

## **Chapter 7: Explosion and the Anticipation**

She didn't know how long she had been lying there in the debris, but the sound of the zap of disrupted electric lines stirred Olivia back to life. Beside a little discomfort in her hip that she had injured upon returning from the alternate universe the last time, she felt fine.

But then she felt a cold, sticky sensation when she planted her hands down on the broken ground. Her eyes slowly adjusting to the dark and blinking light, she could see whatever was split on the ground gave off an eerie blue tint. She looked closer and noticed that it wasn't only spilt on the floor but also all over her, staining her shirt blue.

"Oh, my God," she said breathlessly. Although she wished the blue substance wasn't what she thought it was, she knew it was the cure that would save Peter's life. And it was gone.

As she tried to push back the urge to crumble along with the debris in the room, she turned, searching the room for Walter but he wasn't anywhere to be seen. Then suddenly the room around her changed. As though by magic, the room mended itself, the fragmented walls and ceiling tiles were put back in place, and there was no sticky blue liquid split on the floor. She was the only one in the room, crouching on her hands and knees in the dark silence. Even the blurry image of Peter she had seen before was gone.

She quickly jumped to her feet, her hands clinging to her soaked shirt. Maybe there was still something Walter could do to salvage the cure! Maybe he could extract enough of it in order to replicate it to save Peter. Dashing down the empty hall, she pressed the down button of the elevator, but nothing happened. She pressed it again and again, but still nothing happened and the elevator remained silent.

Turning her head, she found the staircase and flew downstairs through the dimly lit corridor. When she came to the fifth floor, the staircase seemed to shake and change, the opaque texture of the walls melting away to reveal the sleeping city outside; the stairs also suddenly seemed to be made of glass. Holding on tightly to the railing, Olivia felt her head feel strangely light, fantastical sounds of rushing water flooded her ears. She felt herself start to lose the strength to stand as she slid down the side of the wall.

What was happening? Where was she? Why did everything around her seem to disappear? She felt as though everything she had come to care about was being ripped away, leaving her empty and hollow inside, nothing left to mask her fear.

And as the clear world around her went black, she thought she could hear—or rather feel—soft words reaching out to comfort and hold her, but she was too far away to reach them. Although she could hear nothing that made any linguistic

sense, she could, however, understand the feelings that it caused; mostly Fear, a gripping fear ripped and pulled at her from every direction, pulling her down the crystal glass stairs, out the clear windows, up through the open ceiling above her. She tried to feel the sides of the stairwell walls, but there was nothing she could hold on to in a world of illusions. All she could do was try to combat the overwhelming sense of anxiety inside, fearing she would not have the strength to win the battle let alone the war.

Then when she thought she too would fade to nothing like the world around her, a clear voice whispered into her ear through the empty space, so closely yet so far away. "I'm still here with you, Olivia. Can you hear me?"

It was Peter's voice. She turned her head to see if she could find his shimmering form that she had seen with the other Walter, but saw nothing, not until she felt that warm sensation on her shoulder and the warmth that spread throughout her body and soul. Looking to her right, she saw him looking at her with his bright green eyes peering at her with concern.

"Peter, I'm..."

"I lost you for awhile," he said sadly, like it was his fault Olivia had been whisked away so suddenly. "Can you get up? We have to get back to our world."

At the words 'our world,' Olivia remembered the reason she had come, the reason she had tried so hard to make it to this alternate universe. Her hand and eyes fell to her bluish stained shirt. "It's gone," she said. Looking back into his eyes, she added, "Peter, I'm so sorry... I—"

Peter only smiled that soft grin that made her insides flutter wildly. "—It's alright. Listen, you have to be strong right now, okay? I don't know the way back. You have to concentrate to get us back to our world."

"But Peter, without the cure..."

He stood and held out a hand for Olivia as though not caring whether or not he received a cure. "You are all that matters to me," he said, reaching out a shimmering hand to touch her face, his eyes almost glowing in the darkness.

There was so much more Olivia wanted to say, so much more she wanted to experience in a world with Peter in it. It just wasn't meant to be. Maybe if she stayed in this place, this dark world between worlds, they could be together. Even if everything around her turned to air, even if her body faded to nothing... Could she find happiness in an empty world?

"Olivia," Peter said in the darkness as his hand fell from her shivering face to wrap a strong arm around her.

Olivia's heart raced. They were completely alone in the empty space of nowhere. The stairwell, the building, the city lights, everything was gone except for the two of them left floating in the black abyss. If it weren't for the glow of Peter's eyes and shimmering form, Olivia wouldn't have been able to see anything. He was the beacon that illuminated the path from her nightmares, if only she could take that first step forward.

The next moment, Peter's form flickered like a candle flame in the wind but the warmth of his presence still protectively wrapped around her. It was such a comforting feeling, even though she knew it wouldn't last. But maybe if she closed her eyes, maybe time would stop. Simply floating there in the moment, she felt a tickly sensation dance across her lips.

Her eyes still closed, Olivia heard him whisper softly, "Let's go home."

Heart pounding excitedly, Olivia opened her eyes to a dimly lit sidewalk along what appeared to be a pond or small lake. She turned her head right and left, forward and behind, but she could see no one. Peter was gone and she was again alone, a white path extending out into the dark horizon. Although Peter's warmth was still with her, she could feel the sting of the darkness tugging at her, wishing to pull her back into its depths. She had to escape this place while the road lay clearly under her feet.

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The halls had been deserted for several hours, the only people walking to and from were the nurses checking in on patients periodically over the night. From time to time someone would join Walter in the waiting room. He had been staring at the fish tank all night, just watching the fish go around as though any moment Olivia would jump out of the water with the cure in hand. Though, of course, he knew that wouldn't happen; it just kept his mind from shutting down completely.

Or thinking the worst.

He knew there was the possibility that Olivia wouldn't make it back in time. There was a possibility that she wouldn't be able to find the cure. And what would he do if he lost not only his son but Olivia as well in the process? How could he live with himself...?

As he sat drowning in his own nightmare, the surrounding warmth of the waiting room shed its comforting feeling when he saw Olivia, her hair blown all about and her eyes nearly bloodshot from—

Quickly standing to his feet, Walter opened his mouth to speak. He wanted to ask if she had been successful, if she had found the cure to save his dying son, but the look in her eyes gave him the one answer he feared the most.

“Walter, I’m sorry,” she said, two tears slipping from her red eyes. “I lost it. It just fell out of my hands and—Oh, Walter!” she cried, nearly crumbling to the ground had Walter not been there to catch her.

“Olivia,” Walter said as tears welled up in his own eyes. “What happened?”

“I failed. I wasn’t strong enough. I—” she paused as though suddenly remembering something. “I saw him. He was there, with me the whole time. And I let him down.”

Before Olivia collapsed to her knees, Walter was there to catch her again, although his own arms and legs shook uncontrollably. He simply shook his head ‘no.’ “Maybe there’s still time to try again, maybe you can go back—”

“—Walter, that was the last of the cure. The formula’s gone. Even if I went back again, there wouldn’t be anything left to bring back. Oh, Walter! What do we do now?”

Tapping her back like a parent comforting a frightened child, Walter was unable to give her an answer. What was left for them to do? Nothing. There was nothing they could do no to save Peter. He would die, leaving Walter and Olivia behind to bury him in the cold March ground. All that was left was to be there for him when the time came.

And that time was not far off.

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As they entered the hospital room, the hissing breaths of the breathing machine filled their ears. The clock on the wall read 1:35 in the morning.

Walter was the first to step near Peter’s bedside; he took Peter’s still hand in his as he sat in the chair next to him. Still unable to accept that this was the end, this is how it was going to be, Olivia lingered in the small hallway in the room. It hadn’t even been a day since Peter was admitted to the hospital yet, but she had a sickening feeling that there was little time left. This thought alone drove her further into the room even though she wanted nothing more than to run as far away as she could.

“Hello, son,” Walter said, stroking Peter’s hand tenderly with his thumb. “Olivia’s back with us now. She tried to save you, you know. She did all she could to save you...”

Before Olivia had the chance to sit in the chair on the other side of the bed, across from Walter, both Walter and Olivia’s eyes widened, focused on Peter’s deathly face as two tears slowly fell from his closed eyes. Did he know they were there? Did he know where he was, what happened to him—what was about to happen?

It was too much to bear. Walter saw Olivia spring forward, her hands shaking, clutching at Peter's face as though unwilling to let this be the end. "Peter, no! Listen to me! You can't go, you have to fight it! Please, you have to!"

All Walter could do was sit, still holding Peter's hand. There was nothing more he could do, nothing more he could say to make the pain go away. And then he remembered it, the cemetery where his real son had been buried. That same sense of tragic closure, that sense of inadequacy, that feeling that he was willing to give anything just to have a second chance. He was never able to give his Peter a good life and he always wondered exactly how Peter had felt—did he know how much he was loved? So much for his father to do all of this, risk the fate of the world to get that second chance to tell him...

Rubbing Peter's hand a few more times, Walter leaned forward and placed his trembling lips upon it. "You are my everything, Peter," he gasped, tears mixing with a suddenly runny nose. "I love you, son."

As if in response, Peter's hand jumped in Walter's grasp, startling both onlookers. For a moment they dared to believe it was a good sign, that maybe by some miracle Peter's life would be spared. Then the monitor beside them began to sing a high pitched hymn of The End as a long line of red appeared across the screen.

"No. No!" Walter heard Olivia's screams echo in his ears. Then a tear-streaked Olivia looked pleadingly up at him. "You have to do something! Walter, please! Walter!"

It was time.

"Walter!" came Olivia's voice as she shook him from his nightmare. "You have to do something!"

His head swam in the murky darkness of the vision, tears still in his eyes. He looked around himself to take in his surroundings. Although he felt like he was just in Peter's hospital room, saying his last goodbyes, he now found himself sitting in the waiting room next to the large saltwater tank, where he had always been. The clock on the wall read 1:03am.

Walter blinked back the tears, poorly hiding his raw emotions, and looked up to see Olivia standing in front of him.

Her hair was a mess, windblown all over the place, and her shirt and jacket were stained with a strange blue liquid— *No!*

Jumping to his feet faster than even a 12 year old could have, Walter gripped Olivia's shirt. "Olivia, the cure! What happened?"

“Walter, I’m sorry. The vile slipped from my hand—it broke and...”

Walter’s head spun, hundreds of possibilities threatening to drown him. “How long ago?”

“Not ten minutes ago,” Olivia replied. She kept her hands down and away from her stained shirt as though touching it would somehow kill her. Or maybe it was the loss of the cure that somehow frightened her beyond common sense.

“Take off your shirt,” Walter said, flatly. “There may still be time.”