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“Ladies and gentlemen, please,” William Harrell shouted to the enraged audience. “Please take your seats.”

It was no use. They were out of control, screaming at him with shaking fists. There was no way to get through to them. He started back to the podium and shouted for the production assistant to kill the houselights.

The entire theater went pitch black and suddenly the noise was cut in half. A second later a spotlight snapped on and focused on the curtains at center stage. The crowd instantly quieted as the curtains parted.

Out strolled Peter Jones.

The crowd went wild, but this time with cheers and applause and whistles, a wave of excitement that carried on for a full five minutes, with Peter unable to do anything but stand there and smile. It was the greatest welcome he’d ever received, and he told them so when they calmed down enough to let him speak.

His voice was shaky with emotion, and the audience remained absolutely silent as he explained everything.

"Today I've become the first new employee of Via as a subsidiary of ICP, and I've got to admit, I never thought I'd wind up working in this company." There was quick laughter punctuated with random boos.

"When I left Via," he continued, "I found a few new friends, and we started working on a new kind of hand-held computer, unlike anything ever invented. A few months ago we were contacted by William Harrell, who was interested in what we'd developed. We decided to let him have a look, and he loved it," Peter said. "ICP then became a silent partner in our product, which I'll show you in a moment. When the boards of directors at Via and ICP decided to merge, William asked if I'd like to come back to put the Via label on our new invention. We haggled over a few small details, but ultimately I decided it was the right thing to do."

He drew his palms together and smiled with evident pride. "And now, I'd like to show you Via's newest product, the In Hand PC."

He reached into his back pocket and withdrew the wallet-size, leather-clad device. The crowd rose to its feet and cheered, and a minute later Peter began a demonstration of the device using a bigger, less-refined version. His actions were displayed on two huge overhead screens. He promised the final In Hand PC would look like the smooth wallet-size device he'd first held up.

He pressed the side of the In Hand and spoke: "Pip, create E-mail."

The In Hand said: "*To whom?*"

The crowd gasped and then instantly quieted.

"To William."

"*William Harrell or William Shakespeare?*" the In Hand said.

"William Harrell," Peter said.

On the large screen, the audience watched as the In Hand filled in the To, From, and Date fields. It asked Peter to say the subject of the E-mail. "The deal," he said, then proceeded to write a short message on

the unit's screen, congratulating William on today's announcement. The audience marveled at the device's accuracy. There wasn't a single interpretation error, no "there" for "their" nor "cat" for "cap."

Peter withdrew a small lid from his back pocket and turned it around to reveal a tiny keyboard. He snapped it onto the unit and finished his message by tapping out his thanks. "This is for all those holdouts who insist they want a keyboard," he said. "Or a wireless digital phone," he added, and the audience went nuts when he punched in the phone number of a local pizza shop. A moment later a voice came on the line and asked him what kind of pizza he wanted. "Sorry, wrong number," he said, and hung up to riotous laughter.

"As you can see, there's a slot for an optional wireless modem and phone card." He pressed the Listen button. "Pip, please send now." The device dialed up the Net and fired off the E-mail message.

"*Message sent,*" the In Hand said. The crowd loved it, and Peter proceeded to show off more of the device's features, including its bantam Web browser, note taker, contact and schedule program, and voice recorder capability.

He signaled backstage, and a table was rolled out bearing At Hand PCs and an assortment of PCSoft-compatible clones. He pointed out a small optional infrared box that attached to the desktop computers to wirelessly beam information between it and the In Hand. And finally, he told the audience that he had saved the best for last.

"First, all of the In Hand's functionality will be available in the next version of the At Hand, so fans of our existing devices can enjoy all of the In Hand PC's same advanced features. Second, ICP will give every In Hand buyer a free year of access to its Net service, which is the largest in the world." He paused, pulled the In Hand PC model from his back pocket once more, and snatched out three crisp hundreds from its side flap. He held up

the cash for everyone to see. "And third, we're gonna sell this little wonder for just three hundred bucks."

The crowd rose to its feet and gave Peter a five-minute standing ovation, during which he waved for Byron, Ivy Green, and Isle to join him onstage. He introduced the trio, and held up the baby Isle so the camera could get a nice close-up of her adorable, bewildered face. Peter then turned the stage back over to William Harrell, who was greeted this time with warm cheers.

For the next half hour he flashed charts and projections and schedules, as well as the company's new organizational chart, which showed him as the company's acting chief executive officer. Peter Jones once again held the position of chairman of the board.

William Harrell concluded by reporting that Matthew Locke had chosen to resign, for personal reasons.

Greta climbed back into the limousine and calmly asked the chauffeur to drive her to the Golden Gate Bridge.

Pulling away from the lot, she looked back at the man formerly known as Gregor as he reemerged from below deck.

She'd asked him why he'd used such a silly name, and he said it was the name of the protagonist in Kafka's "Metamorphosis."

She admitted she wasn't much of a reader, then remarked that his little blackmail scheme hadn't quite transformed him the way he'd imagined. She asked what he'd planned to do with her if she hadn't caught him.

He showed her the dinghy on deck, and said he'd intended to play along with the farce until they'd reached Mexico's Baja coast. At which point he would be free, and she would be cast overboard in the little rubber raft—close enough to shore, and with provisions, of course.

He stood now on the deck, shaking his fist at her and flinging handfuls of Monopoly money and discarded

gloves in the air. She'd of course left the real thing at home, and as for the hundred or so pairs of gloves, she wouldn't be needing those anymore. At least she had him to thank for that, for helping her overcome her fear of showing her hands as they were. She got to her knees and moved closer to the limo's back window to give him a special good-bye. She turned her hand around and waggled her four fingers, then folded down all but the middle one, which she held up until she could no longer see him.

She turned around and settled back into the seat, looking at his destroyed At Hand PC Plus on the seat beside her. She'd shot it twice, to be sure he would never have access to his dirty pictures again, and she'd fired a third bullet through his stack of backup Zip disks. She'd meant to leave the whole mess for him to remember her by, but then he got wise and stupidly blurted out that he knew ways to extract the information from even the most damaged disks.

She pointed out there were still a few bullets left, and he backed off when she collected the computer and disks and departed. She doubted she would hear from him again.

As they approached the Golden Gate Bridge the chauffeur asked if they were going to Sausalito. Just the bridge, she said mysteriously as the driver started over it.

Upon reaching the mid span she asked the driver to pull over. He said he couldn't, that it was illegal to stop on the bridge.

She drew out the gun and asked again, and the car came to a smooth stop in the right lane, facing the city. It was the side where almost all jumpers chose to leave the world, giving the city one last look at them before the end, she supposed. She didn't share in the same sentiment—she would have actually preferred the other side, facing the Pacific Ocean; however, she wanted to just get it over with, so the city side would have to do.

Traffic started to clog behind the limo, and car horns honked noisily. She climbed out with the At Hand PC Plus and the backup Zip disk, checking her slicker pocket to make sure she still had the disk containing Gregor's nude photos.

She walked over to the rail and leaned out, ignoring a jogger who shouted to watch where she was going. She withdrew the gun and a young man on a mountain bike suddenly screeched to a stop and begged the woman with the crazily blowing red hair to put the gun down, that no matter how bad things seemed it would be all right, everything would be all right.

Greta turned to the rider and calmly agreed, that everything would be fine, then leaned out over the rail and flung the bulletted At Hand PC Plus and Zip disks over the side. The handgun followed right behind them.

She brushed her hands together, climbed back into the limousine, and asked the stunned driver to take her home.

And saying so finally brought the tears she'd kept at bay through the entire insane ordeal. She lay across the soft limo seat and cried the whole way back.

Not because of the make-believe Gregor and her unrealized flight of fantasy. But because it was really what she wanted, to just be home, regardless of how wrong it felt.