

## En Vol

“Wings.”

A small boy of ten years, with a smattering of freckles across his face croaked out again, “wings.” He looked at the expanses surrounding his body, petting them with care and admiring their beauty. He turned around so his back faced the mirror.

“I have wings.” He gawked at his reflection and the seamless connection between the flesh and black feathers that stemmed from between his shoulder blades. When he had gone to bed the night before, nothing was on his back, save for a few moles and scratches from playing too rough with the boys at school. But he woke up in agony, rolling over and off of the bed only to notice the large black wings trying to fight their way out of his white tee shirt. He stripped it off and the wings poufed out, the comfort of freedom rushing through the bones and feathers. After the few moments of wonder at the grandeur of his wings had passed, the realization that he had wings finally set in. Panic flushed over his body and the wings started to flap in what seemed a natural progression of his ADD fueled twitchiness. He heard a call from downstairs as he started to sweat.

“PETER, GET DRESSED AND COME DOWNSTAIRS FOR BREAKFAST. THE BUS COMES IN FORTY-FIVE MINUTES,” his mother yelled. Peter yelped, realizing that the wings at which he had just been marveling

were a burden that were not going to go away easily. He shut his eyes; thinking *please go away please go away please go away*. When he opened them again and turned to the mirror, the wings had vanished, only leaving a light gray outline of where they would sit on his shoulders. He wondered if the wings that he just saw extend from his back were actually real or if he'd just dreamt it. But when Peter wished them back, he could feel them growing out of his shoulders, and there they were again, shiny black wings that extended far beyond his arms. He willed them away once more and tossed a tee shirt and jeans on. As he ran downstairs, all Peter could think was *oh no*.

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Peter never told anyone about waking up that morning and finding out that he did, in fact, have wings. He never told anyone that the night before he'd wished on the first star he saw and asked to go somewhere new. He never told anyone that he had dreamt that night about flying far away from the burden he felt he placed upon his mother, who raised him and his two sisters, Anna and Caroline, alone. He never told anyone how much he wanted to escape, how much he wanted to make things better by leaving, how terrible he felt for just existing. So when he woke up and found out that maybe he did have a way to leave, he kept quiet and never told anyone. Peter followed his daily routine; he put on a worn out shirt and jeans with a patch on the left knee, ate a small bowl of cereal with watered down milk, and

rode the bus to school. That day, he was dying to be normal like every other person, pretending that everything, for once in his life, was okay. But it wasn't, was it? He spent that entire day sweating and panicking about accidentally telling his best friends, Kevin and Lydia, or the wings popping out in class when they were in the middle of times tables or a spelling quiz. The anxiety set in under his skin, a constant reminder that his wings were there and that no matter how hard he wished, they would never fully go away.

Lydia approached him that afternoon when they were waiting for the bus. He and Lydia always sat together on the rides home because Kevin lived on the other side of town. They'd been best friends since they were 6. She ran up to him, long brown hair flowing behind her, and asked, "Why are you being so weird today?" Peter paused, stunned at the question and had no idea how to answer.

"I...uh...my back hurts a lot. I think." Peter stumbled over his words, knowing that Lydia, the firecracker that she was, would pick up on his lie in an instant.

"You're terrible at lying, Peter, you do know that, right?" Lydia cocked her head to the side, as if looking at things askew would key her into Peter's weirdness.

"N...n...no I'm not!" Peter stammered, "My back just really hurts. And that science project is due next week and my mom isn't even helping me at all! Okay?"

Peter shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, eyes glued to the ground. Lydia stopped her questioning and patted Peter's back. He shivered at her touch.

"Sorry your back hurts. Maybe I could come over and help with your project. You're doing yours about the solar system, right?" Peter lifted his head up, looking at Lydia and her soft, friendly smile.

"Yeah, that'd be great." They boarded the bus and sat next to each other, just like usual. For the entire ride home, Peter forgot about his wings.

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The next afternoon, Peter tried to fly. He knew his mother wouldn't be home for another few hours as she was picking up an extra few hours at the restaurant she waitressed at, Anna was practicing with the marching band, and Caroline was babysitting until 6. He ran home from the bus stop, dropping his backpack in the living room, and climbed up the ladder of the tree house in his backyard. He peeled his shirt off, tossing it to the ground, and stood at the edge of the balcony. He stared down at the ground ten feet below him. He whispered, "I wish I could see my wings, I wish I could see my wings," and they appeared as black and vast as they had been the morning before when they first emerged.

The wings started to flap a bit frenziedly and Peter's breath began to shake as he realized what he was really trying to do. He thought about what Kevin would say if he didn't actually try to fly. *You're just a big wimp, aren't you? You're too*

*afraid to do anything cool!* The insults sounded so close to what Kevin would say that Peter decided he couldn't wait anymore. The wings flapped harder and harder as Peter jumped off the tree house's deck. "I'M FLYING!!!" he screamed right before he hit the ground.

Peter opened his eyes slowly, pain searing through his right arm. He had landed on his side and thought his arm had broken. He rolled onto his back and realized that though the wings had disappeared, the pain was all too real. He pushed himself off of the ground with his left arm and found his shirt, pulling it over his torso as tears began streaming down his face. If he couldn't control his wings, he couldn't control anything in his sad, pathetic life. Peter sat himself down on the couch in his living room and watched *the Simpsons* until his mom got home and could take him to the hospital. He thought about how much it would cost to get go to the emergency room and get a cast put on, money that his mom and sisters would have to scramble around to find because they could barely make ends meet as it was, all because he wanted to fly. That day, Peter swore he'd never try flying again. He just couldn't take that risk.

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It took Peter four years before he told anyone about his wings. In fact, he wasn't even planning on telling anyone, it just happened one afternoon. He spent his time hiding them from everyone, or at least the people who mattered most; his

mother, sisters, Kevin, and Lydia. Peter had gotten so used to thinking *I wish my wings would go away*, that he always heard it behind everything he did. The only moments when he wasn't thinking it were when he was truly isolated, like locked inside his bedroom or up in the tree house he and his dad had built together before his dad left. There, he would let his wings out comfortably around himself. Sometimes he wrapped himself up in them like a blanket. Other times, he let them spread out to full wingspan as he lay on his stomach. That's how Lydia caught him with his wings out.

She came by after Peter and Kevin got home from freshman lacrosse practice. Peter was determined not to let his wings stop him from being a normal kid, so he took up the sports that required the most equipment; football in the fall, hockey in the winter, and lacrosse in the spring. Lydia only meant to stop by to drop off his world history textbook, but when he wasn't in the house, she checked out back. Peter was reading that week's new Spider-Man comic, spread out in the tree house hoping for a solid two hours of alone time before his mom and sisters would get home and he'd have to wish his wings gone again.

"Peter, you up there?" Lydia called from the bottom of the tree. Peter's head jerked up at the sound of her voice and rolled over onto his wings before he had a chance to will them away.

“Ow, shit!” he muttered before shouting back, “One second!” He threw his comics into the corner of the tree house and started searching for his shirt. He began to wish when he heard a gasp from the doorway.

“Pe...Peter is that you?” Lydia asked, jaw agape and tears beginning to form at the ducts of her eyes. He stood there stock still thinking that maybe, if he didn’t move, this would all just go away.

“Peter, I swear to God, what is going on?” Her voice trembled at first, but grew strong. Peter turned around slowly and stared at Lydia. All he could say was, “hi.” Lydia held up his history book before tossing it at his feet, ready to climb back down the ladder and run away, possibly for good.

“Wait, Lydia! Let me explain!” Peter said, grabbing her wrist before she could go. “I got them when I was ten. I woke up one morning and they were just *there*. I don’t want this, I swear...” Lydia stopped to look at Peter and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“But why didn’t you tell me? Does Kevin know? Does anyone know?”

“No, and please, please, whatever you do, don’t tell anyone okay? I’ve been hiding them for four years; no one has to know. I’m fine.” Peter paused to let Lydia work out her thoughts.

“You’re an asshole,” she said jokingly, a smile finally coming across her face. She reached up to touch the wings that had begun to spread out again. Peter

stood still as she touched them, but he could feel tremors of pleasure running through his body. Her fingers slowly ran up and down, touching the plumage, reminding him of the first day.

“No one’s ever touched my wings before, just me. It feels...different.” Peter smiled at her and she smiled back. Lydia was only one person, and there were more bridges he’d have to cross to close the gap. But a weight had been lifted off his shoulders; he was able to spread his wings in peace for just a moment.

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Though he’d told one person, Peter continued to struggle with his wings. His teammates looked at him weird when he would run out of the locker room after practice instead of taking a shower. He would have to fight the wings back in the middle of practice when he was getting illegally checked or someone would shove him to the ground. Even Kevin began to wonder why Peter would never come to the beach with him and Lydia, or even sleep over his house. Peter was growing restless while Kevin was growing tired. Neither of them felt as close to each other as they did when they were kids, and all Peter could think was that his wings were to blame. When Kevin and Lydia began dating, he thought that maybe that was the right time to tell Kevin. He tried so many times to tell Kevin, to let him in and be free of this secret, but he couldn’t.



When they were sixteen, Kevin approached him in the locker room after lacrosse practice, cornered Peter until everyone else on the team had left, and finally asked him, “Dude, what is wrong with you? I feel like I don’t even know you anymore.” Kevin shoved Peter in the shoulder, and Peter just stood there, breathing deeply and thinking *I wish my wings would stay away*. He let out a breath before quietly asking, “Look, can I tell you a secret?” Peter twiddled his thumbs and stared directly at the ground to avoid Kevin’s glance.

“Yeah, of course. What’s up?” Kevin backed away and sat down on the locker room bench.

“Okay, so, uh...I have wings?” Peter muttered, barely squeaking out the word “wings”.

“Haha, real funny, Pete. Seriously though, what the fuck is up?” Kevin snickered in disbelief. Peter looked at him dead in the eyes, all serious tone and spoke again, “I have wings.”

“Dude, stop messing around. I have to go pick up Lydia in fifteen minutes.” Kevin sounded annoyed, eyes rolling each time Peter said something. He wished, *I want my wings to show*.

“I. Have. Wings.” Peter peeled off his shirt and the black wings flapped out to full wingspan. “I’m not messing around.”

“Holy shit, dude,” Kevin said, eyes peeled wide. “How do you hide them under your clothes? Wait, can you fly?!” Kevin stepped forward, arm outstretched to touch the black feather extending from Peter’s back.

“NO. Don’t touch them!” Peter screamed and his wings disappeared. He took a step back and pulled his shirt back on. Even though Lydia had touched them before, Peter didn’t want Kevin to touch them. He felt the unease from before settle back into his body.

“Chill the fuck out, man. Are you fucking with me because I swear, Pete...” Kevin said, standing up and slowly making his way to the door.

“I promise you, I am not screwing with you. I’ve had wings since I was ten years old. Trust me, it’s not fun. And I tried flying once but...it didn’t work out,” Peter said and collapsed on the bench. Kevin moved back into the room and sat down next to Peter, lifting his hand to pat Peter on the back but stopped right before his hand met Peter’s shoulder blade.

“If you’ve had them since you were ten, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know,” Peter said, head in his hands. “The only person I’ve ever told was Lydia.” Kevin froze.

“You told Lydia but you never told me? Dude, what the hell?”

“I don’t know, man. She just showed up one day freshman year when I had my wings out.” Peter kept his eyes glued firmly to the ground. “I tried telling you a bunch of times. I never meant to cut you out.”

“It’s taken you six years to tell me. Six years! And you told Lydia two years ago? We’ve been friends since pre-school but you still told my girlfriend first. Unbelievable.” Kevin shook his head and started pacing. “I always knew you liked her, dude, but this is low.”

“Are you kidding me? She’s *your* girlfriend, I’m not jealous! It’s also not my fault she walked in on me. You’re being a total dick about this and I’m just trying to be a good friend.” Peter stood up and walked to where Kevin had stopped pacing. Kevin turned around and looked at Peter, face expressionless.

“I just can’t believe you couldn’t tell me about your wings, man. If I had wings, you would’ve been the first to know.”

“Kev. I never asked for this. I *wish* I didn’t have to tell you thing. I wish I never had them. But there’s nothing I can do about that, so stop being a complete ass and cut me a break.” Kevin tossed on his backpack and gym bag.

“I have to pick up Lydia,” he said and walked out the door. Peter sat back down on the bench and rubbed his eyes in disbelief at what had just happened.

“Fuck,” he muttered, feeling the pull of the tee shirt over his wings again. He willed them away and left the locker room in frustration.

That was the last day Peter ever talked to Kevin.

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Peter was tired. He spent the remainder of his time in high school avoiding Kevin, trying to stay friends with Lydia, playing lacrosse, and applying to colleges, all the while hiding his wings. By senior year, Peter had taken to walking around in his room with his wings fully outstretched and relaxed. He felt like hiding his wings was a necessary evil; he finally fit in but he was uncomfortable each minute he had to keep them hidden away. He just needed to stay normal until graduation, until he never had to see the people from his high school again. Then, he could take flight on his new life, where he wouldn't have to hide his wings anymore.

When he turned eighteen, he and Lydia went to a tattoo parlor and had the light gray outline of his wings inked onto his back. The tattoo artist asked him who had done the design of his wings and he just smiled back and said, "a friend." Lydia held his hand through the pain of the tattoo, the solid black ink spanning from his shoulder blades to his waist. When it was finished, he slowly sat up and felt the wings under his skin start to flutter. *Not now, later*, he thought, eagerly awaiting the day when he could spread his wings out after he had finished healing. The black ink on his skin made it permanent, the wings that he'd spent so long hating and wanting to hide were getting the recognition he felt they deserved. Peter felt the contentment sink in his chest. He felt happy.

The day after graduation, Peter and Lydia drove to the quarry at the north edge of town. What had once been a marble quarry was now abandoned and never saw visitors except for Peter and Lydia. They hiked there from Peter's house the day he told Lydia that he had wings, telling Peter that he should take a chance at the whole "wings" thing. Peter had taken Lydia up there the day that Kevin dumped her and screamed into the quarry like they did in her favorite movie, *Garden State*. It was their spot and if they were going to do anything, it would be at the quarry.

They drove up the edge of the quarry; Peter jumped out of the driver's seat of his beat up red pickup truck and flung his white tee shirt into the back. He grabbed Lydia's hand and pulled her into a hug as she got out of the cab, whispering, "I'm gonna do it," into the soft curl of her brown hair. She watched the wings appear out of the tattoo on his back and began to flap. Peter toed the edge of the quarry, shouting, "I AM DONE. I GIVE IN," as he fell forward.

And there he was, wings holding him up. In flight.