

Chapter 3: Frustration and the Obsession

Down the hall, in a warmly lit waiting room with red velvet seating chairs and a large fish tank with bright green and yellow fish swimming aimlessly around and around, Olivia sat in a seat next to Walter, even though she wanted only get away from him, the man who had damaged so many lives, her own included. Nothing could have prepared her for the story of desperation, momentary acceptance, and an unbelievable chance to challenge fate's grasp on reality.

"Walter, tell me exactly what's going on here, and no secrets this time!" Olivia said, her skin prickling with anger. "You said...he's not from this world? That's why I saw the glimmer, isn't it? Just like that building..."

"Yes, it is true. Although he may be my son in another reality, he is not mine. My son died so many years ago, afflicted with an incurable disease, Hepea. It was a disease thought to be dead; there hadn't been a case of it since 1938.

"I was trying desperately to find the cure but I just couldn't connect the dots, solve the riddle. It eluded me no matter how close I might have thought I was getting. If only I could reach out my hand, maybe I could reach the answer, touch the formula that would save my son.

"But I couldn't. I was losing him a little every day that went by. And that's when I saw him for the first time, the bald one."

"The Observer? So there is some connection..." Olivia said, thinking of the Observer known as August, the last one of their kind that she had seen. It had been strange that Peter was able to use the Observer's weapon when no one else could fire it. Could this be why?

"Yes. He told me a way to save him. If I was unsuccessful at discovering a cure, then perhaps I, in another reality, was successful. He told me how to jump to the other universe to retrieve the cure...but before I had the chance to go, it was too late. Peter was gone."

Although it was a difficult story for Olivia to hear, it was even harder for Walter to tell, thinking back to those moments that scared and shredded his life, left him with little nothing to hold on to. The way Walter seemed to crack and bleed from simply telling the story of the past, Olivia was certain that he had never told anyone before. He was now only because circumstances forced his hand. If only it wasn't necessary...if only the past could just die...

"I was lost without him," Walter said. "I would have done *anything* to save him, to get him back. And when my experiments further developed the doorway between

this reality and the other, the thought occurred to me. I could go there, to that other universe, and see my son. I became obsessed with the thought of it.”

“So...” Olivia, her brow still pinched together, “your Peter, the Peter from this reality—our reality—died? He died as a little boy...?” She could feel her own eyes begin to moisten, just as Walter’s had been for so long.

“Yes, Olivia. I was too late, too inadequate. It was my fault he had to die...”

“Then how did he...?” Olivia turned her head to look down the hall, referring to the Peter she had come to care for very deeply.

“I lost myself in the sadness,” Walter continued. “I became obsessed with correcting my mistakes, and that led me to develop a much more powerful doorway to the other reality. I took the advice that my observer friend gave me and jumped to the other side, only I did not simply retrieve the cure that I had been searching for. I had to see him, with my own eyes. I had to know that he was alive and would live a full, happy life somewhere; just not with me.

“I ‘broke’ into the house and walked to his room where I found him sleeping soundly. I was only going to watch as he slept, just for a little while, but he woke up and recognized me. What could I do? I talked to him and told him that the snow had stopped long enough for the stars to come out.

“‘The Pleiades are perfectly in view tonight,’ I told him. ‘Don’t you want to see?’ He smiled up at me and asked if mom would yell at him for going out in the cold at night. I said, ‘No, son. It will be our little secret.’

“Little did he know I had no intention of showing him the stars. I led him back to the spot where I had stepped through the doorway and, holding his hand, I took him through with me.”

There was so much Olivia wanted to say but it was too sad, all around that it was difficult to take sides. Walter had lost his only son and was grieving. He never planned to kidnap the alter-Peter; it just happened, she could see that. But still that did not justify his criminal act—kidnapping his own son! How did the other Walter and Peter’s mother feel? For all they knew, their son simply vanished one night, never to be seen again. Didn’t they deserve answers, too?

But before Olivia had the chance to even open her mouth to speak, Walter continued. “I brought Peter home and back into bed. He never knew any difference, that it was not his bed, not his room, that I was not his father.”

The moisture in Walter’s eyes was clearly visible in the warm light of the waiting room. Why did any of this have to happen? Why did there have to be such pain and

sorrow in the world? If there was anything she could do to stop these things from happening—stop the eternity of heartache, she'd do it, and she knew then that Walter felt the same. That is why he did what he did, giving in to his most inner flaws and humanistic imperfections.

Breaking the tension built up from years of hidden anguish, Olivia said, "So why is he sick now? Why all of a sudden? He was fine last night."

Walter shook his head helplessly. "I don't know. I only fear that this is my punishment for what I did. I know it was wrong...but he doesn't deserve to suffer for my mistakes. How can God be that cruel...?"

"Oh, Walter," Olivia said, shocked at the sound of pity in her own voice. "Who said it was God? There has to be a logical explanation and solution to this. I won't let him die a second time, I promise," her voice cracked as a tear fell from her bright, green eyes that seemed aflame with inner resolve and pure determination.

Walter smiled, reaching out to rest his hands upon Olivia's in appreciation. After all the lies and betrayal, she was still there, on their side. He smiled at the thought that he was right about her, about the both of them. Maybe someday he would see Peter wear that purple tux...someday.

Brushing away the tear, Olivia cleared her throat. "So now we know the truth. What do we do next?"

"Peter needs the cure, the one I was so near to discovering before I lost him the first time."

"Can you replicate your work from back then?"

"Yes, it may be possible to pick up from where I was with my research, but it will be too late for Peter—again. Time is against us, Olivia, even as we speak. No, what I need—what Peter needs—is the cure, now!"

"How can we do that, Walter? You are the only one who can make it, aren't you?"

"Yes, that is true, but I cannot do it. Olivia, you need to find the cure on the other side and retrieve it for Peter."

"Me? I don't understand. How can I find it?"

"Because you can cross over to the other side as effortlessly as stepping outside. You can go there, find the cure, and bring it back with you in time to save Peter's life. I'm afraid he does not have three days left, Olivia... Not without the cure..."

The cure, the cure, the cure... The words swam around her head, making her dizzy and confused. How could she possibly cross over to the other side? She only just began to see objects—and people—from the other side. Wouldn't physically going there require more experience, more advanced skills than she currently possessed? How dare Walter throw this upon her shoulders—This was his mess, why did she have to be the one to clean up after him?

Quickly getting to her feet, frustration boiling beneath her skin, Olivia turned away from Walter. She only turned back around to face him when several nurses went running past the waiting room and down the hall. Her heart skipped a beat as both she and Walter quickly followed them to Room #704, Peter's room.

Colored lights were flashing on a monitor that stood next to Peter's side, displaying his heart and respiratory rate, the latter nearly registering zero.

"He's not breathing," Walter stated blandly as the nurses began CPR. It was just as he feared. Peter was quickly falling under the waves of a cruel fate that Walter tried so hard to change. But now there was little he could do but stand by and watch as his only son was taken away from him a second time.