

>CHAPTER 16

“Mr. Jones,” the doctor said, lightly shaking Peter awake. He’d dozed off in the waiting room, and it took him a moment to remember where he was.

“It’s a girl, Mr. Jones,” the doctor reported as he led Peter down the corridor. “And you can see Ms. Green now.”

Peter stopped in his tracks, his face flushing. He’d fallen asleep, and awakened a father. It was a heavy change to deal with and he needed to pull himself together. “Is the baby all right? Ivy? Are they both okay?”

The doctor motioned for Peter to step out of the busy corridor traffic. “Not entirely,” he said. “There were complications. Both are quite fragile at this stage. The baby weighs three and a quarter pounds. She’s in neonatal care right now, hooked up to support equipment.”

“But she’s alive,” Peter said, for his own peace of mind.

“Yes,” the doctor said. “And the outlook is fair, but

we don't know yet if there may be latent complications. Possible damage that we can't see yet, from the drugs."

Peter felt an abrupt wave of nausea in his stomach. Images of strangely twisted limbs and gnarled faces flashed in his mind. His expression was suddenly grave, and he forced himself to ask the horrible question that suddenly entered his mind.

"Is she retarded?"

"There's no disfiguration, Mr. Jones. But it's just too early to judge her overall condition. She appears to be a normal, if premature, baby."

Peter allowed himself a tight, hopeful smile.

They ambled down the hall and stopped before a patient room, the door closed. "Ivy's been through a strenuous ordeal, Mr. Jones. She needs lots of rest. However, she insisted she see you now. She's very weak, so I'm afraid we can only give you a few minutes together."

Peter nodded. "And then can I see . . . ?" He paused, wondering what Ivy had named the baby.

"Then you can see the baby. And that'll have to be brief, too."

Peter agreed and reached for the door latch.

"Wait," the doctor said, stopping Peter's arm. "I want you to understand before you see her that her condition is unstable, physically and mentally. Be careful not to upset her. Keep things light. She needs encouragement. From what we can tell she wasn't what we would call a serious addict, but there is evidence of substance abuse." The doctor paused, uncomfortable with the next part of what he had to say. "I don't know your situation, or what your plans are, but try to reinforce her with positive thoughts. It'll help her recovery."

Peter took a deep breath, turned the latch, and went inside. The shades were partially drawn and electronic sounds emanated from monitoring equipment stationed beside her bed. He went to her.

A dim lamp spread yellow light over the bed, and

through the blanket covering he could see she was very thin. Her head was turned toward the window, and her closed eyelids were bluish in color. The skin of her face was drawn tight and blemished. She was very pale, and so different from the sunny Ivy he remembered, a woman so lively, so animated. He felt horribly responsible for the way she now looked. He made a private vow then and there to set things right, to take care of her in whatever way she wanted.

And Kate? No, he couldn't let himself think about Kate or what would happen between them. Right now he had to think of his unexpected baby, and of Ivy. He had to assure her that he would take responsibility for his actions. He whispered her name and she stirred, eyelids fluttering open.

Her gaze widened when she realized who it was, and a thin smile touched her lips. A moment later she began blinking rapidly, overwhelmed with emotion, tears suddenly forming in her eyes. Her voice was a sore whisper. "I told myself I wouldn't get like this when I saw you."

"Hey," he said, touching her cheek.

She pulled her hand from beneath the blankets and wrapped her thin fingers around his. His body tensed at her chilly touch, stirring pity and fear in his heart. He was afraid for her life. She looked so weak and vulnerable, like she'd been through hell. Just what has she done to herself? he wondered. And the baby? He wanted to hold her, tell her it was all right now, that all was forgiven, yet at the same time he thought he was the one who should be begging for forgiveness, for unwittingly letting her get like this. It was all so twisted.

She brushed his hand away. "This is so bizarre, you know? I mean, wow. The baby. And here you are. I don't know what to think or say now."

He told her to stay quiet, to rest. "It's going to be fine."

"Fine. Yeah." She licked her dry lips. "It's funny, but I don't know what's more upsetting. Me or you."

“Don’t think about any of that right now.”

She ignored him, as though he weren’t in the room and she were talking to herself. She didn’t look at him. “God, I wanted him. And I got him. And then wham, he tosses me away.”

Her speech was slurred, and glancing at her intravenous tube he wondered what kind of mix they were feeding her. Tranquilizers and painkillers, he suspected.

“I couldn’t deal, I guess, so I threw myself away,” she went on. “And maybe wanted to throw the baby away, too. A little of this, a little of that, sort of a slow poisoning.” She looked at him. “I’m sick, Peter. I know it. I have to get all this poison out of me.”

“Ivy, don’t talk this way. I’m sorry. You’re sorry. We’re both sorry for the mistake we made. But we’ll deal with it. I’ll take care of you. It’s my responsibility, too.”

She winced. “Now you’ve come to my rescue.” It was hard to follow her abruptly shifting mood. She was struggling with her emotions, with whatever chemical imbalances past and present were making it so hard for her to understand what was happening. “I’m sorry. I don’t want to be like this. I just feel like I hate you right now, and love you too. It’s crazy. I keep thinking about that ride up here.”

She was making little sense, apparently caught in some free-association loop, uttering whatever entered her mind. He smoothed her hair around the pillow. It had lost its original white-blond luster, and felt brassy and rough to his touch. He spoke softly, soothingly.

“What ride, Ivy?”

“My big trip to San Francisco. To see Kate McGregor. She was the one I wanted to meet, you know. More than you, that’s for sure. I wanted to be like her. Sing, make music. I’d had voice lessons when I was young, I guess that’s how I somehow ended up so into speech. Her guards or whatever wouldn’t let me meet her at this concert she gave in Golden Gate Park. I tried to

find out all about her, where she lived and all. I wasn't stalking her or anything, just curious, really interested. Like a role model. That's when I read about you. All you'd done. Then, I don't know, I guess I changed my mind. I wanted to meet you instead. I hated her then. I didn't want to be a musician anymore. I wanted to be a techno-artist or whatever. I don't know, blame it on my parents. They're here, somewhere. Probably out back getting stoned."

This made her laugh, so hard that she started coughing. She gripped the handrails and sat up until she stopped.

He gently rubbed her back and encouraged her to calm down. "You have to rest now, and I'm going to see the baby." He remembered wondering about her name. "What did you name her?"

"No name," Ivy said, dropping back on the pillow. "I can't. I don't know. You do it, Peter. I got her this far, now it's your turn."

He nodded his assurance and decided that now wasn't the best time to talk about it. Or anything else, until she had a chance to rest and let the strong narcotics clear out of her system. He told her he would come in to see her again in a while, after she rested.

"Wait. We're not done." She sat up a little. "We're gonna make a deal, Peter, then I want you to go. Don't come back. I don't want to see you for a while." She was talking crazy again and he assured her that he would do whatever she asked.

"The baby's yours to take care of, Peter. I can't do it. Not right now. I can't name her, they won't let me feed her. I can't do anything. Or my work. I told you I did it all for you, and that was the truth. You have to take that, too. Do what you once said you might, help me make it really happen."

He didn't know what she was talking about. "What work, Ivy?"

"That stuff I started at your place." She waved a hand

and scratched her fingers through her hair, suddenly more lucid. "The speech and language software." She gestured to the corner of the room. "It's in that cabinet, in my pack. Get it."

He did as she said, retrieving the same well-worn backpack she'd brought with her when she'd stayed with him. He held it out to her and she pushed it away.

"You open it."

He expected to find her At Hand PC, but instead he found only notebooks, pens, and books.

"The disks," she said.

He found them at the very bottom of the bag, six Zip disks bound together with a rubber band.

"What is it?" he said.

"Read the label."

"ISLE."

"That's what it is."

He wanted to ask more, but then decided it wasn't the right time. They could deal with her work and everything else in a few days, when she was feeling better. "Listen, how about we talk about this later."

She gave him an impatient look. "No. You're not listening. I meant what I said. I don't want to see you after today, not for a while. Take those. Take the baby. Take care of both."

He turned over the pile of disks in his hand. "What do I do with it?"

She explained. "After I decided I wanted to meet you, I got this idea. It happened because of that old song, 'Teach the Children.' You know the one. I thought, yeah, teach them well, and do it with computers. In their own language, their own words. So I switched studies, started researching it. And somehow my hormones or whatever else was going on in me complicated everything. Beyond just the program. To be with you. So I waited until it was the right time of the month to make you that dinner I made, so we'd, you know, do it."

Peter stared at her in disbelief. "You did this on purpose? The baby?"

She closed her eyes tightly and nodded. "I thought it would turn out different. I thought you really liked me. But we're talking about the work now, not her."

"What the hell do these have to do with any of it?"

She looked at the disks. "Take them home and see. It stands for 'Intelligent Speech and Language Environment.' But it's not just for kids anymore, or just learning. It's more than that. Whatever you want it to be. You'll see. Go ahead. Take them, the notes and code charts, it's all in there. Figure out what it's worth to you. Hell knows I'm gonna have a shitload of bills when I'm through this rinse cycle."

She'd laid so much on him he was at a loss for words. Thankfully he wouldn't have to say more, as the door opened and in came the doctor and a nurse. The doctor put on an easygoing smile and asked Peter to let her rest now.

"We'll figure this all out, Ivy. I promise," Peter said, and went to put the knapsack at the foot of the bed.

"No, Peter. Take it, please. Take it and go."

The doctor gave him a meaningful nod, encouraging him to do as she asked.

He slung the sack over his shoulder and laid a hand over Ivy's. "All right. Get better."

"I'll try," she said, with none of her early bitterness. Tears were building in her eyes again and she looked away. "Make me proud."

The nurse gently urged him away as the doctor went about checking the girl's vital signs. Peter backed up a few steps and looked at her again, but she wouldn't look his way. He turned and left, the door quietly swinging closed behind him.

He stood in the hallway unsure of which way to turn. The events of the last forty-eight hours had taken their toll. He'd resigned from his company, sold a great

portion of his stock, and become a father. The baby. He had to see her.

A floor nurse directed him to the neonatal care unit. He tramped down the corridor, rounded the corner, and pushed through a set of double doors. He announced himself to the head nurse, who promptly led him into a clean room, where he was instructed to put on a sterile gown and face mask.

Dressed in the sanitary outfit, he followed the nurse into a brightly lit room containing a row of bubblelike incubators. It was a strange and surreal environment, like a set in a science fiction movie.

“Here she is,” the nurse said, leading him to the last incubator.

There, encased in the hygienic shell, lay his baby girl.

She was impossibly tiny, and he was taken aback by the size and shape of her head. It looked so huge and unnatural that he audibly gasped.

The nurse interpreted his reaction and calmly explained it was normal. “Don’t worry. The head develops a little faster at this stage. All the rest of her will catch up in the next couple of weeks. It’s perfectly ordinary.”

He breathed a sigh of relief and took a minute to ponder the assortment of tubes and wires and probes taped to her impossibly little body. He turned to the nurse. “How is she?”

“We’re keeping a close eye on her. It was a difficult birth, but she looks like a real fighter.”

Peter smiled and shook his head as the first sensation of fatherly pride gushed through his heart.

The nurse explained that despite their sterile protection they had to be careful about exposure. Peter understood that he would have to leave already. He wanted to take her in his arms and kiss her good-bye, but he knew that wasn’t possible yet. Instead, he pressed his gloved fingertips to his masked lips, then touched the top of the incubator in front of the baby’s sleeping face.

Back in the anteroom he discarded the green scrub outfit, collected the knapsack he'd left on a chair, and thanked the nurse. He took one last look at his baby through the observation window, then turned and pressed through the double doors, back into the busy corridor.

And into Kate's arms.

She had been waiting just outside the unit, and he nearly fell over when he saw her. She caught him and stiffly helped him regain his footing, guiding him to one of the hard plastic chairs.

"Jesus, Kate. How did you find me?"

"Byron wouldn't tell me. So I called Ben, at your office. He told me he'd gotten the call they were trying to find you."

Peter looked at the double doors. "She's so tiny."

"I heard," Kate said with anguished eyes. "Why didn't you tell me, Peter?"

He was completely exhausted and unprepared for this conversation. He made a helpless gesture. "Kate, I swear I never thought this would happen, or—" He didn't complete the thought.

"Or what? You would have told me? Wasn't that our agreement no matter what, Peter? That if you or I ever met someone, even casually, we'd tell the other? Wasn't that it? No rules, except honesty?"

"But this was different."

"Different." She shook her head sadly. "And how many others were there, Peter? Different ones, I mean."

"None, Kate. Just this once. I swear."

She looked unconvinced.

"Kate, I'm telling the truth. It was the night before Via dumped me. She was just a guest, like any of the other students. I didn't plan for it to happen."

"And she did?"

"Actually, yes. She did. We had dinner. I guess I had too much to drink. I don't know, she was desperate. I didn't want to do it. I wasn't myself, and it just happened. But it wasn't my fault. It was the wine—"

She slapped him across the face, and he wobbled in his seat, stunned. He reached up and touched his cheek and looked at her. Her lips were tight and trembling and he knew he had hurt her far more than she had hurt him with her strike. "How dare you offer an excuse so foolish."

His voice was a broken whisper. "God, Kate, if I could undo the whole thing I would. It meant nothing to me. It was a terrible mistake, and now I have to face up to it. But you have to believe me. Kate, I need you."

She was about to respond just as the doctor pushed through the doors. He saw at once that the couple were in the middle of a sensitive discussion. He acknowledged Kate and asked to speak privately with Peter for a moment.

Peter turned to Kate. "Wait. I'll be right back." He sought her hand for assurance, but she pulled away and crossed her arms, unable to look at him.

He followed the doctor around the corner and they seated themselves in a pair of waiting chairs. It occurred to Peter that he was still carrying Ivy's backpack over his shoulder. He was operating on autopilot now.

"We need a name, Mr. Jones. Have you chosen one?"

A name, Peter thought. Such a simple question, yet his mind was blank. Ivy had asked him to name her, and he hadn't really let himself acknowledge the importance of this small but significant responsibility. The reality finally set it, and he felt the last ounce of energy drain out of him. He gave a helpless shrug, and the knapsack slipped off his shoulder and fell to the floor, spilling the contents all over the place.

The doctor repeated his question.

"Wait," Peter said, and hopped up, leaving the spilled knapsack on the floor. He trotted around the corner to seek Kate's support.

But she was gone.

He let out a frustrated sound and trudged back to

THE DEAL 231

the doctor, who was collecting the knapsack's spilled contents.

Peter knelt down to take over, raking the pens and notebooks and disks into a pile.

And there he saw it, and for a moment he couldn't move. He reached out for the adjacent chair to steady himself, and the doctor asked if he was all right.

Ignoring him, Peter leaned over and picked up the bundle of Zip disks.

In Ivy's own hand was the name he was searching for. He read the word written on the label of the topmost disk.

"Isle," he whispered.

"I'm sorry?" the doctor said, not sure he'd heard correctly.

"I said Isle," Peter declared. "Her name is Isle."

