What design was that?" Peter asked. But before the man answered, Peter deduced that there was only one computer standard that had been in existence that long, and that was -

"The 990."

Peter tossed his head back, and for the first time in months he let go a huge, cleansing laugh. Of course! Byron Holmes, inventor of ICP's 990 series, which had become, and still formed the foundation of, the architecture upon which all of ICP's mainframe computers were built. Byron Holmes, son of Jonathan Holmes, founder of ICP.

"What's so damn funny?"

Peter touched the man's arm in apology. "I was just thinking how funny it is for us to meet. Go on, please. What did you do after the 990?"

"Revise, revise, revise."

"Things moved more slowly back then, didn't they?"

"Back then? You make it sound like I figured out how to add three wheels to one, so that families could take kids to the dinosaur races."

Peter could see that the man was enjoying this as much as he was. He became wholly attentive and invigorated.

"You kids from the Valley think your teensy computers are going to replace our Goliath machines someday, don't you?"

"I wouldn't know anymore. I'm out of the business."

"Poppyshit!" Holmes said, rapping his hand down on the table. "Don't give me that sour-faced hurt-boy story. Doesn't fly with me."

"I made that company what it is," Peter said, instantly somber. "And then it was taken away from me."

"That's craziness," Byron said, moving his chair closer. "Boy, I'll tell you something. After I made the 990 what it is, they moved me into big management. Sure, it was my dad's company. But I had the right education for it, so I could have done it anyway if my heart had been in it. But it wasn't. All I wanted to do was make those big, beautiful machines. After a short while I stepped down, moved in another fella, a guy that managed the schedule and all that stuff. Kept our friendship golden after all these years. Now he's the big cheese there."

"I stuck around for a long time. I was vice chairman, and spent years evolving the 990 design into what it is now, which'll probably see them through to the year 2000. As I was nearing the age everyone says is the time to leave, I had a heart attack. Guess I thought I was still a youngster. I retired, and me and my wife have been enjoying ourselves and playing around like kids ever since. Not bad for seventy-four years young, eh?"

"But it's not the same. I could have run the company. With all due respect, you inherited yours. I started mine from scratch. They just didn't give me a chance," Peter said.

The older man discounted the younger with a wave of his arm. "Nah. You'll come around eventually. Can't have both, you know."

"I could."

The older man's tone turned serious. "That's just pure, one-hundred percent poppyshit, is all." He pointed his finger at Peter with rigid authority. "You need to squeegee all that anger out of your system so you can get back out there and do something. Again."

Just then a handsome smiling woman appeared at the table, dressed in a light, summery outfit. In one hand she held her wide-brimmed hat, in the other a bag of vegetables and groceries. Byron's face brightened at her arrival.

"Is this man filling your ear with World War II stories?" She handed the bag to Byron.

"I haven't even gotten to those yet," Byron said as he stood. "Another day."

He made introductions. "Gracie, this boy is the one who invented all those pesky little computers littering everyone's desks out there," Byron said. "He's also been the best conversation I've had here in awhile. Mr. Jones, it's been nice talking to you."

"Likewise," said Peter. The two men shook hands.

"Why don't you come by our house for dinner. Saturday night." Byron said, tapping his shirt pocket for his pen.

"Thank you, that's very kind. But I've been sticking pretty much to myself, and I'm not much company -"

"Nonsense! Eight o'clock," Byron said, scribbling his address on a paper napkin.

"All right then, I'll be there. But I have a friend coming. Would it be okay if I brought her?"

"Can she dance?"

"No, but she can sing."

"Of course," Grace said. "Please bring her along." The couple said good-bye and then strolled off holding hands.

With some amusement, Peter settled into his chair and thought about the irony of meeting Byron Holmes here. It wasn't all that unusual, since Camden was where so many men like Byron spent their summers. Yet, of all the people in the world, he'd never guessed he'd shake hands with the man whose surname was synonymous with the world's first tabulating machines. Small world, Peter thought. No, he corrected himself, I'm from the small world, and he's from the big world. But, as he'd just learned, it didn't seem to matter how big or small your baby. When it's yours, it's yours. And this man understood that.

The horses walked side by side, each carrying a rider through the secluded wooded path.

"I don't believe you, that the only love you have ever felt has been for horses. Nonsense," Greta said.

"It is true," said Jean-Pierre, crossing his heart with his finger.

"Ridiculous."

"Greta, I tell no lie when I say that I have been in love only with horses. Nothing has ever come between us," he said, patting his beast's neck affectionately.

"Frenchmen," she said with a dismissing wave of her gloved hand. "Such talkers." Had he noticed? She took a breath, reminding herself to keep her left hand on the saddle.

And, she wondered, had he noticed her color when he'd crossed his heart? Unless he was psychic, she knew that he could not see what was going on inside her when he spoke of things such as his country and horses.

"Your husband, he is doing something very important today, no?"

"Yes. It's important. To him. Some new computer."

"Indeed. I read about it in the paper. You must be very proud, Greta. Yes?"

"Yes, of course. He's done very well since he's been in control. Very busy," she said. She wished this topic to go no further. She let herself look at him, into his eyes.

"Yes," Jean-Pierre replied with a nod that said, without words, that he understood. It was the same look he had given her when they'd first met after they had shaken hands, when his arm had been in a sling.

They continued along in silence at a trot, and Greta renewed their conversation with enthusiasm. "Jean-Pierre, tell me more about your country. Is the French countryside similar to Northern California, as everyone here seems to think?"

"Ah, it is beautiful," Jean-Pierre said. "All year is green out in the countryside where I was born. And clean when you inhale, and pretty, all fresh and tingling in your nose, in your heart. You ride on and on and see no one for very long stretches of time. Here and there, children are playing or doing chores, you see a woman carrying a basket, a man with an ax. They wave when they see you." Smiling, he waved to her as if to illustrate, but all at once his expression changed into a grimace, as though he were suddenly in great pain.

"What is it?" Greta asked.

"This damned shoulder. If I cannot even lift it to wave, how will I ever hold a mallet again?"

"Isn't there anything you can do about it?"

"Oh, sure. There are procedures. Surgery."

"Then why don't you get it fixed?"

"It is complicated."

"Yes, but it's worth a try, isn't it? Wouldn't it be better to try to save it, so you could play again, rather than give up your livelihood?"

"It's not that simple."

"Why? People get things like that fixed all the time, don't they? You're a champion. How can you just stop playing?"

"That's not what I mean. I don't want it to be like this."

She persisted. "I still don't understand. What's so complicated about your case?"

Abruptly he reined his horse to a halt and she brought her horse around. He was looking off into the

hills. For all of his broadness and strength, his maleness, she saw that she had unknowingly struck a sensitive chord in him. "Jean-Pierre," she said, trying to catch his eye, "I didn't mean to upset you. If I have, I'm sorry."

"No. That's not it. You see," he said with a faint smile, "I am an independent."

"I'm sorry, really. You don't have to go on if you don't want to."

"But I do. I do want to go on. Right now, in Deauville, where I have lived most of my life as a polo player, the tournament is underway. Eight teams converge to compete for fifteen cups. The most coveted is the Coupe d'Or. There is money as well. I, of course, was on the French team. I had a sponsor for the tournament, but because of this damned thing, I had to drop out."

"But if you get it taken care of, can't you play again, and make next year's competition?"

"That is the problem, getting it taken care of. It costs money. And because I am an independent and I had to drop out, I lost my sponsorship. What I am saying, Greta, is that I cannot afford the surgery and therapy. That is why I agreed to come here as a consultant to look into developing a polo club. I need the money."

"Jean-Pierre," Greta said, "I understand how you feel." She felt compelled to tell him about her own suffering. However, glancing down at her gloved left hand, she couldn't bring herself to go on. Hers was no common ailment. Granted, he was suffering, losing the use of his shoulder, but her loss, she could not help feeling, was greater. It was not the same. It was worse. And, she feared, it might repulse him, and end the acquaintance they had begun.

They continued along the trails leading back to the stable, back from her escape.

For the past three months she had gone riding every couple of days with Jean-Pierre. It had started with his insisting that she try some jumping, but she dashed that idea at once. However, she did agree to go riding with him once, and had continued ever since. The early mornings frequently found her on these paths with Jean-Pierre, before he began his day. In addition to his polo club project, he trained a number of students. With each day they spent together, riding along the lush trails, she acquired more knowledge of horses and Europe, and of things she had never imagined before - most of all attraction, for the first time since her marriage to Matthew, for another man. While she knew he was here to research the potential for a polo club, he was not specific about the details of his private life. Whenever she pressed him for more information, he turned the conversation back to her, or went into one story or another that was full of adventure and intrigue. He told her that, like most polo players, he was a thrill-seeker; his attitude was that all of life was a game, one big gamble, there for the playing. When she asked him how long he thought he would stay, he told her he was not really sure. All she wanted, she reminded herself continually, was to be able to keep spending a precious hour or two with him each day riding. But lately, when she left him after their ride, she had begun to allow herself a little more; she had now and then found herself thinking about him during her midmorning bath, or just staring out the bedroom window, across the treetops and off into the near distance, at the ranch's gable rooftop. And sometimes, after a morning ride, she would awaken on her bed, not remembering having lain down, his face the first image to appear to her, her mind studying and touching him before opening her eyes and getting on with the day. Although she relished these moments in his company, she could hardly wait to be away from him today, to be alone with him in her secret way.

"I have thought how good it would be to go back to France after my project is through here, taking my meager savings, and my meager arm, and finding a small ranch in the country."

She tightened her grip on the reins. "Well, if you want it badly enough, you'll find a way to get back into the game."

"Yes, maybe. But for now I am a slave to this project. It's paying the bills, as Americans are fond to say."

With mild dread, she knew he would be gone sooner than she wanted to admit. Of course it would be better if he were gone, she told herself. She was married to a very successful man, and that meant security and stability.

Yet as if to discourage her rational thinking, a burst of enthusiasm whipped through her. "Let's race," she shouted, then pressed her heels into Mighty Boy's sides. Before Jean-Pierre could answer, her horse bolted forward.

"Cheater!" he hollered, and gained on her quickly. They rounded a turn in the path and flew past wild calla lily flowers, the tall stems batting their horses' legs. She looked over her shoulder, excited, and

pressed Might Boy harder. Jean-Pierre narrowed the distance between them and his horse fell into a synchronized gallop with Mighty Boy. She laughed at him and saw that he was hiding something behind his back. He saw that she saw.

"Not until you slow," he said, reining his horse to a trot.

She obeyed, dropping beside him. He leaned from his saddle and handed her a single calla lily. She felt touched and overwhelmed, and closed her eyes for a moment, forgetting he was there riding right beside her. Then, suddenly aware of her obvious pleasure, she felt embarrassed. Carefully she tucked the flower between her leg and the saddle, then raced off for the final stretch, hoping the distance would allow her a moment to regain her composure.

He called after her, yet, when she turned once, she saw that he was letting the stretch widen between them, as if he had seen her flustered condition and had, once again, understood what she was feeling.

The soft black path turned dusty as she neared the barn. Her car was parked in the lot. Jennifer's truck, parked in front of her house, was the only other vehicle there.

She brought Might Boy to a halt before the stable entrance and wiped her brow with the sleeve of her chambray shirt. Carefully holding the flower, she lowered herself from the horse. Jean-Pierre had dismounted by the far ring and was walking toward the barn. Normally, the horses would be hosed down, to both clean and cool them, but the groom had not yet arrived, so they allowed some time for the horses to cool down a little in the chilly morning air.

"I'd better be going," Greta said after some time had passed, taking Might Boy's bridle in her hand.

In silence, they led the horses into the barn. The animal bodies were lathered with sweat, and the fine layer of dust that covered their muscles was beginning to dry and crinkle in the shadowed coolness. She reached behind her head and unclipped her barrette, allowing her hair to fall loosely over her shoulders. It was as if everything had changed as they walked through a near-dark silence, like day into night. Her senses sharpened, like those of a nocturnal creature. She knew he was looking at her, and she felt awkwardly exposed. She glanced quickly at him. His eyes gazed at her with peaceful, deliberate regard. She maintained her lead into the barn with Might Boy, then Jean-Pierre stopped at his own horse's stall, and she hastened her task at hand, in an attempt to be done and out of the stall before he had a chance to come to hers. But as she worked with Might Boy's halter, she felt his presence at the entrance of the stall. He pulled the double door shut behind him as he entered, closing them in together in nearly complete darkness.

Her insides tightened as he slowly approached, the very act of breathing becoming more difficult the closer he came. She blinked to adjust her vision, and busied herself with releasing the girth of Might Boy's saddle, but she was clearly having problems; she had not thought to simply put down the flower for a moment while she worked with the snaps. And, as always, there was her hand, which forever burdened even the simplest tasks.

He came to her rescue, and she froze at the touch of his large strong hands on hers. And before she had to even consider retracting her flawed hand, he moved her aside and set about unfastening the girth and removing the saddle, leaving her to just stand there and watch, holding the flower.

Time stopped. Even Might Boy was still. His stare was on her again, but she willed her gaze to remain fixed on the hay-strewn floor. If she looked up into his eyes, there was no telling what would happen. Yet she made no effort to alter what was happening. Instead she shut her eyes, and tried not to think about how much time was passing between them without words. What were his thoughts? Were they the same as her own? What were hers? She could not focus on any of these blind musings. Unaware of her own action she had raised her head, as though all of him would become clearer if she trained her closed lids in his direction. She opened her eyes. Nothing in her mind could prepare her for what she faced. The emerald intensity of his eyes pierced through her, instantly warming her neck, her nipples, her loins.

"Come," he said, motioning to her with one hand, the other flat against the horse's side. "Feel this."

She allowed him to lift her right hand and pull her closer. He made her feel the animal's hot, damp flank, flattening his own hard hand over hers. She focused on his dusty manicured nails, his long fingers, weathered knuckles, and tanned skin. This was the hand she had fantasized about, touching her as it was now, and more.

"The strength of this animal, it can all be felt through his heartbeat. So strong," he whispered. She felt his breath on her forehead, and inhaled to try to bring it inside of her.

Mighty Boy stood steady as she experienced the bold breathing and strong heartbeat drumming beneath her hand. "Yes," she managed, barely, willing her hand to stop trembling beneath his.

He slowly lifted her hand from the horse and turned her so that they were facing each other. The flower fell from her free hand. He removed the glove from the hand he was holding, then he reached for her other hand.

"No," she said, a little panicked. "Not that one."

He nodded to let her know that he understood, then guided the ungloved hand beneath his shirt. He pressed her palm to his chest, over his heart. "It is no different," he said. Then she had the other, gloved hand in his shirt. She felt his insistent heartbeat, so powerful in its pounding, the pulse of his life beneath her hands. She raked her fingers over his muscles. The wild scent of horses mingled sharply with his spiciness. She closed her eyes and took a deep, heady breath, and experienced a wave of pleasant dizziness.

He gripped her wrists and pressed her against Mighty Boy, touched his lips to her ear. "Perhaps this attraction I feel for you is the first to come between me and my love for horses," he said with a little laugh.

She shifted her head back. A bead of sweat jiggled on his chin, beside a tiny flake of hay. She dabbed the droplet with the back of her bare hand, touched the hay flake away and pulled it past his lips, yet did not let herself touch them. He took her hand from his cheek, then curled her fingers into his own. He inhaled the fragrance on her wrist, kissed it.

She began trembling as he lowered his arm around her waist and pressed her harder into Mighty Boy, layering her between the heat of two powerful bodies. She pulled her fingers free of his grip and plunged her hands into his long hair and down his neck, across the hard muscles of his shoulders.

Then, just as their lips drew near, Greta reeled her head away with a shake, as if snapping awake from frightening dream - he had taken her gloved hand in his own.

"No," she said, struggling.

He tightened his hold on her. "What are you hiding, Greta? What is it you are so afraid to show me?" Then suddenly, Matthew's image appeared in her mind's eye.

An agonized moan escaped her, and she let out a small, frustrated cry. She had to leave, at once. "I can't," she said, bringing her lips closer to his. "Do you hear me, I can't."

Or could she? Could she just once, to have him completely in her memory forever? Yes, just this one time. Quickly, she thought, before Matthew returns and makes it impossible for her to go any further.

Lips parting ardently, she hungrily drew in his breath as their mouths joined.

Chapter 8

"Matthew, this is everything." Eileen said, placing a manila folder before him on his desk. "You've got about ten minutes before the meeting begins," she said, then closed his office door. He opened the folder. Before him was an assortment of transparencies, his presentation to the board of directors and executive staff.

Yesterday's introduction of the new Joey Plus, which was warmly received by the press and the user community, would certainly work in his favor this morning when he detailed his plan for ICP connectivity.

He flipped through the films. They were perfect. He felt armed and ready to face for the first time all of Wallaby's power players in the very room from which three months earlier he had ejected Peter Jones.

His intercom beeped softly, and he looked out of his glass office at Eileen. She tapped her wristwatch. It was time to start the meeting.

He nodded and shuffled the films and his notes together into the folder and headed for the meeting. Just as he reached for the boardroom door, it opened. Hank Towers appeared carrying a small plate.

"Good morning, Matthew," Hank said brightly. "Give me just a second for seconds," he said, gesturing at the remaining treats arranged on the long table outside the conference room.

Matthew laughed good-naturedly and went inside. "Good morning," he said, addressing everyone seated around the table. He set down his materials beside the overhead projector. Finishing sentences or the last bite of a muffin or looking up from their agendas, the board members and executive staff voiced their good mornings.

"We're just waiting for Hank," Matthew said. Just then Hank entered the room smiling sheepishly over a plate of fresh fruit salad.

"Matthew, congratulations on the Joey Plus," Hank said. The others followed with congratulations, and someone clapped. Another pair of hands joined in, and then another, until the entire room was applauding his success.

"Thank you," Matthew said. "But the congratulations should go to all of your people who made the development of the Joey Plus successful." His smile swept each face at the table.

Martin Cohn stood and announced the agenda, a copy of which rested before each person. Four items down the list was "The Whole World In Your Hand: Wallaby's Future - Matthew."

After ninety minutes of standard status reports, discussion, and voting, it was time for Matthew's presentation, and he stood. "Should we break for a few minutes before I begin?"

He knew his agenda title had them all intrigued - this would be the first time anyone but Peter had revealed a major future strategy for Wallaby. No one stood or motioned departure.

He dimmed the room lights, then switched on the overhead projector and advanced to the first slide, a modified Wallaby logo. Normally the logo depicted the baby kangaroo poking its head out of a pocket, but Matthew's slide showed only the joey and no pocket.

"At Wallaby," he began, "we've always been intensely focused on the idea of people using a portable computer for their personal tasks and needs. This had been a successful strategy, inherent in our culture because we got our start by giving people the power to use our portable personal computers for exactly that: very personal computing.

"But to some degree, we've been in the dark. In the early days we succeeded because we were the only players. But we lost our number-one status to our largest competitor, ICP."

He changed to the next slide and paused for a moment, allowing the visual analogy depicted to sink in. The slide showed the same lone joey, offset to the bottom left corner of the frame, and a sketch of the earth with the initials ICP stretching around it.

"International Computer Products is everywhere. They own the world of mainstream computing. There's hardly any big business, organization, or function in the world that doesn't in some way use ICP's products for its information processing."

The next slide showed the Joey Plus screen with little filing cabinets and documents positioned here and there. "By design, Wallaby's Joey Plus is the choice method of computing. The user community has stated that, and we all know that.

"But competition from ICP with its BP system, regardless of its inferior technology, continues to grow at a steady rate. The ICP logo on the front of its desktop and portable computers makes them mentally compatible with its mainframe computers. And for the past decade at Wallaby, we've all held a resentful attitude toward ICP. This is due, in part, to the premise upon which the company was founded. We're a small, free-spirited company, providing people with personal mobile computing tools contrary to what ICP has represented throughout its history - people acting as slaves to headquarters and mainframes."

He then showed a slide bearing an ICP BP computer graphic with a circle around it and a slash through it, like the "No Smoking" signs found in public areas. A few chuckles emerged from the darkness.

"Consequently - by design, if you will - few of us at Wallaby are apt to perceive an opportunity that could take advantage of ICP's Goliath size. Locked into our rivalry with ICP, we're too busy reacting, competing with our portable computer technology as if we had a chance to displace its impersonal, worldwide installed-base of systems."

He let them absorb this truth for a few moments, then removed the slide, allowing a pause before asking his next question.

"But what if the Joey Plus were equipped to make a huge leap into the big game?"

Chairs creaked, and elbows settled on the table as those seated around the table moved forward to more attentive positions. The next slide showed the Wallaby Joey Plus computer screen again. But in this one, the ICP globe logo was orbiting within it, with the baby kangaroo hopping from the U.S., across the Atlantic, to Europe.

Matthew heard whispers and low voices. In an instant he understood his position with profound clarity. Here he stood, in the place that for the last decade had been occupied by Peter Jones, with his hand on the lever that, once thrown, would forever alter the focus of Wallaby. He threw it.

"I believe that Wallaby has the potential to penetrate the worldwide installed-base of ICP computer users by becoming more compatible with ICP systems."

Not surprisingly, Hank was the first to protest. Incredulous, he rose from his seat. "Matthew, are you proposing we build an ICP clone computer?" His alarm was amplified by the others, and the room suddenly erupted into a rumble of questioning voices.

"Wait. Listen," Matthew pleaded. "Please."

Hank dropped back in his chair, turning his attention to Matthew. The others followed his lead and quieted.

"No. Hank. We would not, not ever, develop systems that operated ICP's system software. First of all, we would continue with our design to evolve the Joey hardware, adding a simple, inexpensive port that would provide an easy connection to ICP mainframes and workgroup networks. Second, we would implement system software communication hooks in our operating system, which would read and understand file formats and information from ICP systems. These hooks are what would enable the user to easily manage the massive ICP mainframe databases from within Joey software applications, as well as share data between personal programs like word processing documents, spreadsheets, and graphics, to name a few."

Hank was slowly nodding. "We're following you, go on."

The room fell silent, and Matthew placed his next graphic on the overhead.

"We've got a window of opportunity, and if we can act quickly and bring compatibility products to market in the next quarter, Wallaby would enjoy the rewards of major penetration within a year."

The attendees were leaning to one side or the other, whispering back and forth. What Matthew was able to discern sounded positive, and, sensing no opposition, he placed the next slide, a proposed schedule. Midway through the his timeline breakdown, Graham Stevens, vice president of personnel, spoke up.

"Pardon me for the interruption, Matthew." Stevens removed his glasses and folded his hands on the table. His face bore the troubled look of a professor deliberating a complex formula. "There's one thing that concerns me. Something that does not appear on the schedule."

Matthew took a step away from the projector. "Please, go on."

"This company, as you pointed out when you started, was trained to think of ICP as the enemy. Do you really believe we can get the employees to support a strategy that slants us toward our biggest competitor?" His question was supported by contemplative murmuring throughout the room.

"That's a very important question," Matthew said. He tucked his hands into his pockets. "Perhaps the most important of all."

In fact, it was. He had asked himself the same question a thousand times. And he knew he had to be very careful with his response. Both the reason and the solution had come to him when he had asked himself why, all along, ICP had never simply threatened Wallaby with a hostile takeover. The reason was simple - ICP could not acquire Wallaby and hope for the company to succeed without support from Wallaby's highest-level executives and employees. This was precisely where Matthew fit into the whole plan. He was the horticulturist who would graft the sapling Wallaby onto the deeply rooted, sky-high tree that was ICP. He would nurture the company into accepting that this was the right thing to do, this second phase of providing compatibility with ICP's systems. He would convince them that while maintaining its personality, Wallaby would also grow vigorously in size and sales. Later, in the final phase - the plan's ultimate goal - after Matthew's compatibility strategy had proven successful and thereby gained the employees' trust, the process for merging the two companies would begin.

He seated himself casually on the edge of the table. "When Peter and Hank started Wallaby," he said, dropping a nod to the cofounder, "they had a vision of placing into people's hands their own computing

power. Naturally this was perceived as competition to ICP because it is also a computer company, which quickly brought to market its own all-in-one computer. But what I've come to understand is that we have a valuable product that can make greater headway by coexisting with ICP's computers rather than try to overtake it directly. And if we carefully educate our employees that it's our vision to keep building great portable computers for individuals, which can also connect to other systems, then yes, we can pull it off." His voice was piping with conviction and enthusiasm. "Joey, with its innovative mobile and expandable design, becomes the dynamic key that opens doors to other systems and other markets around the world."

"It would be tough, Matthew," Graham said, curling his index finger against his chin, "but if we were to get you out there, talking to our people about this strategy, I think you're right. We could pull it off."

Did this first agreement, from the man who raised the most difficult question of all, presage the entire team's vote? Had he just persuaded them to place in him their faith to change the lifeblood vision of the entire company?

He switched off the projector and brightened the room's lights. "Before I go on, it may be good to get an idea of how many of us agree on this strategy."

"Right," Hank said, helping him along. "I think it's smart, mature. Clearly a direction in which we should consider moving. However," he cautioned, sweeping the group with his serious eyes, "only if we can handle the perception aspect of it with the employees. Only as long as we make them understand that we're not selling out and building a clone, that we are actually making our Joey the best choice of portable computer on its own, and in tandem with ICP's computers. If we can accomplish that, then I think we could eventually come out ahead of the game."

Matthew experienced an epiphany. Hank had just explained Matthew's strategy exactly as he wanted them to see it. Furthermore, Hank's approval signified a point that was especially penetrating to the people seated there - higher stock prices. For each of them, this translated to even greater personal wealth.

Matthew quickly took advantage of Hank's definition, while the carrot still hung in the air. "Does anyone disagree with the concept?"

Heads turned, searching for dissent.

None.

He felt a powerful thrill wash through him like the one he had experienced at the last quarterly board meeting, when his organizational design had flexed Peter Jones out of his way. In the last meeting he had been given the opportunity to prove himself. Now, with the new strategy revealed, they had become his followers. They believed in him. That was what it all came down to. They trusted him with their future.

"Very well," Matthew said. He switched off the overhead lights again and returned to the projector. With his finger on the switch, he bade farewell to the old Wallaby, farewell to Peter Jones. He flicked the machine on, and alighted the screen with his next slide: "The Whole World In Your Hand: Wallaby's Future."

* * *

"Thanks, Hank," Matthew said, gripping Hank's arm with one hand, the other locked in a firm handshake.

The board room door silently swung shut, and Matthew dropped himself heavily into one of the chairs and let out a long satisfied sigh.

He'd done it. From here on, it would be smooth sailing. With the executive's support in the bag, he was now free to turn his secret plan into reality. And what did it translate to for him personally? The power and the rewards would be astronomical.

"How'd it go?"

He had not heard anyone enter the room and, startled, he turned to find Laurence Maupin. For the briefest moment he just sat there and admired her in her finely tailored light linen suit. Her soft and flowing honey-colored hair framed her fresh intelligent face, and in her delicate hands she clutched a small bundle of budding branches, held together by a blue ribbon.

"It went great," Matthew said, blinking with exultation at the sound of his own pleased voice. Then, unable to contain his satisfaction, his smile broke into a broad grin. "Really great," he spilled, feeling remarkably comfortable in revealing his joy in front of her.

"That's wonderful, Matthew. Wonderful!" she said, closing the space between them. "These are for you," she said, holding out the bundle.

"Pussy willow," he remarked. He felt a tingling sensation in his finger, where it had brushed hers. "Where did you get them?"

"Believe it or not, I found a bush of them in Woodside. I stole some for you," she said with a mischievous chuckle.

"Thank you," he said, able to meet her eyes only for a second. Her unanticipated arrival and the gift she had brought made him suddenly feel awkward and boyish. It was as if the room, his heart, had all at once changed seasons, going from the promise of spring to the all-out heat of summer. He watched her flip through his collection of slides, and he felt the light tingle return, this time in another place, as she keenly examined his illustrations.

She beamed at him and tapped the topmost slide. "Matthew, it's brilliant. Just three months, and you're already making important changes."

"Thank you. But you deserve some of the credit. Your coaching has been a great help."

"That's my job," she said. "Eileen said you have no other meetings this afternoon."

"None. I didn't know how long this would take."

She returned the slides to the manila folder, then circled her hands around the neck of the overhead projector. "Then how about lunch?"

"Good idea."

"Great. What do you say to San Francisco? I've got to run a few errands, and you can drop me off at home later in the afternoon since I don't have my car. It's being serviced."

He hesitated, then shrugged. "Why not. I think I deserve the rest of the day off. And I haven't been to the city for lunch in a long time." He had forgotten that she lived in San Francisco. Lunch, then a ride home.

They gathered his materials and in a few minutes were on the highway and heading for the city.

He felt relaxed in the car with her. With absurd clarity it occurred to him that while they had worked together almost constantly for several months, everything they had discussed pertained to business. How could he have been so focused on his work and not gotten to know her better? Now, he decided, was as good a time as any.

"How are you adjusting? This being your first full-time job and everything?"

"Excellent. Of course, working with you has made it all worth it."

He had hired her fresh out of school, graduating with a communications degree from Villanova. The previous summer she had been an intern, working in the public relations department as an apprentice speech writer. On two occasions she had assisted Matthew in preparing his speeches. The impression she had left him with was so positive that he had had his secretary contact Laurence as she neared graduation, to ask if she would be interested in working for him as his personal press assistant. Although she was inexperienced, she really had helped him. Enormously. Not only where his public image was concerned, as when she had smoothly handled the press for him after Peter Jones's departure, but also with his self-image, the hours they spent together in coaching sessions, counseling him on his manner and style, reinforcing his self-confidence. He felt as though some transformation was about to happen between them, some new level of communication.

"...right there," she said, pointing to the high hills and valley a half-mile in the distance, to the east.

He had been daydreaming. "I'm sorry?" he said.

"My horse. That's where I keep my horse."

"At Woodside Ranch?"

"Yes."

"That's where my wife keeps hers, too." He remembered Greta for the first time since leaving the house that morning.

"They have a new trainer who recently came to the States to start a new polo club. He's fabulous."

"Maybe that's Greta's trainer."

"It is," Laurence said, then, quickly: "I mean, he knows her, mentions her horse. He said Mighty Boy is the most beautiful horse he's ever seen."

"He's something, all right," Matthew said, changing lanes.

"I'm happy to be riding again. I've missed it so. In school I rarely got home to see my parents in Los Angeles. My father sponsors polo players, did I already mention that? I'm sorry, I'm rambling."

"Not at all. I want to know more."

"Well, a couple of years ago my father spent a year in North Carolina, opening a new company. While he was there he got hooked on polo. That was just when I had gone east for school. I felt like I needed a break from La-La Land, and Philadelphia seemed like as good a place as any, and the school was one of the best for liberal arts. Anyway, I'd fly down to see dad every now and then while he was in the South. We went to a couple polo tournaments together. By the time he went back home he was a member of the Equestrian Center in Griffith Park, in LA. I was quite taken with the game myself, the valiance."

Her enthusiasm was infectious, and Matthew was enjoying himself immensely. In the distance the city came into sight. Seeing the tall buildings, the two magnificent bridges, the bay, he experienced a sense of newfound being. He thought of Greta, and how, in all the time they had lived here and she had had her horse, Matthew had never been the least bit interested in her hobby. Yet when Laurence spoke of it, he was intrigued. The Valley felt well behind him now. Before him lay a completely different world, and his insides stirred with the same excited nervousness a schoolboy feels on a class trip. "I don't come to the city often," he said, "so I'm at your mercy."

"Don't worry, you're in good hands. How about Union Square for lunch? It's near the shop where I have to pick up something."

"Sounds fine," Matthew said.

They pulled off the highway and wound their way through the busy city streets to Union Square. He pulled up in front of the Campton Hotel, and the attendant took the car.

"Can we shop first?" Laurence said. "I'll just run in and tell them we'll have lunch around two o'clock."

With an appraising eye, the formally dressed door attendant held the door for her. After she vanished into the lobby he stole a cursory glance at Matthew, the man so lucky to be with such an exquisite woman. The other man's envy brought a smile to Matthew's face. A minute later she was back.

"All set," she said, then frowned. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," he said, overshooting his innocence. "I'm just happy. I feel like I'm playing hooky," he said honestly.

"Come on," she said, tugging playfully on his arm. She led them into oncoming traffic and, with city-smart agility, navigated them to the other side of the street. They strolled past the Hyatt and turned onto Post Street. The sun shone brightly on Union Square, and a cable car bell rang out on Powell Street. He fell back a step behind her when they crossed the street to admire the way her wavy hair bounced on her shoulders with each determined step. His eyes trailed to her waist, so perfect and slender, then lower, to the lovely curves of her bottom. She stopped so suddenly he almost crashed into her.

"This is it," she said, standing before an old shop. "It's like a toy store for me," she added, pressing through the doors. For an instant he had the pleasure of seeing the flat of her hand pressed against the glass. Even after they were inside, this image lingered bright in his mind's eye like sunspots on the eyelids.

"Come on," she said, tugging his arm again. She led him to an open stairway that rose to the second floor. He saw various equestrian products as they climbed the stairs. Saddles hung over the rail encircling the upper level, and rows of boots lined the wall, with riding crops, helmets, and assorted

garments displayed throughout. He trailed after her as she strode to the rear wall and stopped before a case of leather riding gloves. She spun, hands at rest behind her on either side of the display case. "Do you know about Swaine Adeney?" she said, playfully affecting a British accent. "It was founded in London in 1750. They are the exclusive suppliers of fine equestrian products to the royal family."

"May I help you?" asked a young, dark-haired woman wrapped tightly in a tweed outfit.

Laurence turned serious. "I'd like a pair of these gloves." She tapped her finger on the glass in front of a simple brown pair.

Matthew swallowed. Gloves. The thought of Laurence hiding her beautiful hands inside a pair of gloves prickled his skin with a sensation that was very close to terror. He thought of Greta. Her gloves, so many gloves. Leather, wool, and cotton. Suede, cashmere, and silk. Oh, he thought with dread, those especially, which she had worn to bed every night since the accident...

"Do you like them, Matthew?" Laurence said, flexing ten delicately gloved fingers before him.

"Yes," he said, forcing a smile. "Very much."

"These are our finest pigskin gloves," the sales clerk informed them.

"I'll take them."

"Very good," said the woman, accepting the gloves from Laurence. She closed the cabinet and locked it, and they followed her back down to the lower level. Before Laurence could withdraw her charge card from her wallet, Matthew reached for his own.

"Wait, Lauri. I want to buy those for you."

"Don't be silly."

"Please. A small token of my appreciation," he said. "Please?"

The clerk accepted his credit card.

"I'll treasure them," Laurence said with a pleasant smile. "Thank you."

They strolled back to the hotel, where they were immediately seated in a booth in the rear of the Campton Place. There were few other diners; it was late in the afternoon, and most of the see-and-be-seen crowd was already gone.

"How about Champagne?" Laurence asked. "A toast your success."

The wine steward uncorked a bottle of Veuve Cliquot and they toasted, and while they enjoyed an excellent lunch, she spoke again about horses and polo.

"I would love to go to France. I've never been there. I would give anything to see the championship tournament that's held every summer in Deauville."

Hearing her talk about it, he thought that it might be exciting to go there. With her? Was that why it would be exciting? What had happened in the last couple of hours? What was it she had said or done to break down the restraint he had exercised for the past couple of months, which he now fully acknowledged?

With this thought, and all their talk about horses, he thought again of his wife, and the realization that this pleasant afternoon with Laurence would soon be over.

Back outside, the attendant brought him his car.

"Where exactly do you live?" Asking this question, it occurred to him that he had learned more about her this afternoon than in all their of previous times together.

"In Pacific Heights. Well, lower Pacific Heights. I can't afford real Pac Heights yet."

"Is that where you would like to live eventually?"

"Not really. I don't think I'm really a city person at heart." She directed him up Pine Street to Fillmore, then to a narrow street called Wilmot. Hidden in the middle of the busy Fillmore shopping district, it looked more like an alley than a proper street. He found its concealment unusually exciting.

"There, the second house."

He braked before one of three houses tucked into the middle of the block, sandwiched between business establishments.

"Well," he said. "I had a wonderful time."

"Me too," she said, folding over the top of the bag in her lap.

He paused, unsure what to do next. The air in the car felt charged with possibility, promise. He acknowledged his attraction to her. She stirred in him feelings he had not felt in years, which now suddenly gushed free inside him after today's victory. When she had entered the boardroom, he had felt a potent sense of longing. How long had it been since he had been satisfied, really satisfied? Again his thoughts turned to Greta. He gave his senses a shake. He resolved that after all he had accomplished, which Lauri had helped him attain, he wanted to experience with her their own, intimate celebration. He wanted to take her hand, hold it, and kiss her, to feel her fingers respond in his own hand as their lips met.

From behind he heard the sound of cars passing on Fillmore Street, and ahead of them, a group of young boys were playing basketball in a fenced school-yard. With a sidelong glance he studied her delicate, childlike hands, the impossible softness of her skin. She was so much younger than he. She had been silent all this time, and finally she spoke.

"Do you have any children?"

This startled him a little. Was she too unsure of what to do next? Stalling, as it were? "No," he said, "no children." He and Greta had planned to start a family after the successful launch of Orange Fresh. But after the accident, which happened on the very day that they planned to begin their journey into parenthood, the act by which a child is conceived never again occurred between them.

So that was how long it had been since they had made love, he thought. How long it had been since he had been with anyone that way.

Again Laurence broke the silence. "Why don't you come inside for a moment and see my place?"

He accepted without hesitation, and a moment later they were inside. "I've made do with my limited decorating skills," she said with a wave of her hand. "I'd love your opinion." She excused herself to the kitchen for a moment while Matthew wandered from room to room.

Her apartment was a recently restored Victorian with black and white tile at the entrance and hardwood floors throughout. Dhurrie rugs in light colors covered the floors in the living and dining rooms, and her furniture was a tasteful mixture of contemporary and antique. The bedroom was tantalizing. Her bed was an unusual steel frame design with a dreamy, sheer canopy draped lightly over the top. Its message was at once powerful and delicate. So were his feelings for her. He finished his tour and circled back to the living room, where he found her standing and holding two glasses filled with dessert wine. "Just a little sip, before you drive back," she said, handing him a glass.

He inhaled the bright sweet aroma, his eyes lingering on her hand encircling her own glass. She raised it to his, and he met her sharp, gray eyes.

"Here's to you." Her voice was quiet.

He touched his glass to hers. They each took a sip and, with his head still lowered, he let his eyes stray once more to her hand.

"You like my hands, don't you?" she asked simply, revealing her mindfulness of his regard all along, confirming it.

"Yes," he said, his voice barely a whisper. He swallowed.

"Go on, then," she said.

He knew what she meant. He slowly reached out and traced lightly along her index finger to her wrist, her thumb, to her glass, which he took. He had to have her hands.

He settled their glasses on the table in front of the sofa and folded both of his hands around hers. Never before had he held hands so supple. But these hands belonged to a whole visage of uniform loveliness. There was the difference, he understood at once. He had loved Greta's hands, yes, the power they had had over him, his pleasure, yet that was all. Just her hands. That was why, he now understood, that they had had such an unusual sex life. But Laurence was different. When he looked up from her hands, his heart quickened at his appreciation for all of her. That was it, and he let himself go.

He pulled her hard against him, as if it were the first time he had felt a woman's body against his own. In fact, it was. It was the first time he was really feeling a woman with all of his mind. The sensation was overwhelming, this feeling of taking in her whole image. His mouth came down firmly on hers. He felt a moan come from her throat as their tongues mingled with the wine's sweet aftertaste. He tasted her, felt the material of her dress, smelled her hair, understood that in her shoes were feet that were no doubt as lovely to look as her hands, as rousing to touch and kiss. From head to toe, he wanted to feel all of her at once. Their hips pressed together and she pulled him closer, kissed him hungrily.

"Matthew, you've done wonderful things for Wallaby and for me. I want it to keep going this way for you. Is this wrong, what we're doing?" she said, fingertips touching along the edge of his belt.

"No," he said, and closed his eyes with anticipation. Her fingertips slipped down an inch into his slacks. "I mean yes. Oh, yes."

"It's yours for the taking, Matthew. All of it. There's no stopping you now."

Her words drove him into a frenzy. He gripped the back of her head and pulled her in close, his tongue darting in her mouth, over her eyes and around her ears. He coursed his fingers through her hair, everything coming to him in rushing waves of passion.

Yes, she was correct. There was no stopping him, then. He thought now only of the bed. He pulled back from her. His trousers were undone and her blouse was open. He gripped her wrist and led her, walking backward as he did so, to the bedroom. She grabbed the bottle of sauterne and raised it to her lips, following with no resistance. At bedside, she passed the bottle to him. He took a large swallow of wine, then set the bottle on the night table. He held the liquid in his mouth and kissed her, then reached for more, but she beat him to it.

"Wait," she said. She lifted the bottle, and with her free hand, pulled down her bra and brought the bottle close. Staring into his eyes, she poured some of the sweet wine over her erect nipples.

Never before had he felt so avid. In his urgency, he pushed her back on the bed and crossed his leg over her smooth firm belly. He hungrily licked her breasts, sucking wine from one, then the other, struggling to work off her bra and blouse.

He raised her farther up on the bed, her head settling into the soft, feather pillows. This was the part he had envisioned from the moment he had laid eyes on the striking bed.

He led her hands to the steel head bar, and she understood at once how he wanted her. She gripped tightly, her knuckles turning pale. She lunged for his lips with her own. He met them and forced her down with his head, urgently reaching between her legs.

He worked his erect penis out of his pants. Gripping his hands beside hers on the bar, he entered her. He tuned into her every response, licking her eyelids, feeling the movement of her eyes beneath. He felt her teeth with his tongue, at the same moment aware of her ankles against his calves, and he wasn't sure he would be able to hold back very long. The feeling of the cold steel in his hands welded in his mind the image of their position, both gripping tightly to this linen-draped frame. He drove into her forcefully, with unfamiliar awkwardness. It was better than he remembered, he thought, gnawing at her neck ravenously as he quickened.

He climaxed almost immediately, shouting hoarsely with each burst. Once his tremors stopped he felt drained of all energy. He was so, so tired. Barely pressing off the bed with his arms as her hips thrust upward, he tried to help her finish. She managed to lift much of his weight, but not without effort. Her moans were coming in quick, strained gasps. For one trembling instant, before succumbing to his weight, she moaned. He collapsed on her, forcing her breath away.

He rolled away, onto his back, his legs twisted around hers, too tired to move them. Almost instantly, his breathing slackened and he lay there depleted. He became oblivious to her, to them, to where they were, and to what they had done. He felt pleasantly used up, yet at the same time, in another part of his being, he felt very full, larger than life.

Far away now, a dreamy smile alighting his face, he heard Laurence's words once more in his mind as he dozed off.

No stopping you now...

"Hey, you ready yet?" Kate said, appearing in the bathroom doorway.

Peter stood leaning over the sink, cautiously dragging a razor across his face.

"Hallelujah!" Kate shouted, watching as the beard that had grown long and scraggy over the past few months disappear into the sink. Peter paused for a moment and winked at her in the mirror, his face white and foamy, then returned his concentration to the razor.

She leaned a shoulder against the edge of the door frame and stood watching him. "I like your face smooth, it feels better on me."

"Ouch!" Peter said, jerking the razor from his face. A dot of red instantly formed on his chin.

"So, Lancelot," Kate said, hanging her robe on the door hook, "what do I wear?"

"Whatever you want, it's just a neighborly thing." Peter rinsed his face, then pulled the skin on his neck taut and inspected his work. He saw that she was still watching him, and he took in her full naked reflection before turning to face her.

"I think it's more than that," she said.

"What's more?"

"The dinner. I think this Mr. Holmes is probably excited that he's met you, and wants to get to know your better."

"Well, me too. I could use a friend here. I only see you for two or three days at a time." He crossed his arms, resting his rear against the sink, and studied her up and down with a playful, approving grin. "You know, for a forty-year-old lady, you're still quite a knockout."

"Oh yeah? Well for a thirty-something boy, you're not so bad yourself." She came over to him and slid her fingertips beneath the waistband of his jockey shorts at the small of his back, rubbed her cheek softly against his. "Mmm, this does feel better." They stood there for a while, holding one another.

He pulled away from her a little so he could look into her eyes. "What is it about us?" he said. "What makes it work?"

She considered for a moment. "Well, we're a lot alike," she said, lightly kissing his nose. "And a lot unalike."

He nodded and bowed his head, focusing on their touching hips. "Do you think maybe we should be together more?"

"Maybe."

"More permanently?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?" His eyes widened a little as they sought hers.

"Petey, we work because we both have things in our lives that we believe in."

"Had," he mumbled.

"Have," she said, lifting his chin with her hand. "You're just a little dry right now. You have to give yourself some time to let things happen inside here." She knocked his head lightly with her knuckles. "It doesn't all just suddenly change overnight, Petey."

"I know. But I've been thinking." He hesitated for an instant. "What about maybe if I were to settle down a little, split some time between here and California, take it easy."

Her expression was full of attention and love, but not without a small and knowing frown. They had had the conversation before, usually when he was feeling depressed, and they both knew that neither was fully ready to settle down.

"And what if you and I, you know..." he said, his voice trailing off, his hands brushing her shoulders.

"No."

"But - "

"Petey," she said, pressing her fingertips to his lips. "You know that once you get something zipping around in that carnival-quick head of yours, you're going to be flying at a million miles an hour."

He smirked. "Okay, maybe not marriage, but how about...I don't know. I've been thinking more and more about the feeling I get when I remember back to the first time I saw a kid use a Mate computer." His voice became a whisper. "Maybe a child in my life, a baby, our baby." He stressed his grip on her waist and pulled her closer.

"You know I can't have a baby," she said. Her eyes were glistening. "I'm too old, and I told you I tried long before we met," she said. "You know that. And yet you suggest it." Taking his index finger, she lightly poked her taut belly in an attempt to make light of the situation. "Closed for business. Sorry." She trembled.

He pressed her head against his chest and rubbed the back of her neck. "Hey, I'm sorry." He kissed her eyelids. "That wasn't nice of me to bring up again. I'm really sorry. Okay?"

She nodded and he wiped his thumb under her eyes.

"Petey, trust me. You just need a little time to think. You're thinking right now about what is today, and you're not giving yourself a chance to just take it easy."

Now it was he who nodded and lowered his head to hers, and she hugged him. "It'll come, Petey, I know it will. It will come again."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart. Now put some clothes on," she said, slapping his rear. "I'm getting cold and hungry, and we don't want to be late for your new friend." She turned and strolled to the bedroom.

Suddenly his underwear whizzed past her head, grazing her hair before landing on the bed. She stopped in place and set her hands on her hips and turned around with a playful grin on her face.

"Isn't it fashionable to be late?"

* * *

"Dinner is ready," Greta said from Matthew's office door, just off the library.

"I'll just be a minute," he said, turning to acknowledge her, but she was already gone.

He finished typing his e-mail message to William Harrell, then clicked the send button. Piled on his desk were notes, charts, and schedules, each a vital facet of the overall ICP Strategic Alliance report he had been working on all day. Another Saturday devoted to work, but that was nothing new. Glancing at his watch he figured he could probably finish most of the outline by morning, so long as he hurried through dinner.

Leaving the light of his library office, he strolled through the uncharacteristically dark house. He padded down the long hallway and passed the closed dining room door, crossed the foyer, and rounded the corner to the family room and kitchen area. The room was dark and there were no plates, glasses or utensils on the table where they usually ate, just outside the kitchen and facing the family room with its big-screen television. Only the day's mail rested on the table, where he had left it several hours earlier.

"Greta?" he called, turning toward the kitchen. In the minimal illumination of the dimmed track lights he saw pots and pans resting with their lids ajar, a few gooey spoons. Having had a moment to adjust to the darkness, he caught the flickering glow coming from the dining room, which was accessed either by the foyer or through the doorway in the kitchen.

"In here," came his wife's voice softly.

He rounded the turn and was a little surprised to see Greta seated at the formal dining table, facing him. The room was dark except for the gentle radiance from two candles. Silverware shimmered and crystal glasses sparkled in the soft light. Poached vegetables and steaming new red potatoes in delicate china bowls sat beside a covered serving dish. Between the candles, in a large vase in the center of the table, were pussy willow branches, fuzzy and in full bloom. When he had walked in the door with them yesterday, she had thought for a moment that he had remembered. But then he explained that someone from the office had brought in bunches for everyone.

"Oh," was all he managed to say before he seated himself.

"I gave Marie the rest of the afternoon off," Greta said. "I fixed it myself."

"It smells wonderful," Matthew said, smiling but puzzled. They only ate in the dining room when entertaining guests. Why so formal all of the sudden?

She poured him a glass of wine and handed it to him, then lifted her own glass and held it out to him. But he had already taken a sip and was lifting the lid off of the covered dish. She hesitated, almost said something, and sighed instead. She tasted her wine and watched him for any sign of recollection, any hint of awareness.

Matthew placed the covered lid aside. "Wow, my favorite dinner," he said.

"I know," she said, clearing her throat.

He gestured for her plate and selected one delicate hen for her, two for himself. He ladled sauce over his birds and vegetables, took another sip of his wine, and dug in. Barely ten seconds into his meal, and Greta could see that his mind was already somewhere else.

No, she admitted to herself, he had not remembered. And with this knowledge came a strange aching feeling, a throbbing, in her left hand, where what had once symbolized their marriage used to be. The doctors had told her that that would sometimes happen. That at odd times it would feel as though everything were in its right place, like normal. The same was true, she thought in silent agony, of her marriage. At odd times it had felt as though it was all still there. But not now. Plain and painfully simple, he had forgotten.

After a minute or two, as if remembering that she was there, Matthew looked up from his dinner.

She sat staring at him with shimmering eyes, her utensils still resting untouched beside her plate. Before he could say anything, she spoke.

"Happy anniversary, Matthew," she said. A weighty tear dropped down her face.

His body slackened. He set down his utensils. All at once he saw the brightness of her lips, the accents around her eyes, the fine, glimmering pattern in the silk dress. He became acutely aware of her perfume lingering among the aromas of the meal. Her tears were painting dark trails down her cheeks. He gazed down into his plate, their anniversary dinner, and let loose a guilty sigh.

"Greta, I'm sorry. I'm, so, so sorry. With all the work and everything..." He lifted his hands a bit. "I just, well, I just forgot."

She reached her gloved hand across the table and touched his wrist. "It's all right, Matthew," she said with a resigned smile. She wiped her cheek with her napkin and lifted her fork.

"It is delicious," Matthew said enthusiastically.

She speared a few vegetables, chewed slowly, put down her fork, and took a long drink of wine, all the while watching her husband's hurried consumption.

"Matthew, can you slow down? Please, can't we enjoy our dinner together tonight?"

"I'm sorry, honey. It's just that, you see, I've got more work to do," he said, then tentatively added, "for the trip."

"What trip?"

"Tomorrow. New York. I told you I was meeting with Harrell on Monday, didn't I?"

"No, Matthew, you did not."

"Hmm. Funny, I thought I said something. Sorry. See what I mean. I'm so overwhelmed these days."

"Matthew, you're changing in unpleasant ways. And there's nothing funny about it."

"I beg your pardon?"

"However selfish you were before getting rid of Peter Jones, you were at least considerate and apologetic. Genuinely. Or so you seemed."

"I said I was sorry about forgetting. You're upset, and you're basing your criticism on that."

"No, Matthew. That's exactly what I'm talking about. This new way you're behaving. You say you are meeting with 'Harrell' - whatever happened to 'William,' your friend?"

"He's not my friend, Greta. He's a business partner."

"Oh, of course. Pardon me. And is that what we are too, Matthew? Business partners?"

He shook his head as if to say he'd had enough. In fact, she thought, that was what was wrong, that he'd had enough of them, of the dead end that their marriage had turned into.

With an disgusted huff she poured herself more of the good French wine, held the glass beneath her nose and she gazed out the window at the reflecting pond beyond the foot of their estate.

"Maybe, Matthew, we should talk. Don't you think, especially since tonight is our anniversary, that we should talk? What's happened to us?"

"Dear, I can't," he said, pausing to wash down a mouthful of food with a swallow of wine. "I'm going to be up until six in the morning as it is. And I've got an early flight. I'll just be able to jog and shower."

He ate and she drank in silence for a few minutes, until she could stand it no more.

"Matthew, is it going to stop? Is it going to change? Ever?"

"What, honey? Will what stop?"

Any remorse he may have felt for forgetting their anniversary was obviously gone now she could see, forgotten with everything else, as if a switch had been thrown, his mind saturated once again with his work. "Matthew, do you understand that you are obsessed with Wallaby? Really, you are worse than Peter ever was."

"It's not an easy job," he said, wiping a piece of bread in the last smear of sauce on his plate. "Replacing him."

"We never see each other anymore. Even when you two had your falling-out, you saw him more than you see me now. Every morning you're up at five-thirty, then you're at work all day, and I never talk to you - "

"Meetings."

"Then you come home and gobble down your dinner, barely a word between us, or if you do have anything to say it's about that damn company, then you're off into your library until late at night until you come to bed and fall asleep." Her breathing had become panicky.

"Look, I've got to do my job," he said, irritated now.

She leaned forward with her hands flattened on either side of her full plate. She didn't care that her gloved left hand was there for him to contend with. Maybe that was the problem, that she had never really forced him to deal with it.

"Matthew, I'm all alone. You're all I've got. It's not that I mind being here all day, but when you come home, it's worse because then you're here but we're still not together, and on the weekends, like today, you work all day in the library."

She intended to force him into battle if that was what it took. But what he did next completely disarmed her: He placed a hand over hers, the left one, and met her eyes with compassion. She felt suddenly hopeful. She had finally gotten through to him.

"Greta," he said gently, "everything I'm doing is for us. The things I'm making happen at work are very complex and important, and these things will change our lives forever." He patted her hand and smiled. "Soon it will slow down a little," he said, tossing down the rest of his wine.

But his words sounded shallow and condescending. Her hopes of understanding disintegrated and the throb in her left hand returned with renewed force. She snatched her glass and finished her wine in one quick swallow. She poured another. Was there no way to get through to him? To make him see how close he was coming to destroying them? "Matthew, it's ruining us, and you're letting it happen." Nothing. She went for broke. "Don't you see, I'm trying not to let anything bad happen to us."

He seemed undaunted by her warning. Wiping his lips with his napkin, he got up, walked around behind her chair and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"Darling," he said, "I have to get back to work now. Nothing bad will happen to us. I won't let it." Then he kissed the top of her head and left the room.

She turned her head and looked out at the pond again, and whispered to her reflection in the window.

"Then I will."

* * *

"Poppyshit!" Byron shouted, waving his glass at Peter, who sat across the table. "The problem with kids today is their parents!" He set his glass down firmly as if challenging anyone to dispute his opinion.

"Dear," Grace interrupted, gently touching her napkin to her upper lip with raised eyebrows at her husband.

"What? Huh?" he mumbled, confused. "Oh," he exclaimed, dabbing his lips with his napkin, wiping away a small piece of sauerkraut.

Grace smiled and shook her head, her grin spreading wider when Kate smiled back.

Peter had chosen the subject of children to start the table discussion. "I don't think that's a fair judgment, Byron," Peter said. "I think it's more than just what goes on in the home. It's everything, all of society. Kids are hardly given a good example by their parents, their friends. Movies. Television," he said. "It's like they've turned into MTV lemmings."

The foursome ate at an antique Shaker table, situated near the living room hearth. The home was decorated in simple and warm country style. A charming, homey combination. Like Byron and Grace Holmes themselves.

Kate and Peter had both felt instantly comfortable when they arrived a few minutes late wearing jeans and sweaters, which fit in nicely with Byron's work shirt and khakis, and Grace's simple cable-knit sweater and flannel slacks. Dock lamps dotted the inlet outside, and boats bobbed silently in the bay, glowing with a fuzzy luminescence in the moonlight. Peter and Kate's own vacation home was situated a few hundred yards down the inlet. Their dock was similar to the Holmes's, though they did not own a boat.

"We had primarily invented the Mate computer with no one in mind but ourselves, computer guys," Peter said. "But within a short time, parents were buying them like crazy for their kids.

"We want," he started, then paused for an instant to correct himself, "wanted computers to be especially great for kids, to lure them away from the TV set. When some of the software developers created really great learning games, it all took off from there." His eyes were shining with the clarity that comes when you talk about something you deeply care about.

They were silent for a moment then Byron looked up from his plate with a frown. "That's all well and good. And you're right about it, that children especially benefit from computers, and not by television. Now," he said, pointing to Peter's plate with his mustard-smearred knife, "how about you eat that bratwurst before it gets cold."

Grace broke the silence. "They have a computer at the foster home where I volunteer a few hours a week, one of yours I think," she said, smiling at Peter. "Those little kids, and the bigger ones too, they sit there for hours and play games on it, and do homework, and talk about all sorts of things I don't understand, in a language all their own. It's lovely how such a thing could bring these children together and give them a family of sorts."

The discussion carried on some more. Peter had not resumed eating, so Grace got up and began to clear the table.

"Let me help you," Kate said.

"You get no dessert if you don't finish your meal, boy," Byron said. He rubbed his hands across his chest in post-Thanksgiving dinner fashion.

"Everything was delicious, Grace," Peter said. "It's just that I haven't had a very good appetite lately."

"That's all right. You can take home leftovers if you'd like."

"Too late," Byron said, spearing the remaining half of sausage from Peter's plate.

When Kate and Grace were out of earshot, Byron leaned across the table. "You're a lucky fellow," he whispered. "She's a pretty lady." He dropped a big wink.

"I know it," Peter agreed, looking out at the water. There was a stirring in his chest, and he quickly turned his thoughts to other things.

"Come on," Byron said, pushing away from the table. "Let's get some air while the ladies fuss and giggle."

Peter had to laugh at that one. The thought of Kate "fussing" about with Grace in the kitchen made Peter both happy and sad at the same time. It was what he wanted now, yet it was what she would not be for him. How could she be so sure they weren't ready to settle down? As far as children were concerned, they could adopt. Talking about kids, and knowing that there were none in his and Kate's near future, had turned his dark mood of late even darker.

As they headed out onto the deck, Byron pulled a small pouch from his pants pocket, and from his shirt pocket he produced a briar pipe. He filled the pipe in silence as they strolled along the dock. When they reached the end, Byron lit up. The glow of his match reflected back in the black water. That is just what I need, Peter thought, a spark to go off inside my head.

"You know, boy," Byron said, shaking out the match, "I like you." He inhaled on the pipe, regarding Peter for a moment.

"Thanks," Peter said. "You're a good guy, too."

"That's what my wife tells me," Byron said, exhaling a cloud of blue smoke. "You and I ought to take a float out on this baby," he said, poking his pipe at his boat, the "Net Work." He sat down, dangling his feet above the low tide, and Peter sat down beside him. "Listen, I'm gonna tell you something, and I want you to promise me you'll think about it. Okay?"

"Sure."

"You're a bright fella. But you're walking around like a little boy who lost his old dog and hates the world for it," he said.

Peter exhaled, his breath forming a faint mist in the cool air, and looked down into the water.

"Son, everything dies. It's how life goes on. Your pooch, he's gone. It's time to go pick a new puppy, and train it, and love it, and make it great."

"That's easy for you to say. You've done it all and it lasted longer for you, most of your life, and you have a wife now and you're happy."

"Poppyshit!" Byron said. "Do you think the 990 was the only thing I ever did with ICP? No way. I did all sorts of things with them, but the difference is that I stayed on board, and times were different then. I was trained to do the things I did. You're different."

"How so?"

"You're a rebel. I was too, but in a different sort of way. You're a real risk-taker, but not for the sake of taking risks. You do it because it's the only way you know how to be."

Peter nodded.

"You've got to understand and accept that it just takes a little healing, over time. Time. I can tell you this because I've been through it myself. I almost died once, had that heart attack I mentioned to you the other day. Got it from not letting go. Almost lost my life. But worse, after I got out of the hospital, I almost lost my wife. Ah, I don't want to get into all that. Just understand something mister, that this isn't the last time it's going to happen to you. You have to know that now, while things are germinating up here." He tapped a finger to his head. "When the next thing comes, when you start out all clumsy and getting into it all over again, even if it's way back in the back of your heart, you have to accept that someday it's going to change, end, and then you start all over again. And again and again. You keep doing it. Over and over. And it gets better and better with age. Just like they say."

Peter felt choked up listening to Byron so candidly share his experience. "But," Peter started with a little more than a quiet puff from his lips. "But it hurts."

"Of course it hurts," Byron said. "But you pick up, dust yourself off, and go at it again. Where do you think all this age-old advice comes from? It's truth, friend, that's why you're hearing it from me. Sure thing."

"I don't know. It's not all the same, you've got more that matters," Peter said, hitching his thumb absently in the direction of Byron's home.

"Hah, boy's blind, too. I see a lady in there who looks at you with real fancy in her eye. She's standing by you strong, I know it."

Byron took his pipe from his mouth and looked thoughtfully into its bowl. "I'll give you something to think about, and you let it roll around in your head a bit." He sniffed. "Thing is, is I've been bored lately. Yeah, I love it here, and our home in Connecticut, and Gracie, and we've been talking about maybe traveling again this winter," he said, waving his pipe in the general direction of everywhere in the world, "but I've been feeling sort of itchy. Like I gotta do something. You ask me, I think there was a reason for us running into each other the way we did."

"How's that?"

"I don't know why. Not yet, anyway. I suspect it has something to do with our difference in thinking. I mean that in a good way. We come from different worlds, yet we we're not such different beings. If you and I put our heads together, I bet we could really show the rest of 'em a thing or two."

"Think so?"

Byron winked. "I know so," he said, patting Peter on the leg. "Now come on," he said, rising to his feet. "Let's go get us a slice of that apple pie."

* * *

She set the dirty dishes in the sink, wrapped the leftovers in foil. On the counter, there sat a cranberry and apple crumble she had made for dessert. The bourbon sauce, which was to be warmed and drizzled over the piping dessert, sat in a saucepan on the stove, a gloppy mess. She dumped it down the drain and left the dishes in the sink for Marie to deal with in the morning.

Matthew was back in his office working, and Greta stood with the last of the wine in her glass gazing out the kitchen window at the valley beyond.

When was it going to end, she had asked him. But she knew the answer to that question. There were two answers, really. The first was that it was never going to end, and the second was that it already had. She had tried - for the last time? - to break through the wall he had over the years erected between them. But she knew now, after tonight's dinner, that the wall would only grow higher, thicker. After Matthew turned Wallaby into what he wanted, then sold it to ICP, it would be no different when he was promoted to a higher rank within ICP, perched atop his ever-growing blockade. Maybe they would stay in California, but probably they would have to go back to New York, to ICP's headquarters. Though she sometimes missed New York, the thought of returning held little appeal. There her friends were all wives of the other International Foods executives, and out here, regardless of all she had heard about the nice people in California, the women were still the same, robots who yessed their husbands at social occasions and dinner parties, while behind their backs they, and their husbands, engaged in extramarital affairs.

That wasn't how Greta wanted to end up living her life. But would she?

She finished her wine and set the glass on the counter - a little too firmly. The crystal base shattered into little bits with a high resonating tinkle, yet the bowl of the glass remained intact in her hand.

"Shit," she cried, the sound breaking a dam in her, releasing a flood of tears. She tossed the unbroken half into the sink, which echoed the same tinkling sounds, even louder this time. She held her breath, wondering if he had heard, wondering if would come to see if she had injured herself. She waited, holding on to this fragile hope with all of her breath.

If he had heard, he wasn't letting her know. She let out a great sigh. Jesus, was that her life with Matthew? Shattered, broken beyond repair? It was too much to consider at this moment. She needed to get out of the house for a little while, to go for a walk in the pretty night and clear her head.

She snatched her windbreaker from the coat hook beside the door to the garage and stepped outside into the evening's coolness. She wandered down the sloping hill to the high, solid gate. She stepped through the gateway and hiked down the trail to the edge of the pond with its narrow dirt path.

Eventually, if she followed it, the path would lead her to the horse stables. Sometimes she rode Mighty Boy along here, circling the entire pond and back around to the stable, passing her own home on the way. Quickly and steadfastly she strode through the twisted, tree-lined path in the moonlight. The stables lay a half-mile ahead.

It was supposed to have been her night to celebrate the memories of her marriage, but now she found herself thinking about the scene that had taken place in Mighty Boy's stall the other day. For better or worse, she had stopped him. She had admitted to him that she and Matthew were having problems, but they were still married, and even though she had desperately wanted him to go on, she said she could not let herself be with him. He had released her, and assured her that it would not happen again. Unless, he said, she came to him. Since that day she had not gone back to the ranch.

She slowed for a moment, then stopped. She absently stroked her left hand with her right hand as she examined her present state of mind. What was she going to do, just knock on the door of his cottage? She turned and looked back up the hill to her home. A few lights glowed - Matthew's office. She swallowed, and her left hand throbbed some more.

Yes, she decided, that was exactly what she was going to do.

She moved on, her pace quickening, her heart pumping. Shortly the stables came into view, illuminated by both the light of the moon and by the floodlights surrounding the property. Trailing along the border of light, just beyond its edge, she grew excited and reckless, like an inexperienced burglar. Her brisk walk had warmed her and she unzipped her jacket as she stealthily slipped around the stable.

She passed the main house, where the ranch's owner lived alone. Purple-blue light flickered from an upstairs window. About fifty yards from where she stood were two small cottages. She had passed them many times while riding. Jean-Pierre lived in one of those cottages, and though she had never been invited inside, she knew which one was his because he had mentioned once that it afforded a beautiful view of the pond from his bedroom window, through which he could see her home and its rear upstairs light glowing late at night. Though her home was too high and far away for him to see inside, she was excited by the thought of him lying in his dark bedroom, fixated on her bedroom window. Had he ever glimpsed her passing the window, closing the curtains?

The sound of a car engine starting suddenly broke through the quiet evening. A second later a swath of light beamed just a foot beside her and beyond, as far as she could see, into the woods. She ducked behind a small wooden utility shed stationed alongside the drive. White light pierced through the tiny cracks and seams of the shed. Cautiously she peeked around its edge. A car appeared from between the cottages, its light sweeping past the shed as it steered onto the drive. Greta flattened herself against the side of the small building and crept around the corner once the car had completely passed.

Was he going out for the night? The sound of the engine grew distant, then came a high squealing noise when the car reached the end and turned onto the main road. Once more, the sounds of the night and her own pulse were all she could hear. She left her cover and pressed on.

No, she saw at once, it hadn't been Jean-Pierre because his MG was parked in front of the cottage. Avoiding the light cast by the lamp outside the front door, she circled around to the back of the small house. She peered into the bedroom window. The room was lit by a small lamp beside an empty bed with twisted sheets. The sight caused her breath to catch. She rushed to the back stoop and halted before the door, flexed her hands a few times. Feeling the night's coolness breezing through the silken material of her gloves, she absently wiped them on her dress and turned and faced the pond for a moment to collect her thoughts.

Could she really go through with this? Her eyes searched across the small shining lake, along to the narrow shore and the trail's edge, up the hill. Her home. She could see the very window where she had stood just minutes earlier, and she could see too the damned glow coming from Matthew's office, where, on their anniversary night, he was fondling his true love, Wallaby.

Yes, she could go through with this, and would. She turned and knocked three times on the Dutch door, so loudly that she startled herself. She heard the short, hollow tump of footsteps, the clacking sound of the door latch. For an instant it felt as if her wedding band had tightened around her finger. Irrational.

The top half of the door swung open, and there he stood, wearing only jeans and wire-framed reading

glasses. His expression bore no surprise. A knowing smile formed on his full lips. She started breathing again. Plumes of mist danced around her head as the warmth of the cottage bled outside into the chilly air. He removed his glasses and closed the top door for a moment, then the entire door opened and he stepped back, his arm extended. She quickly and nervously glanced around the room as she went inside, taking in at once its simple furnishings and his things. There were boots beside the front door, a black T-shirt tossed over the back of the couch, a beer bottle beneath the shaded lamp, a wineglass beside the bottle, a pair of brown leather gloves beside the glass. She heard her own blood pulse in her ears, felt dizzy and a little buzzed by the wine, the rush of activity, and now the stillness.

Following her gaze, Jean-Pierre quickly stepped into the tiny living room. He picked up the gloves. They were women's gloves, she could see that now. Everything was happening so fast.

His shoulders sagged. "You saw them," he said.

Her eyes quickly jumped to the bottle, to the glass, to the gloves, back to the glass. She thought of the car that had just gone. She looked into his eyes. "What?" she said, her voice not sounding like her own.

He held the gloves out to her. "I wanted to wrap them and surprise you."

She blinked. "For me?"

"Of course."

She accepted the gloves in her right hand. There were a few small, barely noticeable scratches on them, but the stitching was clean and new. She wanted to say something, but when she looked into his eyes again, whatever she had thought she wanted to say vanished, and in its place was desire, like what she had felt when he kissed her in the stall.

"Thank you," she managed as she absently watched him take back the gloves and carefully fold them over, then tuck them into her jacket pocket.

He took her by the shoulders and kissed her. Her eyes were still closed and lips slightly parted when he pulled his face away. She had come to him, and now she needed him to guide her.

He stepped aside and indicated the way to the bedroom. She moved and he trailed her holding one of her hands in his, the one she would let him hold. Had he figured it out yet, she wondered, about the other one. She stopped beside the bed, facing the pond. He switched off the lamp and placed his hands on her shoulders. She struggled to see clearly, but could not. He pressed his hard body against her back. The air was all made of his scent, musky, sexy, alive. She wanted to be tumbled and spun in the tangled sheets that lay before her, to move her hands between their softness and his firmness, to flop into the pillows, his weight hard on her, his mouth on hers. She closed her eyes. Yes, his mouth, which was now gently kissing the back of her neck, his lips pulling the small hairs at the base of her skull. She twisted her head into the warmth of his hot and chilling breath. A small sound escaped her as he slid her windbreaker from her shoulders. It fell to the ground with a soft rustle. She closed her eyes and reached her good hand to her left shoulder, placing it over his hand. She leaned back into his hardness and he pressed himself against her more firmly. The wine had helped to numb her feelings, and now the charged atmosphere of his bedroom melted her into yielding. Even her left hand felt normal.

I tried, God as my witness, I tried, she thought with a shudder as he wrapped his arms around her and across her breasts. He held her until her trembling subsided, then he began to unzip her dress, very slowly. She opened her eyes. Her vision had adjusted to the silvery light, which now sharpened the edges of everything and cast ambiguous shadows.

And there, across the pond, she saw Matthew's lamp.

"No," she said, reaching behind for her zipper.

He gripped her wrist.

"Yes," he breathed hotly in her ear.

She challenged his hold. Unable to resist, she yielded, spun fiercely, and sought his lips. He held her head between his hands and kissed her, pushing against her so intensely she felt she would burst into flames. Her hands slid up his chest and across his shoulders, his broad back. This hardness, I want this on me, was all she could think, I have to have this in me.

But again, as if burning into her back, Matthew's library lamp broke her, mocked her. With a cry, she twisted around. "No. I can't. Not with him right there."

"We'll pull the shade," Jean-Pierre said. He nuzzled his nose in her hair.

"No," she said, planting herself firmly. "Not now. Not with him this close."

"Then when, Greta? When?"

This had been a mistake. She had to get away. "Tomorrow," she said, pulling away from him. "Tomorrow, Jean-Pierre." She tugged at her dress, putting some more distance between them as she rearranged herself. Her expression was final, forbidding. She wanted to remember him just like this, standing before her with his arms at his sides, his bright white teeth and eyes, the silvery sharp edges of his muscled chest.

"Where?" he asked, taking her by the elbows.

"Matthew is going to New York. I'll call you." Afraid that the gentle yet firm and alluring touch of his powerful hands would stall her, she forced herself to pull away.

He handed her her jacket, and followed her into the light of the living room. She opened the door, turned around, and slipped on her jacket, zipping it firmly.

He clasped one hand on the door's edge. With the other he gripped her wrist and pulled her close. She gasped. He kissed her long and deeply. The cold night air chilled her back, while the heat of his mouth warmed her insides. She drew away with a frustrated moan.

He raised her good hand to his lips and brushed it lightly. The stubble of his beard on the silken material caused a sound that had an extraordinary effect on her lower regions. She pressed her upper thighs together.

"Tomorrow," he said, and released her.

She nodded, then was off and back into the night, back to her home.

Running through the chilly night she remembered the gloves in her pocket. She stopped and removed her silk gloves and put on the pair he had given her. They made her feel secure and warm, but not all the way. Perhaps they would feel right once she had the left one tailored to accommodate her shortcoming.

Whatever it takes, she solemnly vowed, whatever it takes.

Chapter 10

"Mr. Harrell, Mr. Locke has arrived."

"Send him in, please," came William Harrell's voice thinly from the intercom on his secretary's desk.

Matthew was surrounded by the kind of opulence afforded only by companies at the highest reaches of the Fortune 500. Plush carpets, deep, rich wooden desks, fine art originals, and people referring to one another as Mr., Ms., Mrs., and "sir." It was a sobering contrast to Wallaby's compact, Herman-Miller modular partition offices, open-air buildings, and first-name protocols. Had it been only three years since Matthew had occupied an office at International Foods very much like this one, so expansive it was more like a penthouse apartment than an office? Matthew's own office at Wallaby was no larger than the standard manager's office, just big enough to move around comfortably in. He felt queerly out of place entering the ICP building, surrounded by such abundance, such magnitude. He had even forgotten how long it took for elevators to climb tall buildings; Wallaby's tallest building was only three stories high, and almost everyone used the central atrium stairs to travel between floors.

He shrugged his shoulders to straighten his suit - yet another difference between casual West Coast wizardry and starchy East Coast Big Business. He had felt uncomfortable walking through the city, unable to see more than a few blocks in any direction, surrounded by noise, exhaust, and serious faces. Indeed, California, with its rolling hills and vistas, mild weather, and no-hurry attitude had affected him more deeply than he had realized.

In one hand he carried his briefcase, in the other a large binder containing all of Wallaby's product plans, financial summaries, and forecasts, as well as the strategy he had worked on two nights ago. He had finalized the strategy on the plane yesterday and printed the finished copy in his hotel suite last night with his Joey Plus and portable printer.

He had come to think of the binder as his clay, molded into the shape of a new Wallaby, a grassroots

company deemed a serious player by the most important counsel of all, based in this very city: Wall Street. Since last week's introduction of the new Joey Plus, Wallaby's stock had climbed four points, and reviews were glowing.

It was all very exciting. So much so it had affected him in his sleeping hours. Last night he had had a shadowy, romantic dream, that he was as a gemologist transporting precious jewels for Sotheby's of London...then it shifted, and the gems had changed to secret documents for the CIA...then it turned out that he was working not for the CIA, but for them...the other side. When he left the hotel this morning for his meeting, he felt as if he were holding in his hands his fate, his life. Many lives. And then a macabre thought entered his mind, left over from his exotic dream: Where was the cyanide pill? He had no cyanide pill if he was caught. It was a preposterous notion of course, his imagination getting the better of him. Nevertheless, still a little intrigued by the role his dream had cast him in, he strode into William's office with his life in his hands and a feeling of pure elation, and just a little fear. Good fear.

"Hello, Matthew," William said heartily, rounding his wide desk with his hand extended. He wore a perfectly tailored charcoal business suit, a crisp white shirt, and a burgundy tie. The man's entire appearance exuded sharpness, Big Business. In other words, ICP.

Matthew set his briefcase on the thickly carpeted floor, clutching the binder in his left hand. He noticed William's impeccable manicure as they shook hands. Matthew's own fingernails were chewed and dry, and he could not remember the last time he had had a manicure himself. He was beginning to feel as if he were underdressed, as if he had underestimated the importance of this date. Gripping the binder with both hands, he grasped all at once that it was not his costume that should match William's incomparability; it was the binder's contents: Wallaby. This was not just his life in his hands, it was his love. And it was perfect.

William's secretary returned with a tray of coffee, tea, and pastries. She placed the tray on the table, and Matthew asked her for a glass water.

"What's the matter? No more city fuel?" William said as he poured himself a cup of steaming coffee.

"Haven't touched the stuff in over two years."

"Next thing you'll tell me is that you're into flotation tanks and sushi."

"The sushi part, yes," Matthew said with a light laugh.

"How's Greta?" William asked, sipping his coffee.

"Oh, she's fine, thank you." Matthew accepted the glass of water and finished half of it in one drink.

"And how does she like California living?"

"She likes it. She keeps quite busy."

"Sounds nice."

"Yes," Matthew said, setting the glass down. He placed his briefcase on the table. With the mention of his wife, he thought for an instant of what he had hidden inside his briefcase. Since he had placed it there, he had never once taken it out again and looked at it. Would he ever?

"Let's get started," William said. "I got your e-mail, and I'm pleased to hear everything went well with your executives and board. It hasn't been easy on my end. My advisers keep scratching their heads, thinking their boss has gone crazy, especially after your introduction last week. They want us to build something to 'blow the doors off the Joey Plus,' as my technology adviser puts it. But, to his dismay, I've not approved any new development, other than revisions and enhancements, since you and I had our first meeting."

Matthew was pleased with this confirmation of the Joey Plus's success. It meant that to William and ICP, Wallaby, and he, Matthew, were even more valuable now than when they had first met to discuss their secretive pact.

"I'll tell you," William said, indicating the binder with his eyes, "I'm glad I can finally reveal our plan to my board of directors and the executive staff. As I've assured you already, they will vote unanimously in favor of our plan. They'll have no choice."

"Here it is. The complete strategy, as outlined." Matthew handed the binder to William, who opened it in his lap and was silent for a few moments as he browsed through the various sections.

"Oh yes," he said, "this is a trade after all." He lifted a folder from the table and handed it to

Matthew. "Here are all the connectivity specifications for the 990 series, as well as the file compatibility specs for the BP series."

Matthew took the slim nearly weightless folder in his hands and all of the sudden felt a bit let down. The folder felt like nothing compared to the binder he had just turned over. No girth. No satisfaction. No substance between his fingers. This information would go to Alan Parker and his engineering organization, and perhaps to them it was attractive, but Matthew already missed the extensive, intricately organized volumes in the thick binder now in William's possession. The exchange felt uneven, unbalanced. Unfair.

"I especially like your idea of calling our plan a 'strategic alliance,' " William said. "Tell me more about how you plan to handle the announcement."

Matthew stood up and removed his jacket. "I think what we should do is announce our relationship in three months, when we have a working prototype of the Joey II, which will be the first Wallaby portable computer that's compatible with your computers."

William nodded, crossed his legs, and continued to browse through the lengthy document, glancing now and then at Matthew.

"We'll announce that we're working together on strategic connectivity products from an engineering, marketing, sales, and customer service standpoint. We'll reveal that you and I met, several months ago - and by the way, my executive staff and board are aware of today's meeting - and you will explain ICP's election for Wallaby Joey II systems as an alternative to your own portable computer, and that you will continue to support the older ICP BP computer, as well as facilitate co-sales with our people for Joey II computers. And finally, once you begin the merger process, we'll determine Wallaby's value, and you'll follow up about a year later with the acquisition announcement."

William snapped the binder closed. "Excellent."

"Yes," Matthew agreed under his breath as he seated himself. He felt a little dizzy. Perhaps the building's height and the change in environment were getting to him. He wanted to finish this meeting and get back down on the ground as soon as possible.

"It's exactly how I had envisioned it, but better," William said. "You've managed to smooth the transition with the alliance aspect, so we're careful to unveil our deal a little at a time."

"That's the idea."

"Very good." William placed his cup and saucer on the table. Rubbing his hands together he sat a little more upright. "Now, there is one small detail that I'm curious about. Have you spoken with Peter Jones?" His eyes locked on Matthew's.

"No," Matthew said, barely able to contain his surprise.

"I see," William said. "Has there been any communication between the two of you? A letter? An e-mail?"

"None."

"Hmm."

"Why do you ask? Is there a concern?"

"Well, it's more a curiosity than a concern really. Nothing to worry about. What's he doing now?"

"He's been in seclusion in Maine, at his vacation home. He still owns a large amount of Wallaby stock," Matthew added in an attempt to reassure the other man.

"Yes, well, that's no guarantee, is it." William said. It was not a question. He removed his glasses and lightly massaged his eyelids. "What I'm wondering about is the same thing I was curious about when I first contacted you, proposing this venture."

"Which is?" Matthew asked, fully knowing the reason before William delivered the words.

"My biggest - " William started, but then paused abruptly to select his choice of words. "My initial motivation for wanting Wallaby was, of course, Jones's product in the pipeline, the Joey. And what is the Joey, really, but the physical evidence of Jones's vision? So naturally, I'm curious about what he's up to, now that he's not spending his time at Wallaby."

This concern had never occurred to Matthew, and apparently his expression said as much.

"Matthew, don't worry, it's not going to change our arrangement," William said. "We want Wallaby, and especially the Joey technology."

Joey technology. Peter's invention. Matthew was at once overcome by a wave of jealousy and loathing. When would Wallaby be considered his? Once Wallaby was merged with ICP, would people still call it "the company founded by Peter Jones?" Would he, Matthew, be forgotten, like some sort of middle man?

William poured Matthew another glass of water. As he accepted it, William said, "There's no way you can persuade Jones to return to Wallaby?"

"That seems unlikely," Matthew said calmly, but what he really wanted to say, to shout, was that Wallaby was his now, and Peter Jones was gone for good.

"I see." William nodded and closed the binder, shutting with it any further discussion of Peter Jones. "When do you fly back?"

"Tomorrow."

William tapped the binder. "I'm going to have to spend some time with this before I'll have any questions for you." He glanced at his watch. "Do you have any other meetings while you're here?"

"None. I allotted a full day for us, and intended to go back tomorrow. However, if we're through, I'll go back tonight, and you can contact me when you're ready."

"Fine," William said, rising. He offered a few words of reassurance. "It's all coming along well, Matthew." They shook hands outside William's office, and Matthew exited the suite.

Pressing the down elevator button, he noticed his hand was a little unsteady. Now that their meeting was through, he was grateful to be leaving New York City a day sooner than planned. "Come on," Matthew whispered, pressing the button again and again.

As he stood brooding over William's surprise concern for Peter Jones, waiting for what felt like an eternity for the elevator to arrive, he absently chewed his thumbnail, wishing in earnest for things to move more quickly.

* * *

"Hey, where're you off to so early?" Kate said, lifting her head from the pillow.

Climbing into his jeans, Peter nearly tripped himself in his pants legs as he turned to face her.

"Oops, sorry," he whispered, "I was trying to be quiet." He knelt next to the bed and kissed her. Her eyelids fluttered, wakefulness coming slowly. "Would you mind if we took a rain check on our trip to Boston today?" Her hair lay spread around the pillow, and he combed it with his fingers, smoothing it around her head.

She opened her eyes and shook her head, then smiled slowly, joyfully.

"Why the big grin?"

She lifted a hand from beneath the comforter and gently knocked her knuckles on his head. "Circus is in town," she said, cupping his chin.

"Well, I've been thinking," Peter said, running fingers through his hair.

"Mm hmm."

"When Byron and I talked the other night, you know, outside, I started thinking about some things."

"You don't say?" she said, with mock surprise. "Like when I kept trying to talk to you yesterday at the park and you were in another zone?"

"Yeah," he said, nodding, "then too. I started coming up with a concept I think he could help me work through. There's something missing, a link I guess, and if I talk to him about it he'll probably be able to help me come up with some ideas."

"Hey, you're going to be busy, it sounds like. Maybe I should just go down to Boston myself, then home. That okay?"

"If it's okay with you. I mean, if you want. I'm sorry," he said, planting his hands on either side of her head and looking into her eyes. "I just have to talk to him about this."

"Petey, I'm ecstatic you want to see Byron this morning. I'll be back next weekend. If, that is, you'll still want to see me."

"You're a goof sometimes." He thanked her with a kiss, then went back to getting dressed.

"Hey," she said, propping up on one elbow as he slipped on his dock shoes.

"Hmm?"

"Who's calling who a goof?" She tossed a pillow at him. "You're inside-out, Einstein."

He looked down at his shirt, pulled it over his head, reversed it, and put it back on. "Thanks," he said, then leaned over and kissed her good-bye.

"Don't mention it."

On his way out of the house he stopped in the kitchen and wrote "I'm a lucky guy," on a little yellow Post-it note. He signed it with a tiny heart and pressed it onto the coffee machine.

He walked the short distance to the Holmes house quickly, his thoughts turning round and round. With the tourist season over, the town was somber and cool. Here and there a car occupied the driveway of one of the homes along the inlet, and even fewer boats remained docked. He arrived at the Holmes place just as Grace was coming around from the side of the house carrying a potted plant in her hands. "This one isn't going to make it," she said, holding the sickly plant up for him to see.

"Sure isn't," Peter said. "Is Byron here?"

"He's in back," she said. Then, with a smile, she confided, "I'm glad you came by. Yesterday he was mumbling about some idea he said he's got to talk to you about. He was going to head over to your house in a little bit. He'll be glad you're here."

Peter rounded the house and trotted down the dock. He could see the top of Byron's white-haired head. "Hey," he said, leaping from the dock to the boat.

"I see you got your boat shoes on," Byron said, looking up from his work, as he finished oiling the boat's teakwood bulwarks. "Good," he said, making a few last wipes. "You're ready to sail."

"If you say so."

"I say so. You saved me a short walk, you know, 'cause I was going to come over and talk to you today after I took a little sail." He replaced the lid on the can of oil and tossed the sodden rags in a plastic bag, stuffed both into a canvas sack. "Here, stow this, son," he said, pointing to an open bin just inside the cabin. Peter caught the small sack and put it away. The boat's teakwood and brass cabin was clean, classy, elegant, and sharp - much like its captain, Peter thought.

"Cast off," Byron told him, indicating the boat's mooring lines.

Peter jumped to the dock and unwrapped the lines from the cleats. The engine churned alive. "Now give us a good shove," Byron ordered.

Once Peter was back on board, Byron applied power and the boat lurched once, then smoothed, and they motored for the inlet, the water ahead rolling in small swells, the day clear and crisp.

"Is it going to be windy enough?" Peter asked, shading his eyes and squinting out at the ocean that lay a half-mile ahead.

"Here," Byron said. He tossed Peter a spare pair of sunglasses. Peter put them on and looked again. He could see a few boats in the distance whipping along at a respectable clip, their sails puffed fully.

"Sail much?" Byron said.

Peter shook his head. He gripped the rail behind him with both hands, anchoring himself in a leaning position as he watched Byron work the wheel.

The older man smiled and pulled his pipe from his shirt. Holding the wheel steady with his elbows, he

expertly applied his lighter to the pipe's bowl. "You'll get used to it," he said, pointing his pipe at Peter's rigid knees. "Just gotta go with the flow."

When they reached the ocean, Byron began yelling orders to Peter, who followed them with colt-like shakiness. Within minutes the mainsail and jib were swollen fully in the eastern wind.

Byron shut off the engine, and Peter observed the silence, the power of the wind as it pushed the sleek vessel along quickly and quietly, as if by magic.

"Here," Byron said, stepping back from the wheel. "Hold it where my hands are."

Peter placed his hands over Byron's, ready. When Byron let go, Peter's body gave a slight jerk. "Just keep her steady," Byron said, returning his hands. He held them there until Peter adjusted to the boat's pull.

Byron disappeared inside the cabin for a moment, then returned with two cans of beer. He popped the lids and handed one to Peter. "Top of the morning to ya," he said, tipping his can to Peter.

The two men shared a couple of minutes of silence between them as they sailed some distance. Peter was the first to speak up. "I've got an idea," he said simply.

"Me too," Byron said. His gaze was focused behind Peter, at the distant shoreline. He took a sip from his beer and gave Peter a nod. "You first," he said.

"Okay. I was thinking about what you said the other night. You know, about our differences, good ones."

Byron took a thoughtful suck of his pipe and nodded, then expelled a plume of aromatic smoke.

"So I started thinking," Peter went on, his speech coming quickly, "that with your experience in big system stuff, and with what I know about little system stuff, what if we put our heads together?"

Byron made a gesture with his pipe for Peter to go on.

"Okay. See, I've been thinking about portable computers, and PIAs - you know, personal information managers. And as much as I think they are helpful, like the Joey, they're not really as helpful as they could be. They don't so much help you, not directly anyway, as serve you, so to speak. I mean, they're really just smaller, more tightly-integrated computers than real helpers."

"Mm hmm."

"So, what if there was a way to make a portable computer really help you? To really assist you, by anticipating your next move. By knowing you better and better the more you work with it?"

Byron took the small metal wind cap off the bowl of his pipe and checked the tobacco. He leaned over the side of the rail and tapped it carefully against his weathered palm, spilling the black ashes into the ocean. Then he leaned against the cabin, took a long swallow of his beer, and pushed his sunglasses higher on his nose.

"What you're talking about is agents. Agent technology. Little 'intelligent' software buddies that run on your computer in the background and pay attention to what you're doing, and what you're not doing, and then act on their own, on your behalf, to help you by anticipating your next move. Sound about right?"

"That's exactly right. We were just starting to play around with the concept before I left. But my lead programmer was really into them, and he had a bunch of friends at MIT who were studying them in a big way."

"Right. And what I was thinking about fits in nice with what's got you all juiced. See, all this poppyshit everyone's going on about, the world wide web and the Internet, it's got me a little ticked off. It's supposed to be the world's greatest 'new' information source, yet getting connected is a bitch. And what with those snappy little computers you make, well, a person should be able to hook up to the net and web by just plugging in the phone. It's too damn complicated the way it is now. It needs to be simpler."

Peter jumped in excitedly. "You know, that's incredible, I was thinking that that would be my next step at Wallaby, to make net stuff easier for people. And now that you mention it, think about the two. I mean, combining both the net stuff and the agent stuff. I've seen demonstrations of net-savvy agents

that go off and find information and articles you are looking for, seeking out news that you know you are interested in, and news that you didn't know you were interested in, but based on your previous interests, the agent finds related items for you. That's what I call a real information assistant."

"Yep, that's a damn good idea," Byron agreed. "And that net stuff, you know, is what this old geezer knows best. Hell, I was cruising the net while you were doo-dooing in your diapers. That was when the government was the biggest Internet user and text and numbers ruled the world. Now I log-in and whew, it's like walking into a virtual playhouse, all the stuff that's on there these days. Just the other day I took Gracie for a 'tour' of Prague, thanks to that city's new web page, created by this group of expatriates who just up and moved there. It was all there: snapshots, video clips, restaurant and hotel guides, travel information, the whole works."

"Wow. Sounds like you've really kept up on all this stuff."

"You better believe it. What, you think a guy like me retires and then just unplugs? No siree. And as for those snazzy little agents you're all worked up over, I've got a recent report on them back at my office in New York. In particular, the ones with net smarts."

Peter smiled and gave an amused shake of his head. "You know, it looks like you were right. I mean, that you and I have more in common than I thought."

Byron shrugged and looked off into the distance for a few moments, then looked Peter in the eye.

"Guess it's time I fess up," Byron said. "See, I'd been watching you sit in that cafe for a couple of months. I knew who you were. I saw the way you looked. I saw the way you didn't look, too, at anything around you. It was in your face, that you wanted to be left alone. I knew I couldn't introduce myself to you, not for a while, anyway. So I waited. Until the other day, when that new Joey Plus was introduced. Hell, I figured it was as good a time as any to throw a line to a fellow sea dog. All along I've been hoping since I saw you the first time that we'd get it on in the brain, like we are now. You know?"

A beaming grin peeled across Peter's face. "Yes. I know. And so what I was really wondering is, do you think maybe we could work on some of this stuff together?"

Byron scratched his head. "Sounds like I've got a new hobby," he said. He raised his can of beer. "Partners?"

Peter felt a little sting in his eyes. It was the briny ocean mist, he told himself, blinking behind his sunglasses to rid his eyes of the moisture that had abruptly formed there as he touched his beer can to Byron's.

"Partners."

Chapter 11

Her tears had caused her mascara to run all over the pillow in black streaks. Applied two nights ago, the night of their anniversary, her makeup was all gone now from her puffy red eyes. She turned the pillow over, revealing more smears, then reached across the bed for one of Matthew's pillows, which she punched it into shape and stuffed under her head.

After rushing home from Jean-Pierre's cottage Saturday night, Matthew had noticed neither her absence nor her return. He had been in his office the whole time, and was still working when she went to bed, where she spent several restless hours alone. Finally, unable to lie still, she had gotten up and sat gazing out the window, across the pond, to the cottage. A few times she had actually considered going back to him, but she told herself that maybe Matthew would come to bed. Her imagination had ultimately forced her back to the welcoming pillows, and in a few moments Jean-Pierre had magically come to her, by way of her own sleight of hand, stroking her, yes, like that, then sweetness, and finally she was satisfied, and then sad, and then guilty. She had cried herself to sleep. A few hours later she was awakened by Matthew rustling with his jogging things and again, a little later, by the shower. She had pretended to be asleep while he dressed and packed for his trip to New York. She had heard the gate bell, indicating the arrival of the limousine that would take him to San Francisco International Airport. She waited, half expecting at any moment to smell his clean scent wafting near, a light kiss on her cheek. But there came no scent, no kiss. Just more of the same indifference, more hurt.

She had slept until noon, then gone downstairs, in her robe, and eaten the remainder of last night's dinner for lunch. She put her dish in the sink and pulled a clean champagne glass down from the shelf and snatched a bottle from the refrigerator. By two in the afternoon she was drunk in bed, and crying. She could not bring herself to call Jean-Pierre as she had promised, could not bring herself to dial the

number she had by now committed to memory. She could only cry and doze, cry and doze, all through the afternoon. Once more, when it was dark outside, she ventured downstairs for something to eat. She found lasagna in the freezer, which she reheated in the microwave. Afterwards she washed down three Extra Strength Tylenol with champagne from the second bottle she opened. Retreating once more to her bed, she pulled the shades on her windows and climbed under the covers.

She had slept through most of Sunday night in drunken illness, and except for using the toilet and descending to the kitchen, had been in bed from Saturday night until now, early Monday evening. She wondered if she should get out of bed, or just go through the night again. Marie had knocked cautiously on her bedroom door earlier in the day, asking her if she was feeling ill. She had told her yes, and told her not to make dinner, that she would find something in the freezer.

She felt exhausted from thinking and dreaming and worrying about her predicament, which only seemed to tighten its hold on her heart.

How could she face Jean-Pierre? She wanted him, yes, but she had felt awful after Saturday night, struggling to understand her motivation, her fantasy of having him. Was she only reacting selfishly to Matthew's rejection? Perhaps. But that was what hurt the most, facing the fact that she had lost Matthew.

And every time she thought about this, she thought about her own very personal loss, and the irony of it all. It had been her upper hand, she mused, with which she had originally attracted Matthew, the young marketing manager on the rise among the ranks of International Foods.

After their initial meeting at ICP's Orange Fresh advertising photo shoot, Matthew had asked Greta to dinner, where he excitedly told her there was talk of his promotion. Yet, during dinner, his confidence seemed to weaken. When he told her about some of his ideas, she expressed genuine interest and fascination, to which he brightened. She could plainly see that he was a rising star, yet his mood had vacillated wildly between confidence and insecurity in the span of time between the first course and the dessert. After their first dinner date, a pattern then developed. As often as possible they would dine together, and sometimes he would invite her to spend the night with him. What she never seemed to notice was that he only asked her to stay during periods in his career when he was lacking in confidence about a particular campaign or promotion. It was during their evenings together that he had first introduced her to his unusual sexual tastes. Almost every time she would end up masturbating them at the same time, him with her left hand, and herself with her right. He always complained that he was too tired for intercourse, but if she wanted, they could do it that way, his way. He was a young, busy executive on the fast track, who had spent all of his prime years working hard at his career. Clearly he was going to be very successful, and if this was the price she had to pay, she concluded, then for the time being it was worth it. She wanted him.

A year later they married. She continued to pull him from the emotional fluxes that arose whenever he started to lose his nerve, especially when he was deciding whether or not to go to Wallaby, and then later, when he faced his first confrontation with Peter Jones. In the few of months that had followed Peter's ouster, Matthew had come to her less and less with his dilemmas, suddenly, miraculously confident in all aspects of his work.

As much as she wanted to deny it, she had finally, in the last twenty-four hours, forced herself to admit that the essential separation had happened the day of her accident onboard the yacht when they were celebrating the success of Orange Fresh.

And after last week's introduction of the new Joey thing, she had sensed the last of her power of persuasion slipping from her grasp. This past Friday night was the worst. He had gotten home later than usual, and when she had asked him how his day had gone, hoping for a hint of something special for their anniversary the following day, he had told her all about his meeting with his executive staff, that they had granted their support to work closely with ICP. This was just the beginning, he told her excitedly. How many times had she heard that? When the truth was that their marriage had ended long ago, when, drunk on the very potion that had earned him esteem, she had gone overboard, landing in the lagoon with a bloody splash. Yes, that was when she had lost him, lost them.

And that, she knew, was the real reason why she could not bring herself to call Jean-Pierre. Now, for probably the twentieth time, she picked up the telephone and merely stared morosely at the green digits glowing enticingly before her. She had memorized the phone number, not by digits, but by the pattern of tones that she played over and over with her index finger. Each time she pressed every digit in his phone number except the last, the six-note Touch Tone song deepening her dilemma because it reminded her of one of International Foods' stupid little commercial jingles for soda pop or corn chips. And, of course, the real reason was that when she dialed, she had to look at her hands, which, since the accident, had never been seen or held by another person unless they were gloved, and even then she

would only offered the right one. She too had learned how to avoid seeing the left one. By diverting her eyes she only ever caught a flesh-colored flash, nothing more.

She tossed her head into the pillows. Maybe he would understand. Maybe it was not as grotesque as she imagined. Should she simply go to him, as she had the other night, and try to explain her problem to him?

No. She could not, not now. She was too drunk and tired, and had not showered in two days. But she could be with her fantasy of him, she thought with painful longing.

She turned off the bedside lamp and reached inside her robe, touched her breast. If she was going to consider herself grotesque, she thought drunkenly, she might as well begin to associate the act with the cause. That way, perhaps she would eventually banish him from her mind out of sheer disgust. As if to punctuate this point, she removed the gloves upon her retreat to bed on Saturday night, and for the first time she could remember, she had skipped her nightly ritual of creaming her hands with moisturizing lotion. Already, she told herself, she could feel them drying out. She switched hands and used the left.

Before she got any further, she froze.

A sound, outside.

She strained to listen...heard the wind through the trees, but nothing else.

Just when she was ready to discount the noise as her mind playing tricks on her, she heard it again. Closer this time, as though just outside on the ground level, below the terrace.

Except for the faint light from the downstairs foyer lamp that bled up through the open bedroom doorway, she was in nearly complete darkness. The lamp, she thought, turn on the lamp. Shakily, she stretched to her night table, and, unmindful of the champagne bottles, her hand blindly knocked one to the floor. It landed with a solid thud.

Silence.

She hunkered down onto her hands and knees beside the bed to retrieve the bottle. It was the empty one, and it gave her an idea. She hefted it in her hand, considered its weight. Could she use it to protect herself?

She heard the sound again, louder. Closer. A scratching noise, along on the side of the wall where the ivy clung to the trellis and covered the huge stone pillars supporting the terrace.

It was probably nothing, she tried to assure herself. A cat. Or just the wind, she ventured. But then why if it was only a cat, she asked herself, was she holding her breath and the neck of a champagne bottle so tightly in her fist? She crouched beside the bed and stared hard at the drawn cotton curtain hanging before the French doors. Silver blue moonlight shone through the sheer fabric, picking up the shadows from nearby trees that swayed to and fro in the easy breeze.

What to do, what to do, she wondered with growing panic. Run downstairs and get a knife from the kitchen? Call the police? Why didn't they have a gun?

Deciding on the second option, she reached for the phone. The number. What was the phone number? Drunk and scared, she struggled to remember the something-something-one number in her head, but no rhyme came. Instead, Jean-Pierre's phone jingle bleep-bleeped over and over in her mind.

The scraping sound again, much closer. As close as the edge of the concrete terrace wall.

The dial tone questioned loudly. She pressed the zero button and waited a moment before realizing her error. She remembered the number: 411. She smashed her thumb down on the disconnect button and redialed.

A large form settled heavily on the platform just beyond the door, a human form silhouetted against the curtain.

A voice from the handset: "What city please?"

Greta gasped and swallowed a dry lump in her throat as she realized her second error. Dear God, she had dialed wrong again. No, she had remembered wrong. Not 411!

"What city please?" the voice repeated.

Nine! 911! Yes! That was it, ask her to connect you -

But before she could speak the line click-clicked, disconnected.

"Wait!" she hissed, straining to be both heard and quiet at once.

Dial tone.

A soft knock on the French doors.

She punched the correct sequence into the phone.

The knock again, more loudly now.

She looked outside. The silhouette crouched.

"Woodside Police emergency services. Can I help you?"

"Greta?" His raspy French accent from the terrace.

"Oh," she murmured into the phone, snapping her eyes shut for a moment.

"Hello? Can I help you?" the phone voice repeated.

She placed the phone back on its cradle and breathed a fatigued sigh. She would have to make no decision now. He had decided for her. And it was the right decision. Clutching her robe tightly around her, she got to her feet and went to the closed door. All at once she halted, remembering that she had not showered or even brushed her hair. But her greatest negligence during her temporary invalidation was that she had even let her hands go unconditioned. And ungloved. She leaned closer to the drawn curtains.

"Jean-Pierre?"

"Greta. Yes." The shadow of his head leaned closer, just inches away. "Open the door."

"Jean-Pierre. I can't. I look just awful," she said. "You can't see me like this. I've been so upset. In bed for two days."

"Greta," he crooned softly. "You did not call me yesterday. Nor today. I have been waiting, but could wait no longer. I thought Matthew may have come home early, so I sat nearby and watched for a while. I know he is not here. Let me in, Greta."

The thought of Jean-Pierre sitting in his bedroom, or just outside the gate, watching for signs of Matthew being home made her feel suddenly roguish and sexy. Desired.

"Jean-Pierre, it's been so awful staying here. I wanted to come see you, but I could not bring myself to do it."

"I am here. I brought you something. Now let me in," he commanded, his voice much louder.

"Yes," she said and unlatched the door.

He stepped inside the room and gripped her shoulders. Night air and animal and maleness flooded her senses. She gasped all of it in, then her breath was cut off by his lips. He kissed her, hard, and snapped his head away. "Matthew. When?"

"He won't be back until tomorrow."

"Good."

"Yes." She looked past his shoulder, outside the doors, and began to cry softly.

He frowned and pulled her down beside him on the bed. "Greta, what is it?" He wiped her cheeks with his thumbs.

"I've been so upset and confused by everything. This is so hard for me." She closed her eyes and dropped her forehead against his shoulder. Her mind flashed with images of the first time he had kissed her, in the horse stall.

"You mustn't cry." He kissed her again. His hands touched just inside her soft robe. Lightly, down to her belly. Gooseflesh prickled her forearms, spread to her stomach, her loins. Her nipples felt pinched and hard, needed pinching.

"Wait," she said, squeezing his strong forearms. "I've been in bed for two days. I really must take a shower."

"Mmm," he hummed. "Never mind that." In one quick motion he slid the robe from her shoulders and undid the belt, parting the garment at her waist. Pushing her down, he crouched over her, facing her, supporting his weight on either side with his knees. His jeans-clad thighs rubbed lightly against her own. She had imagined and wanted this moment for so long. However she could not be with him here like this until she had a quick shower.

"Please," she said, squirming from beneath him. "I'll just be a few minutes," she said, and darted from his lunging grasp to the bathroom.

There, she looked at herself in the mirror. With horror, she remembered that her hands were ungloved. She let her eyes go first to her right hand, then the left. She forced her vision to stay there until she could breathe again. Yes, she would have to tell him. And show him.

A few minutes later she emerged from the bathroom wearing a towel around her midsection. Jean-Pierre was lying on the bed propped on one elbow, naked. Timidly, she proceeded to the bedside. He raised himself to his knees and placed his hands on her hips. Before she could take in the shape and size of his nakedness, he had her on the bed in one quick movement, the towel discarded with a flick of his wrist.

He breathed a lusty sigh and lowered his lips to hers. She felt his hard, blazing length along her entire body. She wanted to look at him next to her like this, but before she could take in their togetherness, he kissed her again, gently this time, teasingly. She expected that in any second he would enter her, have her.

But instead he gently clasped her hands in his own. "Your hands, Greta, this is the first time I have felt them."

"Feel them. Both of them. Go on."

It took him a moment to register. "Oh, Greta. Is this why you have been afraid?"

She began to cry again. "It's so horrible. I was once a hand model, and then that happened. And everything ended."

He said nothing. He kissed her, told her softly to cry and let it out. "What happened, Greta? You must tell me. There is nothing bad about it to me."

When she stopped crying she wiped her eyes and sat up, allowing his hands to remain on hers through the entire story, which she recounted in a quiet monotone.

"We were on a yacht anchored in a windy lagoon, celebrating a new soda of Matthew's that was a huge success. I'd had a lot to drink. At one point I was standing off to the side all by myself. I was poking my ring finger in the little hole of an empty can, thinking about how Matthew and I were going to start a family. Apparently we were getting ready to sail some more. It was dark. I remember they were taking Matthew's picture just a few feet away. The flashes popped and at the same time a strong wind rocked the boat. I lost my balance and reached out to grab the rail but I was blinded by flashes and couldn't see. My finger was still in the can and I had no time to shake it off before grabbing on to stop myself from falling. I felt rope and metal and pain all at once. I had grabbed between the support line and the rail, and the can was caught between that and my hand. I think that was when I started to scream. I was leaning forward trying to free my hand when the boat lurched. I fell overboard. My finger didn't come with me. Matthew was standing at the rail of the boat, screaming hysterically. Someone jumped in. It was dark, but I saw the blood then, and when I reached for the life preserver I saw what had happened. The little white nub of bone. The rest of it gone. I passed out and woke up in the hospital. They said that the can with my finger and my wedding band had fallen overboard with me. They never found it. It's still out there in the ocean, lost, Matthew and I with it."

They were silent for a very long time. She did not cry anymore, she only lay there with her head turned on the pillow, eyes closed, waiting for him to let go of her hand. But he did not let go. Instead he kissed her right hand, then the left one, each knuckle. She was frozen in place as he did this, as he kissed between her pinkie and the middle finger, at the space where her ring finger once was. She gasped when she felt his tongue there.

Holding the hand, he leisurely traced along her breasts with her own fingertips. He trailed their course with his lips and tongue, taking tiny nips at one breast, then the other. He squatted over her, his knees on either side. His ponytail fell forward into her face and she let some of the gathered hair enter

her mouth as he sucked her breasts with growing urgency. Her hips responded. She lifted herself against him, pressed his head harder into her chest. He held both of her breasts, licked beneath them. She felt a chilling tingle along the back of her neck each time the fine hairs of his buttocks brushed against her thighs. Gripping him beneath his armpits, she squeezed his strong chest between her hands and pulled him fully down onto her with all of her might.

"Slowly," he whispered, resisting her insistence. "There is no hurry."

"Yes," she moaned, nearly in tears. "Yes, hurry, I want you so bad." Never before had she been kept on edge like this, all of her energy wriggling beneath him, wanting him. It had always been Matthew wanting her when he needed, and she had always been there to service him. But this was not like that.

And then she felt a new emotion that was both exciting and frightening. "I need you," she mouthed without a sound into the pillow. Her inhibitions lifted and, as if beyond her control, she felt her entire self slacken, acceptance at last releasing her anxiety.

Sensing her sacrifice, he pressed his whole hard body against her, claiming her entirely from head to toe. His hot sex lay rigid between them, ready to consummate their bond.

With a lustful moan of anticipation he lay on his side and took her hand again. He kissed her wrists, her lips, her throat, traced her fingers along his ample sex, beneath his scrotum, which lay swollen over her hotness. She attempted to wrap her hand around it entirely, attempted to gently cup and fondle his testicles, but his control was beyond her own, and so she let him lead her maddeningly, pleasurable, on an erotic discovery of their bodies.

With his penis in both their hands, he played its tip along her folds, as far up to her navel, back again, and down and around the edge of her anus. In an instant he was inside her with his fingers. Then he removed his and encouraged hers in. At first she pulled away, her entire arm taut in his grip. He eased her resistance with a kiss that was both tender and probing, secure. "Shhh," he whispered, gently pressing her fingers inside her. She yielded, pressed a breast to his mouth as they alternated their exploration of her innermost region. Gently he withdrew his hand entirely, and watched her as she continued by herself, tuning in to her own rhythm.

"Yes," he said encouragingly, caressing between her buttocks with his hand. He changed position so that he could work his tongue between her fingers. She quickened her rhythm, squeezing his tongue with each press and flick. He followed her fingers inside with his tongue and she cried out his name when she felt it slide in the gap created by her missing finger. Her free hand flew to his hair and with a moan she freed his ponytail, wanting all of him inside her. His hands rolled and pinched her nipples in time with each lunge of his tongue, propelling her on mercilessly. She moaned deeply, and he pulled back when she drew close.

She pulled his head up by the hair and crushed his lips with a kiss. She opened her legs and slid them up, pressing her knees into his flanks. Then she led him in, pulling her hand from between them. He alternately kissed her and her hand, the stubby knuckle. With each of his thrusts he kissed her, and it felt marvelously good and wicked at the same time, feeling him inside her and holding her hand and kissing her. With each lunge he squeezed more tightly, as they inched closer, until his unflagging rhythm suddenly altered to forceful, jutting bursts. With each hot gush inside her, she cried out his name, her hand twitching spasmodically in his as she was overcome by wave after wave of irrepressible pleasure.

After their breathing returned to almost normal he took her in his arms, their steaming bodies sticking together as they lay entangled, too exhausted to move. Her head was spinning from the champagne and from their intoxicating lovemaking.

Never before had she felt like this, she thought, feeling him still inside her, softening. Matthew had always been the one to want, and she had always given to him, but now she understood all at once her desire to be given to.

Their hands remained clasped together as she drifted away from her thoughts, the tingling inside her turning to numbness as she cooled, cooled, then felt chilled, as though she were shaking.

Being shaken.

"Greta!" Jean-Pierre whispered.

"Mmm?" she moaned, disoriented.

"Matthew!"

Not Matthew, she thought half-consciously. No, not Matthew. Not for a while. Only Jean-Pierre now.

"Matthew!" Jean-Pierre hissed again, leaping from the bed.

She sat up, wide-eyed. It was dark in the room. She turned on the bedside lamp. Jean-Pierre was hastily gathering his strewn clothes. No, he didn't understand. They were safe. Touching her hand to her head for an instant, she relaxed a little, felt a little laugh begin in her chest at the comedy of his panic. He must have heard Marie, because Matthew wouldn't be home from his New York trip until tomorrow afternoon.

But then she heard his voice, "Greta?," faintly, coming from downstairs.

Judging by the echo she guessed that he was in the kitchen - and only one minute away from making his way through the foyer, up the stairs, and into their bedroom. "My God!" she gasped, struggling with her robe. "Hurry! Leave!"

Jean-Pierre had managed to pull on his pants, shirt, jacket. Snatching up his shoes and socks and wristwatch, he stepped outside, onto the terrace. She gathered her robe and tied it closed as she rushed from the room.

"Matthew?" she called from the top of the stairs. "I'm up here," she said, composing herself as she descended quickly.

"There you are," Matthew said, his garment bag and briefcase in tow. He set down the briefcase at the bottom of the stairs and flipped through a few pieces of mail. Yes, she thought thankfully, take your time and read your mail, all of it. "I came back tonight instead. My meeting was shorter than I'd expected." He glanced at her.

As if sensing her scrutiny, he stopped going through the mail. He dropped it next to his briefcase and began climbing the steps. "Why is it so dark in the house? Are you in bed already?"

She stopped and raised her wrist to her head, fumbling with her words. "I'm not feeling very well," she said. She pulled a tattered tissue from her pocket, dabbed it beneath her dry nose, coughed. "Darling," she said, blocking his way, "could you please get me a glass of water?"

He stopped, eyed her with subdued curiosity. Then he let out an impatient sigh and turned and started back down the steps. Just another minute, she thought, and Jean-Pierre would be safely gone.

But then Matthew stopped, turned around, and climbed toward her again. "There are cups in the bathroom," he recalled aloud as he passed her. She clutched the hem of her robe and lifted it and chased after him in hopes of getting to the bedroom before he did.

She didn't.

He flipped on the light switch, which lit up several lamps in the room all at once, and tripled its brightness. Now everything was fully illuminated, exposed.

She tried to see what Matthew was seeing: The bed was a shambles. Sheets, pillows, and the comforter strewn across the mattress and onto the floor. The two empty champagne bottles. One on its side. The bath towel beside the bed. The unlocked terrace door.

He strode past the bed to his walk-in closet and hung up his garment bag, acting as though he did not notice the mess. Pulling his tie from his collar, he caught her earnest reflection in the full-length closet mirror. He turned around to take a closer look at her disheveled appearance, and for a moment his eyes fixed on the empty champagne bottle resting atop the night table. He graced her with a brief, condescending glance, then went back to undressing.

A chilly gust of wind blew open the terrace doors and lifted the curtains. He clucked his tongue as he crossed the room to close the doors.

"Oh" Greta said sharply, coming up quickly behind him. "I was so hot. I think I have a fever."

Ignoring her, he pulled the doors shut.

She angled her head to see outside. Jean-Pierre seemed to have gotten away safely.

Matthew twisted the lock and grabbed the curtains and started to slide them together. Suddenly he stopped and crouched a little. "What's that?" he said, squinting outside.

"What's what, darling?" Greta said, hearing her own voice crack as she rushed to his side.

Matthew stepped out onto the terrace.

"This." He bent over and picked something up. "It caught my eye in the light," he said. From his fingers he dangled a fine gold chain, with a sparkling gold object dangling from it. A charm of some sort.

She scrutinized the object for an instant, then broke into a wide smile. "Oh, there it is," she said, taking the chain in her hand and holding it up with a glad smile on her face. "I've been looking for this for days."

"Hmm. I've never seen that one before," Matthew said indifferently before disappearing into the bathroom.

And neither had she. Her heart was galloping in her chest. She sat on the bed and took a quick peek at the charm necklace in her palm. Then all at once she remembered Jean-Pierre saying, when he'd arrived, that he had brought her something.

The bathroom light went out, and she carefully tucked the object into her robe pocket. Assembling the bedclothes as best she could, she pulled the comforter over her legs, then shut off her night lamp.

Dressed in his pajamas, Matthew stood at the foot of the bed. "Since you're not feeling well," he said, glancing at the mascara-streaked pillows, "I'll sleep in the guest room." He shut off the remaining lamps as he left the room. When she heard his door close down the hall, she switched her night lamp on again and pulled the necklace from her pocket. She inspected it more closely under the light.

It was a tiny horseshoe charm. She squeezed the charm tightly between her palms, feeling him again. Then she clasped the necklace around her neck and turned off the lamp. She pulled the comforter over her body. "Good night, Jean-Pierre," she whispered. She kissed the charm, then squeezed it tightly in her left fist and held it against her breast.

As her thoughts swirled into pleasant dreams, her grip relaxed, then gently unrolled, and the symbol of Jean-Pierre's love slipped through her fingers, and she slept like never before.

* * *

After William finished reading through the binder Matthew had given him earlier in the day, he got up from his reading chair and stretched.

The strategy was perfect. Matthew had put together a plan that, after they announced the Joey II computer in about a year, would demonstrate that Wallaby had grown up and was venturing into the big-business world by working a strategic deal with ICP. Soon after that, before the stock had too much time to climb, Wallaby would be acquired by ICP and become a subsidiary of the huge computer giant.

William thought for a moment about Matthew and his manner. He seemed high-strung and edgy when they had met earlier in the day. When he had asked about Peter Jones, Matthew had turned defensive. Though William had every intention of following through with his plans to acquire Wallaby, he wondered if maybe his inquiry had caused Matthew to fear that he was losing confidence in him, and in Wallaby.

William was in fact more than mildly curious about what Jones had been up to over the past few months. Even though he was still on the payroll at Wallaby and officially an employee, after what Matthew had told him, William felt certain that there was little hope of Jones ever going back to Wallaby.

An unhappy thought, for, after all, it was Jones who had invented the Joey, and the older Mate, which was the reason he had even started formulating the secret acquisition plan a few years ago in the first place.

He wondered: Could Jones be a threat to ICP and Wallaby if he decided to resign and go it alone, perhaps competing head-on with his "old" company with a newer product, something more compelling than the Joey?

William knew that Jones had substantial financial reserves, and combined with the venture capital he could gather by simply picking up the telephone, he would easily gain the resources necessary to do something big. But in an industry dominated by only a few major players, even Silicon Valley's wunderkind would face obstacles at this stage of the game. And of course, William reminded himself,

suddenly taking down his fear a few notches, the largest obstacle Jones would confront was Jones himself. Wasn't that why he had originally hired Matthew Locke? He was not an organization man, incapable of managing a large company. And that would hurt him. Thank goodness for small wonders.

With some amusement at the irony of this last thought, William placed the binder beside his Joey, with which tomorrow morning he would compose an e-mail message to Matthew, congratulating him on his work. He was too tired now, and his elation had turned to exhaustion. He needed a good night's sleep. He glanced at Martha's picture for a moment, then shut off his desk lamp.

The ring of the telephone startled him. He reached across his desk to answer it before the second ring, noticing the time on his wall clock. Quarter past midnight.

"Hello?"

"Billy, did I wake you?" a croaky voice asked.

"Who's calling, please?"

"I knew it! Working late as usual. How's the ol' boss?"

"Byron! I'm fine. How are you and Grace?"

"A-okay. We're staying for an extra while here in Maine. Sailing's been good. Few more weeks left."

"Great to hear."

"I'm calling for a favor," Byron said.

"Shoot."

"I need some of my old stuff from my office there in New York."

As the most prominent inventor in ICP's history, Byron was granted lifelong privileges that included an office that was cleaned every day and kept in a ready state, should he ever decide to drop by and sit in, for whatever reason.

"Sure. What kind of stuff?" William said and smiled to himself. His honorable former partner was experiencing post-retirement pangs. He probably wanted to browse through his old journals, notes, take a trip down memory lane, as it were.

"On my shelf, right behind my desk, there's a binder called 'Advanced Network Agent Design.'"

William snapped on the desk lamp and wrote himself a note.

"I'll have Barbara send it to you. Anything else?"

"No. I mean, no, I don't want you to send it to me. I want you to send it to this address," Byron said.

William heard some papers shuffling.

"Here it is: 42 Inlet Drive, Camden, Maine, 04288."

"You got it, Byron. I'll have Barbara fetch it tomorrow and express it to you so you get it by Wednesday. Oh, wait a second, who's the addressee?"

"Peter Jones."

William's eyes shot to Martha's photo. He blinked rapidly and his lips parted. But no words would come out. He shut his mouth, took a deep swallow. Heard himself repeat the addressee's name, then for a few beats he heard his own blood pounding in his ears.

"Yep, new buddy of mine. You know who he is, right?"

William took a few seconds to answer. "Of course," he said, staring at his Joey. Then, struggling to sound as matter-of-fact as possible: "Why are you sending him this?"

"We're kicking around an idea we've come up with," said Byron, all snappy and playful.

"I see," William managed. "Byron, are the two of you thinking of starting up something new?"

"Hell, I don't know. It may be nothing. But it may be something, too. Listen, I don't want to talk your ear off. It's late, and you've got a real job to go to in the morning."

"It's okay. I was just reading."

"Well, if you've got a few minutes."

"I do. Really. The time doesn't matter," William said, and shakily seated himself in his chair. He reached over to the bookshelf and lifted Martha's photo. He placed it in his lap.

"Please, go on," he said, and for the next forty-five minutes, he listened.

PART III

Chapter 12

Four months had passed since William Harrell and Matthew Locke had traded secrets in New York... and since Matthew and Laurence Maupin had met on her bed.

They were together again now, backstage at Lincoln Center in New York City, preparing for the announcement of ICP and Wallaby's strategic alliance before an audience of executives from both companies, and industry partners, customers, and the press.

"Matthew, you seem a little nervous, and that will show to the audience," Laurence said, standing before Matthew, who sat backstage in a dressing room. A makeup attendant patted his forehead and cheeks with flesh-tone powder.

"I'm just excited," he said.

"Smile. Make sure you smile," Laurence urged, trailing Matthew as they moved along the rear hallway to the stage area. They stopped behind the curtain's edge, and Matthew checked his watch.

"Hello, Matthew," William Harrell said warmly, joining them. Though they were dressed similarly, William appeared very cool, very calm, very much in control, the very opposite of how Matthew was feeling.

A man appeared wearing a microphone and earpiece headset. He nodded to Laurence then faced Matthew. "Mr. Locke, you're on in one minute, as soon as the music stops."

"Good luck," William said, shaking Matthew's hand. He stepped aside, opening a clear path to the stage.

The auditorium grew silent as the overhead lights dimmed and the piped-in classical music dissolved. An announcer's voice greeted the audience and a large screen unrolled, on which a slide projector beamed the Wallaby logo.

"Good luck," Laurence whispered, squeezing his hands. A spotlight focused on the podium gaped wide and bright.

The announcer boomed: "Please welcome the Chairman, President, and Chief Executive Officer of Wallaby, Incorporated, Matthew Locke."

Applause sounded when Matthew appeared. He traversed the distance to the podium with clear composure and stood before the audience a few moments, allowing them to take in his dark gray suit, his confident air. He graced the audience with a sweeping smile, then focused his attention at the center of the auditorium, just above the heads of his audience, as his mistress and tutor had taught him.

"Thank you, and good morning. Today will mark a very important day in Wallaby's history. As you know, Wallaby is a company that has always been focused on empowering individuals with portable computer technology. Many of you today, stowing your own Joey or Joey Plus in your briefcases and folios, have first hand experience with Wallaby's products, and today we'd like to take that experience to the next level."

In sync with his speech, the slides Matthew had shown the executive staff just four months ago, when he first proposed the strategic alliance with ICP, flashed behind him on the high screen.

"What we are about to show you will enable Wallaby to continue to deliver on its original vision of powerful portable computing, but with more flexibility than ever. That means customers who were previously locked out of the Joey platform because of its incompatibility with other systems can finally hop on the bandwagon and benefit from the Joey's advanced technology, and continue to access files and documents created on those other systems, simply and easily."

At this the crowd stirred. It was exactly the kind of reaction Matthew had hoped for. Barely able to contain his smile, he pressed on.

"Today, Wallaby announces a new and friendly personality in compatible computing." The spotlight on Matthew faded to a dim glow, and a second circle of light appeared, center stage.

"But rather than standing here and telling you about our exciting news, why don't I let the new Joey II show you."

The excited audience silenced. On drum roll cue a shrouded, remote-controlled box about the size of a shopping cart glided from stage right to center stage, into the spotlight. The drum roll intensified.

The entire auditorium went black for a few seconds, then cymbals crashed loudly. The shroud was gone, and there, bathed in intense light, was a dark gray prototype Joey II computer.

Matthew himself joined in the thunderous applause. He felt as though an intense wave of heat had just washed over him. For the first time in Wallaby's history, someone other than Peter Jones was revealing a new product before a cheering audience.

Seconds later the computer's screen, controlled by an automated script, came to life, and its image was projected, via video output, to the overhead screen for all the audience to watch.

The screen cleared and then the Joey II went into a six-minute animated presentation demonstrating the system's new features, including a new slot for plugging in a local area network card, a larger hard disk, faster fax sending and receiving, and built-in file translation software for reading documents and other files directly from ICP's formerly incompatible BP desktop and portable computers.

When it was over, cymbals crashed and the audience applauded wildly, thrilling Matthew to the bone. He stole a quick glance to his left, offstage and behind the curtains. Laurence signaled with a thumbs-up gesture.

He turned back to the audience and waited for the applause to finish.

"Today you just saw a prototype of the new Joey II computer, the first engineering collaboration between International Computer Products and Wallaby.

"When the Joey II is available in six months, Wallaby and ICP will begin a co-selling relationship. For the first time in history, two former rivals, Wallaby salespeople and ICP salespeople will share and support the same customers.

"This is a non-financial arrangement, and represents a first-ever strategic alliance between our companies, enabling Wallaby to continue to develop exciting and powerful portable computers, now with built-in ICP compatibility that makes the Joey II the perfect companion to ICP's line of BP desktop computers."

The presentation continued, and Matthew detailed the specific markets and technologies that each of the companies had agreed to develop together. Afterward, as Matthew and Laurence were collecting their notes and briefcases, William strolled into the press room.

"Well done, Matthew," William said, smiling politely to Laurence.

"Thank you."

"May I have a word with you?" William said. "It will only take a minute."

"Sure," Matthew said, shutting his briefcase. "I'll be right back, Lauri," he said, and followed William from the room.

"In here," William said, pushing into an empty dressing room. The light from the hallway fanned into the room and aided their search for the wall switch.

Finding none, Matthew switched on one of the makeup tables mirrors. Twenty light bulbs lit up around the mirror's rim, and he turned around the chair facing it and seated himself. William pulled up a small stool and sat down.

"It all went very well, Matthew," William said. "I just wanted a moment alone with you to tell you how happy I am, especially after the shakiness we've experienced over the past few months."

"Thank you. And I understand. We've both had our own concerns, you on one side, me on the other."

"Yes," William agreed. "I sometimes didn't believe we would make it to this day, but we did, and now we're ready to move into the final phase." The final phase: ICP acquires Wallaby, and Matthew comes under William's command. "And they bought your response with nary a doubt," William said. "That was good. Because they're going to have a big surprise in a couple of months."

He was referring to the reporter's question that had been directed to Matthew minutes ago: "With this 'strategic alliance,'" the reporter had said, affecting a difficulty with the definition of the agreement, "aren't you afraid, Mr. Locke, of a possible ICP takeover of Wallaby in the future? Or is this perhaps something you may want?"

Despite the dead-on accuracy of the reporter's speculation, Matthew had not wavered in his response, explaining, with a discernible hint of Peter Jones's once-infamous arrogance, that today's strategic alliance announcement was as close as Wallaby intended to get to ICP. To further squash the theory, he threw in a nugget about takeovers, and how FTC regulations would prevent ICP from subsuming Wallaby as long as Wallaby continued to build portable computers.

However the reason his response had sounded so believable to everyone, and to himself especially, because it was the truth.

Was.

Right then, as he had answered the reporter's question, a new plan, a revised plan, had crystallized in Matthew's mind: There would be no eventual merger between ICP and Wallaby.

"It's back to the office for me," William said, checking his watch.

Matthew said good-bye and turned to face himself in the mirror. He felt different, felt he looked different. Younger. More alive than ever. He pinched back a smile as he whispered the words he would say if it were Peter rather than himself looking him in the eye right now: "I told you so." He said it again, and this time broke into a huge self-satisfied grin, his laughing eyes piercing back from the mirror into his own.

"Matthew?" Laurence stepped into the room. "Who are you talking to? Is everything okay?"

This somehow stuck him as funny and he let out a burst of laughter. "Fine. Great. Super," he said. He whisked his fingers through his hair and inhaled a deep breath.

Ironically, he at once understood that Wallaby - no, that he - now had ICP in a precarious position. William himself had told Matthew that he had not approved any new portable computer designs, banking everything on today's announcement, so that ultimately he could acquire Wallaby with its now-compatible technology. The way Matthew saw it, Wallaby - delightfully modest and manageable, both in size and volume compared to ICP - now held at least a two-year technology advantage over the world's biggest computer company. And the thought of having them by the tail delighted Matthew beyond any dream he ever had of merging the companies as one.

"Good," Laurence said. "Come on, let's go play in the city." She shook her rental car keys at him. "I've got the keys."

"Wrong," Matthew said, and with a playful look in his eye produced his hotel room key and twirled it on his finger. "It looks like I'm holding the only key we'll need."

Chapter 13

It was on days like this, bright and sunny with a slight morning chill, that she felt happier than ever. With Matthew in New York on business, Greta had given the housekeeper the past three days off, letting her know that she could handle her own meals. But that was hardly the reason why it was better for Marie to be out of the house.

She gripped the handlebars firmly, admiring her own hands without ill feelings. The gears of her exercise cycle spun quietly, crisp air breezing in through the open balcony doors. Her breathing was heavy but controlled, just as he had taught her.

She heard the shower stop and checked the cycle's timer. Another quarter mile before she was

through. That would work out almost perfectly, giving her a few minutes to cool down before he was all finished in the bathroom.

The cool winter air whispered across her face, and with each misty exhale puffing from her nostrils she imagined the sensual air of France, of Europe, so much there for them to see and do together, an afternoon ride in dewy green hills, pedaling along right behind him with his strong back in view, the bobbing of the red and white checkered tablecloth peeking out from the picnic basket strapped to his bicycle...

"Darling, are you going to pedal all the way to Alaska?" Jean-Pierre said, glancing at the accumulated mileage on the cycle's odometer.

Greta laughed heartily. "I stopped looking and...I guess...I just...kept...going."

"To the hospital is where I'll be going," Jean-Pierre said. Hitching his towel around his waist, he went to the balcony doors and closed them. "With pneumonia!"

"Oh, darling, I'm sorry," she said, lifting her feet from the pedals. She dropped her head into her crossed arms over the handlebars and regulated her breathing as she cooled down. The machine's flywheel slowed to a stop and she shook herself briskly. "I feel so good!" she shouted.

For the past four months, since the beginning of their affair, she had exercised every day. Though Jean-Pierre had been the one to suggest the calisthenics, she had become obsessed with her daily workout and needed no encouragement to get on her cycle and go every morning. With each strained breath she pictured herself becoming more slender, more youthful, more attractive and beautiful and sexy for him.

Clad in undershorts, Jean-Pierre stood combing his long hair before Matthew's bureau mirror. He swung his head back, collected his mane with both hands behind his head, and worked an elastic band over the ponytail.

Greta tugged off her headband and playfully pulled it over his head. "Now you look like an Indian."

He smiled and tugged the band off. As he reached for his shirt hanging on the bedpost, she grabbed his wrist and roughly pulled him beside her on the bed. She flattened his hand against her chest, his middle finger settled over the horseshoe charm he had given her. "Are you an Indian giver?" she said suggestively, moving his hand from the charm to her breast.

He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead. When her grip loosened he stepped back and stood before her with his hands on her hips. "Greta," he warned her, "I must get ready. I have a nine o'clock lesson, and already I am going to be late."

She stretched, "Okay, okay, no pow-wow for now."

"Besides, darling," he said to her reflection in the mirror, "you too have a busy day ahead of you."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said with an unpleasant expression. "I'll call as soon as I get out of the shower."

He sat beside her, boots in hand. "Maybe you should call now," he said, "so I can be here with you."

"After the shower. I promise." She stood and unzipped her athletic top.

He tugged on his second boot. "It is just that they can be so pushy and overwhelming."

"He is a friend of ours, Jean-Pierre. Well, of Matthew's anyway. But I trust he'll be straight with me," she said, sounding not totally certain.

"I am just trying to help," Jean-Pierre said, tucking in his shirt.

She slid her little horseshoe charm back and forth on its chain. Should she call now? Perhaps with Jean-Pierre here it would be easier. And if she really was going to go through with this, she might as well do it with him here. He was, after all, the reason why she had made up her mind in the first place.

"Wait," she said, as he was zipping his suede jacket. "Pass me my little address book. It's over there next to my wallet." She flipped through the book and found the number she wanted and dialed the telephone.

Jean-Pierre stood with his arms crossed, broad shoulders pressed squarely against the wall. He gave her an encouraging look.

She turned her attention to her free hand, the left, which she had kept ungloved since she and Jean-Pierre had made love the first time. Somehow it seemed only fitting that she stare at where her finger once was while making this call. On the second ring a young woman's voice greeted her.

"This is Greta Locke," she said, and after a moment's hesitation, "Matthew Locke's wife." She met Jean-Pierre's intense stare. "I'd like to speak with Mitchell, please." A pause, then: "Mitchell, hello. Yes, he's fine, thank you." Her expression turned serious as she smiled through the last of the lawyer's greeting.

"Actually, Mitchell, things aren't exactly perfect," she said, twisting the phone cord in her hand. Her eyes went to Jean-Pierre for a moment, taking him in from head to toe, his boots. The ranch, she reminded herself, boosting her courage. This was all for their ranch. She took a deep breath and plunged on. "I'm calling you, Mitchell, because I want a divorce." Pinpoint dots of sweat had formed on her upper lip.

"I'm sorry?" she said, shaking her gaze from Jean-Pierre. "No, Matthew and I have not talked about it yet." Another pause. "No, I don't know if it's what Matthew wants. It's what I want." She swallowed a deluge of conflicting emotions, her eyes pleading with her lover for support.

Jean-Pierre dropped before her and rested his head in her lap.

"Yes, I will," she said, and placed her hand on Jean-Pierre's head. "Yes, as soon as he gets home from New York, yes."

Jean-Pierre lifted his face. He was silently mouthing a word, but she could not understand him.

"No, I can't think of anything. I'm sure by the time I call you back I'll have - oh, wait." She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece.

"Property," Jean-Pierre whispered.

"Oh yes, Mitchell, I do have one question." She held the phone with both hands and looked out the window. "Mitchell, I'm not clear on a few things in these matters. The property. The house. Assets. Those sorts of things."

Jean-Pierre held her around the waist with both arms. In the distance she could see his small cottage, the ranch, a few horses being led from the stable.

"It is half, then," she said softly. Her hand dropped to Jean-Pierre's head and slid down to his shoulder. She held on tight. "Half of everything," she uttered, feeling as if her lips were suddenly anesthetized.

"Okay," she said, her voice different now, smaller. "Thank you, Mitchell. I'll contact you soon." She placed the handset on its cradle and closed her eyes.

Jean-Pierre seated himself beside her and wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. He whispered to her soothingly, to breathe slowly, relax.

She opened her mouth, tried to form words, but they would not come. After a minute she regained some control. "My God, Jean-Pierre," she managed, hiding her face in her trembling hands. "That amounts to millions."

"Greta," he said, pulling her from him, "You have earned your share. You have worked for it."

"Yes," she said. "Yes," an emphatic whisper. "I have worked hard for it, haven't I?"

"Yes," Jean-Pierre assured her, petting her hair. He smiled. "You have indeed."

* * *

"That's right, as much of it as I can sell," Peter said into the telephone. With a disbelieving expression he shook his head at Byron, who crossed his arms and shot him a mildly disturbed look.

"Okay, Peggy, thanks," Peter said, then hung up the phone.

"You sure you want to do that?" Byron said carefully, turning his coffee cup in his palm.

"You bet I am! Byron, I can't believe this! I can't believe Matthew has formed an alliance with them!" Peter said, batting

his hand at the "Wall Street Journal," whose headline announced, "ICP, Wallaby Announce Strategic Venture."

"Petey, don't forget that 'them' is where this old timer comes from."

"I know, I know. I'm sorry. I don't mean to disparage you, or where you're from. I'm just astonished Matthew has actually done what he was trying to get me to agree to do. To sell out Wallaby to ICP."

"He's not selling out, boy. He's upping Wallaby's market. Probably triple it in a few years because of that two-step he pulled today."

Peter folded his arms. "All the more reason for me to sell my share in Wallaby and invest it in what we're working on. You know, I'm in the mood for a little shopping spree. I think my mind is made up about those couple of acquisitions we've been talking about. The net browser. The compression routines. And definitely that knock-out handwriting recognition kernel. Yes indeed, it's time to do a little spending."

The two men had turned the extra bedroom in Byron's Maine home into a lab and workroom. Scattered all around were diagrams of circuit boards, tools, and assorted computer and electronic parts. A flowchart of the software that Byron was engineering, based on the design the two men had come up with in the last four months, was spread out on the table before them.

"Well, that's settled then," Byron said. "Good. Now what do you say you wipe that little snarl off your face and we get back to work. Come on." He patted the stool beside him and Peter, still plainly agitated by the news, returned to his seat beside his partner.

"This is what I changed last night," Byron said, pointing at a series of boxes indicating the user interface portion of the code. "It's what's going to make this baby different from every other portable doohickey out there."

Peter leaned over the table, following Byron's finger. He shook his head. "No."

"No? No what?"

Peter roughly took Byron's hand in his. "This!" he said, encircling the entire drawing with the other man's finger and, in doing so, pulling Byron from his stool and practically stretching him across the table.

"Hey!" Byron yelled. "If you want to dance, just say so, but be careful, boy, I prefer the floor to tables!"

"I'm sorry," Peter said. He let go of Byron's hand, and gently patted it.

Byron tugged at his sweater sleeve and flexed his arm.

"But look at this," Peter said. "All of this!" he continued, gesturing in a frenzy now with both hands at the entire table, the scattered parts, the room.

Byron casually fished his tobacco pouch from his shirt pocket.

"Don't you see what's wrong with all this stuff you're talking about?"

"Why don't you tell me," Byron said. He crossed his legs and began packing his pipe.

"First, with all respect to your history," Peter started, "it's too complicated."

Byron took a few glowing tokes from his pipe than shook out the wooden match. His motions were slow, unruffled. He exhaled a plume of smoke, then strolled slowly around the table, eyeing the diagram from over the rim of his glasses. "Well, now that you mention it, she is kind of a little monster, ain't she?"

"Little? Hah! If we were to code this thing as it is we'd need an army of programmers. We need to break it down into smaller, smarter chunks. Objects. Maybe we should snap up that little object system those kids from Cal Poly showed us last week. Hell, looking at this, two million doesn't sound like that much anymore."

"Mmm, that would definitely let us break her down to a more manageable size. And adding features would be trivial. Okay, let's call them back and have another look, make sure it'll do what we want," Byron said.

"There's something else."

"Such as?" Byron said, squinting through the rising smoke trails.

"I'm not sure what it is, though. I mean, everything we've got worked out with the agent software is right on. All the cross-referencing between the applications, the net-savvy look-ups and updates and all. But when I step back and look at this, at how it's going to actually look and operate when it's done, I feel like it's missing something. Under the hood we're doing things no one has done before. But on the surface, as nice as it will look, it doesn't seem, well, new enough to me. Different enough. What can we do to make ours really different from the others that are cropping up out there. They've all got styluses now. And there's that Sony slate computer that came out last week with a track pad almost exactly like the Joey's, so that's caught on too. All of it has. The add-on keyboards. CD-ROMs. Modems. PC Cards. The whole works. I don't know. Other than the smart software agents we're putting in, what can we do to make ours the all-out winner. The really intelligent assistant."

"Mmm," Byron hummed.

"What we need is a new paradigm. A bigger-picture metaphor that goes beyond what's already out there, taking this whole business to not just the next possible step, but two or three steps ahead. Something that really get the juices flowing. I mean, this is all well and good, but is it good enough?" He knocked his fist gently on the flowchart and stared intently at Byron.

"I'm with you."

Staring intensely at the drawing, Peter let out an exasperated sigh. "I just don't know what it should be. And that's the frustrating part."

Grace appeared at the doorway with a tray in her hands, holding sandwiches, French fries, two glasses of milk. "Time for a break, boys."

"Ah, relief," Byron said, rubbing his hands together. "Honey, we got any vinegar for those fries?"

"Coming right up," Grace said, handing the tray to her husband.

"Now, while we eat," Byron said, blowing on a hot French fry, "you can give your head a rest for a few minutes, and I promise you, while your stomach is doing some work of its own, your brain'll be busy too."

"I'm not so sure," Peter said. He took a sip of his milk.

The telephone rang.

"I'll get it," Grace said, returning from the kitchen with a bottle of cider vinegar. Byron made a beckoning gesture for the bottle.

"I got it," Peter said. "Holmes residence," he said, wiping his lips on his sleeve. "Hi, Peggy. What's up? Wait, let me guess, a problem with my stock sale already," Peter said with a smirk and a roll of his eyes at Byron.

"His secretary," Byron said, identifying the caller to his wife.

"What?" Peter shouted, eyes suddenly wide with panic.

"What is it?" Byron asked, coming to Peter's side.

"Hello?" a voice called softly, from inside the house.

"All right, yes," Peter said. "I'll get there as soon as I can."
He hung up the phone and stared at the handset.

"Hi," Kate said, bounding cheerfully into the room. "I let myself in." She froze in place when she took in Peter's aghast expression as he turned away and faced the wall. He locked his hands behind his neck and looked up at the ceiling.

"What the hell's wrong?" Byron said.

"What's going on?" Kate asked Grace, who replied with upturned palms. "Peter?" Kate gripped his arm. "What is it?"

"Something back home," Peter said, avoiding every set of staring eyes.

"Is it the stock sale, boy?"

He shook his head.

"Then what?" Kate asked, tugging his arm to make him face her.

He turned around and took her hands. "Something happened. I have to go home." He studied their interlocked fingers. "I can't tell you about it right now." He looked her straight in the eye. It was the wine, he thought grimly.

He let go of her hands. "I need to get to the airport right away," he said to Byron.

"Okay," Kate said, "let's go," taking his arm.

Peter's feet remained planted.

"Peter?"

"I have to go alone," he said, leaving no room for disagreement.

Grace discreetly nudged her husband.

"Okay," Byron said, settling his hands on both Kate's and Peter's shoulders. "Put your coat on. I'll take you to the airport." He gave Kate a reassuring look and a wink.

"Don't you want to pack some things?" Kate said.

"There isn't time," Peter said. "I'll call," he said, unable to look her in the eye again, then turned and left the room.

"Be back in a bit," Byron said, kissing his wife on the cheek. "Keep those fries in the oven please, dearest." He turned to Kate and gently squeezed her arm. "It's going to be okay." Then he turned and went after Peter.

Hearing Byron's words of reassurance as he waited outside the workroom, Peter felt the thing in his heart come fully awake. It had been hibernating all through the winter and he had forgotten about it. But now it was time for it to reemerge.

A knot of contradiction swelled in his throat when he remembered back to the premonition he'd had on that fateful night, more than half a year ago, that he was going to lose everything close to his heart, everything that ever mattered. It was starting, he reasoned, and by the looks of it, Kate would be the first piece to fall away.

Chapter 14

William Harrell flipped through the folder of reports his technical adviser had left him, a pleased expression on his face.

His plan was approaching its final stages. Yesterday's strategic alliance announcement had been deemed an enormous success by the press, and in just a few short months the plan's final phase would reach its climax.

He felt at ease and at peace now as he awaited the completion of his original plan. Though he had a real scare when Byron Holmes had called him four months earlier, asking for some of his notes and documentation, his former partner had ultimately assured him that what he and Peter Jones were working on would not become a "real" product anytime soon.

Even so, he still felt more than a little concern for what the two were up to, but after finishing his conversation with Byron, William realized he had initially overreacted to his old friend's new hobby, as Byron himself had referred to it.

And now, with the strategic alliance phase complete, William felt for the first time like he could lift his feet from the pedals and coast through the final stretch as he advanced to the finish line.

With regard to the merger, the FTC would never allow ICP to acquire Wallaby under the two companies' current modes of operation. To counter this regulation, ICP would halt production of its BP portable computer, thereby avoiding a monopoly by pulling its own entry from the market-the Joey line would become ICP's new standard. In doing so, an even greater battle would cease. The clone makers, companies that manufactured computers that operated the same software as ICP's, would be nearly

shut down once ICP announced Joey as their new portable computing standard. Unlike the BP, which used a third-party source operating system, the Joey was built upon Wallaby's proprietary hardware and software technologies, and was therefore illegal for other manufacturers to replicate it.

William's desktop now proudly displayed his prototype Joey II system, which he used for all of his office work. He'd had his technical adviser move his "old" BP to a shelf against the wall. As far as he was concerned, he would no longer need it.

The irony of his plan was beginning to hit home. Here he sat, the chairman of the largest computer company in the world, with his "competitor's" product on his desk. William's dream was nearly reality. "I liked the product so much, I bought the company," he quipped to himself as he activated the e-mail program.

The machine's modem dialed the phone and connected to the host computer. There was only one message, and as it was being written to his screen, scrolling quickly from the bottom of the screen to the top, he saw that it was from Matthew Locke. The action was too quick for his eyes, so as he waited for the message to finish downloading, he pulled a tissue from his drawer and cleaned the computer's monitor.

Matthew's message was now unfolded on the display, complete, and as he wiped, the e-mail's subject caught his eye. He quickly scanned the screen for the gist of the message-and he froze.

His throat constricted and his mind slammed on the brakes, chucking him from his exhilarating joyride. He felt his insides rumble as if he were about to lose control of his system, not unlike the feeling, the lack of feeling, that he had experienced as Martha's hand let go of his when she had slipped away.

He forced his hands to be still on the desk and read the message from the beginning.

TO: wharrell@icp.com
FROM: mlocke@wallaby.com
SUBJECT: REVISED PLAN

William, I'll get right to the point: Yesterday's introduction of the Joey II was phenomenal.

Therefore, Wallaby and ICP will maintain a strategic alliance relationship, as we disclosed to the press: Wallaby will work with ICP to develop powerful Joey products which are compatible with ICP systems.

We will not go through with our private original plan of merging the two companies into one.

I am satisfied with my role at Wallaby as chairman, president, and CEO, and I look forward to our two companies working together.

—Matthew

"No," William declared breathlessly as he sank heavily into his chair. He raised the tissue to his brow, blotted the sweat that had instantly formed there.

In one fell swoop, Matthew Locke had just changed William's entire plan-and the future of ICP. He felt his heart racing, and he began to hyperventilate. He wondered if he was experiencing the onset of a stroke. He held his palm over his heart and willed it to slow while he attempted to breathe evenly, all the while staring at the message spilled across his-no, Matthew's!-screen.

When he eventually calmed down enough to think a little more clearly, his panic was replaced by shallow emptiness. Then, vaguely at first, a strange feeling of grief and mourning numbed his senses, resurfacing for the first time since he had begun his plan to acquire Wallaby.

His mind started racing, and his immediate reaction was to quickly counter Matthew's scheme by unveiling ICP's own competitive product, showing him that no one pushed the number-one computer maker around. Thinking this through, however, William could hardly bring himself to ask the question, What can I do? He already knew the answer. Nothing. Hadn't he himself halted any new designs of ICP's BP series, or for that matter, any new portable design, after reaching the "Jones" phase of the original plan, when Matthew had moved into power?

No backup plan, he thought and shook his head sadly. The funeral...the rebound to Wallaby...through these events he had lost the foresight to build a backup plan in case something like this should happen. And, he realized, taking the final blow, there could be no going back. While he could simply pick up the phone and call his development heads in and put together a team to begin accelerated development of his technical and market advisors' proposed concepts, a real product would not surface for at least twelve to eighteen months, probably more. He had no immediate backup plan, no product of his own to augment ICP's new strategic dependence and commitment to Wallaby and the Joey. He could not cancel the strategic alliance.

His gaze lingered painfully over the Joey II stationed before him. Its beautiful compact design, its crisp high-resolution screen, its ergonomic keyboard, its slick trackpad. Gently, William touched the trackpad, slid his fingertip across its smooth black surface.

Suddenly, strangely, his thoughts turned sympathetically to Peter Jones. Matthew Locke had just pulled on William the same surprise he had inflicted on Peter Jones.

Then all at once he felt charged as if by a synaptic tingle, a stirring in his fingertip that shot up to his brain. At first he feared he was completely losing control, but then he let out a little laugh, realizing, yes, he had crossed a fine line, and suddenly it all made complete and wonderfully perfect sense to him.

The call. Of course. It had been there all along, a hibernating backup plan, but William had simply ignored it. There had been no reason to notice it. His old friend calling just to say hello, to ask for a few notes, all along up to his old playful tricks.

Could it be possible? Were they really onto something? Something that William could perhaps enlist to save ICP from the switch Matthew Locke had just thrown?

Jones. That was the mistake he had allowed Matthew to make. A mistake that would now work in his favor.

Perhaps you were right, Matthew, William mused, sliding his fingertip to an appended e-mail file. He opened it and searched for Matthew's very first message to him after the board meeting in which Jones had been voted out of Wallaby. There it was. Though Matthew had tried to persuade Jones to stay on at Wallaby, his exact words in the message were, "We'll succeed regardless."

You may be right, Matthew, William thought silently. He slid his fingertip over to a tiny card-file icon on the screen, typed "Holmes" on the keyboard and tapped the find icon.

He tapped the phone icon and the Joey's modem dialed Byron Holmes's telephone number. As he waited for his old friend to answer, he stared at his fingertip resting comfortably on the trackpad. A sudden awareness hit him as if somehow he had just solved a puzzle that had been silently challenging him for a long time, that Wallaby without Peter Jones was as unsound as a the Joey without its sleek intuitive trackpad.

Grace answered, and they exchanged a few moments of courteous conversation then William asked for Byron.

"He's in his play room. I'll tell him to pick up."

A moment later, Byron came on the line. "Hi, Billy."

"Byron, how are things coming along?" William asked.

"Oh, not bad. You know, too cold to fish, mostly sitting around the house, stoking a fire."

"Right," William said, knowing he couldn't just pop Byron's cap open without a little playing. "And in your spare time, how's your hobby coming along?"

"Well, now, Billy, is there something you're curious about?"

"Yes, there is." He decided to come right to the point with his old friend, to simply ask for his help. "I'm very interested in what you and Peter Jones are working on."

"It's good stuff, Billy, though we've had a little bit of a pause."

"What kind of pause?"

"Petey had to go back to California. Had some business to deal with."

California: Wallaby. Was there more to Matthew Locke's scheming? Had he persuaded Jones to come

back to Wallaby, to rejoin him in leading the company? That would explain Matthew's newfound resolution to go it alone, without ICP. After all, wasn't Jones the one who had been so resistant to ICP all these years?

"Back to Wallaby?"

"Hell, no. Quite the contrary. Petey started selling off his Wallaby stock yesterday to fund our project."

William knew that Jones's stock sale would yield millions of dollars, many digits, the sort of lengthy figures required for serious development. Things were coming along, then. Which meant that they were probably well on their way to a real product design after all.

"He's selling the stock because he was disgusted that you and Wallaby are in a deal together," Byron said. "He predicts that you're going to buy them in less than a year, and he doesn't want any of his money going to that. Nothing personal, Billy. It's Locke he's angry with."

Touche, William thought, ironically pleased that Jones's speculation was right on target. He dabbed his forehead with a fresh tissue. "Byron, I'd like to make a proposition."

"Shoot."

"I'd like to have a look at what you are working on. When you are ready, of course."

"Hmm. I like that idea, Billy, but I don't know if Petey would feel the same way."

"Byron, listen to me," William plunged on, pulling out all stops. "The Wallaby announcement is meant as a temporary solution. We want to come out with our own system that will do everything the Joey can, but more."

"Billy, you don't sound so good. Are you all right?"

"No, Byron. I'm not. I'm asking you for a favor, from one old friend to another. Let me have a look at what you're working on."

"Well, since you put it that way, let me see what I can do. I think I can get Petey to agree to let you have a peek."

"When?"

"That I don't know. A little while. He needs some time to himself to take care of some personal business."

"Fair enough," William said, and said good-bye.

He glanced out the window at the World Trade Center. This may be the best way, he reasoned. After all, the portable system stationed before him had been invented by Jones. And even if his plan to acquire Wallaby had worked, wouldn't he have been plagued with worry over Jones's next step?

Perhaps this time, he pondered as he gazed out the window, he would get the strategic ally he had been after all along. Peter Jones.

* * *

Peter stared absently at the clock mounted high on the yellow cinderblock wall. Following the second hand's ride around the dial, he mused at how as a boy he used to watch the clock in school, the thin red line sliding silently past the bold black numerals, inching painfully closer with each agonizing second toward the end of the school day. Would this baby ever have the opportunity to watch the second hand sweep the dial in a schoolroom?

He had been sitting at Stanford Hospital for hours. His neck and back were sore from sleeping on the hard plastic furniture, and now, staring at the clock once more, he willed the thin red line to go slower, for each precious second offered more hope, life, for this unborn baby.

His baby.

At first Peter had not wanted to believe the doctor, insisting that there had been a mistake, a mix-up, that he was just a friend of Ivy's, and it couldn't possibly be his baby. But the doctor relayed to Peter,

from Ivy, that she had been with no one else in more than a year before Peter, and no one after. The doctor offered to conduct a simple blood test that would settle the matter, but Peter decided against it.

He knew Ivy was telling the truth. It was his baby, and he prayed that it not be delivered. Not just yet. It needed more time.

Dr. Chen, the resident physician caring for Ivy, said the chances of survival for the twenty-eight-week infant were roughly ninety to ninety-five percent.

Peter could not believe this was happening to him. It was not something he asked for or wanted. Not like this, anyway. He had assumed (hadn't he?) that she had used some sort of protection. In the past, he and Kate had never worried about birth-control. With Kate it was neither an issue or a possibility.

He thought back to their night together, her desperation. He also recalled the indications of her drug usage. The doctor warned him that she was very weak, and had admitted to taking drugs during the pregnancy. The birth would be difficult and extremely dangerous for her, considering her overall poor health. Presently the physician was attempting to prevent the premature birth by administering medication that could retard labor, to allow the baby its final eight weeks of development in the womb.

Now, waiting to find out if the drugs would take effect, Peter sat alone, wondering what he would do if the baby was born today, or next week...or whenever, for that matter. Even if they successfully postponed the birth, there was no running away from the fact that it was his child. And what about Ivy? Would she ask him to marry her? Who was the faulty party? Hadn't he known that he had done the wrong thing? Hadn't he known afterwards that things would never be the same again with Kate?

Kate. Their talk, before they had gone to dinner at the Holmeses' for the first time, about wanting a baby. About wanting to settle down, to marry. What would happen to him and Kate?

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," Dr. Chen said, snapping Peter's gaze from the clock.

"How is she?"

"There's been a change. After her first round of medication the contractions were less frequent, indicating that the pregnancy would not proceed," the doctor explained.

"That's good news, right?"

"It was good. But Ivy has passed fluid. The amniotic sac is leaking. Her labor has resumed. We have no choice but to see it through."

"But the baby?"

"We don't know how much damage Ivy's drug abuse may have caused the baby, or herself. Any baby coming into the world early runs the risk of respiratory distress syndrome."

Peter shook his head impatiently to indicate that he didn't understand, and Dr. Chen explained.

"A vital substance that coats the lining of the baby's lungs and its small interior cavities, called alveoli, is not fully advanced at this stage of development. The air sacs in the lungs tend to stay collapsed. We'll have the baby on a respirator, of course, but there may be other complications."

Peter closed his eyes, images of tiny pink, deflated balloons streaking across his mind. So fragile. So vulnerable and helpless.

The doctor placed a hand on Peter's shoulder. "This isn't going to be easy," he said. "We'll do our best."

And then the doctor was gone, leaving Peter to stare once more at the clock and wait, all by himself.

Chapter 15

"Hello, Matthew," Greta said coolly, settling her coffee cup onto its saucer.

"Hi," Matthew said brightly. He dropped his garment bag and briefcase in the doorway, strolled past her without so much as a glance, and went to the kitchen, where he poured himself a glass of orange juice, drank it in one gulp, and set the glass on the countertop.

"Has Marie been sick or something?" he said, striking up conversation as he strolled into the breakfast area, peeling the paper wrapper off a muffin.

"I gave her a few days off," Greta said. "She'll be back this afternoon."

"How come the time off?" Matthew said, without much interest. He ate his muffin and pulled apart the newspaper, folded it on the table, scanned the page, then glanced across it to his wife.

"I didn't want her around. I wanted to be alone."

He nodded, as if respecting her wish for privacy, then started reading yet another article reporting yesterday's Wallaby and ICP New York City announcement.

"Matthew," Greta said abruptly.

"Hmm?" he replied, his eyes never leaving the article.

"We need to talk."

He looked up distractedly for a moment at his wife, then returned his attention to the newspaper. "Okay. Do we have yesterday's 'Examiner'?" He looked around the room. "I couldn't find one in New York."

"Over there. Next to the sofa," she said, indicating the pile of papers in the sitting room. He went to the stack and picked up the topmost issue and sat down on the sofa. "What were you saying?"

She studied him, instantly oblivious to her again as he read about himself and yesterday's news. In an odd way she was glad that he was behaving like this, poring over himself in the newspaper, for it solidified her determination and kicked up the heat of her anger a few more notches. There he sat, holding in his hands the cause for their breakup, smiling proudly at his own picture of himself and his damned machine. Should she feel any guilt or remorse for having taken a lover, for calling the lawyer yesterday to inform him that she wanted to divorce Matthew, when there he sat beaming at his engagement announcement to a stupid little computer?

Well then, let's see how he liked her newsbreak announcement. She stood up from the table walked over to where he sat, crossed her arms and waited for him to acknowledge her.

"I'm sorry," he said, folding the newspaper and tossing it to the floor, "I just wanted to see what they said locally." Rubbing his hands together, he settled back comfortably into the sofa. "Now, what was it you were saying?"

It was plain to see that he was being perfunctory, that he couldn't wait to be done with whatever it was she wanted to talk about so he could rush off to the office, where, having just flown in from New York, he'd squeeze in a few more hours of work. She pictured him on the plane, skipping the meal so he wouldn't have to sacrifice the workspace of his tray table. It was just the sort of image she needed to complete her anger and loathing.

She said, "I want a divorce." The words rolled off her tongue easily and she nearly smiled to herself. So simple. She tucked her fist in her robe pockets as he stood, hands open at his sides.

"Honey? What do you mean?"

"Shall I get you a dictionary?"

"Greta," he said cautiously, clasping his hands together. "I know I've been busy, but it's all been for this." He tapped the pile of newspapers with his foot.

"My oh my, the papers are right, you are smart. Yes, it has all been for that," she agreed, stamping her foot over the picture of his face.

"But honey," he said, wrongfully interpreting her sarcasm, "I've changed my mind. I sent a message to William before leaving New York calling the whole thing off! I don't want Wallaby and ICP to merge as we had originally planned. This way I - I mean, Wallaby - will have more power because now we're going to grow at a phenomenal rate, all because of yesterday's announcement." His eyes were shining. "The plan is off!" he said, and gripped her shoulders.

"And so are we!" she spat, shrugging from his touch.

"But Greta, wait. I mean, I know we've had our problems, but that doesn't mean we should just throw away our lives together."

"Together?" she said, astonished. "What lives, Matthew? What together?" She shook her head sadly at

his photograph smiling up at her from the newspaper. "There's your together."

"Greta? What is it? What have I done? What can I do? Is there something you want?"

"No, Matthew, not from you." She touched her finger to her horseshoe charm, slid it from side to side. "This time, I've gotten what I want all by myself."

This seemed funny to him. "Oh?" he said grandly. "And what's that, honey?"

"Love."

That wasn't what he'd had in mind. He blinked several times rapidly. His eyes locked on a point in the ceiling. All the clowning was gone from his face. He had expected something amusing, like a new hobby or craft, but this took him by complete surprise. "An affair?" he asked, catching her eye. She looked away. He tugged the cuffs of his shirtsleeves, composed himself, all business. "An affair," he repeated. "I see."

"It's your fault."

He was thoughtful for a moment, then cleared his throat. "Yes. I suppose it is."

Matthew's first reaction was to tell her about Laurence. He cared very much for the girl, and telling his wife so would at least give him the satisfaction of equally offending the fidelity they had promised one another when they married. He wanted to tell his wife how Lauri had helped him build his confidence the way she once had, and too how the girl brought him pleasure in ways she, his wife, never had. But what would that accomplish? She was having an affair, he thought absently as he perused the room, eyes stopping here and there. He might be having an affair with Laurence, but he was not in love with her, and he certainly had no desire to marry her. He was not in love with his own wife either, but, he quickly calculated in his mind, he could not bear a divorce. It was a matter of economics. Quite simply, if he agreed, she would be entitled to at least half of his assets, over fifteen million dollars, give or take a million. His alternative: appease her, make her feel better, no matter what the investment. A weekend cottage in Monterey? A trip around the world? Whatever she wanted, he would give it to her - he would think of it as an insurance policy.

"Darling, I'm so sorry," he said with pleading eyes. "It really is my fault. What with my obsession over Wallaby all this time, letting things get this far away from me. From us. However, I don't think divorce is the right answer. We should try to work this out."

She smiled. "Do you think I don't know what you're thinking? Oh yes, half of this is mine. And that's the law. Darling."

He swallowed. She knew him too well, could read him so easily. He couldn't hide from her his fear of losing half of his wealth. He had to try a different angle.

"But you're the one having an affair. You admitted it. How do you think that will hold up?"

"It doesn't matter. California still splits the pot."

"This is bullshit."

"You should know, you're so full of it."

"Don't challenge me on this, Greta."

"Too late. I called Mitchell yesterday, and told him - "

Matthew cut her short. "You what?" His voice was a disbelieving rasp. "You called my friend and told him we wanted a divorce?"

"No. I said I wanted it. But yes," she said with a shrug, unafraid, "that's what I did."

"How dare you contact my lawyer when I knew nothing of this! Are you crazy?"

"Why, yes, darling. That's exactly what I am, crazy. Driven mad by Mr. Chips. At least that's what I'm ready to tell the court, if I decide I'd like more than half. In fact, I think I need to lie down, I'm feeling sort of suicidal again. All the stress I've been under since this happened." She stuck her four-fingered hand out at him.

He smacked it away. "I'll fight you on this, Greta."

"Try. You'll only make matters worse for yourself," she said, kicking the newspapers. "It doesn't

matter what they might say about me in the papers. But you, my dear - you better think twice before you make your next move, or it's going to cost you a hell of a lot more than you can afford."

It was true. The press would turn this kind of thing into a circus. He had seen this expression on her face before, this same expression he had once found so alluring, so sure and empowering, so certain of his success, their success. When working on his behalf, this look had once charged him with excitement, confidence. Now he saw the face of his opponent from across the ring, and she looked fanatical in the way she said she was - in the way she would convince the court she was, and possibly all but wipe him out.

He needed time. This was too much to handle right now, especially in light of his change of heart with ICP. He had to make a deal with her, come to some sort of understanding, at least for a short while until he could deal with this properly.

"What about a trial period?" he said. "Just give me a little time, and we'll work out some sort of settlement between us. In the meantime, I'll leave you alone. You can have whatever you need to go away on your own if you'd like. Let's just not do anything hasty. Please, Greta. I'm asking nicely. Just give me some breathing room to sort through this."

She thought for a moment about what Jean-Pierre had told her. First, he was going to travel to France to look at properties for them. That would take some time. And once he found something, she would have to pack, and with all the logistics involved in moving, especially to another country, that too would take awhile. Either way, she would be in California for at least a few more months while she and Jean-Pierre made their plans. There was no real hurry, and, she suddenly realized, they had not even discussed marriage. Would they marry? She felt an unexpected chill along her neck. Perhaps it was best to play it cool, she told herself, while the arrangements for France were being made.

She said, "I may choose to travel, get away for while. Maybe even stay somewhere else."

What could that cost? Matthew asked himself. Compared to what she might get if they were to proceed with a divorce, setting her up in her own place amounted to a pinch of salt. For now.

"Fine. Whatever you need. Let's see what happens when things settle down in a few months."

"Ha ha, that's what you think. Please, take a good look at yourself. With you it will never settle down, Matthew. You're married to Wallaby, not me. You think you've replaced Peter Jones as some sort of hotshot smart aleck, but now you're as sickly attached to that company as he ever was. You didn't want him out of your way so you could run the business - no, you were after more. You were after his lover. And you got it." She shot him a mean laugh and turned her head in disgust. And began to cry.

If only right now he would come to her and hold her, and tell her everything would be all right, and kiss her, really kiss her, the way he once had, full of need and desire, then she would go back to him, make their marriage work again. Somehow. As happy as Jean-Pierre made her feel, she understood that she had only begun her affair with him because Matthew had rejected her. If he wanted her back, he could have her. But it was now or never.

Matthew turned away. "Fine," he said flatly, then lifted his briefcase and walked out of the house, got in his car, and drove away.

And along with him went all of her hopes of ever realizing the plan for happiness they had made before moving to California. It was really over. She was now in control of her own plan. She was scared, but she was determined. To hell with him. With her share of the money, she could live the rest of her life without a care. She hugged herself tightly inside the sleeves of her robe, and an eerie thought entered her mind. She shivered, and the hairs on her arms stood up. Glancing around the room, at their things, she understood for the very first time that everything she ever associated with Matthew - money, power, luxury - all of a sudden didn't matter anymore. She was angry with herself for thinking she should go back to him. Was she going mad? Had he really made her crazy? How could she in one instant wish to go back to him, and in the next wonder if he had ever really mattered? Had he been an instrument to her, just as she had been to him? It sure looked that way now. She had used him to acquire more and more things, but she no longer needed these tokens of power and prestige. There was only one thing she needed now, the love of her attractive Frenchman. Nothing else mattered anymore.

Feeling free for the first time of the man to whom she had felt so dependent, Greta calmly sat down on the sofa. Yes, it would be worth waiting a little longer while Jean-Pierre created their new world.

After all, she told herself, she had nothing to lose.

Chapter 16

"Mr. Jones," Dr. Chen said, lightly shaking Peter's shoulder.

Peter snapped awake. "What time is it?" he asked as he shakily rose to his feet. Dr. Chen gently steadied him. Daylight shone through the windows at the end of the hall. He glanced at the wall clock. Half past noon. He had been asleep for little more than an hour.

"It's time for you to see Ivy," Dr. Chen said. He led Peter by the arm through swinging double doors. "And your baby girl."

Peter stopped in his tracks. He felt flushed and his throat felt swollen. "She's all right? And the baby too? They both made it though okay?"

Dr. Chen carefully guided Peter to the wall, out of the way of the busy corridor traffic. "Not entirely," he said. "There were complications. Both Ivy and the baby are very fragile. The baby weighs only two and three-quarter pounds. She's in neonatal care right now, hooked up to life-support equipment."

"But she's alive."

"Yes. She's alive," the doctor said. "The outlook is fair, but we don't know yet if there is other damage. Damage we can't see from the drugs."

Peter felt a sudden wave of revulsion. Images of strangely twisted limbs and gnarled faces flashed in his mind. He himself and asked, "Is she retarded?"

"There is no disfiguration," the doctor said. "But it's too early to judge her overall condition. She appears to be a normal, if premature baby."

Peter allowed himself a tight smile. "Thank you, doctor," he said.

They ambled down the hall. "Ivy's not doing well," the doctor added, "but she insisted on seeing you now. She's very weak, so you'll only have a few minutes."

Peter nodded. "Then can I see...?" he said and left the question unfinished, wondering what was the baby's name.

"Yes. But that must be brief too," the doctor said, bringing him up to a closed door. "Wait, Mr. Jones," Dr. Chen said, gripping Peter's wrist as he reached for the door latch. "Her condition is not very good, physically or mentally. Don't upset her. Try to encourage her. I don't know what your plans are with her, but try to reinforce her with some positive thoughts. Do you understand?"

Peter nodded, then gingerly opened the door and went into the room. The shades were drawn, and strange electronic sounds emanated from machines stationed beside the bed. He went to her.

A dim lamp spread yellow light over the bed, and through the blankets covering her Peter could see that Ivy was very thin. Her head was tilted toward the window and her closed eyelids seemed dark and bluish. She looked so different from when he had thrown her out of his home. He remembered her pure adoration, her desire to please him with her project. He braced himself against the bed rail and leaned his face closer to hers. She smelled medicinal, sterile. Her delicate bone structure, her pert nose, were masked by thin, nearly transparent skin. He felt responsible. Guilty. He must take care of her.

And Kate...? No. He couldn't let himself think about that right now. He had to let Ivy know everything would be all right, that he would take care of her.

He whispered her name and she stirred, eyelids fluttering. A thin smile touched her lips, then she blinked a few times and her eyes filled with tears. She let out a long breath through pressed lips, closed her eyes, and made an anguished face. "I told myself I wouldn't get like this when I saw you." She looked away.

"Hey," he said, touching her cheek. She pulled her hand from beneath the blankets and wrapped her thin fingers around his. His body stiffened at her chilly, tenuous touch. At once he felt pity and fear. He was afraid for her life. She looked as if she were a breath away from dying. She had all but destroyed herself. And the baby? What had she done to the baby? He wanted to hold her, tell her she was forgiven, yet he was the one who should be asking for forgiveness. It was all so twisted.

"Don't," she said, pulling her hand away. "Just don't. I don't know what I'm more disgusted about. Me, or you? I wanted you, and you took me and then you threw me away." Her words were thick and slurred. She was bombed on painkillers and tranquilizers and whatever else they were feeding her

through the intravenous tube. "I threw myself away, too, after you made me go. I think I wanted to make the baby go away. I think I did what I did, the drugs and all, to hurt it. I'm sick Peter. I'm very sick now, and I have to get all this poison out of me. Including you."

"Ivy, don't talk this way. I'm sorry. You're sorry. We're both sorry for the mistake we made. But we've got to deal with it. It's my responsibility."

She winced. "Now you come to my rescue," a pause, then, "I'm sorry. I don't want to be like this. I just hate you right now. So much. Christ, that ride from LA up here."

She was making no sense at all. "What are you talking about?" Maybe, he thought, it would be better to leave and come back later, after she had rested.

"Yes. The ride. To see Kate McGreggor. She was the one I wanted to meet, more than you. She was who I wanted to be like. Her guards, or whatever they are, never let me in to see her. I tried to find out more about her, where she lived and all. That was when I found that article about you, with her in it. I didn't even know who you were. And then I read about what you'd done, and that you were why the Joey was what it was, I don't know, I wanted to do that instead. I hated her then. I didn't want to be a musician anymore. I wanted to be a techno-artist or something. It's my parent's fuckin' fault, my liberal upbringing. I don't know. Or maybe something else. They're here now. Better late than never, right? Hey, lucky me, I can call them by their first names, but I could never call them Mom and Dad. That's what I wanted. Rick and Jeannette. No. It's not their fault. What am I saying? I don't even know who I am."

She turned her head away from him and rested. She lay still for a while, and when he thought she was asleep he turned to go.

"Stop," she said in a rasp. "We're not done." She was sitting up. Her eyes were dry now, awake yet unalive. "We're gonna make a deal. You've got a baby to take care of now, Peter. I can't do it. Not right now, at least. I can't even piss on my own. I have to push a button to get one of them to help me. How the hell'm I gonna take care of a baby? I can't even name the thing. That's your call, too. You get to call all the shots, Peter. Shoot, bang, bang, I'm almost dead. You're holding the gun, man. Don't go shootin' your own head, though. Oh, don't worry, I'll get better - it's the only way I'll get you. Get back at you is what I mean. You got a cigarette?"

He shook his head.

She made a disgusted face at him and waved her hand, scratching her fingers through her hair. "Then there's the other thing. I can't do any more about it. Not for a while. You might as well take a look at it."

"What other thing?"

Like a drunkard at a bar, signaling for a particular brand, she gestured to the corner of the room. "In there. In my pack. Get it."

He opened a narrow cabinet door and pulled her blue knapsack from the shelf. He held it to her. She smacked it with her hand. "Open it yourself."

Inside he found several notebooks and pens.

"The disks, dick."

And he found a large stack of diskettes, bound together by rubber bands.

"What is it?" he said.

Once more she turned her head on the pillow so that she was facing away from him. "What's it say on the label?"

"ISLE."

"You can read."

"Ivy," he started, but then held his tongue. She had every right to be treating him this way. But she was saying things he didn't want to hear her say. She was heavily drugged and needed rest. They could deal with all this in a few days. "Why don't we do all this later?"

"There is no 'later.' I don't want to see you again. Not for a long time, till I'm able to look at you

without all this shit in me and coming out of me."

"Then what? What is this? What do you want me to do with it?"

"That ride I told you about, from LA back up here with the idea of somehow meeting you? I heard 'Teach the Children' on the radio on the way up. It hit me like a cyclone. I had to stop in Fresno to find the tape. I played it over and over. I thought, yeah, teach them well, and do it with computers. I mean, it's what I knew I had to do, with what I was thinking about language, the idea of it applied to Joeys and letting kids learn with them. And somehow my hormones and whatever else was in me when I met you thought, 'Do it with your own kid, like with him, you, make a baby out of it all and the program will write itself.' I waited until it was the right time of the month to make you that dinner I made, so we'd do it, and get it all going the way I saw it."

"You did this on purpose? This baby?"

"Yes. But stop it. I mean, we're talking about the other now. We're on that, what's in your hands."

"What's it got to do with what you said?"

"It means Intelligent Speech and Language Environment. There's a little box in there too, synthesizer and recognizer all in one. But it's not just for kids, or learning. It's whatever you want it to be. You'll see what I mean. Go ahead, take it, the notes and code lists and everything, it's all in there. See if it's worth anything to you. Hell knows, I'm gonna have a shit load of bills when I'm through with this rinse cycle."

"Okay."

"'Okay' is all you say. No thanks? Jesus. That's just like you."

"Thanks. I mean, we'll figure this all out. We will."

"Blah, blah, blah."

The door opened behind him. He turned. The nurse and a middle-aged couple entered the room. "Mr. Jones, Ivy's parents would like to be with her now."

He looked at Ivy. He could not see her face.

"Get better," he said to her and she responded with a huffing sound.

The man came before Peter. His face was tanned and pleasant, and the woman at his side was attractive. Her hair was bright, like Ivy's. She looked at Peter sadly, and pressed her husband forward an inch.

He spoke. "Mr. Jones, we'd like to know how you intend to take care of this."

"Dad," Ivy said to the window, "lay off. We're dealing with it."

"We had hoped you wouldn't come," Mrs. Green said. "We would be the child's guardians if you hadn't. We'll gladly take care of her."

"Get out," Ivy said, poking Peter in the ribs. "Just get out with it all."

"This child's an enormous responsibility," the father said.
"Please let us take her."

"Right, Dad. Like you know all about it. Got a joint on you?"

"I can take care of her," Peter said, clutching the knapsack with both hands. "And I will provide for Ivy."

"You sure will," Ivy piped in. "I'll send you the tab." She snorted and laughed, then she started crying. Her father glanced her way, then looked at Peter. He shook his head in disappointment and went to his daughter's side.

"I'm so sorry," Peter said to Mrs. Green.

"To say the least," she said, joining her husband and daughter.

Peter exited the room carrying the knapsack. From the hallway he took one last look at Ivy and her

parents before the door closed, shutting out the image huddled behind it. He was dazed by the events of the last forty-eight hours. He slowly made his way down the corridor, turning once to look back at the closed door to her room. The first thought to surface through his haze of emotions was of the baby. He had promised these people that he would care for her.

He paused before the nurses' station and asked how to reach the neonatal care unit. He tramped down the corridor, rounded the corner, and pushed through a set of swinging double doors. To the nurse sitting at a small desk, he said, "Pardon me, which baby is the Jones-Green baby? I'm her father."

The nurse led him into a clean room and instructed him to put on a sterile gown and a face mask. He followed her orders in silence. Dressed in the sanitary outfit, he followed the nurse into a room containing a row of clear plastic bubble-like incubators, one of which held his baby's fragile baby. It was a strange setting, surreal, like something out of a science fiction film.

"Here she is," the nurse said.

Encased in the hygienic shell lay his baby girl. She was tiny, and he could see thin, pulsing veins through her skin and bruises all over her body. Her head! It looked so huge and unnatural, he thought with alarm. He leaned closer, panicked.

The nurse saw his aghast expression and touched a gloved hand to his arm. "Oh, don't worry. That's normal," she said. "All the rest of her will catch up in the next couple of weeks. The head develops a little faster at this stage. It's perfectly ordinary."

"What is all this?" he asked, studying the clear tubes entering her nostrils and poking into her arms and belly, the wires and probes taped to her impossible little body.

"Respiratory, protein, waste, heart," the nurse said, indicating the various points, all of which appeared crudely connected and held in place by swatches of white tape.

"How is she?"

"We're keeping a close eye on her. It was a difficult birth, but she seems like a fighter."

"Hang in there, little girl," Peter whispered.

"I'm afraid we have to leave now. We need to be extremely careful about exposure."

Peter nodded, and through his paper face mask he kissed his gloved fingers and touched the plastic shell. He straightened and followed the nurse out of the room. Pulling himself free of the green scrub outfit, he glanced one last time back through the glass window into the neonatal room. He collected the knapsack and pushed through the doors.

Sitting outside the room in one of the hard plastic waiting chairs, was Kate.

Without a word she stood and caught him in her arms. She held him for a moment, stiffly, then guided him to the seat beside her.

"Jesus, Kate. How did you - ?"

"I called Peggy. She told me you were here."

Peter looked at the silver doors. "She's so tiny. "

"I heard," Kate said. She pressed her folded hands into her lap and cleared her throat. "Peter, why? Why didn't you tell me?"

He closed his eyes. He felt precariously close to throwing up, surrounded by riddles and agony. Ivy. The baby. Kate.

"Kate," he said, "I didn't think this would happen." He opened his eyes and looked at her. "You have to believe me."

"How many does this make?" Kate said, bitterly. "We could have adopted."

He tried to put his arm around her, but she pulled away and stood, hugging her arms tightly around herself.

"Kate, none," he said, moving closer. "There have never been any others. I didn't plan this to happen."

"And she did?"

"No. Yes! I don't know," he said. "She was desperate. It just happened. I didn't want it to, but it just did. We'd had too much to drink. It was the wine - "

She slapped him hard across the face.

Without a word, he dropped his chin to his chest. He knew that the blow he had struck her, this whole situation, had cut deep. The damage would take a very long time to heal. But he had to have her forgiveness, because without her he would never get through this.

"Kate, please. I don't know what we'll do," he said. "But please don't leave me. I need you."

Dr. Chen appeared from around the corner. "Mr. Jones?" he said. He looked at Kate and gestured politely for her to sit down. Then he led Peter away, around the bend in the corridor. They sat down.

"Mr. Jones, we need for you to name your daughter."

No name. Their baby girl had no name. This thought seemed to be the final blow to drain him of his last ounce of energy. It was real, and final. His life was changed now and forever. Somehow the knapsack fell from his hands, its contents spilling onto the floor. Kate. He had to ask her.

"Wait," he said to the doctor. He jumped to his feet and ran around the corner, calling out her name. But she was gone.

His shoulders slackened and he went back to the doctor, who was collecting the contents that had spilled out of the knapsack. Peter bent down to take over. He was overcome by a wave of dizziness and the nausea. Then, just as abruptly, the spinning halted and the sickness retreated, forced back by a keening sound that arose in his throat.

There, among the clutter of notes and pens and the little black box with its exposed circuits and wires, he found, written in her mother's own hand across the label of the topmost disk, their baby's name.

"Isle," he whispered.

"Mr. Jones?" the doctor said, not sure he had heard correctly.

"I said, Isle," Peter said, louder this time, taking the disks in his hand. "My daughter's name is Isle."

PART IV

Chapter 17

"That's a good girl," Peter said, cradling the tiny Isle in his arms. He checked her bottle. "Almost done."

For one and a half months she had been home with Peter, deemed well enough leave the hospital after a touch-and-go stay for the same length of time. She weighed a scant six and a quarter pounds. Her eyes were curious and alert, just like her mother's. Peter longed for her eyes to keep the clear sapphire color, a glittering reflection of Ivy. Isle's hair was beginning to outcrop in satiny brown whorls, the same color as her father's.

"Your little jewel," Grace said all smiles as she came into the living room. "Go ahead, I'll finish up with her."

"Okay, shrimp, over to Grace," Peter said, handing over the little pink bundle.

Peter stood beaming at his infant in Grace's lap, her tiny mouth puckering the nipple of the bottle, tiny hands clutching and uncurling, tiny stocking feet kicking. So fragile, yet strong.

"Petey!" Byron boomed from elsewhere in the house. "Let's go!"

"Better hurry before the bear comes out of his cave looking for you."

"Coming," Peter called, and hurriedly kissed Isle's fuzzy head.

Having temporarily moved into Peter's California mansion since they had come back from Maine after Isle's birth, the Holmeses had been a godsend. Grace was all too happy to help out with Isle, and Byron and Peter had resumed their project. He had still not seen or heard from Ivy, and she had refused his

calls at the detoxification clinic where she was recovering.

Byron and Peter and their small team worked all hours of the day on the design they had settled on. The day Isle was born, Ivy had provided him with the missing link, the distinct component that he had been seeking. With the ISLE interface, they now had a model from which to refine the hardware, honing its design to provide the ultimate platform, the perfect stage upon which Ivy's invention could perform.

"Come here," Byron said enthusiastically, "Get a look at this." He was standing before a Joey Plus computer. It was connected to a small, open black box filled with a convolution of wires, circuits, and components. Peter stood beside his mentor in the makeshift partitioned lab they had set up in one of the large bedrooms.

"We've got the agent tied in to the speech recognizer and it's working like a charm. Here," Byron said, handing Peter a small microphone, "tell it you want to make a date."

Peter cleared his throat. "Computer," he said, the keyword that the ISLE speech recognizer listened for to carry out spoken commands, "lunch with Byron on Friday."

On the screen, a small month-view calendar opened and the upcoming Friday flashed. A moment later "12:00PM Byron Holmes / Lunch" appeared in the date box.

The Joey Plus's built-in speaker came to life with a robotic voice. "Lunch with Byron Holmes, noon, confirmed. Is there an agenda?"

Peter grinned and looked at Byron, who lowered his voice. "A little something we threw in this morning."

Peter spoke into the microphone. "Yes. Discuss computer enhancements and - "

"Computer," the Joey said, interrupting Peter, "is unrecognized."

Peter gave Byron a puzzled look. "What happened?"

Byron was scratching his head. "Well how do you like that. We never considered that. I mean, that if we call the computer 'computer,' then we can't use that word once it's listening to whatever we tell it."

"Ah," Peter said. "Right. Hmm." He thought about this for a second, then sat down before the Joey and started typing.

"What are you doing?" Byron said.

"Well," Peter said, lifting the microphone, "since the word computer won't compute, all we need to do is give it a unique name that we wouldn't normally use in an everyday context."

"Of course," Byron said. "Good thinking."

Peter pressed a key and the Joey spoke: "Please say my name so that I know who I am."

"Pip," Peter said, loud and clear.

"Please repeat my name again, faster this time."

Peter said the name faster. The Joey Plus asked him to repeat it once more, slowly this time, so that it knew three slight variations on of its own name, thereby making recognition more accurate.

"Pip?" Byron asked.

"Sure," Peter said. "Pip. Like in Dicken's 'Great Expectations.' One of my all-time favorite characters."

"Then Pip it is," Byron laughed. "Let's give it a try."

Peter repeated the test and the Joey Plus, a.k.a. Pip, pulled off the scheduling task without a hitch.

"Well done," Peter said, congratulating Byron.

"That's nothing. We got the net lookup voice stuff working too."

"Hey, come look at this," Paul Trueblood said, appearing from behind one of the partitions used to divide the huge room.

Peter had contacted his two favorite engineers, Paul Trueblood and Rick Boardman, after he and Byron had relocated the project to California. During a dinner Peter had arranged, Byron had talked about the ISLE vision, providing the engineers the opportunity to get to know him. Both were excited by what they heard, and the very next day both engineers resigned from Wallaby and returned to Peter's home, ready to dive into the project.

In one hand Paul held a short stylus pen, and in the other a flat display unit that connected to another Joey Plus portable computer. With the stylus he began "writing" directly on the display. As he scribbled, the computer converted his script handwriting into clear text.

"Looking good," Peter said, watching the software do its thing quickly and accurately. "Hey, no mistakes," he said when Paul finished jotting down several lines. It took him a moment to realize that what Paul had written were the lyrics to a song. A Kate McGreggor song.

Byron applauded and, noticing Peter's ruminating, elbowed him.

"Good stuff, Paul," Peter said quietly.

"Hey, Ricky," Byron called, "how'd you manage to speed up the recognition so much?"

A smiling Rick peered over the edge of another nearby partition. "You can thank my pals at MIT. They were kind enough to slip me some new algorithms at that conference I went to last week," Rick said. "It zips up the language translation stuff, too. Watch." He punched a few keys and the text on the display suddenly changed to Spanish, accents and all, then, a keystroke later, Cyrillic.

"Okay, come on now," Peter said with a clap, putting an end to the show. "We've only got another forty-five minutes," he said, checking the clock on the wall. "I want you guys to run through it once more to make sure there aren't any glitches."

"It's all working," Paul assured him, a little defensively. Just like old times.

Peter smiled. "Okay, okay."

Byron said, "We've got the whole works all ready to show him. It's gonna knock his socks off."

Peter had been skeptical about meeting Byron's old friend, who was due to arrive shortly. However, trusting Byron's judgment, he had ultimately given in.

"I hope so," Peter said, then, "I'm going to check on Isle." He excused himself.

"She's asleep," Grace whispered, glancing up from her book. Isle slept peacefully beside her on the sofa.

"Any calls?" Peter said. The house and lab phones were on separate lines, so that the men were not distracted while working.

Grace gave a sympathetic shake of her head.

Peter had not heard from Kate since Isle's birth. He had called her the night she'd departed, and tried to persuade her to return. She had declined, and that was the last time they had spoken.

He now had Isle, and Byron and Grace, a family of sorts, and ISLE. The project had crystallized into a wondrous thing. This afternoon's meeting could signal the beginning of something great, something bigger than anything he had ever done at Wallaby. Yet, if he could, Peter would trade all of it to have Kate back. If only he could undo his mistake...

As if reading his mind, the older woman laid a hand on his wrist. "Petey, you can call her, you know."

He shrugged. "I told her I would leave it up to her. That she's eternally welcome, and we want her back. But I think I've lost her for good, Grace."

"Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. You know, after Byron had his heart attack, I almost left him."

"Really? How come?"

"His pride. He felt so incapacitated by the fact that he couldn't help himself, and that he was nearing retirement, that he sort of turned against me. When he was bedridden, I set up a room in the house with all his favorite things, maps and model ships, books he loved. But all he could do was reject my

help, hurt me."

"But it's not the same."

"Isn't it? Didn't what happened between you and Ivy happen because you knew, in the back of your mind, that you were losing control at Wallaby? And maybe you thought Kate would not want you once that happened?"

Peter stared at her. What she said had never occurred to him, but when he considered it, it rang true.

"Petey, I know my husband better than anyone. And I know when I see someone who's like him. I made a decision many years ago to be his partner, till death do us part. We came close to breaking that promise, until he told me one simple thing."

"I think I know what he said."

"Then why don't you say it?"

He hesitated, then it. "I was scared."

"And so was he. But when he told me, when he came right out and said it, I understood. Yes, it's different. Infidelity is harder to forgive. But if you tell her why, as you just told me, maybe she'll give you a second chance."

"It's all so mixed up. There's the baby, and the project and everything going on today. I'm not sure now is the right time. Everything is so up in the air."

"But if she were back in your life, Peter, wouldn't these things seem a little more tolerable?"

He looked at his baby. "Yes," he said. "You're right. I'll do it. I'll call her."

* * *

Greta walked into the bank and faced the long line of customers. "Ugh," she sneered, settling her sunglasses in her hair.

Resigned, she labored to the end of the line, a dozen or so people between her and the front. She fished through her purse, looking for a stray form left over from a past visit. She found none, and besides, she wasn't sure which form she needed anyway. There has to be a better way, she thought, glancing anxiously at the multitude of forms stacked on the podium beside the line. Just then, the branch manager appeared from a small room behind the main counter, carrying a handful of papers in his hands. Ah! There it was, a better way. She managed to catch his eye.

"Bruce! How are you?" Greta said affectionately, catching him lightly by the arm.

"Well hello, Mrs. Locke. How are you?" he said, patting her hand.

She leaned close to his ear. "I was fine, until I walked into this. It's becoming so difficult to bank."

Taking advantage of her impairment, which, before falling in love with Jean-Pierre, she would have never considered, she fluttered her four-fingered hand in the air. She sighed. "Oh well."

Managing to restrain his surprise, he glanced pensively at the papers in his hand, then at the woman who stood in front of Greta. Like the others in line, the woman's attention was fixed on the front of the line. Greta read the young manager's mind with delicious knowing: She is Matthew Locke's wife, with a history of enormous deposits. And very large balances. And, she knew, he had never before seen her disfigured hand. Pity.

He leaned closer. "Wait over at my desk. I'll be finished with this transaction in just a minute, then I'll take care of you."

She graced him with a thankful smile and casually strolled over to the manager's desk and seated herself. She opened her purse, busied herself emptying old receipts and gum wrappers. A few minutes later the manager returned and seated himself opposite her. He collected her litter and, all business, discarded it in the wastebasket beneath his desk. Clasp his hand together atop the desk blotter, he beamed with anticipation, plainly expecting a big deposit. "Now, what is it I can do for you, Mrs. Locke?"

She produced her checkbook and flattened it on the desk before her. "I'd like to withdraw some of my funds," she said.

His expression seemed to flatten a little. "How much would you like to withdraw?"

She looked from side to side, then leaned forward, her chin an inch above her poised pen. "A quarter-million dollars," she whispered.

"I see," he said, blinking, looking personally offended. "Is there something wrong with our service?"

She gave a little laugh. "Oh, no. No, no. You're always so kind and friendly. It's really not that much money - relatively speaking," she said with a shake of her shoulders, a subtle reminder of their overall balance.

"From which account will you draw the funds?" he asked, his fingers working quickly over the keyboard of the computer terminal beside the desk. "Your personal checking account balance here doesn't total that amount."

"I know. I'd like you to arrange to collect it from the market fund account, and then deposit it into this," she said, indicating the account number in her open checkbook. She unfolded the small slip of paper Jean-Pierre had given her and showed it to the manager. "Then I'll write a check, which I'd like wired to this Swiss account."

"Very well, Mrs. Locke." He opened one of the desk drawers. "We'll just need to fill out this form," he said, tearing off a small pink sheet. "Are you and Mr. Locke traveling?" he asked casually as he transcribed her account number onto the form.

"Nope. Just me. It's to help set up affairs in Europe before I depart for an extended trip."

He tapped the account number into the computer terminal and a moment later the account activity unrolled on the display. "Oh," he said, frowning. "Mrs. Locke, this is a joint account. I'm afraid we're going to need Mr. Locke's signature on this form before we can provide wire authorization."

She straightened. "But the account is in my name," she said, puzzled.

"Yes, Mrs. Locke," he said patiently, "your checking account is in your name, but the funds are coming from your joint account with Mr. Locke."

"But they are leaving from my account," she insisted, as if this made a difference.

"Yes, they are, but to get into your account they must first come out of the market fund, which is in both names."

"Is there any other way?" she said, distressed. "I mean, It's really such a small amount. Couldn't we just this once make it work somehow?"

"I'm afraid not, Mrs. Locke. We must have Mr. Locke's signature on this form before we can proceed with the transaction. I'm sorry."

The manager wrote an X beside the line that needed Matthew's signature. "Normally, Mr. Locke would have to appear in person. But if you can just have him sign this and then come back with it before three o'clock, we can complete the transaction today."

Pulling out of the bank's parking lot she decided to drive to Wallaby and have Matthew sign the form immediately. It was best to just get the whole transfer done and over with.

When she had asked Jean-Pierre why he couldn't first go over to France and open a joint account in both their names, he had told her that this was the best way, something to do with interest rates and international rules and regulations and other things she didn't understand, or care to know more about. The long and short of it, according to Jean-Pierre, was that a delay would cause them to lose thousands of dollars in interest. He obviously knew what he was talking about, and she had agreed to do it his way. After all, she rationalized, it was for their future. And besides, he had promised he would make no decisions without first consulting her. This way, if he found something that they liked, he would be able to act fast, securing the property quickly, without having to wait for signatures to arrive via slow, international means.

She pressed hard on the accelerator, hoping to catch Matthew while he ate lunch in his office, as he customarily did this time of day.

Chapter 18

"Matthew, it's all so positive," Laurence Maupin said with smiling allegiance as she closed the copy of the "Wall Street Journal" resting on his desk. "You've got the press in the palm of your hand these days."

"I'd say you've had more than a little to do with that."

"Just doing my job."

"And more," he said with a mischievous grin.

His secretary opened his office door and leaned in. "Matthew, your meeting with the executive staff has been moved to one-thirty."

He thanked her and she returned to her desk. He closed the issue of "Business Week" he had been reading, which featured an article Laurence had pitched. He appraised his young assistant appreciatively as she flipped through a manila file folder. She looked at him.

"How about some lunch?" she asked, closing the folder.

"Sure. What are you up for?"

"You pick."

"I haven't had sushi in a while."

Laurence wrinkled her nose. "Hmm. I've somehow managed to avoid sushi all these years. Well, I guess it's time I tried it."

"You'll love it," he said, escorting her out of his office. To his secretary Eileen, he said, "We're going next door for lunch."

They boarded the elevator. "I'm curious as to why the executive staff pulled together for a meeting this afternoon," Matthew said. "No one has indicated a problem or situation of any sort to me."

"Perhaps it's to congratulate you on the fact that the Joey II is shipping two months ahead of schedule, with thousands of orders waiting to be filled."

"Maybe," he said, without conviction. "But we usually don't call together an executive staff meeting without some prior notice. And I'm usually the one to call them."

They crossed the Wallaby parking lot and walked along the sidewalk. "Who did call this one?" she asked.

He stopped in his tracks, and looked at her. "You know, I don't know," he said with mild astonishment. "I hadn't thought about it until you just asked. I suppose it was Hank Towers."

"Well, I can't imagine it being anything but good. Things have gone up, up, up since you've taken control."

"Yes, and I can thank you for that too," he quipped, shifting the topic from business to pleasure.

She touched her fingers to her lips to stifle a laugh as he opened the restaurant door for her. The Japanese hostess greeted them with a bow, and indicated for them to follow her. She led them into the dining area.

"I'd prefer a room in back," Matthew said when the hostess presented a table in the crowded general dining area, occupied mostly by Wallaby employees.

She nodded kindly and led them to the rear of the restaurant, to one of the more private rooms, screened off from the rest of the place with sliding rice paper and teakwood partitions.

"This is much better," Matthew said, stepping up to the low platform. He and Laurence kicked off their shoes and handed them to the hostess, who placed them outside the private room. They seated themselves side by side in the sunken pit, facing the sliding door.

The door slid closed and they opened their menus. A moment later Matthew felt Laurence's stocking feet resting on top of his own.

He scanned the menu briefly then folded it. "How about I order?" he said, noticing she was having

some difficulty choosing among the unusual dishes. "Trust me," he said, and kissed her forehead.

He felt like a man on top of the world. This was how things should be. In the past couple of months his wife had calmed down, just as he had known she would, and was off again doing her projects and things. Whatever it was she was occupying her time with he did not care, so long as she remained placated. As for her affair, he supposed she was still carrying on with it, but with whom, and where, he could not say. Nor did he care.

The rice paper screen silently slid open, and the waitress entered carrying a tray. She handed them each a moist hot towel and filled their mugs with green tea, and Matthew recited their order.

The waitress exited, and he gave Laurence's knee a little squeeze. "Don't worry, I picked a nice variety. No appalling surprises, I promise."

* * *

"Amazing!" William Harrell said excitedly as the ISLE system looked up a name he asked it to find in its sample phone directory. "And what did you say ISLE stands for?"

"Intelligent Speech and Language Environment."

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

"It was what really shifted our focus on this whole new design," Peter began. Byron, Paul, and Rick sat at the table also, listening as Peter explained their design. "We had already decided that intelligent agents were the next big step in portable computers and devices, but it didn't seem like enough to us. We wanted more. And when we encountered the ISLE hardware and software, the pieces just sort of fell in place."

He paused for a moment, picked up the small black box sitting on the table before them. "In its final configuration, this circuitry will fit on one single PC card, that slides into one of the portable's available slots. It contains the core recognition software, speech synthesizer, and 74,000 word English language library. The card's extra RAM stores up to 5,000 additional words, such as last names or companies or terms you commonly refer to. Additional libraries, ones that are industry-specific, for example, medical libraries, can be stored on another PC card, or on the hard disk."

"Incredible," William said. "But really, do people want this sort of interface? Will they really use it? In tests we conducted in our labs, we found that while users often asked for speech recognition, few actually used it once we installed it on prototype systems. What makes this any different?"

Peter nodded in agreement. "You're right. It's true. While people think they want to be able to talk to a computer, have it take dictation, we believe what they really want is to give it simple commands to make certain small tasks simpler. But listen, instead of telling you all of this, why don't we show you instead. Guys?"

Paul and Rick arranged the hackneyed Joey Plus computer in front of William and Peter handed him a microphone.

"In a final product," Peter said, "we'll of course build-in a microphone for hand's free operation." He hit a few keys. "Now, say you are driving in your car and you remember that you need to send an e-mail or fax to an associate to confirm an upcoming appointment."

"Okay," William said. "How do I start."

"Do what comes naturally."

William thought about this for a second then spoke into the microphone. "Pip, create an e-mail."

The Joey's hard disk was busy for an instant and then a blank e-mail form popped up on the screen. The Joey said, "To whom?"

William turned to Byron with wide eyes. Byron nodded and whispered, "Go on, give the little fella what he's asking for."

William said: "Peter."

Joey: "Peter Jones? Or Peter Smith?"

"Peter Jones," William said, then he covered the microphone and was about to say something, but

Peter anticipated his question before he could ask it.

"That's the agent at work, behind the scenes. It found two Peters in the address book and didn't know which one you wanted, so it asked you to decide."

The Joey filled in the 'To:' field and skipped to the next line. It had already filled in the 'From:' and 'Date:' fields automatically.

"Subject?" the Joey said.

"Meeting confirmation."

The Joey considered this for a few seconds and then the monthly calendar view appeared on the screen, layered above the e-mail form.

"Do you mean your meeting scheduled for this Friday?"

"Yes."

The Joey automatically keyed in the subject field with: "Meeting Confirmation, July sixth."

"Dear Peter," the Joey said, then "Please begin your message, William."

William recited a brief note, saying that he was looking forward to the upcoming meeting. When he was done, he covered the microphone with his hand again and turned to Byron. "How do I tell it I'm done?"

"Just say it's name first, and it will know that you want to give it a command. That's why we named this one Pip. It's a word it would probably never encounter in your normal correspondence and so it knows that you are talking to it, rather than giving it text to put on the screen."

"Pip," William said into the mic, "That's all."

The Joey did not respond.

"Pip," William tried again, "Thank you."

Nothing.

William looked at Peter, who looked at Rick.

"What's the word for done," Peter said.

"Done," Rick said. "Looks like we'd better put in a few more ways of saying done," he said, scribbling a note to himself.

William said, "Pip: done."

"Thank you," the Joey said. "Shall I send this fax now or later?"

"Now," William said. He looked at Peter. "Is that okay."

Peter nodded.

"Sending," the Joey said. A few moments later the portable's built-in modem dialed the phone line plugged into it. They heard the line ring through the computer's speaker, and a half-second later the fax machine in the workroom rang. It picked up on the next ring, and William got up and went over to it. The fax he had just dictated, properly dated and addressed, whispered out of the fax machine and lay in the tray, complete. William picked it up and let out a pleased whistle. He heard two beeps behind him and he turned around.

"Fax transmission complete," the Joey said.

"Pip," William said, "thank you."

"You're welcome, William," the Joey said.

William laughed and shook his head. "Incredible," he said. He switched off the microphone and laid it down on the table. "Well, I guess that proves your point. You're right. For simple busy-work like sending a fax or creating an e-mail, being able to speak to the computer directly does make the job

easier."

"Right," Peter said. "And some people will use it for longer documents, like a traditional dictation system, but without the need to transcribe it. And in order to avoid being interrupted in the middle of your brainstorm it will wait until you are done to ask you to clarify any words it did not understand."

"What about the handwriting stuff," William said.

"That's another enhancement," Peter said, ready to explain how it fit in with the rest of the product. But just then, Grace came into the room.

"Come on, boys, lunch is ready."

The men stood and stretched, and Peter went on as they headed out of the room. "Like the speech interface, we think the handwriting recognition, which we've vastly improved over the standard Joey version, will be used for smaller tasks, jotting down notes and contact information, that sort of thing. But not necessarily for writing long letters. For that, they can use the keyboard. However, for editing an existing document, using the stylus like a red pen to mark up the page and scribble in corrections or move text around, we've put in standard editor pen-strokes to make revisions a snap."

William removed his glasses. "It's amazing. The way these enhancements - the agent technology, and the speech and improved handwriting recognition - have upped the ante, making an already pretty smart portable system truly intelligent."

"Right," Peter said. "And the vertical application possibilities are endless. Publishing, using the editorial mark-up features I described. And any business that relies on forms. We're already collaborating with a doctor friend of mine at Stanford," Peter said enthusiastically. "She's building a system that lets doctors and nurses track patients' vital signs and prescription orders on a prototype system we've hacked together for her."

The group seated themselves around the dining table, with Peter and William sitting side by side.

William said, "But what about the computer itself? I see you've cracked open a few Joeys in there and put in your own custom hardware. Is that how you intend to deliver the product? As a Joey peripheral?"

Peter let out a big sigh on this one. "That's a good question. One I tend to get a little too worked up over. See, I want to do our own thing. It would take longer, but it would be ours, and not a part of Wallaby's. Let's just say I'm still a little sensitive on the subject. Byron, why don't you handle that one." Grace handed Isle to Peter and he gently rocked her in his arms.

"She's precious," William said. "I didn't know you were a father."

"Yep," Peter said. "Her name is Isle. She's the little jewel behind everything you just saw." He kissed her fuzzy head.

Byron took a sip of his water and addressed William's question. "That's not a bad idea, Billy. Petey and I have been talking about it between us, and we're not exactly sure how we're going to deliver the final product. We could do it as a Joey add-on. Or we could create our own new computer. That Joey in there that you were playing with is only the basic guts. For more reliable net and web access, we've slipped in a faster, 28.8 KB modem with a wireless option so you can send and receive e-mails or do paging through the airwaves, without plugging into a phone line. And we've come up with a sharper, lower-power thin-film transistor display, a longer-life battery pack, and an infrared port too, that lets you beam information to your desktop system or to other Joeys and IR devices, like printers, or hell, to your TV even, when we get the home-entertainment interface software we're kicking around up and running."

William put down his fork and took a sip of his water. "Well, there is another option that you have not mentioned." He paused. "You could integrate the ISLE design into a next-generation ICP product."

Everyone around the table stopped and looked at him. Then they looked at Peter.

Peter, gently rocking Isle in his lap, looked at Byron. Then he turned to William, and he smiled.

"Now there's an interesting idea."

* * *

She pulled into a handicapped parking space beside Matthew's car, then flashed her Wallaby VIP

badge to the security guard sitting behind the lobby desk. Matthew had gotten the pass for her a few years ago, after she had once been accosted by security when she had arrived and marched right past the desk carrying a basket of flowers, a surprise for her husband. As far as she was concerned, she was still the boss's wife, and she could go anywhere she damn well pleased. She ignored the guard's pleasantries and boarded the elevator. A moment later the door parted, and she was on the top floor.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Locke," a handsome receptionist said cheerfully.

"Hello, Sheldon," Greta said with an effusive smile. Such a charming young man. He knew how to treat a distinguished woman. As she headed away, her peripheral vision caught the young man lifting the telephone handset, warning the executive secretaries that she was on her way.

So well trained, she thought, a sudden hush falling over the executive area. As she marched along the row of offices, each of the secretaries graced her with a smile and a greeting.

"Greta," Matthew's secretary Eileen said with deliberate flatness.

Greta marched past her desk without so much as a glance and went straight into her husband's office.

Eileen came in behind her. "He's gone to lunch next door," she said. "Can I help you with something?"

Lingering for a few moments, she examined several documents on Matthew's desk with feigned interest. Satisfied, she cleared her throat and walked out of the office. Neither of the two women wished the other any sort of day, good, bad or otherwise.

She made her way back to the elevators.

The elevator rang, and someone ran past her and boarded it. "Please hold that," she called out. Taking her time to reach the elevator, a pleasurable knowledge swept through her; whoever the person in the elevator was, he or she would hold the door for her.

"Thank you, dear," she said to the young man aboard the elevator. Because she had participated in all of Wallaby's major functions, whether on stage with Matthew as he wished the employees season's greetings, or during congratulatory speeches and celebration events, everyone in the company recognized Greta Locke - the head-honcho's wife.

Reveling in this notoriety, she strolled into the sushi restaurant and searched among the tables for her husband. Conversations quieted among the diners as they noticed her. Mrs. Matthew Locke pretended indifference to the attention she drew as she started through the dining area and headed for the back room, where on past occasions she and Matthew had dined with some of the other Wallaby executives and their wives.

"May I help you?" the hostess inquired politely, treading alongside Greta.

"I know my way around," Greta said. She went in back and stopped before the group of private partitioned rooms. The doors to three of the intimate little rooms were open, and she could see they were empty. She went for the first closed door, but just before sliding it open she noticed Matthew's shoes, as well as a pair of heels, sitting on the floor by the last room, which overlooked the carp pond at the restaurant's atrium center.

As she neared the room, she heard Matthew's voice. "Here, try this one," then a foolish giggle, presumably belonging to whoever it was who fit into such tiny heels.

Greta stepped up to the platform and slid the door open, just in time to see Matthew, chopsticks in hand, placing a dripping pink piece of raw fish into the mouth of a young pretty thing. The girl sat with her eyes closed and head tilted back slightly, wriggled her tongue in anticipation. Matthew's other hand was hidden beneath the girl's hair, supporting her neck.

Looking up and encountering his wife's stunned expression, Matthew jerked impulsively, and in doing so plunged the chunk of raw fish into the girl's mouth. Her eyes snapped open, and she made a revolting sound. Her hands flew to her throat. She was choking.

Matthew struck the girl sharply on the back, and with a great popping cough, the pink thing flew from her mouth into her cupped hand.

Seeing that the girl's airway was free, Matthew turned to his wife. Getting up, his napkin fell into the tray of sushi. As he reached for it, his feet encountered an obstacle, and in an effort to prevent himself from crashing through the window, he caught the edge of the table, managing to tip over their mugs of

tea, as well as knock most of the remaining sushi onto the floor.

"Sit down, Matthew," Greta said with a disgusted flap of her hand. She gave him a look. "I must say, darling, I'm very impressed with your technique. I would have thought you'd need a hook to catch this sort of fish."

The girl sucked deep gulps of air, alternating her wide, watery-eyed gape between husband and wife.

"Poor thing, so sorry you don't care for the selection," Greta said with a pout. "I think there's some more on the floor. Go fetch, dearie."

"Greta," Matthew snapped, "close that door!"

"Oh, relax, Matthew. This will only take a minute. However," she said, seating herself in the pit across from them, "I'm not leaving until I see this live one swim through a hoop and catch a chunk of that bait in the air."

Matthew glared at his wife as she opened her purse and withdrew the pink bank form.

"This is Laurence Maupin," Matthew said, attempting to explain himself. "She's my public relations assistant."

Ignoring the girl's flawless extended hand, Greta slid aside the tray and dropped the form on the table before Matthew. She made sure to use her left hand.

The door slid open and the hostess poked her head in. "Would you like a menu?" she asked graciously.

"Go away," Greta snapped. The door slid closed.

"We were just going over some notes," Matthew said, still indulging in his farce. "For a speech I'll be giving in a few weeks."

"Is that so?" Greta said. "And where will you be speaking, Matthew, Sea World?"

More composed now, Laurence eyed her tormentor with plain contempt. "This is not what you think, Mrs. Locke," she said.

"Butt out. This business is between my husband and I." She flicked the form into Matthew's lap, then slapped a gold pen down on the table. "Sign it."

"Greta! This is for a quarter-million dollars," he said, his voice disbelieving. "What the hell are you doing?"

She gave her husband an impatient look. "Matthew, either you shut up and sign that, or I walk out there and announce your fishy little affair with Flipper here."

He considered this, looked down at the form. "I hope you know what you're doing," he said, and picked up the pen.

"What the hell is so funny?" Greta asked, noticing Laurence's apparently merry expression as she watched Matthew's hand squiggling across the form. For the briefest instant, Laurence's smile intensified when she met Greta's eyes. At this stare-down, Greta lost.

Matthew shoved the pen and the transfer document across the table, then crossed his arms and stared down at the ruined lunch like an angry child.

Greta collected the form and folded it neatly, a triumphant smile on her face. Matthew shook his head in disgust as the slip disappeared into her purse with a snap. His anger was complete. At this point he was only thankful she was leaving immediately, without causing him any further embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry I can't stay to see the rest of the show - " Greta started, calmly.

Or so he thought.

"I'll especially hate missing the part where you balance his balls on your nose."

Matthew lunged for her, but she escaped his grasp with a titter and left the room, not bothering to close the door. She swept past the mute diners, her victory plain for everyone to see. She even paused at the door for a moment to take a few mints at the hostess desk.

But when she pressed through the doors, leaving her stunned audience behind, she felt strangely unmasked in the bright sunlight. Something inside her shifted, and her elation quickly drained.

She was overcome by a sudden panic. And then it hit her. Was this her last hurrah? Would that young girl take over her reign as Mrs. Matthew Locke? she wondered covetously.

She pressed her fist to her mouth and forced herself to concentrate on her task at hand. She had to get to the bank with the signed transfer. Then she would feel better. Yes, she told herself, catching Matthew with his little tart would strengthen her decision, would reassure her. She couldn't wait to tell Jean-Pierre she had caught him, red-handed.

But this small euphoria was as short-lived as the last. As she raced up the highway, a disturbing realization mocked her, prodding obscenely at her sensibility. That all this time, contrary to her reasoning, Matthew had had the capacity to love more than Wallaby, and he had chosen to share it not with her, but with another woman.

Chapter 19

"Then we have a tentative agreement," William said with plain satisfaction in his voice. Isle lay slanted across his knees, her tiny hand now and then batting his tie.

Peter and Byron, seated on a sofa, both nodded in agreement.

"Wonderful," William said. "You hear that, young lady? Your name is going to be famous!" As if on cue the baby yawned, and everyone laughed.

"Speaking of tired, you men must be working yourselves to the bone with all the progress you've made," William said, handing Isle to Peter. "When do you expect to have a final design?"

Byron considered for a moment. "The hardware design is nearly complete. We've got a lot of software work to do. Six months?" Byron ventured, turning to Peter.

"If you say so, chief," Peter said. "We'll need some engineers, administrative support, that kind of stuff."

William assured the men that he would get them whatever they needed to see their project through to completion as quickly as possible.

Peter was nearly satisfied, but there was one last thing he wanted to clarify. "What about the strategic alliance?"

"That stays, for now." William said, then: "But when the ISLE system is ready for production, we'll be less dependent on Wallaby. There's an important difference between what we've got with Wallaby, and what we are proposing for ISLE. With this, ICP will have invested hard cash in your baby. So don't worry, we'll see to it that she's a success."

"Then we're on," Byron said.

William beamed. "Excellent," he said. He checked his watch. "I'd better get moving if I'm going to catch my plane." The trio walked to the door together. They shook hands, and William departed.

"You see, Petey," Byron said after closing the door, "the big guys aren't all so bad after all, eh?"

"I like him," Peter admitted.

"Man, we've sure got our work cut out for us. I just hope we don't have any setbacks."

"How did it go?" Grace asked.

Byron kissed her on the cheek. "Like a charm."

"Congratulations," she said. "Peter, this man called while you guys were out in the yard." She traded a Post-it note for Isle. There was a name written on it that Peter did not recognize, and a phone number. "Thanks. I'll call him later. Let's go tell the guys the good news."

* * *

"Did Greta find you?" Eileen asked, rising from her chair as

Matthew returned from lunch.

"She found me, all right," Matthew said, winded, rushing past her and into his office. He gathered his pen and notepad and hurried to the boardroom. There was only a minute to spare before the meeting began.

The entire Wallaby executive staff was seated around the table. "Good afternoon," Matthew said, sweeping the group with a smile. For an instant their inexpressive faces reminded him of the day they had voted Peter Jones from the company, and the hairs on the back of his neck tingled as he seated himself at the head of the table.

All eyes drifted to the assistant chairman, Hank Towers.

"Matthew," he started affably, "we're all pleased with the large volume of sales orders for the new Joey II."

A few heads nodded. A smile here, another there. The room seemed to loosen a little, and Matthew smiled broadly. Laurence had been correct. The meeting had been called to applaud his success with the Joey II, and the strategic alliance with ICP.

"Thank you," Matthew said modestly. Then he became serious, scanning the room expertly, locking briefly on each person's eyes. "But I couldn't have done it without all of you."

Nods. A few brief smiles of genuine affection. Then all eyes gravitated once more to Hank Towers. There was an unsettling air of deference, protocol.

"Matthew, you've been very busy with the ICP alliance," Hank said, "which is perfectly understandable. So the executives and I have been working on our three-year plan."

Matthew nodded.

"However," Hank said, "there is some concern among us, particularly in the area of future product engineering."

Matthew glanced at Alan Parker, who had been Matthew's assistant in getting the Joey division back on track after Peter's ejection. Alan had directed the reorganization of the Mate and Joey divisions, and managed the day-to-day development operations, while Matthew had championed the project's overall mission of delivering the new Joey Plus, then the Joey II, to the public. At present, Parker seemed to be very interested in his disposable pen.

"What kind of concerns?" Matthew said, relieved to hear that his own voice sounded authoritative.

Hank said, "With the work we've all done, focusing on the Joey Plus, and especially the II, none of us had much time to think about the future. Now that you've gotten the Joey II out the door, we've come to an important realization. Matthew, the truth of the matter is we have no realistic three-year plan."

"What do you mean no plan?" Matthew said, his voice splintering in mid-sentence. It was as if he were being shaken awake while in the midst of a pleasurable dream, suddenly confronted with the bafflement that comes with the knowledge that it was just that, a dream. Because he had spent all his time securing the alliance with ICP, he had never considered what Wallaby would think about after the relationship was announced.

Actually, he thought in the silence of the room, that was not altogether correct. In truth, he had not cared about what Wallaby would face after the ICP strategic alliance, because after that, according to the original plan, ICP would have bought Wallaby, and the future strategy would have become their concern. At that stage he would have been protected behind his big desk in his luxurious, apartment-sized office. How could he have made such a simple oversight? After contacting William to cancel the final stage of the eventual merger, hadn't he realized that following the Joey II, there would have to come new, future products from the innovative Wallaby?

Sometime during his reverie, the meeting had resumed.

"...among us is an awareness that we're all but succumbing to ICP as a maker of compatible systems. Our days as a radical portable computer company, a company for the people, may be over."

As Matthew considered this implication, that he had crumbled their fairy-tale company by moving them successfully into big business, he felt as though he were somehow slipping back in time, to the meeting in which he had forced out Peter Jones. Only this time, he was playing the part of Peter. Wasn't that what he had always wanted?

"Each one of you," he charged, sweeping his index finger around the table, "approved our plan to build systems that could tie-in to ICP's computers and share the same information!" He stood up, shoved his hands into his pockets.

"We did," Hank said calmly, speaking on the group's behalf. "As well as granting you the authority to run the shop. And all this room wants to hear is that you've got a product strategy, a vision, that goes beyond where we are today."

"Of course I have a plan," Matthew said indignantly. "We will evolve the Joey II, incorporating more powerful features." His voice turned shrill. "ICP is at our mercy. Think about it! The orders indicate that we are now the maker on the rise, that Joey is the one that people want for doing their work and accessing other systems, if even those systems are ICP's!"

"Matthew, be realistic," Hank said. "ICP could drop our arrangement at a moment's notice and introduce their own system." His manner became grave. "Or worse."

Matthew pressed his hands flat on the table, ready to challenge the group's faithlessness. "Worse? What worse?"

"Denise?" Hank said with a deferential nod to Denise Campbell, Wallaby's chief financial officer.

"There's a rumor circulating" Denise said. "Supposedly one of our engineers heard from his former colleague, Paul Trueblood, that Jones was demonstrating some new product to an official from ICP today."

Matthew paled. ICP? William Harrell? Was it possible that William had teamed with Peter in the few short months since Matthew had pulled the plug on the acquisition plan?

"That's what could be worse," Hank said. "In my estimation, it's possibly the worst thing that could happen to Wallaby. Our own founder leaves and builds a product that directly competes with his own invention."

They all stared at him, waiting. If he didn't think quickly, there was going to be another vote. "But the ICP alliance is our vision," Matthew said, groping for a solution.

Hank met this revelation with a gentle shake of his head. He looked down at his leather portfolio, at some notes. "Matthew," he started, sounding very tired.

If he didn't come up with something in the next few seconds, Matthew knew they would be asked to place their ballots. Resorting to the thing that had brought him to Wallaby in the first place, he decided his only chance was to resurrect his original secret plan.

"Wait," he blurted, cutting off Hank before he could continue. "I have a solution," he said, trying to sound confident. "I propose that we merge with ICP."

Their faces around the table disclosed either total confusion or total shock. Hank gave an astonished chuckle. "What on earth makes you think we would do a crazy thing like that? Or that they would?"

"They would, and they will," Matthew said firmly. "When we announced the strategic alliance, William Harrell had expressed ICP's interest in possibly merging our companies. I told him we weren't interested," he said, shifting the details to accommodate his story. A funny feeling hit him just then. That regardless of today's outcome, the act of finally revealing his compulsion felt like a great weight off his shoulders. At least his original plan was no longer a secret.

"Why weren't we told of this?" Hank demanded.

"I didn't seriously think it would be something any of us would want," Matthew said. "Harrell knew he couldn't acquire us without our consent, so I never feared a hostile takeover. An attempt to create a monopoly would be prevented by the FTC, and more seriously, the employees would rally against it, and our culture would be lost."

"But that's just it, Matthew," Hank said. "Without any real future products in the pipeline our culture is essentially doomed. You've succeeded in convincing the employees that coexisting with ICP was the right thing to do. No one has given back their profit-sharing checks, for crying out loud."

"Hank, this is business, not a fraternity. Business is sales, and we're finally making them, big time. Why not go all the way with it? We're a grown-up company now, in with the big boys."

If Wallaby were to merge with ICP, no one seated around the table would have a financial care in the

world. Their stock options would stack additional millions upon the millions most of them had already accrued. And looking around the room, at the calculating faces, he knew that that was exactly what each was thinking. All except Hank.

"Now then," Matthew said, "I propose we vote. How many people would agree to the initiation of a merger with ICP?"

"It would mean the end of Wallaby," Hank said gravely.

"No, Hank," Matthew countered, turning to face him. "It's just the beginning. ICP would sell millions more Joeys than we ever could."

"Agreed," Hank said. "You just said it yourself. ICP would sell. No more Wallaby."

As far as Matthew was concerned, it was all the same. He would assuredly be named president of the Wallaby subsidiary, just as he and William had planned almost three years ago. And the thought of eventually taking over William's role at ICP held enormous appeal again, as it once had. He locked onto this as his new goal.

"All in favor of me contacting William Harrell and proposing the merger of ICP and Wallaby, please raise your hands." His own hand stretched so high it hurt his side.

"We'll have to get full board approval," Hank warned, one last effort to counter Matthew's proposition.

Matthew said, "When they find out that Peter has been talking to ICP, I don't see how they can object. Now, all in favor, please raise your hands."

The room teetered on the edge of absolute stillness.

Then, slowly at first, hands rose. One after another, every person in the room raised his or her hand - except Hank Towers.

Once more, all eyes were on him.

Slowly, he lifted his open palm, held it there briefly, then stood and left the room.

"Very well," Matthew said and lowered his hand. The others followed suit then silently gathered their things and left the room.

All alone now, he lowered himself to a chair with an exhausted sigh. He had done it again. First Peter. Then the strategic alliance. Now the merger. An agreeable sensation of vengeance washed through him when he thought about Peter Jones and whatever plan he had up his own sleeve. For the second time he had voted Peter out, crushing whatever his secret scheme with ICP might have been.

But then he was hit by a sudden troubling thought. What if Peter's new project actually was superior to Joey? What if William no longer wanted Wallaby? What if the two had already decided to do business together?

He bolted from his chair and raced from the board room. He had to hurry and try to reach William after he was through with Peter Jones, even if that meant intercepting him at the airport.

* * *

She had considered driving straight to Jean-Pierre's after finishing her business with the bank, but decided instead to drop the car at home first and walk to his cottage. The stroll and the fresh air would calm her.

In her tight fist she carried the receipt from the funds transferred to Jean-Pierre's Swiss account. Transaction complete. Very soon she would find herself strolling to their own stable on their own ranch, with as many horses as she wanted. She envisioned a large property with a simple, stately home, the stable not far from her own back door, nestled among the rolling hills where she and Jean-Pierre would ride.

She rounded the bend of the path that opened onto the ranch. There were a few riders tramping out to the hills, a trainer in the ring was instructing a young student. Jennifer spotted her and waved from

her doorstep just before going inside. Greta returned the greeting with a wide, happy sweep of her arm.

She doesn't even know, Greta thought. For that matter, no one knew about her and Jean-Pierre. They had been discreet with the affair, seeing each other when Matthew was out of town, which had been often in the past months. She still rode almost every morning, and often Jean-Pierre joined her. Together they would hunt out a secluded spot in the hills with a beautiful view, dismount from their horses, and make love.

Yes, that was how it would be almost every day in her new life with Jean-Pierre. As she approached the rear of his cottage, she noticed the drawn curtains on his bedroom window. Was he napping? She knocked, but there was only silence.

She twisted the doorknob. It was unlocked, and she decided to let herself in - just as the door was jerked from her hand as it swung inward.

The girl from the sushi restaurant stood there, shocked.

"You!" Greta screeched.

Laurence took a terrified step backward and attempted to swing the door shut in Greta's face.

Greta charged and trapped the girl between herself and the kitchen table. "What are you doing here?" she screamed.

Laurence lifted her hands to protect herself, just as Jean-Pierre rushed in from the other room and stepped between them.

"Greta, wait," he pleaded, grabbing Greta by the shoulder.
"Laurence is one of my students."

"What?" Greta said, turning to him with a confused and exasperated expression, the girl temporarily forgotten.

"Yes," he said. "In fact, it was your husband who referred her to the ranch, knowing that you kept your horse here. Please, let go of her darling. Come inside. Let me get you something? He spoke as if he were entertaining guests, three old friends gathering for lunch.

Laurence had managed to extricate herself from the threesome, and was presently collecting her bag.

"She" Greta said, "is having an affair with my husband."

"I know," Jean-Pierre said indifferently.

"You knew?"

"No, I said I know. She just told me now. She was so upset that she stopped off to tell me she wasn't going to take her lesson this evening, because of what happened at the restaurant."

"And she'll be leaving, right now," Greta said.

"I was just going," Laurence said with a show of dignity.

"I've had enough of your face for one day," Greta said, edging toward her.

"The feeling is mutual, Mrs. Locke," Laurence replied with a smirk. Then, "I must say, after finally meeting you in person, I can stop feeling guilty about my relationship with Matthew." She brushed a long wayward lock of hair from her face. "You, madam, and I use the term generously, are a quintessential bitch."

Greta's mouth gaped. "You little tramp!" She lunged for Laurence's throat.

"Stop," Jean-Pierre commanded, catching Greta by the waist just in time. "Go," he said to Laurence.

"I don't ever want to see you again!" Greta shouted after the girl.

Laurence climbed into her car and slammed the door shut, started the engine, and rolled down the window. She look as though she were about to shout a retort, but then she thought the better of it. Or so it seemed, until she lifted her closed fist and ever so slowly raised her middle finger at Greta.

Greta made another lunge for the girl but Jean-Pierre's hold on her was too strong to break away.

Laurence laughed heartily at this little show of helplessness, then gunned the engine and she raced away in her BMW, kicking up a great cloud of dust in her wake.

Jean-Pierre pulled Greta inside and closed the door. Before she could say anything, his mouth was on hers. She struggled out of his grip and fixed her shoulders squarely against the door.

"What is this - what the hell is going on here, Jean-Pierre? I don't like the way this looks."

He considered her with some amusement, gave her his sexy look.

"What the hell's so funny?" she said. He touched his finger to her little horseshoe charm and her breath caught and held, and she felt at once like she wanted to hit him and kiss him.

"You are, Greta. You are overreacting," he said, leaning closer. He kissed the charm, his breath hot on her throat, then lower.

His touch was distorting whatever semblance of perspective she had - she was so confused. She shook herself from him and pressed him back with both fists. "Wait. Stop. Just what do you expect me to think? One minute that little bitch is sucking tuna fish off my husband's fingers, the next she's traipsing out your front door!"

"I don't expect you to think what you're thinking," he said calmly. Too calm, she was beginning to see, to be guilty.

"But Jean-Pierre," Greta said, still not sure, "why haven't you told me about her?"

He shrugged. "What is there to tell?" He took her wrists in his hands. "Do you really think she and I are something?"

"She's very pretty," Greta said. "And very young."

"Not as beautiful as you are to me," he said, kissing away the creases on her forehead. "Greta. I live here, and I make love to you. Ms. Maupin, who, as you are now aware, is your husband's lover, lives in San Francisco. How many times, Greta, has he told you he's working late at the office? Do you ever check on him when he goes away? Are you so certain he isn't just fifty miles from home and at her place, not where he says he's going." He touched his finger to her chin. "Need I go on?"

She met his eyes. "No," she said quietly, and he kissed her. Well, Matthew, she thought, tit for tat, and told herself to let it go. Then she remembered how this whole crazy afternoon had started.

She held up the receipt.

"When do I start packing?" she said and gave the form a little shake.

He took it and opened it and smiled and wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her chest and lifted her off the ground. "We're going home!" he hooted.

Then he grimaced and made a pained sound and nearly dropped her.

"Darling! What is it? Your shoulder?"

He nodded, closed his eyes to fight off the pain.

"Oh, you poor thing. When we go we've got to get that fixed for you, first thing. I don't care what it costs."

He shook his head. "It's very expensive," he said.

"I don't care. Now I want you to promise me you'll let me do that for you. Promise?"

"Yes," he said, "I promise."

"Good," Greta said, and began unbuttoning her blouse.

Chapter 20

After bolting from the boardroom, Matthew called William Harrell's secretary at ICP in New York, and she confirmed what he already knew: William was out of town, and was due back into New York this

evening. He asked her for the flight number and departure time from San Francisco, then took off for the airport.

He raced down the corridor of the United terminal, checked his watch as he slowed to pass through the metal detectors. He found William's flight on one of the departure screens, and to his great relief, the flight had been delayed fifteen minutes. He collected himself and walked quickly to the correct gate.

He spotted William in the gate waiting area, flipping through some notes, a leather garment bag beside him on the floor.

Matthew walked up to him, and William glanced up from his notebook. "Matthew," he said, surprised. He snapped his notebook closed and stood, shook Matthew's extended hand with a mixture of curiosity and indifference. "Are you on this flight?"

"No. I need to talk to you," Matthew said. He motioned for William to sit, then sat down beside him.

"I know you met with Peter Jones today," Matthew said, glancing at the binder in William's lap.

"I did," William said.

Matthew hadn't expected William to deny that he had met with Peter, though now, hearing him admit it, he feared that they had already formed some sort of deal, and that he was possibly too late.

"Look, I'll get right to the point. Today I proposed to the executive staff that I contact you with Wallaby's proposition of merging our two companies, as you originally planned."

"Really. And why, may I ask, the sudden change of heart?"

Matthew cleared his throat and tried for an open confiding tone. "Simple. We decided that a merger would be the best thing for Wallaby because of how well the strategic alliance was received, and how well the Joey II is selling already. The orders are phenomenal."

The gate attendant announced that flight was about to begin boarding. Matthew's heart quickened, but William's expression remained cool and unchanged.

"The best thing?" William repeated, barely able to conceal his sarcasm. "I see."

"I want us to go through with the rest of our plan," Matthew said. "With my support, the merger would be smooth and friendly. I guarantee it."

"And the board of directors?"

"I've already put a call in to each, and have spoken with two members on my way here. Both approved the prospect. And with their votes, as well as mine and Hank's, we've already got a majority, in addition to the entire executive staff's full support."

"Hmm. Interesting. Let me think about this, Matthew." William rose to his feet and reached for his garment bag.

"Wait," Matthew said, gripping the other man's arm desperately. "I know the original plan wavered a little, but I fully understand now that you were right all along." Matthew had to get William's assurance, his word, that they would go back to their original plan.

Hoisting his garment bag over his shoulder, William seemed nonplused. The gate attendant announced final boarding.

"I know it's asking a lot," Matthew said, stepping between William and his path to the gate. "But I'd like your word that you'll recommend to your board that ICP reinstate its plan to acquire Wallaby."

William glanced down at the notebook tucked under his arm. Matthew fancied that he was perhaps sizing up the second of two opportunities that had been presented to him today, silently judging which of the two rivals he would choose.

William looked Matthew in the eye, nodded. "Very well," he said, "I'll make the recommendation, as we had originally planned. You've got my word."

Matthew let out a sound that was at once a great sigh of relief and a slightly hysterical chuckle.

"Thank you," Matthew said, slapping William on the back. "Thank you, thank you." He ambled alongside William to the gate and quickly ran down his immediate course of action.

"Matthew, relax," William said. "I said you have my word. Now, go home. We'll talk in the morning." William handed the flight attendant his boarding pass, and she removed the ticket and handed him the receipt stub.

"Good-bye, Matthew," William said, then turned and proceeded down the jetway.

It was done.

* * *

Peter picked up the phone to call Kate at her studio, but then he remembered the message Grace had given him. He dialed the number.

"Good afternoon, Phillips and Phillips," a receptionist announced.

"Arnold Phillips, please," Peter said.

The man came on the line a moment later.

"This is Peter Jones. You called me?"

"Mr. Jones, thank you for returning my call so promptly. I'm representing Ms. Ivy Green. She has hired our firm to reclaim her rights to Isle, which I believe is currently in your possession."

The room spun. Peter dropped down onto the sofa. "Wait a minute. I thought she was still in detox? She's not fit to be a mother. Not yet."

"Oh, Mr. Jones, no, no. There seems to be a misunderstanding. I apologize for not making the purpose of my call clear from the start. My client has not retained me to reclaim her child. It's the hardware and software I'm referring to. However, I believe my partner does in fact need to talk to you also, about another case."

Peter listened to what Mr. Phillips had to say, then, a half hour later, he was transferred to another Mr. Phillips, who, for forty-five minutes, discussed the child-custody case he had been hired by Ivy to handle. A hell of a one-two punch.

By the time he hung up the phone he was numb all over. In just over an hour, his whole life, which he had managed to somehow get back on track, however shakily, had once again come undone. He felt like he was at the end of his rope, like he was cracking up. And the only person who could ever help him through the really tough times was Kate. That was who he needed to talk to right now.

But how? How could he call her, when the reason he needed her was the very reason she had left him?

So instead of calling her he sat there alone, wondering if this was it, if this was the last of his punishment for his mistakes, or was there still more to undo?

* * *

"What are you doing?" Matthew said, finding Greta in the den, crouched among a scattering of cardboard boxes.

"What does it look like I'm doing?"

"Packing."

"Bingo."

"Why?"

"Why?" she repeated, taking in his goofy expression. "Why do people usually pack, Matthew? Because I'm moving." She returned to her task of carefully settling a vase into a box.

He placed his hands on the box flaps, holding them down as she stretched a length of tape from a

spool. "When?"

"Soon. And I can do this, thank you," she said curtly, holding the strip of tape over the box. He let go and dropped his hands to his sides.

"Greta, I'm sorry about today," he said, watching her work. "It's not what you think, though."

She stopped what she was doing for a moment and shot him a warning look. He had come to understand that look very well in the last few months. She went back to her business, placing the box atop a few others.

He shifted on his feet and then all at once his face brightened.

"Hey, guess what! We're back to our original plan!"

She settled an antique serving dish inside a new box. "Good for you."

"Didn't you hear me?"

She poured foam puffs into the box.

"Greta?" he said, gripping her wrists.

"Get your hands off me," she said calmly, wriggling from his grasp. The box between them trembled dangerously. She quickly righted it.

"Greta, please," he said. "What you saw today was just lunch."

"Horseshit," she said, getting worked up. Then she checked herself. She had no intention of getting into an argument with him after the shit she had been through today. "Matthew, listen to me. I'm only going to spell this out once. I gave you the time you asked for. Now you've pushed me too far. Besides, it doesn't matter."

"It does," he insisted. "What I'm saying is, it's all over. ICP's going to buy Wallaby after all. And I'll become president of the subsidiary, just like we planned. And we can go back to New York if that's what you want. Or we can stay here. Or whatever. Whatever you want."

"Ah, of course. You'll need a wife if you're going to be a big shot at ICP. Might as well stick with the one you've got, save yourself some money that way, and keep the young thing in an apartment." She offered a scornful chuckle. "Christ, Matthew. You still don't want to face it?" She shook her head sadly. "It's too late. We're through. Broken."

"But it's going to be easy from here on in," he pleaded, trailing her to a black lacquer display pedestal. "My job at ICP will be a cake walk."

"Cake? Darling, the only cake walk I see is the one between you and your little girlfriend." Enough of this nonsense. She had work to do. She wanted to have her most prized possessions safely packed, to give her a sense of assurance that she was getting closer to her future with her lover.

Gingerly, she raised her crystal salmon bowl off its pedestal.

"Greta," Matthew cried, gripping the bowl.

She gasped in surprise, then shrieked, "What's gotten into you - let go!" The quartz ceiling lamp accentuated the bowl's precarious plight.

"Wait. Oh, Greta. Don't you remember the day you brought this home?" he said.

Her eyes fixed on his thumbs squashed white, firm and unyielding. The piece was too valuable to risk losing. She gave in, and he carefully settled it back onto the pedestal. She stared at him with a resigned frown, catching her breath. He had nearly ruined it.

Matthew bent over, set his hands on his knees. "Look at it," he said, mesmerized by the engraved salmon fish swimming their final, predestined course.

"All right, Matthew, you've your look. Enough now. Please" She reached for the bowl.

He gripped too. "It's over," he said, his voice cracking. "Don't you understand? The struggle's over, Greta. Do you remember when you came home with this bowl, to celebrate our plans coming together? That was when it started. And now it's over. So you see? It all worked out. Everything is fine now. Fine."

She glared at him. "Let go of my bowl."

"Greta, please. It means so much to me. To us," he urged, tugging forcefully.

"No, damn you. It's mine and I'm taking it with me."

"Where?" he shouted at the top of his lungs. "Just where the hell do you think you're going?" His neck was straining, and his knuckles were white around the bowl's rim.

"To France!" she cried. Her eyes glistened in the bright white light. "With Jean-Pierre."

He burst with laughter, and shot his face closer to hers, over the bowl. "The horse trainer? Oh, that's good, Greta. That's real good! The horse trainer! So I'm not the only one sleeping with the staff, am I?"

Her fingers hurt, and she could barely hold on any longer.

"Matthew, please," she begged, afraid. She was painfully close to letting go, and with this awareness came another, deeper understanding. That were it not for her missing finger, she would have possessed the strength to hold on tighter and harder and longer - No, that was not it, she realized with a cry, her understanding now complete. The truth was, were it not for her missing finger, none of this would have ever happened. Tears streamed down her face and she begged him to please let her have her bowl.

"Oh Greta," Matthew said with disgust, "you're so pathetic."

He released his grip on the bowl...and the misfortune that directly followed his letting go lasted only seconds.

With great force the bowl crashed into Greta's chest and propelled her backward.

Instantly seeing what his letting go would cause, Matthew dove forward with outstretched hands. His fingers grazed the bowl's surface.

Flying backward, Greta let go of the bowl and thrust her hands behind her to try and break her fall. However, it was her not her bottom that crashed first, but her head, into the wall behind her.

Her body dropped to the floor in a lifeless heap, legs splayed at an awkward angle.

Matthew, in midair, felt the bowl's cool underside brush his fingertips and he squeezed his hands together. But it was too late.

The base of the object struck the hardwood floor. It shattered with a resonant ring, and shards of glass blasted in every direction.

He closed his eyes as he sailed to the ground and landed in a pile of glass between his wife's unmoving legs.

Then, perfect silence.

He lay there for a moment before opening his eyes, grateful at once that his vision had escaped the shrapnel. The first thing he saw was blood. He panicked, and glass crunched beneath his arms as he raised himself up on his elbows. He was aware of many stabs along the undersides of his arms and blood started gushing from his palms.

Then he saw her. He quickly brushed the largest broken pieces away with a folded box. He leaned close to her face, squeezed her cheeks between his bloody fingers. "Greta," he shouted. "Wake up!" He looked from her face to her chest for evidence of life, pressed her stomach, tried to make her breathe. He squeezed her lips between her fingers and put his lips on hers and blew, felt nothing in return. Had he killed her? He let out an agonized groan, how could this be happening when everything was back to the way they had planned?

He crawled up between her legs. He pulled her head to his chest, and with his other hand he searched for her pulse.

"Oh Greta," he moaned, gazing with disbelief at the fragments.

Where was her pulse?

"I'll fix it," he whispered, probing for her heartbeat with his bloody fingertips, all the while staring with bedazzled eyes at the brilliant shards twinkling in the light, searching in vain for one that might contain the etchings of the salmon fish.

But he found none, for their arduous journey had come to its fated end, lost forever in the frozen crystal bits.

* * *

Once the plane reached cruising altitude, William reclined his seat and closed his eyes, musing over an idea that had flashed in his mind the instant Matthew had asked for his promise.

Now, after dozing on and off through half the flight, half-consciously dreaming up the specifics of his new plan, he was ready to put down the particulars. He opened his notebook on the tray table and went to work. He drew various boxes and connected them together. He penciled his name in the uppermost box, and filled in the others.

A flight attendant appeared at his seat. "Sir, you slept through the meal. Can I bring you a snack or a beverage?"

He looked up from the chart. This was cause for celebration.

"How about a Sassy Screw?" he said, a little embarrassed saying the cocktail's name, but in want of one just the same. He continued drawing, completely filling the page with little squares and lines.

The flight attendant returned and placed the drink on a napkin beside his notebook. As he put the finishing touches on his work, a few bubbles fizzed from his drink and settled on the page, staining it with tiny dots.

As he stared at the little dots speckling his work, an awfully funny thought entered his mind. A short laugh burst from his lips, and a few passengers in nearby seats glanced curiously his way.

There, on the page, was the cause for William's amusement. The little orange dots, speckling the paper. Matthew's one-time soda pop success, now a mere stain on William's organization chart.

Pop, pop, fizzle, he mused, and sipped his cocktail.

* * *

Peter stood beneath Hoover Tower on the Stanford Campus, not far from the very place where he had first met Ivy. He had agreed to meet her here, to discuss the terms of her cases against him.

In the time he had to wait for her, he considered his life as it was at this moment. He had long ago gotten over the hurt and anger he had felt from being ousted from Wallaby. He missed Kate, but the work he was doing with Byron went a long way to keeping his mind off his loss of her. Not all the way, but enough to help. Isle was healthy, and Ivy's lawyers had said that she was deemed stable enough to mother her baby. But it was his baby, too. And had he not felt something for her, that night they were together? To be honest, he was not sure. That night was long past now, lost in mixed up events and complicated circumstances. All that remained of it was the unusual feeling he still carried in his heart, about everything that had been affected by his actions that evening. He knew he was not in love with Ivy. But he loved his baby, their baby, and the three of them formed a kind of family, didn't they? He had never been part of a real family, and the thought of his daughter going through life without two parents deeply disturbed him. Would Ivy consider marriage?

"No lawyers?"

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

She looked as youthful and vibrant as when they had first met. Her bright white-blond hair was pulled up into a smart bun, and her delicate face was tanned. Her blue eyes sparkled with the iridescence of tropical water.

He wanted to touch her, her belly, the place where Isle had come from. She smiled, and he experienced a stirring for her that was unlike any he had felt before, a connection of some kind, between her and himself and their child. It was all light and strangely uplifting, and he let out a breath and wet his lips and formed in his head the words he would say to her, for at this instant he knew, yes, that he could love her and that they belonged together. That they were a family.

But her smile was changing, right before his eyes. It became a smile that betrayed not her happiness to see him, but her happiness to see him looking at her this way. Looking at her with real attraction.

Desire. Her smile was the smile of pure self-satisfaction.

"Amazing, isn't it," she said. "What a little time can do?"

"Oh, Ivy," he said, turning his hands helplessly. "I'm sorry. About all of it."

"Ha," she said. "Please. I've been in the desert learning how to stop apologizing. Take my advice, save it."

"But we don't have to be like this. Can't we try to be, I don't know, nice?"

"Um, no. Not now, anyway. This is business, Peter. Maybe in a while, after we close our agreement."

"But I don't want you to be angry forever."

"Sit down," she said, and he did. She remained standing however, looking down at him. "Poor Peter. Just a lost little boy. Look, I'm not pissed off anymore. Well, not too angry. I'm not sorry, either. What's done is done. I am definitely not having an easy time of it, coming off the drugs and all. But I will get there. All I want is to see my Isle, and my Isle, and how they've grown in your care." She seated herself on the concrete beside him. "I thought for sure you'd have ten lawyers here with you," she said.

"Nope," he said. "Where are yours?"

"Don't need them for this. They told you what I want." She withdrew a single folded sheet document from inside her light jacket. "It's all here. Plain and simple."

He accepted her pen and the contract, spread the page down on the concrete.

But he didn't sign it.

Instead he put the pen down, looked her in the eye. "What do you feel?"

"Feel? About this? Excellent."

"No. I mean about me."

"You?" She looked away for a second. He could see her expression soften. "I'm not sure." She met his eyes. "But it's not anger anymore. Really it isn't."

"No, I don't mean that."

"Guilt? Nah, I'm done with that."

"No," he said. "No, not that." He looked at her forehead. Unwrinkled and smooth, pure. Eyes so sharp, intense, curious. Cautious. He remembered what it had been like to touch her neck, her breasts. Back to her eyes.

"Is there anything else?" he said. "I don't know. I mean - love?"

She blinked her eyes closed for a few moments, and when she opened them again they were glistening. But from what emotion he could not tell.

"Peter, just sign it."

PART V

Chapter 21

He had not slept all night.

It was not because he missed sleeping in the same bed with Greta. That, of course, had ended. Nor was it because he missed sleeping with Laurence. At almost exactly the same time Wallaby started its merger negotiations with ICP, Laurence had taken a temporary leave of absence to, she said, care for her ill father. It was just as well, considering what had happened to Greta and everything that had followed. Besides, the majority of his speaking engagements had been postponed or canceled, and he spent his time attending meeting after meeting, and putting together piece of the business plan, which

consumed most of his waking and sleeping hours. Relentlessly, he studied ICP's complex corporate structure and product line. Once more his favorite bed partner was paperwork - binders, reports, analyses, and technical documents, a courtship that all led up to today.

Today. The reason he had not been able to sleep all night. He climbed out of the bed and strolled leisurely through the dark house, crossing through the living room. A few months ago, after Greta's accident, he had moved the sofa and furniture against the wall, among the many stacked boxes that occupied the room.

Today was the most important day of his life. After more than three long and arduous years of cultivation, he was about to harvest his greatest achievement. The merger of ICP and Wallaby. Finally his monumental plan would reach its climax. And afterward he would begin his new plan - But not so fast, he warned himself. One step at a time.

The emerging dawn lit up the kitchen with a dull gray. He opened the refrigerator, considered making breakfast, then decided against it. He had no appetite. Instead he poured himself a glass of milk and gazed out the kitchen window while he sipped, pondering his new and exciting future.

His presence would be required in both New York and California. Maybe he would set up his primary residence in New York, and find something smaller in California, perhaps even in San Francisco. Such a commute would be trivial, for with ICP's takeover, the issue of highway miles would disappear and he would do his work on his rides between office and residence in the chauffeured limousine he would be entitled to.

A rush of elation coursed through him, and he decided to go for a run. Besides, it was too early to leave, and a run would pass the time until he had to get ready and meet William Harrell at the announcement.

He placed his glass in the sink and left the kitchen, changed into sweats. He needed to be at the hall by nine o'clock. He tied his sneaker and stretched through a few warm-up exercises, then collected his house keys.

Just as he was about to leave, the telephone rang.

He checked his jogging watch and picked up the handset. It was William Harrell. They exchanged greetings, and William asked Matthew if they could meet for breakfast before the announcement.

"I was just going to go out for a run, but sure."

"Go for your run," William told him. "I'll meet you at the Good Earth restaurant at seven-fifteen."

"Will do," Matthew said, and asked William what was so pressing that they needed to meet before the event.

But William had already hung up, leaving Matthew do presume that his business partner probably wanted to go over a few last-minute details before the big show.

Although he had no way of knowing it, he had presumed correctly. There was indeed one minor detail left to go over.

* * *

When she heard him leave the second time, after his run, Greta climbed out of bed.

She too had not slept very well. She was too excited. She stretched and considered climbing onto her exercise cycle for a quick workout. Checking the clock however, she decided to skip it. She would rather use whatever spare time she had to make sure she had not forgotten to pack anything that the shipping company would later send to France.

Standing at the window, she gazed out at the dawning day. Across the lake she could see Jean-Pierre's cottage. The lights were off. She pictured him in her mind, sleeping peacefully. No more would she sleep alone, she thought to herself, letting go of the curtain.

She took eggs and ham from the refrigerator and set to making herself breakfast. Marie didn't usually arrive until eight o'clock, and besides, she thought dreamily as she cracked the eggs into a bowl, it was good practice for the big country breakfasts she would make for Jean-Pierre and herself.

While she prepared her eggs, the pictures he had shown her when he returned from France last week flashed through her mind. It had taken him a while, but he had finally found them the ranch of her dreams. How she had missed him! It had been a long and painful two months, she reflected, but today would finally signal the end of her suffering with Matthew.

After what he had done to her, nearly killing her that day they had fought over her bowl, he ended his resistance to her request for a divorce. On the contrary, because of what he had done, her case against him was even stronger, and he had no choice but to agree to her lawyer's terms. The final papers would be drawn up any day.

She seated herself at the breakfast table. While she ate she checked the list she had been keeping. Everything she wanted shipped was checked on the list. Her clothes were already packed, and their plane tickets were the only unchecked item on the list. Jean-Pierre had taken care of them. Still, she would ask him to show her the tickets when she arrived at his cottage in the limousine. Just to be safe.

She looked at the clock again and saw that it was a good thing she had gotten out of bed early. Somehow she had managed to spend nearly a half hour sitting just there dawdling, daydreaming. The car was due to arrive at eight o'clock sharp, and now she would have to hurry.

She left her dirty dishes for the housekeeper and trotted briskly to her room, noticing outside the clouds darkening the sky. It had rained all week but last night's weather report for today had promised a possible break in the showers. She prayed they wouldn't have to take off under stormy conditions, for it would be a miserable way to start off on their new life together.

Chapter 22

"Ladies and gentlemen, please find your seats," the announcer's voice boomed through the bustling auditorium.

The seating was already jammed to nearly full capacity as thousands of Wallaby employees filled the auditorium. A few front rows remained vacant, reserved for VIPs and the press. The stage was illuminated with a bright circle of light focused on an empty podium.

Backstage, William Harrell parted the curtain an inch and peered out at the gabby crowd. Hank Towers squeezed in beside him and also surveyed the crowd.

"I've never given a speech to so many people dressed like that," William remarked.

Beyond the first few dark rows, wave after wave of bodies clad in T-shirts and jeans stretched all the way to the back of the auditorium.

William stepped away from the curtain and rearranged his tie.

Hank patted him on the shoulder and laughed. "You look like you've gained twenty pounds," he joked privately.

"They're going to witness the world's fastest weight-loss program," William said with a cunning grin, referring to the surprise he had prepared for today's announcement.

"Get ready, William," Martin Cohn said, gesturing for everyone to move away from the curtains.

The announcer's voice filled the auditorium: "Ladies and gentlemen, vice president and general counsel, Martin Cohn."

Amid quick applause and murmurs, Martin greeted the audience. The Wallaby logo appeared, projected brightly behind him on a huge screen hanging above center stage.

"This day will mark an important juncture in Wallaby's history," Martin said. "A few months ago we announced a strategic alliance with International Computer Products, the world's largest manufacturer of computer products."

The ICP initials materialized beside the Wallaby logo.

"As a result of our announcement, sales of the Joey II computer have skyrocketed, exceeding in just two months the previous year's total sales."

The audience applauded, and the screen changed to a picture of the Joey II sitting beside an ICP

desktop computer.

"Today we have an announcement that will ensure that both Wallaby and ICP continue to grow and profit together."

There was a dead silence, and a photo of William Harrell's smiling face filled the overhead screen. "Now it's my pleasure to introduce William Harrell, chairman of International Computer Products."

A murmur ensued throughout the audience. Though Martin Cohn usually started off the meetings, it was always to introduce Matthew Locke.

Martin stepped aside, and William crossed the stage. The audience applauded mildly and stopped once William arrived at the podium.

"Thank you, Martin. And thank you," William said, sweeping the audience with a heartfelt smile. "I've always been envious of you guys out here in California. I look out there and all I see are T-shirts, jeans, and sneakers."

There was some mild laughter, and William knew the crowd was probably a little thrown off by his being up here and not Matthew Locke. He went right into his presentation.

"Maybe it's this kind of environment in which you work at Wallaby that lets you create products as spectacular as the Joey computer."

On the screen an older picture of the original Joey team appeared, a younger Peter Jones kneeling in the center of the group, his arms wrapped around a Joey poised on his knee. The audience applauded with pride and appreciation.

"A few months ago, your company and ICP joined forces to work together to offer our customers powerful hybrid systems. On that day a dream came true for me. Finally, users of ICP's line of computers had an easy way to access our difficult operating systems, actually working smarter because of the Joey. Now, that's a big deal to us starched shirts at ICP," he confided, "because we've been playing catch-up with Wallaby, trying to figure out how to build portable computers and personal information assistant software as great as the Joey.

"You see, the truth is I've always been envious of the Joey and Wallaby. Jealous that we, the biggies, hadn't been the one to invent an equally breakthrough design."

It was time for him to pull his prank, which he hoped would act as the perfect segue to the real announcement. Pulling off his tie, he stepped away from the podium and strolled to center stage.

A strip-tease song started playing on the big speakers throughout the auditorium, and the audience was mute with wonder as William began unbuttoning his shirt. Next he unzipped his pants, and dropped them to the floor. Underneath, he wore faded jeans. He pulled off his shirt and flung it aside. He raised his arms, and turned around so the audience could see the graphic on his back. It showed the Joey kangaroo as always, but this time the pocket it climbed out of was embroidered with the ICP logo.

The audience applauded and cheered as he sauntered back to the podium.

"Oh, wait a minute, I forgot something," he said, then crouched behind the podium. A moment later his black wingtip shoes clunked hollowly out onto the stage, and he produced a pair of worn-out sneakers. Encouraged by cheers and laughter, he fumbled comically with the running shoes and laced them up.

"Now, dressed like this, you'd think I could probably do some of the thinking you guys do to make amazing computers, right?"

"Right!" the audience echoed, playing along with his skit.

"Wrong," he said. "To have the systems you folks have, guys like me have to leave it to you, the experts."

Here goes. He felt his heart pounding wildly, and he took a deep breath.

"What I'm about to announce may at first come as a shock to you," he warned, serious now, "but please," he said emphasizing with his hands, "before you throw your chairs, give me a moment to explain."

As he had feared, an anxious murmur started up in the crowd. He had to act fast.

"Today," he said, raising his voice, "I'm very excited and proud to announce the merger of Wallaby and International Computer Products.

Mayhem exploded throughout the audience.

"Wait, please!" William shouted with raised palms, his voice barely audible in the angry cacophony. "Wait. Please, let me explain..." he said, moving across the stage, closer to the incensed crowd.

* * *

The limousine driver collected Greta's Louis Vuitton suitcases and boxes and bags and carried them to the car. He set them at the rear for a moment then ran to open her door. She jumped in and wiped the light drizzle from her face with a scarf.

The trunk slammed shut and the driver climbed in and started the car. As they drove through the gate she looked over her shoulder at the house. She thought of her house keys, which she had left behind on the breakfast table. She would never need them again. It was really ending. With her things packed and ready to be shipped to France, there was no reason to ever come back. She chased away any leftover sentiments, and thought only of Jean-Pierre and their new ranch, their new lives.

Glancing out the window as they turned from the driveway onto the road, she spotted Matthew's approaching car. What was he doing back so soon? She turned her head away from the window and shut her eyes. She did not want his face to be her last memory of her life in California.

The driver switched on the radio, just as a news brief was being announced. "...and in Silicon Valley this morning, in a coup that has stunned the business world, International Computer Products, the world's largest computer company, and Wallaby Computer, have announced the merger of their two companies, as well as - "

"Shut it off!" Greta snapped, pressing her hands to her ears.
"Please!"

She looked at her in the rearview mirror and apologized. A minute later they were bouncing along the ranch's bumpy dirt driveway, and she directed the driver past the main house, to the cottages. She smoothed her lavender Chanel dress over her legs and touched the lapel of her Gucci raincoat.

Her heart stopped for an instant. Jean-Pierre's car was gone.

Of course, she rationalized, scolding herself for being so anxious. He's probably arranged to have it shipped back to France. Or did he say he was going to sell it? She couldn't remember.

The driver stopped the car.

"We'll only be a minute," Greta said, pulling on her gloves as she climbed out before the driver could reach her door. Ducking in the light drizzle, she shrouded her scarf over her head and went up the steps to his front door. She rang the bell, then glanced back to the limousine for a moment.

Silence.

She pressed the bell again, once, twice, and at the same time scanned the barn and the training ring for any sign of him. The stable doors were shut. Could he have overslept? She checked her watch then pounded the door, growing more worried with each moment that passed without his answering the door. She had planned for them to get to the airport early, and even if he was asleep they could still certainly make their flight as long as they hurried.

She turned and raised her hand at the driver, signaling for him to wait. She hurried off the small porch and ran around to the back of the house. She looked into his bedroom window. The bed was made, and rising on her toes, she could see through the bedroom door into the living room. He wasn't inside.

She climbed the small rear steps and frantically pounded her fist against the door, oblivious to the pain she was causing herself.

"Jean-Pierre!" she called. "Open up! Jean-Pierre!"

She held her breath and listened.

More of nothing.

She felt a chilling wave of nausea and told herself not to panic, that he was around here somewhere and tending to some last-minute things.

Rounding the house, she wagged her finger at the driver again and bolted for the barn, her raincoat whipping in the wind.

Maybe he was at Jennifer's house, she considered, saying good-bye to his former employer. She would check that after she searched the stable. Or was he with Mighty Boy? Yes, that was probably it. He was probably saying good-bye to Mighty Boy for her, so kind of him, because he knew that she could not face saying good-bye herself because they were unable to transfer the animal to their ranch.

She heaved the stable door open with a grunt and raced down the center of the long and dark dirt throughway, shouting out Jean-Pierre's name. As she neared the end, Mighty Boy whinnied. She pushed the horse's head to one side and went inside the stall, encountering only the animal. Did she really think he would be in here with her horse? No, he had to be outside somewhere. Her stomach tightened at the thought of missing their flight.

She turned and started to run back up the throughway, when suddenly she stopped dead in her tracks. There!

"Jean-Pierre," she cried, laughing now as she hurled herself toward the shadowy, darkly-clad figure looming just inside the stable.

She froze in her tracks when she realized her error.

"Oh!" she moaned.

Jennifer, the ranch's owner, pulled back the hood of her raincoat and approached her cautiously. A bewildered expression creased her face as she took in Greta's disheveled appearance.

"Mrs. Locke, my goodness," she said with a wary smile. "It's a bit wet for a ride today, don't you think?"

"Where is he?" Greta demanded, her chest heaving. "Where is Jean-Pierre?"

"Jean-Pierre? Why, he's gone." Jennifer wiped her brow with the back of her hand. "Oh, it's getting ugly out there," she said, wincing at the sound of the building downpour rattling down on the metal roof.

Greta grabbed the older woman's raincoat sleeve and roughly spun her around, screaming: "What do you mean he's gone?"

Jennifer leaped back with astonishment. "He's gone. He left, Mrs. Locke. For France."

"No! That's wrong," Greta cried. "That's not possible, I'm going with him! Do you hear me? He can't be gone!"

Jennifer was mortified and hastily tried to explain. "Mrs. Locke, I gave him a ride to the airport myself. Last night. He informed me at the very last moment, yesterday afternoon, that he was returning to France. With her."

"Her? Her who?"

"Why, his fiancée, Ms. Maupin."

Dear God, she thought, suddenly comprehending what Jennifer was saying. He was gone. Gone without her. He had lied to her. Had tricked her. It had all been a game. A scam. The girl had probably been in on it all along. A double seduction. And they had gotten away with the money. And with more than the money. They had gotten away with the only happiness she had known in a very long time. It was all coming too quickly, and she felt suddenly faint.

Jennifer caught her by the arm just before she collapsed. "Mrs. Locke, come inside with me. You're trembling. I'll make you some tea and - "

"No!" Greta cried, shaking free. She stumbled in the dirt, landing on her gloved hands. She unsteadily got to her feet and fled from the barn. The driver leaped out of the car and rushed to open her door. She had soiled her dress, and her face was wild.

She dove into the back of the car and stumbled to the floor. She managed to struggle up onto the seat and the driver closed the door and climbed in up front.

"Ma'am?" he called gently through the open partition. She did not reply, and he turned around in his seat to look at her.

She sat huddled with her knees drawn up, elbows pressed into her stomach. Her face was hidden behind muddy gloves, and she made noises like she was injured.

He started the car. "To the airport, ma'am?"

She began rocking back and forth against the door, facing away from the ranch.

"Ma'am?" the driver asked again, braking as he came to the end of the ranch driveway.

"Home," she whispered, and burst into tears.

* * *

William shouted into the microphone again, "Wait! Please! Listen, please!"

The cacophony of protest continued. A pen flew by dangerously close to his head. It was useless. There was no way he could get them to settle down so he could explain the announcement. After ducking another flying object, William turned and made for the curtains. In just a moment the thing would fix itself.

The house lights went out and then a spotlight illuminated center stage. The curtains parted.

And Peter Jones emerged.

The audience went wild.

Peter took a few steps to the edge of the stage, grinning from ear to ear. The crowd whistled and cheered and rose all at once, welcoming their champion with a standing ovation that lasted and lasted, earsplitting in its intensity.

"Thank you," Peter said fanning his hands at the audience. "And thank you, William," he said, looking offstage.

The audience returned to their seats, some still applauding, but low enough so that he could be heard.

"It's good to be back," he said. This lifted the applauding audience from their seats once more. He strolled to the podium, wiped his forehead with the back of his hand, and waited. When the audience settled down he continued.

"Today," he said, his voice a little shaky, "I've become ICP's newest employee, in their new subsidiary, Wallaby. I have to admit," he said with a laugh, "it's kind of weird being re-hired by the company you started!"

There was quick laughter, then rapt attention.

"When I left Wallaby, I had a lot of time to do some thinking. I found a new friend, and we started working on a new portable computer, one that stretched our imaginations to the limits. Then, a few months ago, we were contacted by William Harrell. He had heard that we were up to something really neat. We decided to let him have a look at what we had come up with, and he loved it.

"At that point ICP became a silent investor in our computer, which is called ISLE. We finalized our design and developed a prototype. Now I'd like to show you your newest computer."

Peter stepped into the middle of the stage. A large, shrouded table rolled before him, controlled remotely from backstage.

The lights intensified and the tabletop was projected on the overhead screen, for all to see.

"This," said Peter, whisking the shroud from the bumpy shapes on the table, "is ISLE." The prototype model was sleek and black, as thin as a notebook.

The audience applauded wildly, then hushed when the computer's screen came to life.

"Now I'd like to let ISLE show you what she's made of," he said.

The auditorium darkened. Two large projection screens, mirroring the ISLE's screen on stage, lowered from the ceiling. Peter picked up the prototype and gave a demonstration like the one he had given to William several months ago. When the demonstration was over the audience stood and cheered with thunderous applause.

"Thank you," Peter said. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm very happy about this merger of Wallaby and ICP," he said. "I'll be working in the engineering and development labs, finalizing the ISLE design, and overseeing its integration with the Joey and BP systems.

"Earlier I mentioned a new friend, my partner, the man who helped design the ISLE computer. Some of you may recognize his name because he is the father of ICP's first mainframe computer. I've also made two other very important friends. One is the inventor of ISLE, and the other is its future.

"Please give a warm welcome to my friends Byron Holmes and Ivy Green." Peter stepped away from the podium, and Byron and a beaming Ivy emerged, cradling the baby Isle in her arms. Peter shook Byron's hand and kissed Ivy on the cheek.

Byron took the microphone and greeted the audience. A chart appeared on the overhead screen, and Byron explained the new organization. When he finished, William Harrell returned to the stage and conducted the remainder of the session - he also announced Matthew Locke's decision to resign, for personal reasons.

Backstage, Byron hugged his wife and Peter and Ivy and Isle all in one cluster. "We did it!"

Isle yawned.

"You can say that again," Ivy said with a chuckle and kissed her baby on the nose.

"Come on," Peter laughed. "Let's go home."

Chapter 23

The cyanide pill.

It was all Matthew could think of as he sat at the breakfast table with his head in his hands. It was over. His work. His love. His life. All gone.

Everything had been going according to plan. Or so he had thought.

But in the final plan, Matthew had not been included. Once more he replayed the scene that had taken place just an hour before.

Pulling into the Good Earth restaurant's parking lot, Matthew was surprised to see an exact duplicate of his own car. Of course it could be anyone's, but Matthew could not help but think that it was Peter's black BMW coupe parked beside the limousine. What were the chances of Peter happening to be here at the same time? One in a thousand. And Peter Jones was the last person he needed to see today. Matthew would simply ask the host to find William's table, and ask him to come outside. They would take their breakfast meeting elsewhere.

He parked his car at the other end of the lot and walked around the back of the building. He went inside, looking around cautiously. At first he had not really noticed the two Wallaby security guards standing near the hostess station. Seeing him, guards left the station and went into the restaurant.

Positioning himself out of sight of the dining room, he motioned for the hostess

"I'd like to ask a favor, please," he said. "There's a man I'm meeting here. His name is Mr. Harrell, and he's - "

Just then William appeared, the two guards flanking him on either side.

"We can't stay here," Matthew said. "Peter Jones is in there somewhere."

"Yes, I know."

"But I'd rather not see him. Today especially. I haven't seen him since he left the company."

"Matthew," William said calmly, "please come inside."

Bewildered, Matthew followed.

"William, I'd much rather we go elsewhere," he said, then halted abruptly when he saw Peter, dressed in an oxford shirt and jeans and sitting in one of the booths. Seated beside him was an older man wearing dark slacks and a tie.

William pressed him onward, directing him right toward Peter.

Peter looked up, and for the first time since the boardroom showdown, their eyes met. His face bore no surprise, no expression whatsoever.

To Matthew's astonishment, William led him right up to the booth that Peter occupied. The older man rose and seated himself on the other side of the table.

"Matthew, sit down please," William said, indicating the vacant seat beside Byron.

Matthew looked at Peter uneasily, but Peter said nothing, he just sat there quietly and watched Matthew.

Adding yet another element to Matthew's confusion, Hank Towers materialized and joined the surprise party. Positively astonished, Matthew turned to William for an explanation. "What's going on? What the hell is the meaning of all this?"

"I'll get right to the point," William said. "Matthew, the Wallaby board and the executive staff decided to vote on whether you are suited to maintain your position at Wallaby."

Matthew struggled to keep his voice down. "What? This is absurd. How could you do this?"

"Matthew, I did it," Hank said.

Matthew stared at Hank with disbelieving eyes.

"I initiated the vote," Hank said, "after several of the executives and board members came to me with their concerns."

"Why?" Matthew said breathlessly.

"Because in your effort to make the company successful, you acted with negligence and selfishness. What's more, you have no long-term strategy for our product line. And in order for us to survive and continue innovating our company must have a plan."

Instantly, Matthew put the pieces together in his mind. He turned his blanched face to Peter and met the dark, unwavering eyes of his nemesis with hateful resignation.

"So that's it. Now, after I've turned the company around, you come back to run the show?"

Peter kept quiet.

"Not exactly," William said. "Byron Holmes here," he said, indicating the man seated beside Matthew, "will temporarily take over as Wallaby's president."

Matthew was deeply shocked.

William said, "Peter has decided to rejoin Wallaby in an at-large position, working on our future products. However he'll only come back if you leave." William produced a folded document from his coat pocket. "I'm sorry, Matthew, but I have to ask you to resign."

"I will not," Matthew protested loudly.

Several diners, most of them Wallaby employees, turned their heads in the group's direction.

"Matthew," William said, his voice empathetic now, "I'm afraid you have no choice." He unfolded the document and placed it before Matthew. "We've put together a first-rate severance package for you."

For what felt like a long time, Matthew was unable to do anything but sit there and stare down at the document that spelled out the rewards of his terrific failure. His brain sizzled as he attempted to focus on the details. He saw numbers and lots of parenthesized paragraphs. There was a long line at the bottom, with his name printed beneath it.

He raised his head and looked across the table at Peter. "Why? Why didn't you just agree with me when I suggested all this? It would have had the same outcome."

"Sorry, Matthew, but it was never that simple."

But it could be now, Matthew thought, sitting there at the breakfast table, clutching tightly in his fist the little circular thing he had been hiding in his briefcase for so many years.

He was completely spent, used up. Alone. There was no one for him now. No one he could call on. William had informed him that Laurence had arranged for a transfer to an ICP office in France. And, effective immediately, Eileen, his former secretary, was Byron Holmes's personal assistant.

And then there was Greta.

He opened his fist and looked at the gold object in his palm. It rolled out of his hand onto the tabletop.

He twirled Greta's wedding band round and round with his fingertip. On that awful day years ago, he had retrieved the ring from the boat deck before kicking her severed finger into the ocean. Unable to face the horror of what had happened to her, to her hand, he had hidden the ring in his briefcase ever since.

She was the only person in the world who had ever truly supported him, the only person who would know just what to say right now. And she was gone. He had destroyed her, too, with his damnable, selfish dream. A dream that had become a nightmare. One from which there would be no waking. It was all over. Really and truly through.

Ah, but the cyanide pill. It was his grandest plan ever. He wiped his nose on his shirtsleeve and straightened, contemplating the details of his new plan. Had Greta left anything in the medicine cabinet? Sleeping pills? What about the garage, in that damned car? He lowered his head to his folded arms again, considered his options.

He was awakened by the sound of the doorbell.

As everything came back to him all at once, his first reaction was paranoia. The press. Reporters and photographers. They had scaled the gate, and they were coming for him, coming to mock him.

"Go away," he shouted.

But instead of leaving him alone, they resorted to pounding, screaming his name. They rang again, more pounding.

He called for Marie and ordered her to send them away. The housekeeper came back a moment later and told him who it was at the door.

He grabbed the ring and leaped up from his chair, tears finally coming as he staggered down the foyer.

He twisted the lock and swung open the door.

And there she stood. A sobbing Greta, wearing, he noticed at once and unmistakably, the very gloves he had bought for Laurence. Pigskin, and fit for a queen. His queen.

Yes, she was wearing them now, and didn't that then mean that he had bought them for her, really? That they belonged together?

Chapter 24

Peter sat on the rug with his legs crossed, Isle in a bundle beside him, and together they listened to Kate's soothing voice mingle with the sound of the light rainfall outside.

Ivy came into the room, humming softly.

"Is she asleep?"

"Not quite. I think she's sorta wired. She's had a tough day. You too."

"You three," Ivy said.

Peter stood up. "Thanks for letting her stay here tonight. I'll bring her over tomorrow afternoon, if that's okay."

"Sure," Ivy said. "A deal's a deal."

"Thanks."

Peter had offered to marry Ivy, but she had declined. In their out of court settlement, Peter had agreed to child-support payments, and Ivy had granted him visitation rights.

For the rights to her ISLE hardware and software design, ICP paid Ivy six million dollars.

They hugged, and then she was gone.

He sat back down beside Isle and she stirred. He took her in his arms.

"You miss Grandma Gracie and Grandpa Byron already?" he said, pretending she understood every word. "Me too," he said.

Byron and Grace had left a few hours ago for Maine, to take care of some things and plan their move west. They intended to find a vacation home in California, where they would reside for however long Byron managed Wallaby.

Peter's own home now felt like it used to, before Isle. Quiet, empty. Yet at this moment, it was more full of life than ever. But this, he had to keep reminding himself, was temporary. That was the deal. But it was better than nothing at all. Better than being completely alone.

The next song started playing on the disc player. Kate's voice chased away the silence, replaced it with the missing element.

"When you're a little older," he told Isle, "I'm going to teach you how to sing just like that."

"And who's going to teach you?"

Peter spun around.

Kate stood there in the doorway, smiling, wearing a raincoat and carrying a garment bag.

"I let myself in," she said as he jumped to his feet.

"Hello, babies," she said, shrugging off of her wet coat. She dropped her bag on the floor and set her purse on the coffee table.

"I can't believe it's you," Peter said excitedly. "What are you doing here?"

She bent, hands on her knees, and smiled brightly at Isle.

"Look at you, little girl. This is the first time I've seen you in person." She looked up at Peter. "Hey, what kind of welcome is that? I thought you'd be happy to see me."

"I am, I am!" he said touching her arm. "I just can't believe you're really here."

"Congratulations," she said, retrieving a copy of the "Los Angeles Times" from her purse. "And to you, too," she said waving the front page of the business section at Isle. Beneath the headline was a picture of Peter holding Isle, flanked by Byron and Ivy.

"Back to Wallaby," Kate said. "Sure surprised me." She opened her hands before Isle. "May I?"

"Of course," he said, placing Isle gently in Kate's arms. "Be careful, you have to support her head. Like this," he said, taking Kate's hand and carefully cradling it beneath Isle's neck. "That's right."

For a few precious moments he let his hand remain beneath Kate's before pulling away. Watching her holding the infant Peter felt a swell in his throat, wishing it could be like this between them again, always.

Kate sat down on the sofa.

"So, is it true?"

"Is what true?"

Freeing a hand, she picked up the newspaper and scanned the article. "Here it is," she said. "Quote: 'I'm not going to work as much as I used to. There are more important things in my life now.' End quote."

"True," he said. "Totally."

"What about Ivy?"

He explained the arrangement they had made and the deal with ICP.

"Good for her. She's earned it."

Peter agreed, then sat quiet for a few moments, unsure how to say what he wanted to say.

"What about us? You. I mean, is there any way I can earn you back?"

Kate looked at him and smiled. She took his hand and held it in her own, beneath Isle.

They sat there in silence for a while, adjusting to feeling one another again after so long apart. After a minute or so it felt to Peter as though they were breathing as one, the way they used to, and along with this feeling his heart stirred, declaring itself in an unfamiliar way, and he tensed.

"What is it?" she said.

"I'm scared," he said.

They kissed.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK "UNDO": A NOVEL ***

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