

Chapter 8: The Illusion and Resurrection

Time slowly ticked by as Olivia sat next to Peter, holding on tightly to his hand as though he would be swept away by invisible waves if she let go. It was nearly two hours since Walter went running off with her shirt in hand, babbling something about cooking up a new cure. With her shirt gone, Walter gave Olivia his wool sweater that itched beyond belief not to mention smelled of old man. She withstood the never-ceasing compulsion to scratch her skin off for thirty minutes or so before she ripped it off and merely buttoned her suit jacket as high as it would go.

As she sat there in the room, holding on to Peter's hand, Olivia looked at the clock on the wall again. It was going on 4:00am. Maybe Walter wasn't fairing so well, a thought that frightened her greatly as the sound of the ventilators forcing air in through Peter's lungs.

"If luck is on our side," Walter had said, "then it just might be possible to synthesize a new cure from the hospital's excess supply of other flu strains with the remaining residue of this cure that soaked into the fabric of your shirt."

"Will that work?" Olivia said.

Walter shook his head, both anxious and exhilarated. "I don't know, but I will try. Please, Olivia. Stay here with him. And pray this will work..."

Pray. It was a word Olivia never thought she would hear him say, ever. And yet it seemed perfectly natural. She never had a reason to pray in the past. Her family was a self-proclaimed 'whatever' when it came to religion. It was never anything important. And so now, as she sat beside Peter, possibly waiting for his final heartbeat, she found words springing into her mind, her soul, words pleading for a miracle, words that teetered on the borderline of bargaining. Could this be prayer...?

Please, she thought. Don't let this be the end, please. Please...

The feel of his skin was so cold and unresponsive, almost dead. And as that thought grew in her mind, a hallow feeling seemed to sweep from the dark corners of the room, like ebony skeletal fingers reaching out for her neck. But rather than fighting back the feelings of hopelessness and grief, Olivia simply sat and let them wrap around her. Maybe then the anxiety would be gone and she could find some peace.

A moment later, Olivia collapsed to the icy hospital floor, her hair like broken glass shattered on the ground.

When she opened her eyes again, she was in a park, the scent of cut grass and earth blew along with the soft wind against her face. It only took a few seconds to realize that she was not in a park but rather a cemetery, a newly carved tombstone sat unceremoniously at her feet. It read:

**Peter Bishop
1978-2010**

Olivia felt her heart jump up through her throat, gagging her; the heat that washed over her brought her to her knees. This was Peter's grave? Not this world's Peter but the one she had come to know well, come to care so much about... and she failed. She failed to save him and this was the result. Peter Bishop was dead.

Through the tears and debilitating sobs came a familiar sound in the wind:

Olivia... Don't...

Tears still streaming from her eyes, she looked up from the grave and tucked the few loose strands of hair behind her ears to see her surroundings better. She glanced around but could see no one.

Please, said the voice again, but this time she could have sworn she saw something move in the corner of her eye.

"Peter?" she said, almost afraid to turn her head to find no one there. But she risked it anyway. As she turned her head slightly to the left, she saw him, squatting down beside her, his green eyes glowing more brightly than she had ever seen before—and his smile. How it gripped her heart so...and then her eyes fell on the grave before her. "Peter, what is this? This can't be real..."

Peter shook his head. "I would certainly hope not."

"Then why? Why is this... Why are we here?"

This time Peter only smiled softly. "I don't know."

Olivia must have heard the odd sound in his voice because she suddenly raised her head, her own green eyes peering through his. All she could see reflected in his eyes was sorrow.

"When you traveled through the space between worlds, I was there with you," he said. "Remember?"

She nodded. "Peter, that's the only reason I could find my way back. Without you—"

“—But I couldn’t make it all the way through. Maybe because... I’m already gone, Olivia,” he said, his glance falling on his own grave. An eerie chill passed through him and he shivered.

“No,” Olivia said, shaking her head. “No, not yet. There’s still time! Walter said...!”

“Maybe that’s what he wanted you to believe.”

What was he saying? That he wanted her to give up? Because she wouldn’t! Not yet!

And then Peter reached over and took both of Olivia’s hands in his own cold hands. Looking sadly into her eyes, he said, “You know I don’t want to go... but I can’t stay here. You have to let me go.”

You have to let me go. The wind repeated his words.

Was that what this place was? A world of souls in limbo, neither alive nor dead because of the strings and shackles that bound them down, not allowing them to move on one way or the other. If whatever kept him here was severed, where would he go?

Suddenly fear gripped her. “What will happen to you, Peter?”

He only shook his head, a single tear falling from his left eye. He didn’t know. Out of all the hardships he faced during his life, this was the moment he felt the weakest, thoroughly and completely helpless. He didn’t want to know whether or not this was the final threshold between life and death. But there was still hope in hidden behind the folds of fear in Olivia’s eyes. All he wanted was to hold on to that last remaining thread of hope.

As he reached a hand up to stroke Olivia’s face, he said, “Before I lost you, I wanted to thank you.”

“Thank me for what?”

“For everything you’ve done—you taught me that there is so much more to life than manipulating people to get what you *think* you want. I was so lost, Olivia, more than you’ll ever know. You gave purpose back to my life.”

Olivia humbly shook her head. “You don’t have to thank me,” she said, wiping the tears from her face, narrowly missing Peter’s hand that was still gently planted on the right side of her face. She had been hiding a devastating secret from him for weeks... and she couldn’t bring herself to tell him the truth, even now. She did not deserve his gratitude.

With Olivia's hand lingering at the base of her eye, Peter took it and brought her into a close embrace. "I can't tell you everything that you make me feel, not like this..." His hand reached up to cradle her head from behind, his fingers playing in her hair. "But maybe we can at least finish what we started."

Suddenly, Olivia felt like she was in Jacksonville again, with Peter so close, her heart and mind raced. She knew this place wasn't real, that all of this might be a crazy dream and nothing more. But even still, she felt the butterfly wings beat against her stomach. *I can't do this*, she thought, *not again...*

The memory of John Scott flashed in the back of her mind. He was her partner... everything about their relationship was going against what she believed was "good conduct" on the job and yet he found his way into her heart. Just the same way as Peter had...

She wasn't able to tell him how she felt at that moment in Jacksonville for multiple reasons, but now? Did she even know how she felt about him? She knew her life changed the moment when the flight from Hamburg crashed, forever scared from John's apparent betrayal, but could it all have been for a purpose, a long winding path set out eons ago by an all-knowing deity—God even—so that they could meet, Peter and Olivia. Could it be fate that she was now standing in this awkward position in life, second guessing every good thing that came her way? She didn't want to follow in the same footsteps that she had followed before with John; rather, she wanted to stray from the clearly marked path ahead, to forge her own way through life, not because it was what God had planned for her, but because it was the only thing that felt right. And this felt right.

With Peter's arm around her waist and a hand lovingly stroking her hair, Olivia closed her eyes and leaned forward. Their lips met in an ardent kiss for what seemed like hours, time meaning nothing to them within each others' arms.

Olivia felt her heart pulsate with excitement. She would never admit it, but she had thought of this for a long time, even before that tense moment in Jacksonville. She occasionally caught her mind wandering off into flights of fancy, scripting her own romantic scenes with him. It was so fifth grade, she knew, but at least gave her a chuckle now and again.

That's why she should have been better prepared for this moment, she should have seen it coming even though part of her still wanted to be surprised, wanted someone to take her hand and lead her down the path of her life. What she would give if that someone was Peter...

If her eyes had been open, perhaps she would have seen the bleak cemetery be swept away by a swarm of purple butterflies radiating from their embrace. Fluttering their crystal wings, they rose up through the darkness, cutting their way through the passage between and on to the light of day. Before Olivia realized what

was happening, she was already halfway through the portal to her world, both of them carried by the swarm of butterflies. It was the sudden cold feeling that opened her eyes and ultimately ended Peter and Olivia's first kiss.

With her eyes wide open, Olivia blinked as she looked around at the shadowy landscape around her until she noticed something was wrong. Peter was still there, holding her close, but his image was fading, nearly 50% transparent.

Peter placed a ghostly hand over Olivia's quivering lips and smiled as though he knew there wasn't much time left.

You can make it, Peter said, his voice almost like the whisper of the wind in Olivia's ears. A tear fell from her eye, which he caught in a fading hand. *No more crying now, you hear? This isn't goodbye.* He smiled, then added, *I promise.*

The glimmer in his eyes reflected his whole heart and soul in that one moment and yet there was something else there that he tried to hide: doubt. Even if he promised her the world, it didn't mean she could actually have it. Peter was the same.

Would this really be the end? Would this be the last time Olivia could ever be this close, her last chance to say...

"Peter, wait! I—"

But the butterflies carrying them through the portal would not stop their ascent, but rather seemed to gain speed as Peter's form continued to fade to nothing. Olivia could hardly see the brightly shining green of his eyes when she heard his voice for the last time.

You don't need to say anything. I already know.

The next moment everything around her melted into the darkness of night, and the protective feeling of Peter's arms around her was gone. Her last great fear kept repeating in her mind—would this be the end? Would this be the last time?

But he knew...! And just knowing that gave her the courage to tempt fate, to give herself to the unknown, invisible path ahead of her. With a single butterfly perched on her shoulder, she took the last step into reality.

Surrounded by silence, Olivia slowly became aware of the warm sunlight streaming in through the large hospital windows, draping her in a warm blanket of light. When she opened her eyes, the light was too bright and it took several moments before the space around her became visible. But as her eyes slowly adjusted to the light, her

ears caught the sound of something—or rather the lack of something—that forced her to her feet in a bolt of panic.

She knew where she was now. She was in Peter’s hospital room. How long she had been sitting in the chair beside his bed, she didn’t know. The lack of sound from the ventilators frightened her, threw her into such a panic that her hands shook violently as she reached out to take his hand. Why had they stopped? Not only had the ventilators been turned off, but they were also removed from his mouth. It was too late. He was gone. An overwhelming sadness gripped her insides as she thought the worst. With a shaking hand, she slowly placed it above Peter’s mouth for confirmation.

Her heart stopped. He was breathing on his own.

What happened? Was Walter successful after all? He must have been if Peter began showing any signs of improvement, and this was a big one. For a brief moment, her mind wandered off to Walter—where was he?—until it started wandering off to things outside her immediate knowledge, the memory of that place, that bleak landscape between worlds sprang up in her mind. And what had happened there.

If Peter was getting better, if he would make a full recovery, what might lie in store for them? Maybe it was all just a dream, maybe it was just her wild fantasies taking control in a moment of desperation. Maybe what happened between them was just in her mind and that’s all it was.

“Olivia,” came a voice near the doorway out of the room.

Glancing up, her eyes fogged with tears both spent and welling up, Olivia saw Walter walking toward her.

“I just stepped out to take a pee,” he said, smiling like it was the good news she had been waiting to hear. “How are you feeling?” he said as he stepped near her and placed a gentle hand on her forehead. “Mm, no fever any more, it seems. Very good.”

“Walter, what happened? Peter...”

Again, he smiled like he had finally witnessed his miracle from God. “He’ll be fine, Olivia. I was able to salvage enough of the cure from your shirt to synthesize a new cure with the hospital’s excess flu vaccines.” He paused for a moment as though catching his breath. “Olivia...” His hands shook as he took Olivia’s and squeezed them hard. “Thank you. Thank you.”

TWO WEEKS LATER

Sunday, April 4, 2010

It was a beautiful, sunny day, the birds all sang and chirped in the blue sky, in the large oak and maple trees in front of the hospital. It had rained heavily two days ago, enough to give much needed water to the ground and plant life. All kinds of wildflowers and carefully landscaped areas began to bloom in the warm sunlight. As bees flitted about, back from the dead of winter, Olivia stepped out of her black SUV and took the last stroll up to Mass General Hospital. Peter was checking out today.

Walter had wanted to come along, but due to some emergency in the lab that Astrid could not handle on her own, he stayed behind while Olivia went by herself to fetch Peter from the hospital.

After her journey to the other side and back, once Walter managed to make a new cure in time to save his dying son, Olivia only came back to the hospital for a brief visit once, about a week ago. She was beyond relieved that Peter was doing better, but the weight of the secret she carried began to weigh heavier with every day that passed. That's why she couldn't bear to visit him more often. Her single visit had been a quick hello and goodbye.

"Thanks for coming," he had said before she left. "It's been lonely here...with only Walter for company, you know." She noticed a familiar flash in his eyes.

Smiling, she only said, "Yeah," and left.

In through the two large front doors of the hospital, past the reception desk on the left that had the display on the wall behind it, although Walter's face was not burned into the screen in this reality, Olivia walked straight toward the elevators. As she pressed the up button and stepped back to wait, the same mother and daughter pair that she had seen before came to stand next to her. Turning to greet them, Olivia simply smiled and said, "Hello."

The woman, holding on tightly to the little girl's hand, smiled quietly back, a sort of darkness in her eyes. "You were the woman we saw two weeks ago, aren't you? You seemed to be in such a panic..."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Olivia said, embarrassed. She remembered being in a mad dash when she heard about Peter. "I must have frightened you both."

The woman smiled quietly again. "No, it's alright. You seem better now though. How are things?"

"Good. A friend of mine was very sick. We weren't sure he would make it..."

"Oh, how dreadful," the woman said, squeezing the little girl's hand.

“Yeah, but he’s better now. Just heading up to check him out, actually.”

“After only two weeks? That’s amazing. What a blessing, today of all days,” the woman said just as the doors to the elevator opened. The woman never saw Olivia’s puzzled expression.

After the woman pressed the number 3 button, Olivia reached over and pressed 7. As a way to keep the conversation going, Olivia smiled and asked, “So, what brings you here?”

Right as soon as she completed the question, Olivia wished she would have just kept her mouth shut. The woman again squeezed the little girl’s hand and looked down into her little brown eyes behind her crazy black curls. “We’re here to say goodbye to Daddy,” she said. “He had been fighting cancer for years. It took everything out of him to fight it, but now... This is really a good thing. He can finally rest and find peace now, a world with no pain...”

“Oh, I— I’m so sorry,” Olivia felt like an idiot.

“No, please. Don’t feel badly. If this world teaches us anything, it’s that time is not on our side. We best cherish every moment we are given.”

The elevator slowed at the 3rd floor and the woman turned to face Olivia. “I’m glad your friend is better—I hope you make the best of it.” Then she looked down at her little girl and smiled that same quiet yet strong smile. “C’mon, Hannah, let’s go.”

“Bye bye,” the girl waved to Olivia and stepped out of the elevator with her mother.

The elevator doors closed and Olivia stood in deep thought with her back resting against the mirror opposite the door. How strong that lady was for her daughter, even when her heart was dying inside. What she said was true, though. *Time is not on our side*. Who knows what might happen tomorrow, or the next day, next week or next month? Anything could happen at any time. All we can do is make sure to live each day like it is our last, before the world shatters—live life to the fullest.

Without another second’s deep thought, the elevator doors opened to the 7th floor. Olivia shook those thoughts out of her mind, deciding to only focus on the here and now. She had to put on a straight face even though such confusion was still churning beneath the surface.

Out of the elevator, Olivia went down the hall to the right, stopping short at Room #704, Peter’s room. Again pausing before the door, she bit her bottom lip. What would she say when she saw him? Would she see the glimmer, the proof that he is not of this world? What would he say? Would he remem—

Suddenly, the door opened from inside. The curved L-shaped door handle caught on her watch and pulled her inside. She flew at someone inside the room, who managed to catch her from falling.

“Whoa, Olivia! You all right?” Peter said, his hands gripping a shoulder and arm on each side of her.

“Oh, Peter, sorry. I must have been daydreaming.”

Still holding her close, Peter tilted his head with a curling smirk on his face. “Daydreaming. In front of my room? You push it to the next level, don’t you?”

As though suddenly aware of the closeness between them, Olivia shrugged off his hands and gave him a very ‘not amused’ look. “Let’s just get you out of here,” she said hurriedly as she turned away.

“No argument there,” he said, following along behind her. He swung a small, black bag over his shoulder. As they approached the nurse’s desk, a young woman with the brightest red-orange hair and beaming blue eyes smiled at Peter.

“Ah, Mr. Bishop. Is this really your last day?”

“Thankfully,” he said, reaching for the sign-out form, “yes. No offence to anyone. I wouldn’t be standing here if it weren’t for many of you.”

“Including your girlfriend, here.”

“Oh, no—I’m not—” Olivia said, awkwardly setting the record straight. She was too flustered, she didn’t notice Peter looking at her with an amused glance.

The nurse simply smiled, her blue eyes saying, *Ri—ght*. “Well, she really went to a lot of trouble to make sure you stayed with us, or...so I’ve heard.” The nurse leaned over the counter so she could whisper something that only Peter could hear, “You better thank her right.”

With a puzzled look on his face, Peter looked up at the nurse who grinned broadly at him. Blinking awkwardly, he turned his attention back to the form in front of him and was about to fill in the date at the top when he drew a blank. Glancing over at Olivia, he asked, “What’s the date today?”

“Sunday, April 4th,” she said flatly, almost absentmindedly.

Nodding, Peter added the date and signed his name with a few strokes of the blackball-point pen. Then setting the pen down loudly on the counter, he said, “It’s been nice, but I hope never to set foot here again.”

“So do I, honey,” the nurse said, winking. “Take care.” As Peter stepped away, the nurse smiled, although her glance lingered on Olivia a bit longer. It was almost as though she was about to say something. Her mouth opened then closed right away like she changed her mind. Instead, she winked at Olivia, too, then turned away with the form Peter had signed.

Stiffly nodding to herself as though saying “alrighty then,” Olivia turned to join Peter on the way down the hall toward the elevators. Neither of them spoke on the way down the hall, or even when they were waiting for the elevator, but when they walked into the elevator and the doors closed with only the two of them inside, the tension could have caught fire and exploded like a bomb.

Just say something! Olivia thought, her mind racing to find something to talk about. She was saved when Peter spoke first.

“Thanks for coming,” he said. “I know this is the last place you’d like to be on a Sunday.”

Olivia shook her head. “It’s no problem. You came when I was in the hospital, so—”

“Just a return favor,” he said somewhat disappointed that she didn’t understand what he wanted to say. He looked into her withdrawn green eyes. There was something missing in those eyes, he noticed; they seemed faintly sad or frightened, he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. And she continued to fiddle with the car keys in her hands, making a jingling sound echo in the elevator. The sound they made was near maddening, just as much as her equivocal distance. He reached over and subtly touched her hand.

“What?” Olivia said, trying very hard to seem clueless.

“Olivia, is there something wrong?”

Both fear and concern glimmered in his eyes. Olivia knew she wasn’t acting like her usual self these past couple weeks. She knew things would never be quite the same between them, not after knowing his secret, not after his near fatal illness, *not after...*

Breaking the awkward glance between them, Olivia said, “No,” but quickly looked back at him. Who was she kidding? He could read her better than anyone. “It’s nothing, really.” Before she could explain any more, the elevator stopped at ground level, the doors opened. With an expressionless smile, she said, “Let’s go.”

They walked past the reception desk when Peter awkwardly slowed his pace, looking up at the screen on the wall. It was showing a display about the newly added hospital staff. The slide of a Catherine Merro, Ph.D. in Environmental Biology,

must have struck him as odd for the hospital to advertise. Eventually, he picked up the pace and followed Olivia out of the hospital.

It was a beautiful day, the birds all happily chirping, the sun splashing its warm rays down through a few scattered clouds, and the wind blew just enough to carry the scent of spring daffodils in the air. As they began stepping down the stairs toward the parking lot, Peter slowed again, this time bringing a hand up to his head as though pained by something. Olivia didn't notice until he said, "Olivia, hold up a second."

As she turned around and saw him standing there, his eyes tightly closed, a hand to his head, she thought the worst and rushed toward him, placing a hand on his arm in case he might pass out. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I don't know, it just hit me..."

Looking around the area, Olivia noticed a wooden bench in the middle of a small park just opposite the parking lot. "C'mon, let's sit down for a while," Olivia suggested, leading Peter's faltering steps toward the bench.

The bench, although design-wise looked very old, seemed as though someone had cared very much for it. It was by far the cleanest park bench Olivia had ever seen. Save for an old initial carving on the back, it had absolutely no jagged edges, its surface smoothed out and polished neatly. Helping Peter to sit down first, Olivia sat down on his right, staring at his pallid face.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Yeah, better, I guess," he said, resting a hand against his throbbing temple. "Must have been...the bright light all of a sudden."

For a few moments, they both sat without a word, the sound of the morning birds filling the empty space between them. Then as Peter removed his hand from his brow, he sighed faintly and turned to face her.

Clearing his throat, he said, "Olivia, this is going to sound crazy—I mean, it sounds crazy to me, but... While I was out of it, I had a dream. And you were in it."

Olivia heard a bell ring in her head and she sat straight up, looking deeply into Peter's eyes. *He couldn't have...*

Peter continued: "You were looking for a cure for me and you found it, on the other side. But when you got it, it fell from your hand, shattered on the ground and all over you..."

It was exactly as she remembered it, save for the omission of Walternate being a key figure in obtaining the cure. Olivia, however, lost her words and could only sit in silence, listening to Peter's story.

"Then the dream shifted, you were gone, lost somewhere. I tried to find you and eventually I did, but only for a short while before you disappeared again."

She remembered that scene very well. She was floating away, drifting in the sky above the city, and he had found her. In the middle of that dark abyss between worlds he had found her, given her the strength, the courage to make it the rest of the way, even if she had failed her mission.

"But you found me a second time..." Olivia said, finally finding the words as her memory—her joy—of seeing a familiar face in the midst of her swelling fear gushed from her being. For all this time, she had believed it was all a dream... She told herself that's all it was because she feared being let down yet again. But if Peter remembered it, too, then...

"It wasn't a dream," he said, appeared to finally know the truth his heart had known all along. "Olivia, I—"

"—Peter."

"—No, please, let me say this." He took a deep breath. "The craziest things have been happening all around us, even *to* us. Most of the time I don't know what's going on in my life, like I'm losing control, just being led down a path not of my choosing." He paused to smile affectionately at Olivia, who returned his glowing gaze as her own eyes echoed the anticipation in her heart.

Taking another unsteady breath, he continued. "But you've been there, through it all. And..." He smiled. "I think I've come to think of you as...something more than just a friend who's experienced some of the same things as I have."

Olivia uncomfortably shifted her weight on the bench, not quite sure what she was hearing, not quite sure that this wasn't another one of her dreams.

"Peter, listen," she had a sudden urge to fight the feelings she had inside. As she sat there, she felt butterfly wings fluttering around in her stomach. "You've just gotten through a great ordeal. You need to think of yourself right now, getting your strength back."

As though unwilling to change the topic, Peter reached out and took Olivia's hand in his left. He simply held it tightly in his grip as though hoping she could feel the pounding of his heart through his fingertips and understand the words it was trying to say. "Olivia, do you remember what happened between us?"

Of course she remembered. How could she not? Her eyes flashed brightly and that was all of an answer Peter needed even if she couldn't vocalize one for herself.

With a smile that could have melted even the most ancient ice on the planet, Peter lightly stroked the back of Olivia's hand with his thumb and peered deeply into her eyes. He sighed, thoroughly and completely relieved. "So...do you want to talk about it?"

"Peter, I—" Olivia shook her head.

"No, it's alright, if you're not ready. No pressure, okay?" he smiled. "But you know, that place, it wasn't real," he added with a teasing yet very seriously stricken face. "*This* is the real world, so technically we haven't kissed at all."

Maybe he wanted to put her rapidly beating heart at ease, but Olivia knew what he was getting at and it made her laugh out loud. He did *not* intend on kissing her right then and there, in broad daylight no less! Although it was an invigorating thought. Oh, how she felt like the fifth grade!

"Peter Bishop, you just come back from the dead and *that's* what you're thinking?"

"Aren't you?" he said with a sly grin. What a way to answer a question with a question!

Along with the sweet breeze of the air sweeping against their flushed faces, church bells rang from a small, white church across the street. As they both looked toward the church, they could see little children dressed in fancy Sunday clothes of every pastel color imaginable carrying baskets. Out of the church they ran through the small yard, picking things up off the ground and placing them into the baskets. As they scurried to and from, a few children came running across the street and into the park near them, again picking things up here and there on the ground.

"What day did I say it was?" Olivia said curiously to Peter.

"Sunday. Why?"

Olivia only looked into Peter's unseeing eyes and laughed quietly. "Peter, it's Easter Sunday."

Then, as though seeing with a new perspective, Peter realized the connection Olivia must have made right then, although he was unsure how to react. "Wait, just because I got out of the hospital the same day doesn't mean—"

A little girl with straight blonde hair skipped in front of Peter and Olivia, cheerfully holding out a yellow Easter basket for them to see.

“Look what I found!” she said, interrupting Peter’s thought. Her little blue eyes beamed brilliantly as though she had never been happier than in this one, solitary moment. “The Easter Bunny came!” She dug into her basket and took out a package of purple, marshmallow Peeps, holding it out to Olivia. “Here, you can have it. Ma already bought some for me yesterday.”

“Aw, thank you,” Olivia said, smiling. She couldn’t hide her inner child’s excitement as she accepted the gift in her one free hand. When the girl quickly frolicked back across the street, Olivia traded innocent glances with Peter and giggled. “I’ve always loved Easter candy,” she admitted.

“Really? I couldn’t tell at all,” Peter said, sarcastically grinning at her. How beautiful she looked, even in those rare childish moments. When she was happy and it radiated from her like the soft halo of a candle’s flame.

With the sun rays beaming down upon them through the trees above, she squeezed Peter’s hand. “Well, your father will be expecting us,” Olivia said, half seeking escape from this emotionally awkward situation and half wishing to stay here, on this bench, forever.

She was about to stand up when Peter wrapped his right arm around her shoulders, sitting so close to her. He still tenderly held on to her hand. “Can we just...stay like this a little longer...?” he asked without expecting an answer spoken or not.

With the song of spring birds in the air and the sound of children hunting for Easter eggs across the street, Peter and Olivia sat contentedly on the park bench, hoping time would stop, hoping the omniscient loom of the coming war with a parallel universe would just wait long enough for their hearts to synchronize, if even momentarily. One minute melded into fifteen until something began to vibrate within Olivia’s suit jacket.

“Sorry,” she said and reached into her jacket pocket for her phone. “I have to take this.”

“It better not be Walter,” he said as he retrieved his arm from around her shoulders.

“Dunham. Ah, Astrid? No, uh... We’re just leaving the hospital. No, no. Everything’s fine. Yeah. Oh, sure...that won’t be a problem. We’ll stop there on the way back. Okay, see you soon. Bye.”

“What’s he want this time?” He knew his father all too well.

Olivia nodded, only slightly bemused. She placed the phone back into her pocket, and said, “A chilly cheese dog from Flamers, apparently.”

“Food. I swear, for the amount of time that man thinks of food...”

“Like you’re any different,” Olivia said, taunting him.

“Don’t even—”

“—Like father, like son,” she said, a flicker of light flashed across her face.

Peter shook his head and sighed, not amused, “You really enjoy tormenting me, don’t you?”

“Maybe just a little,” Olivia replied. The smile perched on her delicate face gleamed brightly as the sunlight through the trees danced on her skin. Her hair shone like liquid gold.

“Well, before I get any more grief from you...” Peter said. As he got to his feet, he turned around and offered his hand to Olivia. “Shall we go, my dear?”

Olivia, grinning broadly, looked up at Peter and felt the world around her tingle and buzz with excitement, everything in the background seemed to lose focus. The sunlight peered in through the trees and washed over him like nothing she had ever seen. The light was so golden, it almost twinkled like stardust, and as it touched his softly curling hair in the wind, it turned every strand to gold. His eyes gleamed with such fervor as he looked down at her that all of her illusions about love, all her fear about the future seemed to wither away to nothing.

She took Peter’s hand and stood, leaving the little box of Peeps on the bench. “Aren’t you forgetting something?” she said, looking up into his eyes.

He crunched up his face for a split second before realizing that she was serious, that maybe she hadn’t simply accepted his hand to help her stand, but rather... Again he opened his arms and brought her near, only this time she, too, wrapped her arms around him as she rested her head against his chest.

She meant to tease him a little, but instead the second she felt his warmth wrap around her, all of her childlike playfulness evaporated in an instant. At the sound of Peter’s heart in her ear, she felt something inside her fracture.

“Peter, I was so scared...” Olivia said, her eyes beginning to tear up. Her fingers gripped at his back. “I really thought...”

Peter could hear the fear in her voice and he gently caressed her back reassuringly. “Shh, it’s alright. It’s okay now—I’m fine. Really.” He patted her on the back a couple more times before placing his hands on the top of her shoulders to break their embrace enough to look into her saturated eyes. It was almost painful to see her so sad. She was happily smiling just a moment ago, too. “You don’t have to

worry," he said. Touching the side of her cheek, he wiped a falling tear away with his thumb. "I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

This isn't good-bye. I promise.

The words he had spoken in that in-between-space echoed clearly in the back of her mind. He had kept his promise then, and she wanted to believe that he would keep this one, too.

"Prove it," she said. "Give me something to believe in, Peter." As though inducing a bit of déjà vu, Olivia closed her eyes as she raised her head ever so slightly.

Not a second passed between her words and his lips. Again Peter cradled her head fondly as his other arm supported her from behind. Time and space disappeared as they held each other, their lips tingling in a sensuous kiss. Nothing else mattered, nothing else seemed as genuine, this real. The broken pieces of her past mixed and matched with the shattered fragments of his life to complete a totally new and whole masterpiece together.

Although children were running to and fro, a few coming close to gawk and sing that "K-I-S-S-I-N-G" song at them, Peter and Olivia were oblivious to the world around them. They never noticed how the wind blew through the trees and scattered old leaves from last fall along the ground at their feet. They never noticed how the birds around them sang in tune with the beating of their hearts. And they never noticed the single purple butterfly land on the bench beside them, flapping its wings as though it knew all there was and would be, as though knowing how long it had taken them and how much it had cost to get to this point. There would be no turning back, no redo's in this life, and yet it knew—they knew—there would be no need. This was all they ever needed.