

> CHAPTER 24

Peter sat on the rug with his legs crossed, Isle in a bundle beside him. Together they listened to Kate's soothing voice mingling with the quiet rain outside.

Ivy strolled into the room, humming softly to the music. "She asleep?"

"Not quite," Peter said. "I think she's sort of wired. She's had a busy day. You too."

"You three," Ivy said, ruffling his hair.

Peter stood up. "Thanks for letting her stay here tonight. I'll bring her over tomorrow afternoon, if that's cool."

"Sure. That was the agreement."

"Thanks."

He'd offered to marry her, but she had declined. It wasn't what either of them wanted, and they both knew it. In the out-of-court settlement, Peter had agreed to child support payments, and Ivy had granted him liberal visitation rights.

For the rights to her ISLE software, ICP paid Ivy two million dollars, plus royalties.

They hugged, and she saw herself out.

Peter returned to 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. He kissed her forehead. "Me too."

Byron and Grace had left a few hours earlier to return to Maine. They would be back in a few weeks to choose a vacation home in the area, where they would reside for however long Byron chose to stay on with the project.

Peter's own home suddenly felt like it used to, before Isle. Quiet and empty. Yet at the same time it was more full of life than ever. But this, he could not help but think, was only temporary.

The next song started, and he picked up the remote to bump up the volume a few notches. Kate's lovely voice made him feel both happy and sad. He put his finger in Isle's hand and she squeezed it.

"When you're a little older," he whispered, "I'm going to teach you how to sing just like that."

"And who's going to teach you?" Kate's voice said from behind.

He spun around.

"Kate," he said with unrestrained shock.

"I let myself in," Kate said, twirling a key on her finger. She was dressed in a raincoat and carried a large bag over one shoulder. Her smile was tentative.

She dropped the bag on the floor and made her way into the room, shrugging out of her wet coat. He rose with Isle in his hands.

"I can't believe it's you." His voice was trembling.

She bent with her hands on her knees and smiled brightly at Isle.

"Look at you, little girl. What a pretty baby you are." She looked up at Peter. "Come on, what kind of welcome is that? I thought you'd be happy to see me."

“Are you kidding? I am, I am.” He touched her arm. “I just can’t believe you’re really here. I mean, it’s been forever.”

She smiled, but he couldn’t read her expression.

“Congratulations,” she said, drawing out a copy of the *San Francisco Examiner*. “And to you too,” she said, waving the front page of the business section at Isle. Beneath the headline was a photo of Peter with Isle in his arms, flanked by Byron and Ivy.

“Back to Via,” Kate remarked. “Sure surprised me.”

“Me too, more than you can imagine.”

Kate held out her hands. “May I?”

“Yes, of course.” He gently placed Isle in her arms. “Be careful, you have to support her head.” He moved Kate’s hand so that her palm cradled Isle’s head. “That’s right.” He left his hand in place for a moment before letting her hold Isle by herself. He watched with pride and satisfaction as she gently rocked the baby in her arms. His throat tightened.

Kate moved over to the sofa and sat down, humming softly to the baby in her lap. She glanced up at Peter.

“So, is it true?”

“Is what true?” Peter said, seating himself beside her.

She scanned the body of the news story. “Ah, here it is. Quote: ‘I’m not going to be working like I used to. There are more important things in my life now.’ End quote.”

“Totally,” he said.

“What about Ivy?”

He explained the arrangement they’d made and her deal with ICP.

“Good for her,” Kate said. “She’s sure earned it.”

Peter agreed, and he sat there quiet for a while, unsure how to say what he wanted to say. Finally he just came right out with it.

“What about us, Kate? You. I mean, do you think I deserve you? Is there any way I can earn you back?”

She smiled tenderly and took his hand in hers and gently placed it beneath Isle's head, the way he'd shown her. They sat without another word for a long time, adjusting to the feeling of being so close again after so long apart.

"I'm so scared, Kate."

"Of what?"

He struggled to find his voice, and she settled a reassuring hand on the back of his neck.

"This. The future." He inhaled a deep breath and looked her in the eye. "Remember when you came to take me to Maine? How you told me that when you create something great, no one can ever take it away? How it only gets better and better?"

She nodded with a smile, massaging his neck encouragingly.

"That's what scares me."

"But you've done it, Peter. You're back."

He shook his head in frustration. "No, I mean us. We had something great, but it went away. I want it back, but I'm afraid you don't."

"But I do, Peter. I do."

He closed his eyes and touched his forehead to hers, drew her closer.

"Say it for me again," he whispered. "But this time, make it a vow."

"I do," Kate said emphatically. "I do!"

