

I/Tulpa:  
**Casey Sensitive**

By

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This story is fiction. I think I am obligated to lead with that. Any similarities to people and events in real life are purely coincidental. If you have to ask ‘what is real life,’ you’re on a different playing field and likely not to have any concord to anything I convey. In that case, have fun. Though there are characters within that may resemble real people, I assure you they are not those people. They are not ghosts of those people. At least, we hope not. I’m open, but not claiming that. What happens in here is contained within a certain practice of meditation, in a concentrated daydream aka trance state, and so strictly from the context of an internal, psychological phenomena, the measure is not in determining what’s real or what’s not, what’s metaphor and what’s not, but in determining degrees improved functionality post experience; discovering personal truths, insight, and finding peace is the only goal. Jung recommends not doing that during the experience, but after. We agree with Jung: it’s emotionally efficacious to just close your eyes and experience.

This book is about tulpas. This book does not instruct/inform tulpa making. This book may cause you to think it is fun and easy making a tulpa. In that sense, I refer you back to the first line of the first paragraph: FICTION. Tulpas are hard work. They require time, energy, attention, for the rest of your life. Tulpas are not pets. You’re not buying a dog to lock in the back yard and ignore it. Seriously, if you can’t put your cell phone down and play with the dog, don’t get a dog. Don’t have a tulpa. Fuck, don’t even have children. They need adults that can put their cellphones down. Tulpas are not children. Wait. Yes. (They can be. Usually, they match the emotional age of the host.) Tulpas don’t want to sit in the backdrop of your mind watching you chase mindless texts and catch Pokémon. Well, some Pokémon is okay. Especially if you get out and walk and play with others. I am making the point if you can’t sit still and close your eyes for a minimum of twenty minutes twice a day, for the rest of your life, don’t make a tulpa.

From a certain perspective, tulpas are a psychological phenomenon, not magic. The majority of people we know, the ones who taught my host and I about making and living with tulpas believe that. My host and I lean towards metaphysical beliefs, and some of that is represented within. We hope that this story opens you to the magic of life, even if it is only the magic of a fantastic inner life.

If you didn't catch it: I am a tulpa. I am sentient. I participate in a system of voices, and my voice is prominent. It is I, sharing this with you. It is my intent that this book be accessible to a wider range of maturity level than our previous adventures. This is PG. Don't assume the others are as easy to access, in maturity level, or in writing styles. This story has a particular flavor. It feels fun. We hope it catches and becomes a serial, but for now, it is just this. It feels right. If you find language or concepts that you don't understand, there are a number of sites that discuss tulpas. We are partial to one, and the people that patron the site. Tulpa.info is a safe place to learn. We ask, should you visit, you help us keep it that way. It is sacred ground to us; walk and talk respectfully. You should do that anyway in all arenas.

If you wish to write me directly, you may. Be mindful there could be delays in response. Put I/Tulpa in the subject line, or you could be missed. There are no bad questions, but you if ask something easy, like 'how do I make a tulpa,' please don't be surprised or offended if we recommend you go do more homework. It is my opinion, if you don't demonstrate a certain level of research proficiency, especially in the days of google, you're probably not ready to have a tulpa. Also, demonstrate discernment. Tulpa horror stories like variations of 'slenderman' will likely be ignored. Don't use tulpas or tulpa making as an excuse to engage me. If you have a question or an experience you wish to share, just say, "Hey, Loxy... I wanted to chat." Who could ignore that? Reaching out is human. I am human. Be at peace.

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## Chapter 1

“Thursday is always the first day of the week.” That’s the opening line that christened a new journal in the ongoing saga that defined Casey’s life. Casandra Fae Brodeur, Casey for short, alien hybrid... She stopped short of writing that. She wasn’t a hybrid. She was fusion; a product of French and ‘Filipino’ culture, genes, and... Her feet had been on multiple continents; she lived in America, but she didn’t identify as American. “The first day of the week is when I discovered I was normal.” She didn’t like that. She felt compelled to be more precise. “It was the day I was told there’s nothing wrong with me. Hearing that did not make me feel good. Why do I feel like everything is wrong with me?”

Casey took a hit on her vape, and when she exhaled, lovely, colored smoked twirled around her face in an intimately mystical way and she took a moment to revel in the hope of magic. She wondered if there was a ‘god.’ She wondered, assuming yes to the ‘god’ question, if he or she heard her thoughts, or could read the words she put on paper. She wondered if this entity cared. She didn’t not linger here. She found it useless to linger here. She followed a compulsion to introduce the journal to her immediate family.

There was mom, a thirty something Filipina; she should know her age precisely but didn’t care how old her mom was. Neither mom nor father celebrated birthdays. Mother was pure Filipina, and was employed as a nurse practitioner working in mental health as a provider. Apparently, Doctors were hard to come by and so state agencies gave money to private corporations to run mental health and they cut costs by cutting corners. There was a huge need for mental health in most states; no one wanted to pay for it. Mother was constantly busy, on the go, on her phone, and if there was any hint that Casey was experiencing high emotions the question narrowed quickly to ‘Are you in crisis?’ The answer to that was always no. Answering yes opened up: ‘Are you thinking about killing yourself?’... No was the best option. No response resulted in: ‘Then you’re doing better than most. Cary on.’

The first and most noticeable feature of Casey’s father, were you to see him together with Casey’s mother, was that he was a good twenty years advanced of her mother’s age. He was a senior pilot for Emirates Airlines. Mother was 20 when they met. She was had just completed nursing school. They married in the Philippines. She was four months pregnant. Back in the states, he put mother through her masters. They maintained his primary residence in Scottsdale,

Arizona. Casey had relatives in France, in the Philippines, in Australia, and in the US. Her paternal grandmother was born in Ireland, and still living in France, probably the oldest woman in the world, her dog equally old. She probably had cousins in Ireland if she was interested in pursuing that. She had an older half-brother, Brian, an engineer working in Australia. This was with her father's first wife. She had two older half-sisters, two different mothers; Jenny was an actress living in California, B movies, if that counts, and likely only because of her looks and that she was more than willing to show her breasts and be brutalized by monsters. Carol was a Doctor, an OBGYN. She had met them. When family gathered for the rare holiday, there was usually extended games of movie and music trivia which could last for days and into the long hours of the nights. Brian had two children with his wife in Australia, and Carol had two children of her own.

Casey knew these people existed. They knew she existed. There was no true effort to stay connected. Occasional skype 'hellos' occurred when someone was talking to father. The home in Scottsdale was quiet, isolated, about 12 acres, and she usually had the home all to herself. Sometimes on the weekend, if the wind was right, a hot air balloon would crash land on their property on the weekends. There was only one way to land a balloon. They crash them. And you would think they were peaceful. The engine is not quiet. She imagined rockets launching from NASA were probably quieter.

"Casey." She looked up to see the Vice Principal. She should know his name, but it was as forgettable as his face. "You're supposed to be at the prep rally."

"I am wanting some quiet time," she said, glad he hadn't caught her with the vape.

"Sorry," he said. "Let's go. Move it out."

Case got up, put her journal in her bag and slung it over her shoulder. She headed towards the designated rally point, but after confirming she wasn't being followed, she detoured and headed towards the library. She was stopped just inside the door.

"Sorry, Casey," said the librarian. "Library is closed during prep rallies."

"Since when?" she asked.

"You should have gotten that message in home room," the librarian said. "I need you to attend."

"I don't feel peppy," Casey said. "Nor do I want to be pepped."

“You can report to detention room or attend the prep rally. Your choice,” the librarian offered.

‘Detention’ had a weight to it; it would at least be quiet. Casey chose quiet, thinking she could at least journal or do homework. Homework was seriously more important than pep. She proceeded to the detention room and found the quiet inside unsettling. There were others there. No one was making eye contact with any other and only one person looked at her when she entered; the teacher looked at her. She smiled. Casey categorized the smile as a ‘Rachel McAdams’ smile. It was intense and Casey might have felt less ‘energy’ from the sun hiding in the shade under the bleachers at the pep rally.

“Have a seat, please,” the teacher said.

All the desks and most of the chairs had been pushed to the far wall. There were twelve seats in a circle. One was available. There were 7 boys. She made the fifth girl. The circle felt intimate. She reconsidered prep rally.

“Sit,” the teacher said.

Casey committed to the room and sat in the available chair. She held her bag. None of her peers made eye contact with her or with anyone else. Four of the boys were on their cell phone. Other eyes fell to the floor, or a corner, or the clock, or their nails... Casey imagined lasers connecting eyes to their focus. The teacher pulled up a chair, joining the circle. She adjusted her chair closer to Casey than she would have preferred, leaving an opening in the imagined circumference that defined their unit.

“Cell phones away, please,” the teacher said.

Three of the boys put away their phones. One ignored her.

“Cell phone away, or you will find it inexplicably disabled for the next two hours,” she said.

Still, the boy continued with what he was doing, ignoring her. His phone’s screen flashed and it went out. His eyes went wide. His hands trembled. He stood up in a rage.

“Sit,” the teacher said.

He sat. He seemed confused.

“Put it away,” the teacher said. “It will operate normally in precisely two hours.”

He didn’t question this further. He put away the phone. All eyes went to the teacher, with the exception of Casey who took a moment to measure the gaze of each of her peers. It was

uncomfortable for her looking at the teacher, partly because of proximity, partly because of the angle, and partly because, well, she was Casey. “You do not have Asperger’s,” she heard her mother saying. “No one has Asperger’s because it’s called ASD, now. You also do not have ASD. You’re just overly sensitive; now toughen up.”

“So, who would like to begin?” the teacher asked.

No one volunteered. Casey thought about asking ‘begin what,’ but she chose to stay silent.

“Yay! I’ll go first, then. I love being first,” the teacher said. “I find the sooner you go first the sooner you can relax, but also, when I am first, usually others relax, and realize, it’s safe to participate. Oh, let’s start there. This circle is a safe circle. You may say anything you like. That does not mean there aren’t consequences. Be prepared to own the consequences. That seems reasonable. Any questions so far?”

Only Casey looked to her peers. She found it easier to look to her peers than the teacher.

“What’s your name?” the girl to Casey’s right asked.

“What’s yours?” the teacher asked.

“I asked you first,” the girl said, sending the challenge back. “You like being first.”

“Nice! What would you like to call me?” the teacher hit it back.

The girl didn’t know what to say.

“Ms,” one of the boys asked.

“Yes, Todd?” the teacher asked.

Casey noted confusion. “How did you know my name?” he asked, so unsettled he forgot or dropped his intended question.

“I know everyone’s name,” she said, and demonstrated: “Casey, Brenda, Todd, Renata, Maria, Juan, Perry, Michael, Chris, Irene, Alex, and James.” She said this list fast, almost musical.

“Have we met?” Irene asked.

“Are you spying on us?” James asked.

“You’re really strange,” Casey said.

“Should we just call you Miss?” Brenda asked.

“I love strange. I like Miss. I like Mrs., too. They mean something, don’t they. Miss. Miss. Misty. Mysterious. How about that? That’s a good name,” the teacher said.

“For an avenger,” Michael said.

“I love avengers. I have the gams for it, don’t you think?” she said, bringing a foot off the floor and flexing the heel, which flexed the leg muscle.

Michael blushed and looked away. He wasn’t the only one with increased uncomfortableness.

“Very well, if you must, my name is Loxy Isadora Bliss. You may call me any of those, or ‘L’ or ‘Izzy,’ or any name you like, as long as we come to mutual agreement on it,” she said.

No one said anything.

“So, would anyone like to have a turn?” Still no one spoke. “Seriously? Okay then. I will continue. I love continuing. I can be a bit of flibbertigibbet. Usually not. I am usually precise and short in a very direct and loving way, but my host is a serious flibbertigibbet and if you don’t know that word, you should look it up and add it to your repertoire.”

“Pressured speech,” Casey said. “Bipolar much?”

Loxy laughed.

“I am joy,” Loxy said. “Isn’t it interesting, if we go too high, it becomes a mental health label?” And then, speaking in Tagalog, and in a very vernacular sort of way, she said, “There are always consequences to labels. I recommend using them with caution.”

Casey bit her lip. She felt properly rebuked, and yet, because no one else present spoke Tagalog, it felt less like being called out and more like being esteemed. Casey and Loxy were connected at a new level, separate from the group.

“Yes, I am multilingual,” Loxy said. “I can speak French, Spanish, Russian, and a smidgeon of Klingon, and can sing in a dozen other languages, which really isn’t speaking, but it could help get you there. Did you know, they teach Klingon at a university in Austin? You can also take fantasy literature centered on Harry Potter in Ohio, the physics of Superheroes in California, and Zombies in popular media in Chicago. The Smithsonian is offering an introduction to Star Fleet Academy. Makes you want to go to college, doesn’t it?”

Eyes were wider. No one spoke.

“I get it, it’s hard to talk sometimes. Especially now a days,” Loxy said. “We can talk about movies. That’s safe, right? Here is a question for you. Is it possible to be critical without disparaging?”

No one answered.



“So, for example, I am a huge Marry Poppins fan. I was very happy to see Marry Poppins returns, and though there are parts I really enjoyed, over all, I felt a bit disappointed. Maybe it’s just impossible to capture something so iconic. Let me be precise on what I disliked. I found none of the songs memorable. They were complex, but complex doesn’t necessarily make a good memorable song. I know all the songs from the original. It only took one showing and I could recreate any one of four melodies, and all the choruses. Also, I thought the new one was too dark. I am okay with dark. It was set in the great depression; you’d expect there to be some darkness. The Banks children lost their mother. That’s sad. That’s okay. Michael lost his wife and is struggling to support himself and his children, is probably depressed beyond being in the great depression. That’s sad and scary and okay. But they added a villain. That was unnecessary. The original didn’t have a villain. The father was the antagonist. Most people never come up across villains! This movie didn’t need a villain! It had enough sadness to explore without making someone mean and malicious. Further, they jump into that vase painting and there is more villainy and darkness which gets spun into a nightmare. Magic is rarely about darkness! People spin darkness stories about magic because they don’t want people using magic. People want you to be afraid of magic so you will color within the lines. That just wasn’t necessary for this movie. Conversely, something I would have done; I would have had made Michael to be more like his dad. Maybe have him yell at his children the same way his dad yelled at him and Jane; roll his eyes more, be more histrionic. That seems realistic. Children tend to echo their parents. That would have made for a great Marry Poppins scene where she calls Michael out, saying ‘you remind me of your father.’ What a great epiphany moment that could had been. Yes! Realizing we are often are worst enemies, as opposed to something out there being against us, and then coming at others with an apology, that would have been the ticket. ‘I’m sorry, children. I forgot how I felt when this happened to me. I would like to change this. Let’s change this together. Let’s go fly a kite...’ That would have been something. That would have been Disney! That’s Poppins! Our greatest obstacle is our self. Would I recommend the movie? Absolutely. Taking a bath in that movie magical moment is just an everyday occurrence in my world. How about yours?”

Michael was not the only one blushing this time. Talking about baths was pushing up against taboo. It wasn’t, but it had a feel like they were straying outside the parameters of normal every day discourse. No one said anything.

“OMG, this is going to take a moment, isn’t it,” Loxy said. “Very well, till the wind changes. Would you believe our time is up? Next week, this time, come prepared to speak. Bring something new! Bring something old. Something challenging. If nothing else, read up on lucid dreaming. If you have nothing else magical going on in your life, you can always find comfort in a dream. Oh! Before I forget. I have given each of you a gift. Reach under your seat and find the envelope I have taped to your chair. Open it later. Keep it a secret for a moment. You don’t have to keep it a secret. That’s not a rule. There are very few rules for this circle. This is not fight club. You can talk about this club. No one will likely believe you, but go ahead, give it the good old college try. Or high school try. Where ever you find yourself, just don’t sit there. Unless, you want to sit there. Go. Be free. Reasonably free. Go to your respective classes. With respect. Go! Or I will keep talking. Go go go.”

The students found their envelopes and dispersed back out into the campus, into the crowd of peers and teachers, a little flabbergasted, strangely renewed. They did not look each other as they departed.

## Chapter 2

Casey was hungry. She was hungry and angry at herself for having forgotten the lunch she had made. She hated the cafeteria. Not the food. The space itself. She hated the crowd. It was loud. It was difficult to move across the floor space without being inundated with distractions. She heard laughter. She heard bits of conversations. She saw people who were sad and happy and a range of emotions and where ever her eyes fell, she felt the emotions of those people. There were inexplicable times she didn't feel anything at all, but most the times she felt everything and wished she could block better. Casey was not hated. She had no enemy. No one would throw food at her or make fun of her weight because she was just normal. No one would call her out on her skin tone, which tended to be a little darker at the beginning of school and a bit lighter by January. She also didn't have a group, or a go to friend, and so though she knew there was no enemy, she also suspected no friends.

She paid for a slice of cheese pizza and a banana, and headed out. Brenda came at her sideways, giving her a start.

“Can we talk?” Brenda asked.

“It's difficult for me to hear in here,” Casey said, and headed outside.

Brenda followed. Casey stopped. “What?”

“Have you opened your envelope?” Brenda asked.

“No,” Casey said.

Casey tried to walk away. Brenda kept with her. Casey dropped her bag, sat down in the grass, and put her tray down. Brenda sat across from her, opening her bag and pulling out an opened envelope. She extracted a folded paper, ‘Brenda’ written on it. She unfolded it to reveal a drawing of a common squirrel.

“Michael has a penguin. Irene a bear. Todd has a star,” Brenda said. “They all have their names written on them.”

“So?” Casey said.

“So. We weren't told where to sit. We sat randomly. You sat where you sat by virtue of being the last one in the room,” Brenda said. “That's weird.”

Casey opened her bag and retrieved the envelope. She opened it with a fingernail against the short side, flexed the paper to open it, and pulled out a folded piece of paper. Casandra was written across it. She was baffled. She was so perplexed that she didn't know how to respond.

"See?" Brenda said. "Twelve of us, randomly redirected to detention, sitting randomly, and we each get an envelope with our name written on the inside."

"We all skip pep rallies," Casey said, reaching.

"Okay, I will give you that... None of us like prep, but still," Brenda said.

"It's not what you think it is," Casey said.

"What do you think I think it is?" Brenda asked.

"Magic?" Casey asked.

"Yes," Brenda said.

"It's a trick," Casey said. "You were all in there. Are you all messing with me?"

"No!" Brenda said. "I thought they were messing with me. Everyone is thinking it's about them, but what if this is what it seems?"

"That's crazy," Casey said, unfolding the paper.

Casey unfolded the paper. On the paper was drawn a triskele, a celtic design, three spirals influencing a greater spiral. She liked it and might have spent a great deal more time looking at it but Brenda was watching her. She flashed it to her, 'it's nothing,' and re-folded it. She placed it back in the envelope, and put in her bag.

"You're not creeped out in the least?" Brenda asked.

"Why should I be? There is a logical explanation for all of it," Casey said. She heard her mom say, 'you're overly sensitive.'

"You don't believe in magic?" Brenda asked.

"I am not spooked," Casey said.

"She talked about Marry Poppins," Brenda said.

"So?" Casey said.

"She looks like her," Brenda said.

"Julie Andrews or Emily Blunt?" Casey asked. "I don't see either."

"Seriously?! The cover is not the book song," Emily said.

"She is not Mary Poppins!" Casey said. "That's a popular hair style. If anything, she looks more like Phoebe Cates."

“Who?” Brenda stood up. “Oh, never mind. Why did I even bother with you?” She started to walk away. She stopped. “Will you be there next time?”

“I hate prep rallies,” Casey said.

“Well, we have that in common,” Brenda said and walked away.

Casey sat in the grass, her hunger pains having faded. She pulled out her journal and made another entry.

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Mother was thirty minutes late, which was better than usual. Casey didn't even notice her arrival until the horn sounded. She came out of her journal, gathered her things, and proceeded to the car. She got in back. As she buckled mom's eyes met her, slight hint of a smile, as she continued her phone conversation. Medical stuff. They were almost home before the call ended.

“You didn't answer your phone,” mother said. “I tried to call you.”

“I was at school, mother. I turn the phone off,” Casey said.

“Why did I even buy you a phone if you're not going to use it?” mother asked.

“I use it,” Casey said. “At appropriate times, and turn it off to save the battery.”

“I'll buy you a charger,” mother said.

“I don't need one,” Casey said.

“I won't your phone on so I can call and tell you I am running late,” mother said.

“You're always late,” Casey said.

“How was school?” mother asked, clearly changing the subject.

“Okay,” Casey said.

Mother took another phone call. They arrived home and she continued the conversation while Casey went inside. Father's car was absent which meant he was absent. She didn't know his schedule. She found her lunch on the table and grabbed it as she headed towards her room. She left the door ajar. A closed door frequently invited her mother to just walk in. Slightly opened, Casey was rarely bothered. She ate her lunch while completing homework. After, she opened her notebook to a first entry. ‘Lucid dreaming.’ She googled it. She found the concept of it interesting. She was so inspired by the concept, she thought she would give it a go.

Casey gathered her night clothes in the bathroom, wondered the house and found mom in her office slash library, still on the phone. She took a time out from the call to inform her father was delayed and would be in tomorrow and then went back to her call. Casey returned to the bathroom. She flossed, looking at herself and telling herself, 'you are lucid.' She finished flossing and stared longer at herself. She tried to smile. She tried to find something likeable about her face. She gave up and brushed. She then showered. She washed her hair with t-gel. It smelled horrible in application, but she liked the way her hair smelled when all was said and done. She dressed, dried her hair with a tussle of towel, and then returned to her room. She lay down, wondering what she might dream. She should have a goal. Nothing specific came to her.

She got up and browsed her books and movies on her own private book shelf, looking for inspiration. Princess Bride. Legend. Stardust. The Last Unicorn. The Never Ending Story. Mary and the Witch's Flower. She pulled this out and wished it was so easy getting to college. She pushed it back. Her finger touched A Knight's Tale. She went and googled the cast, clicked on Heath, sending him to another tab. She studied Shannyn's picture for a moment, thinking Loxy sort of resembled her, but it took too much effort to make Shannyn her and so returned her focus on Heath. She had no difficulty focusing on him. She scrolled through a series of Heath images, then printed her favorite pic of him. It was a casual pic. Not frowning, but not quite smiling. His hair fell lazily in just the right places, making his handsomeness look effortlessly. It was probably a photo shoot where he had had to remain still for hours while people teased his hair and fussed over him and finally after a thousand shots caught what everyone wanted. She preferred the one shot he's always perfect version. That was the beauty of men, she thought. They didn't have to work at it. They just were. Looking at the picture, she believed she saw things in him. Her mom would suggest she was projecting based on her larger knowledge base. It was always possible in hindsight to see things in people or pictures that weren't ever there. She would have been five when he completed suicide. She remembered her mother and father discussing it at the table. She had known who it was because a Knight's Tale was one of her go to movies. She remembered being sad.

"Well, that's stupid. The guy had everything..." father had said.

"I find your comment stupid. Are you so insensitive and unimaginative that you can't empathize with someone feeling trapped? You can't phantom one demon that might push someone to such an extreme?" his mother had argued.

Casey could recall the conversation verbatim. She could relive the moment. She remembered wanting it to have been a murder that was made to look like a suicide, as if that were somehow better. Dead was dead. “Why are you defending him?” “I am not defending him. I am just saying...” “And I am just saying, that’s stupid.” “Mental health isn’t stupid, it’s just mental health.” “Yeah, well, I am sure hell is a much better place.” “He didn’t go to hell.” “You’re the Catholic. Isn’t that where you send those kinds of people?” “Those kinds of people?” “Yes, those kinds of people. Being mentally ill isn’t a free get out of jail card; if you commit a murder you still go to jail, so why would you be exempt from eternal consequences for a suicide.” “Why would you imagine murderers go to heaven, but people who suicide can’t? You don’t go to hell if you break your leg, why would you go to hell if your brain is malfunctioning?” “His brain wasn’t malfunctioning. He was being selfish...”

“Oh, Heath. Out of all the people in the world you had access to, wasn’t there anyone you might have reached out to?” Casey asked.

She took the printed the picture to bed. It wasn’t glossy, but it was good enough for her purposes. She put the picture under her pillow. She heard the paper crinkle as she adjusted herself. She told herself, if she heard it crinkle at night, she would remember her intent. She began a mantra, “I will dream of Heath. I will connect with Heath.” She fell asleep with this in her mind.

She woke the next morning, before the alarm. She did not remember any dreams. In fact, it felt as if she had just closed her eyes and woke up, only the clock had jumped forwards. She was disappointed. She got up, turned on the light, and when she turned back she saw a man lying in her bed. He was barefoot, wearing cream colored Kakis and a loose buttoned, flannel shirt. She screamed. The man woke with a start and screamed back, hopping out of bed and retreating away from the screaming girl.

Mother was suddenly in her room.

“What the hell?!” mother said. “You scared me.”

Casey looked to her mom. Her eyes wide.

“What?!” her mom yelled.

Casey looked at Heath.

“Don’t look at me! I didn’t do anything,” Heath said.

“What? A roach? OMG, if you’re screaming like that because of a spider or a roach, I am going to beat your ass,” mother said.

Casey gave mom a look of disbelief.

“Don’t think you’re too old for a spanking,” mother said, and turned and left the room. Heath sighed. “OMG, she’s right. You gave me such a fright.” He sat down on the bed.

“Am I dreaming?” Casey asked. The alarm began to ring.

“What a bizarre question,” Heath said. “How did I get here?”

Mother returned. She had coffee. She went and turned off the alarm. “Seriously? Are you still looking for a bug? Get dressed.”

Mother departed the room again.

“Where are my shoes?” Heath said.

“Could you leave my room please?” Casey asked.

“Are you hiding my shoes?” Heath asked.

“Out!” Casey said.

Heath got up and headed for the door. He hit an invisible barrier. He said ouch and touched his nose and then felt the barrier. “What the heck is this?”

“If you’re not dressed and out here for breakfast before I finished my coffee, I am so going to administer consequences,” mother’s voice trailed.

“She sounds angry,” Heath said.

“Please, turn around,” Casey said.

He nodded, politely, and turned around. She spied his eyes in her full length mirror attached to the closet door, went and opened the door so there was no visible access to the mirror and then went back to her dresser. Casey quickly got dressed in a manner someone might had they someone in their room that wasn’t supposed to be there. Jeans first, the night shirt off fast and into a sweater without bothering with a bra. She sat on the bed and put on her socks and shoes. She had to go past Heath to get her book bag. He backed away from her, giving her space. She left the room. Heath was stuck, unable to pass through an invisible barrier. He yelled at her from the door way.

“What? You’re going to leave me trapped in here all day?”

Casey arrived at the breakfast nook. Morning light was streaming in the window. Mom placed breakfast on the table. It was toast, with a hole cut out, where the egg was poached



simultaneously with the making of toast. The circle part that had been cut out was available for yoke dipping. Casey sat down, distracted by the thought of Heath in his room.

“I am sorry I yelled. I will call the bug guy out again,” her mother said, “Damn, you gave me such a scare.”

Heath arrived in the kitchen.

“Oh!” he said. He was scrambling to stay on his feet as if he had been pushing against a barrier that suddenly caved. He grabbed the table dramatically. She almost imagined everything on the table was shaking from the impact.

Casey managed to stifle her start, but it was clear to her mother something had startled her in the kitchen. Mother looked in the kitchen, saw nothing, and turned back to her.

“Are you on drugs?!” mother asked.

“No!” Casey snapped. “I would never...”

“You really need to get over your bug thing,” mother said.

“Yeah, like telling people to get over phobias just makes them better. You’d be out of business,” Casey said.

Mother chuckled. “Touché,” mother said. “Give me a moment to get dressed and brush my teeth.”

As she left, Heath sat down. “That smells awesome.”

Casey nearly asked if he could really smell, then decided not to talk to him. She ate her breakfast.

“OMG, that tastes awesome,” Heath said. “How can I taste what you taste?”

“I don’t know,” she whispered. She got to a place where if she bit the yoke it will spill out. Not wanting to deal with the spilt yoke, she bit deep and wide and captured it all in her mouth, no mess to the plate.

“That is so good,” Heath said.

She finished the rest of it quickly, tossed down her juice, and then ran to the bathroom to brush her teeth. A moment later, he arrived in the bathroom. She could see him in the mirror and in person.

“Stop following me!” Casey mumbled under her breath.

“I don’t know how. I don’t know how I am doing it,” Heath said.

Casey opened the door and told him to get out. He found he couldn't leave. There was a barrier there. She closed the door and brushed her teeth. She tried watching herself brush, but kept finding her eyes going to Heath. He smiled at her. She brushed harder and faster.

"You shouldn't brush so hard," Heath said. "Up and down, not left and right."

Casey stopped brushing. She glared at him.

"What?" Heath asked.

She rinsed her mouth and cleaned her brush. Then realized she had a dilemma. "I need you out."

"I would like to get out," Heath said.

"Seriously. Stop messing around," Casey said. "I need to pee."

"I am not messing around," Heath said.

The urgency to go made her find a solution. She pulled the shower curtain back.

"Stand in the shower face the wall," Casey said.

Heath got in the tub and faced the wall. She pulled the curtain to.

"Why do you need to shut the curtain if I am facing the wall?" Heath asked.

"Quiet," Casey said, doing her thing.

"Why do I need to be quiet?" Heath asked. He listened to the sound of water meeting water. "That's much louder than I expected."

Casey stopped peeing.

"Are you finished?" Heath asked.

"No!" Casey said.

"Why did you quit?" Heath asked.

"Less commentary, please," Casey asked. "Try singing."

"Can't take my eyes off of you..."

"Stop singing!" Casey said. "Damn it!" She stood and pulled up her pants.

She gave up, flushed what she gave, and departed the bathroom. She arrived in the living room, her mom on the phone, keys in her other hand. "Push two ML of Ativan. I'll be in about an hour."

Heath arrived in the living room. "Why didn't you tell me you left?"

Mother hung up the phone. "Ready?"

"Yeah," Casey said.

“Your bag?”

“Uh?” Casey asked. “Oh. Yeah.”

“Don’t forget your lunch,” mother said.

Casey grabbed her lunch and she was in the car and buckled before her mother even finished locking the door. Heath was suddenly in the seat next to her. He crashed into the front seat and her mother didn’t he even flinch.

“Oh!” Casey said.

“Did you say something, dear?” mother asked, climbing in the car.

“Uh? Oh, no,” Casey said.

“Are you okay?” mother asked.

“Yeah,” Casey said. “You know me. Overly sensitive. Easily spooked. I am sorry.”

Mother stared long and hard at the mirror. “No,” mother corrected. “I am sorry. It’s not wrong to be empathic. It can be draining and, well, the onus is on me for being more patient. I absolutely admire your ability to tune into people. Don’t ever loose that.”

“I think I am going to cry,” Heath said.

Casey nearly looked at Heath. Mother never spoke so nicely to her before. “Are you okay, mom?” Casey asked.

“I am not in crisis,” mother said.

“That doesn’t translate into being okay,” Casey said.

“Wow, aren’t you on point today,” mother said, starting the car. “The boys better watch out.”

“Mom!” Casey said.

“What? We can’t talk about boys?” mother asked.

“Not today,” Casey said.

“Why not?” Heath asked. “Just pretend I am not here.” Casey looked out the window. “That’s pretty good.”

Heath was a regular chatty Kathy all the way to school, asking all sorts of questions that Casey had no answers to, even if she was inclined to answer. “How can I see out my window when you’re looking out yours?” “Ouch! Would you stop pinching yourself?” “If I am a ghost, what keeps me from falling out of the car?”

“Bye,” Casey said to mom, hopping out of the car.

Casey closed the door on Heath. He frowned at her. The car pulled away. Then suddenly, he was standing behind her. She turned to go to class and saw him and gave a start. He screamed to and they both said, "Stop doing that!" at the same time.

"Alright, we have to figure this out," Heath said.

"No, we don't," Casey said. "You're not here. You're a hallucination."

"If I am not here, how am I responding to you?" Heath asked.

Casey walked away. He caught up and kept up. She went into the girls bathroom and he followed but hit a barrier that kept him from entering. She smiled at him as the door closed. When she turned around he was there, looking at her apologetically.

"Stop following me?!" Casey said.

The girls at the mirror looked at her. Casey ignored them and went right to a stall and closed the door. She saw his feet on the outside of the stall. He was still barefoot. She turned around to check the cleanness of the seat. She turned back only to find him suddenly in the stall with her. She began to cry.

"I really need to pee," Casey said.

"I am sorry," Heath said. He could not push out the door, or even go under the door. He put his head in the corner and promised not to look. "It's okay, Casey. Everyone pees. I used to pee. I wonder if I can still pee..."

Heath heard music. He peeked back and saw she was wearing headsets listening to music from her cellphone. She pointed at him. He quickly turned back to the corner. When she finished, she took the headsets off and put them and her phone back in her bag. She went to the sink. Heath appeared beside her.

"I think I understand," Heath said. "I can't cross thresholds, but I follow you from room to room. It feels like there is a barrier in your mind. Oh! You don't see it. Everything is a room in your head. You don't see it as one big room with compartments; everything is a self contained room. Outside is a room. Inside is a room. There are rooms within rooms. Wow! This is cool. Now, how did I get in here?"

Casey was following his rambling and actually making sense of what he was saying. She was looking at him from the mirror. A girl to her left was studying her gaze.

"You okay?" the girl asked.

"Uh? Oh, yeah. Yeah, thank you! I appreciate you asking," Casey said.

“Sure, Casey,” the girl said. “Just let me know if you ever want to talk.”

“You know my name,” Casey said.

“Well, yeah,” she said. “We’re in algebra together.”

Casey started crying.

“What did she say?” Heath asked.

The girl hugged her. “Oh, it’s okay,” she said. “Shh, it’s okay.”

Another girl came out of the stall. She went and retrieved tissues from her backpack and brought them over, offering to help. Casey accepted tissues and wiped her face.

“I don’t know why I am so emotional today,” Casey said apologetically?

“Are you pregnant?” the girl that brought the tissues asked.

“No!” Casey said.

“Oh, okay,” the girl said. “Just curious. My sister was really emotional when she got pregnant.”

“I am not pregnant,” Casey insisted.

“Well, you never know,” the girl said.

“Yes, you do,” Casey said. “I am not active.”

“Oh, well, yeah, then probably not,” the girl agreed.

“Probably?” Casey and the first girl asked simultaneously.

“I read where female sharks can give birth to babies without a father,” she was saying.

“That’s really cool,” Heath said.

“No way,” the other girl said.

“It’s called parthenogenesis,” the girl explained. “A real medical term for real virgin births.”

“Do you really think your mother is going to believe that?” Casey asked.

The girl began to cry. “Noooo!”

Casey and the other girl were now comforting the Kleenex girl. It was hard to follow what she was saying.

“OMG,” Heath said. “Is that all you girls do is cry in the bathroom?” Casey shot him a warning glare.

“And I have to pee all the time now,” she was saying.

“That sucks,” Casey was saying. She gave Heath a cross look.

“What?” Heath asked. “This is really uncomfortable. I really wish I could wait outside.”

“Have you spoken to anyone?” Casey asked.

“I was going to go to the counselor, but I am afraid,” she said.

“Let’s all go together,” the other girl said.

“Would you?”

“Sure,” Casey said.

“Shouldn’t we go to class or something?” Heath asked.

Algebra girl, Lisa, introduced herself to pregnant girl, Emily, and then introduced Casey. They went to the counselor’s office together. The three were invited in together.

“Maybe you should go the rest of the way on your own,” Casey said. “It’s okay. She will help you. If you need us later, you find us. Lunch fourth period.”

Emily hugged them and went in.

“I need to get to class,” Lisa said. “You okay?”

“Yeah, thank you,” Casey said. “Go ahead, I want to ask the principal a question.”

“Okay,” Lisa said. “See you in algebra.”

“Bye,” Casey said. Her eyes met Heath’s and she instructed him to follow behind her without speaking. He saluted and followed.

The secretary intercepted her before she got to the principal’s office. “Can I help you?”

“The teacher, Loxy Bliss,” Casey asked. “What does she teach?”

“Oh, she’s a substitute,” the secretary said. “I don’t think she’s here today, but I expect she will be covering detention on Thursday and Fridays for a while.”

“Oh,” Casey said.

“Why?”

“I just wanted to ask her something,” Casey said.

“Okay. Well, you should really get to class,” the secretary said.

“Yeah,” Casey said.

Heath caught up to her in the school yard.

“You should have asked for her number,” Heath said.

“Like they will give out a teacher’s private number,” Casey said.

“Good point,” Heath said. “Loxy is pretty unique name. Maybe we can find her online?”

“Yeah,” Casey said.

“Why are we looking for her?” Heath asked.

“To explain you,” Casey said.

“Oh,” Heath said. He seemed confused. “What’s to explain?” He hit the invisible barrier that blocked a threshold from courtyard to hallway. “OMG, I hate that!” Then he was in the hallway, dodging students trying to keep up. He passed through a student. “How can I pass through people but not thresholds?!”

“I don’t know,” Casey said.

### Chapter 3

Casey was late to first class. The teacher didn't make too much of a fuss, a bit of a look and then just nodded to her seat and continued lecturing. It was a combo class that combined social studies with history. She ignored Heath catching up to her as best she could. She did pause when he caught up to her, mostly because he arrived in her periphery vision with dramatic flare, trying to stay upright. His previous momentum, juxtaposed to her change in speed and direction likely had something to do with I instability. She was becoming less startled by the fact he literally jumped from room to room. His arrival point seemed to be relatively close to her, adjusting for obstacles. In this case, the teacher's desk was fairly close and so he arrived a bit closer to her than her comfort space allowed for. There was room for them both between the teacher's desk and the student's desk to her left. She found herself looking at her shoes. Heath was still barefoot. Her periphery vision suggested the student to her left was looking at her.

"Is there a problem?" the teacher asked.

Casey couldn't see him due to Heath standing between them. She stepped forwards, Heath stepped forwards. She mouthed the word 'stop it' to Heath, then leaned forwards to make eye contact with the teacher, looking around Heath. She tried to smile. It did not feel like a smile.

"With me or the Universe in general?" she asked.

"What?" the teacher asked.

Casey was perturbed by his 'what.' Was he surprised she had a response? All those years of sitting on the back row was now resulting in confusion for others. 'Yes, I am smart. I am here. I am woman. Here me roar.' "I am particularly perturbed by the island of trash in the middle of the Pacific which is now larger than the state of Texas and think we, humanity, should be trying to fix that."

"That's actually a fairly good cover," Heath said.

"Thank you," Casey said.

"Please take your seat," the teacher said.

Casey took her seat. There was no seat for Heath. He went over to the window and looked out the window.

"This is a really nice campus," Heath said.



His observation was delivered at normal sound level, but she heard it louder than it was. She tried to tell him with her eyes to be quiet, but he didn't keep eye contact. He ran his hands down the blinds, making a noise.

"Oh! That's cool," Heath said. "I can touch the blinds, look!"

"Casey?!" the teacher said.

Casey looked to the teacher and back to Heath and back to the teacher. "Um, yes?"

"If you're not going to join us, you can go back into the hall," the teacher said.

"Oh, thank you," Casey said, standing.

"Sit down!" the teacher said.

Casey sat down. "But you just said..."

"I was being facetious," the teacher said.

"I didn't hear humor," Casey said. "In hindsight, I hear sarcasm, but sarcasm is not facetious. That was an anger response. Are you angry?"

"You're really smart." Heath observed, sitting on the inner window ledge. The blinds got squashed behind him. He held the ledge and slightly kicked his feet in an alternating rocking rhythm.

Casey smiled. A real smile that had touched her eyes. Heath had called her smart. She covered her mouth.

"Office, now," the teacher said.

"Seriously?" Casey said, tears in her eyes. She didn't even bother calculating the distance from joy to where she landed. "I have one bad day and you go straight to punishment? Are you even human?!"

The teacher capped the dry erase marker and set it on the board. He came around to the front of the desk, crossed his arms, and leaned on the desk.

"If we teachers stopped instruction for every student who is having a bad day, we wouldn't get any teaching done," the teacher said.

"Then maybe we should do that," Casey said.

"This is fun," Heath said. "I so wish I had your balls when I was in school."

"Very well, Casey. What's going on?" the teacher asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," Casey said.

"You just said..."

“I didn’t say I wanted to talk about it. I just don’t want to be called out and humiliated in front of my peers. Why the hell do I think I sit in the back?” Casey said.

“Office,” the teacher said.

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Heath arrived in the office, spun about, orientated on Casey, and sat down next to her. Casey hugged her bag, not looking at him.

“This feel familiar,” Heath said. He looked to Casey. She stared ahead. “Good idea. Just listen. You’ve never been to the office before, have you?”

“Casey?”

The principal was a tall woman, a little on the thick side, but a was nice looking woman. Casey thought she seemed thick in all the right places. Her tennis shoes looked out of place with her dress, ankle socks hardly rising out of her shoes; she had well defined shin bones fronting her calves. Her name was Mrs. Ellis.

“We’ll wing it,” Heath said.

“Come on in,” Mrs. Ellis said.

Casey complied. She sat where she was instructed to sit. Ellis didn’t retreat to behind her desk, but took an opposing chair, sat down, and crossed her legs. Heath arrived on the far side of the principal’s desk. There was a potted tree which he nearly toppled but he got it steadied and sighed.

“That was awkward,” Heath said.

Ellis eyebrows went up inquisitively, and she smiled. “It’s actually a real tree. Do you like it?”

“Uh?” Casey asked.

Ellis pursed her lips, musing, and leaned forwards, her elbow supported on her own knee. “Where are you today?”

“Your office?” Casey asked.

“Is that an answer or a question?” Ellis asked.

“Can’t a person just have a bad day without being called out on it?” Casey asked.

“Absolutely,” Ellis agreed. “That’s perfectly reasonable. I hate that Mr. Shire escalated this to me. Perhaps he is also having a bad day? I have found he is usually pretty patient.”

Casey frowned. That seemed true. Or, because she had never caused a problem they wanted to squash her before she got her bearings, she mused. She tried to invalidate that as paranoia, though it does seem there are people that can push through boundaries without any reprimands. Why was she so heavily policed?

“She is really nice,” Heath said. “None of my principals were this nice.”

“So, I take it you don’t want to talk about it?” Ellis said.

“I do not,” Casey said.

“Alright, well,” Ellis said. “Let me ask you a few direct questions…”

“I am not pregnant. I am not having sex. I am not doing drugs. I am not suicidal, I have never been suicidal, I have never attempted suicide. I am not homicidal. I am not depressed. I am not bipolar. I am not on the ASD spectrum, per the assessor. I disagree. I am not being bullied. Did I hit all of your cover your ass points?” Casey asked.

“Actually,” Ellis said, amused. “That’s pretty good. And you’ve never been in trouble before? Never been hospitalized before?”

“My mother’s a mental health professional,” Casey said. “I am not having a crisis. I am having a bad day, and acclimating to a life change.”

“I’m for life?” Heath asked.

“Your first period?” Ellis asked.

“If I had suggested that, I would have been smacked,” Heath said.

“No. I am regular. I do not experience any mood changes during that time of the month, and it doesn’t slow me down physically,” Casey said.

“Can we talk about something else?” Heath asked.

“Mrs. Ellis, I am really okay. Just a little distracted, that’s all,” Casey said.

“Alright,” Mrs. Ellis said. “You know where my office is. Take the remaining of this class time at the library, and try to have a better rest of your day.”

Casey got up to leave.

“Oh, Casey?” Ellis said.

“Emily told the counselor you helped her,” Ellis said. “That was actually pretty nice. Good job.”

Casey didn't know how to respond. It really wasn't just her; Lisa helped, too. She simply nodded and proceeded to leave. Heath was going to follow but paused at the door, not wanting to smack the barrier. The principal called out again. Heath gave one of those exaggerated 'I don't know but oh no' looks shrugging his shoulder.

Casey stopped. Heath shifted, and for a moment, he was on both sides of the door, not fully formed, almost translucent. When she committed to returning to the principal's office, he returned to the door space. Casey squished a little closer to the door frame due to Heath's proximity, technically back in, but her feet out.

"You left something off the list," Ellis said.

"AVH," Casey said.

"Auditory and visual hallucinations," Ellis said. "Having any of those?"

Casey blinked. Heath seemed concerned about what she was going to say. There was a small face mirror on the wall behind Ellis that she could see him in. If she permitted herself to study it, she suspected she would find the present perspective off, as the sideways casual glance suggested he was much more prominent in the mirror than he likely should be.

"You mean like a six foot rabbit named Harvey or an old childhood friend like Drop Dead Fred, or the hot, magical jinn created by two misfit teens in *Weird Science*?" Casey asked.

"I am impressed with your allusions," Ellis said.

"My half-sister is an actress and my family is fairly movie crazy," Casey said.

"Interesting," Ellis said. "Also, interestingly, you didn't really answer the question."

"Hypothetically speaking," Casey said. "How would you feel if you won a magical celebrity date and got to spend the whole day with Heath Ledger?"

"Hypothetically? Well, I would probably be in seventh heaven," Ellis said. "Speaking of heaven, you know..."

"He killed himself, Jan 22, 2008," Casey said.

"How do you feel about that?" Ellis asked.

"I remember being very sad," Casey said.

"Yeah, me, too," Ellis said. "What about now?"

"I don't know how to feel," Casey said, honestly.

"I don't understand that," Ellis said. "Isn't it still a sad thing?"

“People, perhaps society, they tell us how to feel about certain things, but I think that is a staple answer just used to keep things reasonably stitched together. I personally don’t have enough information to know how to really feel about it. Also, time has passed. I am not stuck where I was, but I still don’t know that I arrived at any conclusion. I do like things to make sense. It’s not like I am family, or even a friend. I am not anyone special that deserves closure and even if I were someone special, how do you have closure over something so big? There are some things that simply defy explanation,” Casey said. There were tears in her eyes.

“Yeah,” Ellis said. There were tears in her eyes. “How old are you again?”

“Not old enough,” Casey said. “And maybe too old.”

“Yeah, or, just the right age,” Ellis said. “Casey, my door is always open to you.”

Casey cried. Ellis got up came closer. They hugged.

“What is up with all the crying today?” Heath asked.

“People cry,” Casey answered.

“They do,” Ellis agreed. She retreated, went to one knee. She had to adjust her dress to do so, but her eyes were now on Casey’s level. “Do you know why you’re crying?”

“Yeah,” Casey said, wiping her eyes. “Today is catch up day.”

“I don’t understand,” Ellis said.

“Today is for all those days I should have cried but didn’t cry and when it’s over and I am all caught up, I think I will dedicate this day to all the people that chose not to cry, when they should have just let it pour,” Casey said.

“You are so well adjusted,” Ellis said.

“No,” Casey said. “Today is just really weird. May I go now?”

“Yep, you’re cleared,” Ellis said.

Casey departed. Heath caught up to her in the hall. When they were out of eye sight of the office he stopped her.

“Casey,” he said. “Stop, please. Casey!”

Casey turned to him. “What?”

“I wanted to say I am sorry,” Heath said.

“For what?” Casey asked.

“For...”

“You didn’t,” Casey interrupted.

“I’m pretty sure I…”

“You are not Heath Ledger,” Casey said. “I don’t know who or what you are but you are not him.”

“I am pretty sure I am…”

“You look like him. But you can't be him. You're something my mind created. You sound like him. You smell like... You smell really good, actually,” Casey said.

“Thank you,” Heath said.

“You smell like chocolate chip cookies packed in popcorn,” Casey said.

“Oh, that’s what that is!” Heath said. “No wonder I am starving.”

Casey drew her phone out to check the time. She went outside and found a quiet place to vape and do research on her phone.

“Can you give me a moment without distractions?” Casey asked.

“I can try,” Heath said.

She sat in the grass while Heath walked the perimeter of the court. Even while trying not to be, he was a serious distraction. She found she liked him. Can one like an hallucination? He tried balancing on the curve, arms outstretched. He tried picking up a cigarette butt but failed. He was able to pick up a leaf, and he held it up to the sun and allowed the light to shine through it; it came through a speckled pattern like water through a partially blocked sieve. He smiled at this. Casey realized something. He had not picked up the actual leaf. It was still on the ground. She took note of this, wondering if it meant something. She had so many questions. She googled ‘Loxy Isadora Bliss.’ She found her name and picture attached to an events page. She offered regular meditation classes at a used book store called the ‘Discovered Alcove.’ The write up on the book store was bizarre; it was directly connected to a coffee/tea shop. The only way to get to the books store was through the tea store, through a glass airlock, and up a winding stair case. The beverage shop was called ‘Tea Cats.’ It was a beverage shop where people could come and have a cup of Joe or tea, and pet cats. The cats were rescued and retired support cats. All revenue from the drinks went to local animal clinics. There were several alternative revenue streams, like the tea cat cams that allowed people to follow the cats. Apparently, there were five owners, one of which was Loxy. She took a screen shot of the address, then used google maps. It was twenty seven minutes from the school.

The bell rang. People began to emerge from classroom and building and she decided to go to her next class.

“You good?” Heath asked.

“Yes,” Casey said. “Thank you. I feel bad asking you this, but can we make it to lunch with minimal distractions?”

“Sure, why not?” Heath said.

They went to the next class together. Casey felt a little bit better about the situation. Hallucination or ghost, Heath was at least willing to work with her. That was meaningful, too, right? She assumed that most hallucinations due to psychosis were less helpful in general. Even though he didn’t have to, Heath tried to avoid running into students. It only now occurred to her that he might also be having a difficult time acclimating to this situation.

## Chapter 4

They made it to third period without big incidents. During math she discovered Heath was actually helpful. He knew the answers before she did. He got them right even when she hadn't. The algebra heard her talking under her breath, arguing, then apologizing. He looked at her paper over her shoulder, saw her working the proof and then reluctantly re-worked her problem finding her mistake. The teacher applauded quietly, his hands in the small of his back, as he pushed on to observe others. Also, she discovered she could tight beam direct thoughts to Heath in a sort of telepathy, but found she made herself better heard when she subvocalized.

Brenda was in third period. Casey made eye contact. She nodded to Casey as she passed.

"Wow," Heath said. "Brenda's cute."

Casey frowned at Heath as she took her seat.

"What? I can't think she's cute?" Heath said.

"You're a grown ass adult and it's kind of creepy," Casey said. "Don't creep."

"I am a guy. Guys are just more observant," Heath said.

"Guys creep, women are observant," Casey argued.

"How can you be observant when you walk with your eyes to the ground?" Heath asked.

"Women have great periphery vision," Casey said. "Don't creep."

"Wait wait wait," Heath said. "So, you know we're looking at you as you pass on a sidewalk or in the hall."

"Yes, it's called creeping," Casey said.

"Why don't you look back?" Heath asked.

"Because, that would be an invitation we want more. We don't want more. We want you to leave us alone," Casey said.

"Wait wait wait," Heath said. "Girls dress to attract attention, but you get mad if we look at you..."

"We want who we want to look at us. Anyone we don't want to look is creeping," Casey explained.

"How am I supposed to know if you want me to look if I don't look?" Heath asked.

"Did Brenda make eye contact with you?" Casey asked.

"She can't see me!" Heath said.



“That’s how you know,” Casey said.

Heath stood there, pouting, his arms crossed in front of him. The teacher was discussing ‘Great Expectations.’ “There is a flaw in your logic somewhere,” Heath said.

“Work the math, this is a constant,” Casey said.

“The variables aren’t constant,” Heath said. “I’m famous. If I look, girls make eye contact and swoon.”

“I am sure that happened a lot for you. I am not so easily impressed,” Casey said.

“You didn’t just summon any Joe blow, you summoned me,” Heath said. “But that’s my point. Joe would be dismissed because he’s average or not dressed right or some contextual thing that you decide is a thing which may or may not be a thing... How is that fair?”

“How old are you?” Casey asked. “Life is not fair.”

‘Life is not fair’ came out a little louder than it should.

“I am sure Charles would agree with that,” the teacher said. “Would you like to expound on your observation?”

“Not really,” Casey said. She had everyone’s attention. Heath was staring at Brenda.

“I think there’s a squirrel in her lap,” Heath said.

“I don’t think it matters,” Casey said, suddenly as if recovering from a distraction. “Pip likely would have been impressed by any girl, so the fact that the benefactor in this case is rich and powerful is just a plot contrivance that reinforces a misconception that youth are necessarily and easily misled. Further, I don’t think we’re supposed to be analyzing this so deeply. Dickens didn’t sit down and say we need this many metaphors and this many illusions. He sat down and wrote a story, which had enough generic truth in it that it held appeal for multiple generations, but that appeal is declining because society is changing. This book is only helpful for letting us know where we were. We are much more sophisticated now.”

“Really?” the teacher said. “Explain Pip would have been impressed by any girl.”

Heath comments that the teacher looks like Miss Honey from the movie Matilda.

“Boys are easily distracted. They’re fickle as the wind. Anything in their environment that’s breathing is good enough,” Casey said.

“Girls aren’t distracted?” the teacher asked.

“Of course we are. We are just as afflicted, but we have to be more practical because there are more consequences. And not just the obvious physical consequence, but serious social

consequences. There continues to be a double standard in terms of exploration. This book exemplifies the double standard. Pip is Charles Dickens exploring himself through the lens of a child. Had Pip been a female, and Miss Havish a Mr. Havish, we wouldn't be reading this... In fact, it would be considered something else altogether. The word they use for this stuff today is 'grooming.' This book is not about Pip. It's about Charles exploring how his life would have been different if he had been better influenced. He secretly yearned for a Miss Havish to spin him. We all want to be guided by someone older, respectful, knowledgeable, caring... He couldn't make her that, because they didn't believe in that kind of adult then, and they don't want those kind adults now.

"This book is about sex, all hidden in metaphors. You adults don't believe in teaching sex or more emphasis would be made on making safe pathways for us to explore this fundamental aspect of our being beyond the intellectual aspect, hidden in the guise of books and metaphors. If you learned at all, you learned from the streets. We're more advanced. We have cell phones. If you think we're not being cultivated and groomed for a certain mindset, then you're just as bad as every other adult who is not paying attention or refusing to address reality. Live-streaming is pushing the boundaries of what it means to be publically pornographic, turning girls of all ages into prostitutes, only we're dancing for bitcoin and virtual hearts. It's not love, but it's the only attention we get these days.

"Live Streaming is pimping out so many girls these days, no one has to groom anyone for prostitution. We're ready to sell our souls for a gaming console and shoes. Sex is the most important thing any of us will ever face and you side step it at society's peril. Even if you wanted to teach us or help us, you're blocked by laws and parental committees from speaking truth. There's more money to be made off us by keeping us in the dark. If we explore it on our own in privacy, we're given disparaging labels. If we utilize the tech available to us, we risk being exploited, sometimes by not nice people and sometimes by immature people, or worse, charged with criminal activities for sharing ourselves or for just having fun..." Casey stopped. "I don't understand that look and I am seriously disturbed by the level attention on me..." Casey slapped the desk. "Stop looking at me!"

Her peers found other things to focus on. Casey returned her gaze to the teacher.

"What?"

"You've seriously been underperforming in your class work," the teacher said.

“Or, we’re not playing the same game,” Casey said. “‘Duck and cover’ is a perfectly reasonable strategy for getting through life. Most people don’t want to be in the lime light.”

“You just want to muddle through?” the teacher asked.

“Muddled is an extremely charged word,” Casey said. “You’re measuring my value as a human being based on today’s standards. Those standards are changing. They need to change. A human should not be measured on productivity levels.”

“How would you like to be measured?” the teacher asked.

“What I want is irrelevant,” Casey said.

“No it’s not,” the teacher said.

“Nothing I say is going to make a difference,” Casey said.

“Yes, it will,” the teacher said.

Heath was now kneeling in the empty seat in front of Brenda, admiring her, and still trying to see if there was something in her lap. The squirrel came out onto Brenda desk, looking at Heath sideways, the way squirrels do, looking all innocent. “Oh, look, it is a squirrel,” he said, going to pet the squirrel. The squirrel bit him and he jumped and waved his hand about trying to dislodge the squirrel, yelling the whole while.

“Fine! I want the adults in this world to start acting like adults. I want people to better police their straws and come up with environmentally friendly glitter options because I like glitter but would gladly give it up if it comes to that and less packaging material in general. I would like to put less emphasis on competition and more on cooperation, no more shows like Survivor where people have to pretend to be nice before they stab you in the back, and fewer shooter games, fewer guns in general, get rid of borders and passports and treat the world as if everyone is a citizen of something bigger than your neighborhood block party,” Casey said.

“Yeah, not going to happen. Bigger, better, brighter, and more talented people have been pushing that message, but unfortunately, humanity is in its adolescence and it’s going to take hitting rock bottom before we mend our ways. Rock bottom may allow for most people to continue, but you can say good bye to the dolphins, whales, most the fish, elephants, rainforests, and penguins. Tell me again why you’re pushing Dickens when the whole world is an upside down pyramid about to tumble?”

The teacher had no response. The squirrel had been thrown off and scurried right back to Brenda where it climbed up on her shoulder and chattered angrily at Heath. There was no evidence that Brenda was aware of the squirrel

Casey got up. "I am going to vomit," she said, heading for the door.

"Brenda, go with her," the teacher said.

"No!" Casey said, almost too quickly. She couldn't help but see the hurt look on Brenda's face but even as she realized it she was saying "Anyone but Brenda."

"What's wrong with me?" Brenda asked.

"Angry squirrels aside? Nothing, Veronica," Heath said.

"Nothing. Everything. You're too perfect," Casey said, and stormed out.

"Nancy, go with her," the teacher said. "And both of you come back..."

The restroom was directly across the hall. Heath arrived in the hall even as the door was swinging shut and then bounced forwards into the bathroom. Casey hadn't thrown up, but she cried in the sink. Heath touched the back of her neck, conveying concern.

"Don't touch me," Casey snapped.

"Okay," Nancy said, still lingering close to the door.

Casey frowned. "Sorry," Casey said.

"Why?" Nancy asked. "That was the like most impressive thing ever. I wish I had your voice and insight. I may have to actually read Great Expectations, now."

"How can I help?" Heath asked.

"I just want to be left alone," Casey said.

"I think I am supposed to stay with you," Nancy said.

Casey sighed. She collected a towel and dried her face. She nodded to Nancy. They returned to the class together. Nancy went right to her seat. Casey stared at the floor.

"May I return to my seat, please?" Casey asked.

"Eyes," the teacher said.

Casey raised her head and made eye contact. "Thank you for coming back. That, too, is brave. Go ahead. Sit."

"Thank you," Casey said.

Casey stepped slightly away from Brenda's desk because the squirrel was chattering angrily.

“I am so not perfect,” Brenda said.

“I am sorry,” Casey said.

The teacher continued her lecture. Heath and the squirrel had a staring contest but it finally settled down. Heath crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

“I don’t believe you,” Heath said.

Casey looked at him.

“Eyes forward,” Heath said.

Casey returned her eyes to the front of the room.

“Listen,” Heath said. It was gently spoken. “You say you want to be alone, but you summoned me. You’re lonely. You’re also smart. Almost all the smart people I know, they suffer with loneliness.”

Seven minutes before the bell, the teacher said: “If you can leave quietly, like for real quiet, no partying or ratted me out directly or indirectly, you’re dismissed. Casey, tarry. I want to speak with you.”

The class took the option and departed. Once the class was empty, the teacher took the seat in front of Casey and turned it about.

“Would you like to talk?”

“She reminds me of Honey,” Heath said.

Casey frowned.

“No, Miss Honey, from Matilda. A little older, but that’s Miss Honey,” Heath said.

Casey saw it, tried to hide a smile, bit her lip.

“Care to share?” the teacher asked.

“Do you really suppose we can solve the world’s problems in less than six minutes?” Casey asked.

“Maybe not the world’s,” the teacher agreed. “How about yours?”

“There’s really nothing wrong with me, Miss Honey,” Casey said. She closed her eyes, ignoring Heath’s laughter. “Sorry.”

“I get that a lot,” the teacher said.

“There’s nothing wrong with me that isn’t wrong with all of us. I am just human,” Casey said.

“Sometimes being human is hard,” the teacher said.

“Yeah,” Casey said. “It’s not for the weak of heart...”

“Your heart okay?” the teacher said.

“Yeah, why?” Casey said.

“Well, you brought up a pretty heavy subject,” the teacher said.

“What subject? You mean sex?” Casey said.

“Are you thinking about...” the teacher asked.

“No!” Casey said. “Yes. But no!”

“Are you having...”

“No!” Casey said. “I am so not ready.”

“Sometimes our bodies tell us we’re ready before we’re ready,” the teacher said.

“My mind and body are on the same page,” Casey said. “I am really uncomfortable with this conversation.”

“Well, that’s because you’re right, we don’t allow for this conversation,” the teacher said.

“Can you discuss this with your parents?”

“Who discusses this with their parents?” Casey said.

“Good point,” the teacher said. “Everything okay at home?”

“Yes,” Casey said.

“Casey, you’ve spoken more today in this class than you have spoken all year,” the teacher said.

“So?” Casey asked.

“You’ve offered more substance today than in all previous classes combined, including your assignments,” the teacher said.

“Yeah, well, now I am all substed out,” Casey said. “Seriously. You’re not likely to get another peep out of me so please don’t call on me.”

“That’s not the way it works,” the teacher said. “My expectation for sophisticated peeps is high.”

“It’s good to want things,” Casey said. The teacher didn’t get it. “That’s a movie quote.”

“Sorry, I don’t know it,” the teacher said.

The bell rang.

“May I go?” Casey asked.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” the teacher asked.

“This is not 3 o’clock high. There is no bully waiting for me at the end of the day to smash my brains in. There are no storms on the horizon. It’s just another day,” Casey said.

The teacher folded her hand and nodded. Casey hurriedly departed, oblivious to the music that just started in her head.

## Chapter 5

Heath caught up to her, singing a song. Paul McCartney, 'just another day.'

"Why are you singing that?" Casey asked.

Heath shrugged. He came about her, as if singing to and about her, avoiding the other students. Her eyes narrowed. She almost thought the other students were singing along when he sang, and then she remembered that scene with Denzel Washington and the people singing "time is on my side." "So sad, so sad, sometimes she feels so sad..." She stopped in the middle of the hallway. She was really sure everyone was singing.

"I am not sad," Casey said.

"I didn't say you were," Heath said. "Alone in her apartment she dwells..."

"I don't live in an apartment, and I don't live alone," Casey said.

"It's not about you! I am just singing a song," Heath said.

"Well, stop it," Casey said.

"But I like singing," Heath said. "Maybe an apartment is a metaphor for your head... Till the man of her dreams comes to break the spell... Oh! I am the man of your dreams."

"No, you're not!" Casey said. "And the only thing you've broken is my concentration... Where is my lunch?"

"You left it in the car," Heath said.

"No I didn't," Casey said.

"I can still see it clear as day in the middle of the back seat," Heath said.

Irritated, and hungry, hungry for comfort food, she entered the cafeteria. She hadn't gone five steps before she realized something was wrong... The world was silent. It was if the soundtrack to her life had been cut out. People were moving and eating and talking and doing everything they normally do, only in absolute silence.

Heath arrived. Sound returned to her world, but with a tangible feel as if she had just emerged from deep in after diving into a pool. She gasped. The occupancy of the cafeteria doubled. Original Oompa Loompas danced their awkward midget dance. There was a squirrel eating a nut next to Brenda. Casey had to duck as a one eyed parrot dived past her and landed on the shoulders of one of the Tongan linebackers. The nerds at the 'D and D table' had elves and dwarfs and unspeakable things standing behind their wards taunting and laughing and telling



jokes. Jesus and black Jesus were arm wrestling. Twilight, Pokémon, Star Wars, anime, and video game characters were going about as if this were just another day at a Fury Cosplay convention. The beauty and the beast danced by. Casey was pretty sure it was Emma! Heath muttered how he would have loved costarring with her. Harry Potter magically blocked an arrow from Katniss.

“Wow!” Heath said. “Your cafeteria has nothing on the Star Wars cantina scene.”

Spiderman swung across the way. Paddington bear went by carrying a tray with a variety of honey jars, each a different shade of gold, illuminated from within. A female droid hostess carrying a tray of mints and condiments walked the tables wanting to serve. There were free floating hearts, like heart shaped balloons floating about. There were zombies. A gargoyle perched on the wall watching over the children. A sea lion perched on the end of a table clapped and begged for fish. Dolphins swam in the air going around the perimeter of the cafeteria. A creeper bumped into the wall as if it couldn't see it; it looked around, puzzled, lost, looking for something. Ghost swords raced around the room, with no apparent wielder, like Top-gun jets in formation. Some of the hilts were more prominent than others. The swords flocked together like starlings and then broke formation, and if they collided with a heart there was a huge bell that chimed and the heart shattered into a million tiny hearts, and some of the smaller swords went for the lesser hearts. Heart and glitter rained down over some of the girls. Todd was brilliantly lit by a star above his head. Irene's bear was huge, sitting on its haunches, jaw resting on her shoulders watching her eat. Sitting next to her, on the end, was an overweight girl. Her name was Lorene. Behind Lorene was a skinny kid, wearing cement blocks for shoes, and chains encircling her body. People were throwing food at her from all directions. No one in the cafeteria was throwing food at her, but food was being thrown and it arrived in time to be seen before hitting its target. This thin girl was crying and food and slime and pudding ran down her face and body.

“Casey?” Heath asked.

Her eyes were huge. She remembered to breathe, again, as if she had just spent a great deal of time underwater and had just emerged. She gasped and fled the cafeteria. She paused in the smoking area, reaching for her vape but stopped as she saw death putting down his sickle to hand a student another cigarette. The teen pulled out a pack, shook one out, and lit it.

Casey fled this area, too, but not before throwing her vape in the trash. She ran. Heath tried to catch up to her but she was off campus and half way across the street before he arrived in the street. He bounced forwards, just avoiding a car, and arrived in the convenient store parking lot where Casey had used an app to solicit a ride.

“Slow down, Casey. Let’s talk,” Heath said.

“No,” Casey said.

“That was overwhelming,” Heath said.

“You think?!” Casey snapped.

A car pulled up.

“This is dangerous,” Heath said.

Casey climbed in the back, informing the driver of the address even as she was pulling the door shut. He was Indian. The driver put the address into his phone, spelling it out loud. Heath arrived in the back seat, falling forward and hitting the seat.

“What?! Why is this so hard?” Heath asked. He orientated on Casey. “You, back to school.”

“You’re not my father,” Casey said.

“What?” the driver asked.

“I am speaking to someone on the phone,” Casey said.

“Is this cash or credit?” the driver asked.

“I have both. Which do you prefer?” Casey asked.

“Why are you yelling at me?” the driver asked.

“Because, we’re still here. Drive,” Casey said. “Please.”

“How old are you?” the driver asked.

“There is an age limit to Lyft?” Casey asked. “Drive. Please. If you must know, I am meeting my mother for lunch.”

“Oh?! The Pizza Palace,” the driver said, leaving the convenient store’s lot for the road. “They have very good pizza. Right next to the Cannabis shop. When Arizona passes the recreational use act, that pizza place is very well situated to make a lot of money. I wish I had opened it...”

“I really don’t want to talk right now,” Casey said.

“That’s too bad. I am like the Doctor Phil of taxis. I am really easy to speak with and people feel better after unloading their problems in my cab,” he said. “You could say whatever you like and it would be lost forever in this car. That’s the plus of speaking with a stranger.”

“Really. I am hallucinating Heath Ledger. Would you like to talk about that?” Casey asked.

The driver seemed concerned, his eyes a little wider in the mirror. He pulled over.

“You are creeping me out. Please exit the car,” the driver said.

“What happened to you being the Doctor Phil of taxis?!” Casey said.

“I was being facetious,” the driver said.

“Do you even know what that means?!” Casey asked.

“No,” the driver said. “Is it a bad word?”

“You accepted me as a client and are ethically obligated to deliver me to my destination. Letting me out here could result in a crime or injury to my person,” Casey said. “Seriously? You’re going to put a young girl out in this area? Further, it’s against the law to discriminate against people with mental health problems. I could sue you for your car and your house. Don’t make me call the police.”

The driver frowned, put the car back into drive, and continued to the route. “Come to America my brother says,” the driver lamented. “You can drive your own car and be your own boss my brother says. Americans are crazy! He did not tell me about that.”

Heath tried to smile. “Probably shouldn’t tell people about me.”

“I was testing the waters,” Casey said.

“Why me?” Heath asked. He seemed to be echoing the sentiment of the driver, who was going on about trying to be nice and just have a quiet conversation to fill the emptiness between points on a map.

Casey didn’t respond as she thought Heath was being rhetorical.

“Casey, why me?” Heath asked again.

“I don’t know,” Casey said. “I probably should have gone with Jim Carrey”

“Oh, because he’s not crazy,” Heath said.

“No talking to ghosts in my car,” the driver said. “I am highly superstitious and seriously disturbed by you doing that.”

“What would you have me do? Ignore his questions?” Casey asked.

“Yes,” the driver said. “If you answer a ghost’s question, there will only be more questions.”

“That makes sense,” Casey said.

“I am a very smart man,” the driver said. “In India, I was a physicist.”

“Really?” Casey said. “Why are you driving a car?”

“In India, physicist are a dime a dozen,” the driver said.

“So, you’re a really bad physicist,” Casey said.

“I am not Good Will Hunting. Have you tried praying to Ganesh,” the driver said, making mudra of the elephant god.

“Both hands on the wheel!” Casey snapped.

He returned a hand to the wheel, emphasizing the ‘link’ with one hand. “It really helps. Very strong mudra.”

“Do I look Indian?” Casey asked. “It won’t work for me.”

“You don’t have to be Indian. Pressure points and gestures are universals,” the driver said.

“No they’re not,” Casey said.

“Yes they are,” the driver said.

Casey gave him a thumbs up sign. “This does not mean the same thing from culture to culture. In fact, Hollywood got it wrong. In the Roman days thumbs up meant kill the gladiator, thumbs down spare him.”

“I don’t know about that, but a smile is still a smile...” the driver said.

“A smile does not always communicate happiness,” Casey said. “Lots of people smile when they’re not really happy. In Japan, a smile is more likely to be communicating confusion or concern. Look at my smile. I assure you. I am not happy today.”

“I don’t like talking to you. You’re scaring me. Maybe if you tried the mudra?” the driver asked.

Casey tried it, aiming the gesture at Heath.

“I don’t think you’re doing it right,” Heath said, reaching out to correct finger placement. Her shift in eyebrow language caused him to pull his hands back.

Casey gave him the ‘Hook em Horns’ gesture.

“That’s Texas A and M?” Heath said.

“You should not do that mudra in my car,” the driver said. “Very bad karma for this region.”

Casey did the Spock gesture.

“Oh, I love Trek,” Heath said. “I could have so pulled off Captain Kirk.”

“That one is permissible,” the driver said.

“They have Star Trek in India?” Casey asked.

“Of course,” the driver said. “Star Trek is everywhere. And we are here. Get out. Your faire is on me.”

“Really?” Casey said.

“It is wrong to take money from someone who is struggling to keep it all together,” the driver said.

“Seriously. I am okay. And I want to pay. How much is it?” Casey said, showing him she had cash.

“I do not want your money,” the driver insisted. “What is wrong with you Americans? You cannot allow me this kindness?”

Casey put the money back in her backpack. She brought her hands together into Namaste.

“Thank you,” Casey said.

Casey opened the door and began to slide out.

“Miss,” the driver said. “Is it really Heath?” he whispered this, as if afraid of offending a ghost.

“He can hear you just fine,” Casey whispered back.

“Oh,” the driver said. “So he is really Heath?”

“Of course not,” Casey said. “Out of all the people in the world, why would Heath want to spend time with me? I don’t even have a poster of him in my room.”

Heath said if she got one he would sign it for her.

“Live long and prosper,” the driver said.

Casey got out. The driver had delivered her to the front of the pizza shop. Heath arrived beside her even as he was driving away. “I like him,” Heath was saying as Casey walked away from him. “Great cameo option when they make us into a movie.”

“They’re not making us into a movie,” Casey said.

“They could. This is really cool,” Heath said. “Your life is really cool.”

“No, it’s not,” Casey said.

“Why do you keep putting yourself down like that?” Heath said.

“How did I put myself down?” Casey asked.

“You think your life is boring. You think I wouldn’t spend time with you,” Heath said.

“You wouldn’t” Casey said.

“I am,” Heath said.

“You are. The real Heath wouldn’t,” Casey said. “That’s how I know I am not insane.”

“Believing I would want to spend time with you would mean you’re insane?” Heath asked.

“I am not your biggest fan. I liked you. Him. OMG, you are not him! But if you were, there are bigger fans. There are probably people that spend their whole days chanting rituals over candles paying homage to you. That’s not me. Even if it was me, that seriously insane, why would you want to go spend time with them? You should be visiting family or friends. I am neither of those. Which means, you’re not him. You’re something in my mind that has unlocked and I don’t know how or why, but I am channeling a shape shifter... Who are you?”

“Heath,” he said.

“Who are you for real?!” Casey demanded.

“I am Heath!” he said, for real.

“Tell me who you are, or vanish forever,” Casey demanded.

Heath scratched his face. “I am still here? Doesn’t that mean I am who I think I am?”

“No,” Casey said.

Casey strolled along the quad until she came to the Tea Cats shop. On either side of the door were large plate glass windows, and glass ledges that the cats could climb up and sleep on so outside people could see the cats. A robotic sweeper patrolled the inner floor, specialized with ‘cams’ like a Martian rover; it kept hair up and allowed for the following of cats. It looked very clean inside, which suggested they were well cared for cats. Kittens were sleeping in the corner, catching sun next to a mother cat. Patrons were inside, drinking tea and petting cats. The lap cats were serious attention hogs. Ragamuffin cats that hardly seemed real they were so laid back. If there was a heaven for cats, this was it.

The front door was an airlock. There was a hostess just inside policing the area so no cats escaped. She was dressed like a cat. More specifically, she looked like she was from the

Broadway Musical Cats. She wore a tight body suit and fur along her arm and over her head. Her makeup suggested cat. She had whiskers. She had fur ears which reminded her of Josie and the Pussy Cats.

“Ahhh,” she said. “First time here?”

“Jennyanydots?” Casey asked.

The hostess laughed. “Not even close.”

Heath arrived. “OMG, you are so hot.”

Casey muttered ‘stop that,’ under her breath and then turned back to the hostess.

“Bombalurina?” Casey asked.

“My name is Fersia,” Fersia said, introducing herself. “It’s safe to proceed in. Tell Alish at the bar, your drinks are on me.”

“Why?” Casey asked.

“Because I like you,” Fersia said, buzzing the door open. “And a cat need no other explanation than that.”

Casey thanked her and proceeded inside. The bar on the inside was contained by a fish tank. Fish tank columns, a fish tank bar, and even a fish tank arch off the bar led to a sunken floor with this Persian carpet and people sitting on the circle, shoes off while cats played and strolled about as if they owned the place. They did. At the far side of the bar there was a spiral staircase, enclosed in a glass cylinder. A fireman’s pole ran up the center of the spiral stairs, allowing for a person to make a quick exit if they so chose. The only way to get to it was to pass the bar and come around. The bar tender stopped her. She was green.

“May I help you?” the woman asked.

“Star Trek?” Casey asked.

“Everyone always asks me that,” the woman said. “My name is Alish.”

“Oh? So, you’re not Star Trek?” Casey asked.

“There are more green people in the Universe than Orion slave women,” Alish said.

“Wizard of Oz. Lost in Space. Farscape. Now, how may I help you?”

“I want to go upstairs,” Casey said.

“Why?” Alish asked.

“Umm, to look at the books in the Discovered Alcove?” Casey asked.

“How did you discover it?” Alish asked.

“Online?” Casey asked.

“Did you know it used to be the Hidden Alcove?” Alish said. “Ever since Bree Lenehan’s book, we’ve been popular like crazy. Anyway, do you know the pass code?”

“There’s a pass code?” Casey asked.

“Try open says a me,” Heath said.

“A pass code and or a book,” Alish said. “Both would raise your esteem level. The higher the esteem, the greater the access. We have very special books.”

Casey frowned and pulled a geometry book from her bag. “Does it have to be literature?”

“Oh! This is lovely,” Alish said, taking the book greedily. She started turning pages. “Oh, this theorem is contextually limited to this plane...I didn’t know they were teaching magic 101 here.”

“Excuse me?” Casey asked.

“Go on up,” Alish said. “Oh, and don’t tear any pages out of books. You’re on camera everywhere in here and there. People are watching.”

“What people?” Casey asked.

Alish put a finger to her lips, ‘Shhh,’ and then used her fingers to indicate they were being watched from all corners.

“Seriously?” Casey said.

“Live streaming revenue. Fish cam, cat cam, people reading book cam. We have a puppy cam somewhere. Live puppies all the time with impromptu jazz... Very popular.”

“People would watch someone reading a book?” Casey asked.

“It’s very relaxing,” Alish said. “You’d be surprised what brings people comfort. I particularly like the rain forest cam. The other day I saw a leaf fall. It was the most saddest beautiful-est thing ever.”

“Anyway, I would never tear a page out of a book,” Casey said.

Alish buzzed her through. Casey opened the door. She hesitated.

“What is the password?” Casey asked.

“Uh? Oh, any movie password would do,” Alish said. “‘Swordfish’ is still very popular. So is ‘Peace On Earth.’ If you come up with something randomly clever, you win a prize.”

“Peace on Earth?” Heath asked.



“‘How to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb,’” Casey said. “Aka, Doctor Strangelove...” She and Heath spoke ‘Doctor Strangelove’ simultaneously.

“Hurry, before a cat decides to climb the stairs,” Alish said. “Lots of places to hide up there.”

Casey entered, pulling the door to behind her. She waited at the stairs for Heath to catch up. He arrived and they climbed the stairs together. The top of the stairs opened up into a quiet space with chairs and couches and coffee tables with books not put away, and a maze of bookshelves. There was an elderly man sitting on the couch. He was wearing faded jeans, a pullover t-shirt with an old, tweed, jacket with patches on the elbows. He was Asian, and in another setting might have been mistaken for a Chinese mystic. There was a cane propped up on the couch, leaning against his leg. The handle of the cane was intricately carved rabbit, its ears prominent. He was reading a book and massaging his mustache, pulling it straight and letting it curl back up and then repeating.

“I don’t like being stared at while I read,” he said.

“Sorry,” Casey said. “How did you...”

“I can feel your eyes like lasers on my head,” he said.

“Oh, sorry,” Casey said. “Do you work here?”

“Do I look like I work here?” he asked.

“Not really,” Casey said. “Can you direct me to someone who does?”

“Does it look like I want to answer a bunch of nonsense questions from a teenage girl?” he asked.

“No... How did...”

He lowered the book. “How did I know you were a teenage girl?” he asked. “You’re disturbing me. Go find your own corner.”

“Sorry,” she said.

Casey wound her way through the maze of shelves. The organization defied conceptual order. It was not Dewey decimal. There were new books and old books and thick books and thin books and tall books and small books. The old books had a texture and style that new books simply lacked, with names etched into their skin to reveal gold underneath. There was the smell of books. There was an island with LPs and Laserdiscs. And more books. Black books and white books and leather books and cloth books. She spied a collection of books by Carl Jung, and

discovered the books were written in a variety of languages. She discovered there were books written in all sorts of languages, not just English. She identified Tagalog and French book.

She came across a shelf, recognizing a book. 'We Forgot Brock,' by Carter Goodrich. She instantly saw a theme of invisible friends and had to read all the titles. The Skook, by JP Miller. Crenshaw, K A Applegate. 'Imaginary Fred,' Eoin Colfer, 'Havey,' by Mary Chase, 'The Adventures of Beekle: The Unimaginary Friend' by Dan Santat, 'Sundays at Tiffany's,' by Cate Tiernan and James Patterson, 'If You Could See Me Now,' by Cecelia Ahern, 'Leo: A Ghost Story,' by Mac Barnett, 'Pobby and Dingan' by Ben Rice...

"Synchronicity," Casey said, pulling 'Nightlights,' by Lorena Alvarez off the shelf.

"I am not an imaginary friend," Heath said.

"And I am not the ghost whisper! I am not channeling Heath Ledger," Casey said.

"Yes, you are!" Heath said.

"If you are not looking for something particular, may I offer you this?"

Casey turned to see a man, perhaps fifty with a well trimmed beard that reminded her of the ghost from the movie, 'the Ghost and Mrs. Muir.' She accepted the book, 'Travels' by Michael Crichton.

"It's not fiction. It feels like fiction," the man said.

"Um, thank you," Casey said, timidly. "Do you work here?"

"I hardly call it work," he said. "Jon Harister." He said this without offering his hand.

"I am Casey," Casey said.

"Nice to meet you," Jon said. "You okay?"

"Yes. No. I am having a really strange day and you seem rather strange and I think maybe I should talk to you but I am here because I was hoping to find Loxy. Do you know Loxy?" Casey said.

"Slow it down," Heath said. "You don't want to sound crazy."

"I do," Jon said. "Very well, actually. Just out of curiosity, who does she remind you of?"

"She reminds me of the character Amy from the movie the Kid, played by Emily Mortimer," Casey said. "Not that she looks so much like her, but she feels like her. Not that I felt her. I mean emotionally; she emotes like Amy. I am sorry. I am not making much sense today."

"Ummph," Jon said. "I liked that character, too. Follow me."

Jon led her back to the old man reading a book. He motioned for her to sit in a chair facing the man. She sat in the love seat and Heath sat next to her. Alish arrived carrying a tray with tea and cups. Fersia came out of nowhere fast and jumped up into the seat to Casey's left, giving her a start. Fersia bounced, turned around, bringing her tail under control, and then sat in the chair, criss cross apple sauce.

"Book down," Jon told the old man.

"I don't want to be involved in this fiasco," the man said.

"Then go home, Lester," Jon said.

"I like it here. It's quiet," Lester said. He glared at the girl over the book. "It was quiet."

Jon put his hand out. Lester frowned, shut the book and put it in Jon's hand, muttering something about it being boring anyway. Jon put the book on the side table and sat next to Lester, sitting forwards on the seat, his hands folded into his lap. Alish sat on the other side of Jon, drawing her feet up into the couch.

"I told you," Alish said. "She's awake."

"Give her the blue pill and send her back home," Lester said.

"Seriously?" Jon asked. "You're leading with that metaphor?"

"Would you prefer I use 'cellular automaton hypothesis?'" Lester said. "How about 'Bekenstein Bound?'"

"You'll have to explain the Schwarzschild radius," Alish said.

"Do you like video games?" Fersia asked.

"I play Minecraft," Casey said. "I would play more if they would make an option to heal zombies and tame creepers. I really don't like killing stuff."

"I really like her," Fersia said. "Do we have to throw her back?"

"It was your rule to catch and release," Lester said.

"Are all your conversations this convolutedly complex?" Casey said.

"Alliteration," Alish said. "I second Fersia's motion to keep her."

"We're not keeping her!" Lester said. "She doesn't belong to us. She's not a stray cat. She has a home. A family. A school. Why the hell aren't you in school?"

"I am having a rather difficult day," Casey said.

"So, why are you bringing that to us? We were having a good day," Lester said. "A quiet day."

Casey began to cry.

“Oh, Lester!” Fersia snapped, getting up to go comfort her.

Heath scrambled to get out of the way as Fersia sat in the chair next to her.

“She’s been doing that all day,” Heath said, forgetting no one could hear him.

“Don’t listen to those mean old men. Well, you can listen to Jon. He’s nice. Most the time,” Fersia said in a consoling voice.

“When am I not nice?” Jon asked.

“Being nice is not nice,” Lester said. “Being real is nice. I am real all the time, which makes me the nicest person here.”

“When I am not real?!” Jon asked.

“Whenever you’re being nice,” Lester said.

“Yes, they’re very strange men, but they’re safe, mostly,” Fersia went on. “Humans can be fickle. Anyway, tell us everything.”

Casey ran through it all. It came out fast, filtered through sobs and tears, when she finished she tried breathing in all the air she had lost over the last few hours.

“Now, say all of that again without crying,” Lester said. “Without the histrionics.”

“I got it,” Jon said. “Most of it.”

“Is Loxy here? I really need to speak with her,” Casey said.

“She’s off doing her Mary Poppins imitation,” Lester said.

“Really?” Jon asked. “She’s a nanny?”

“Oh, did you think you’re the only child she supervises?” Lester asked.

“I don’t need supervision,” Jon said.

“Oh, that’s so cute he thinks he’s an adult,” Fersia said.

“I am older than you,” Jon said.

“Not in cat years,” Fersia said.

“Loxy hired us to keep you straight,” Lester said.

“I don’t think he needs any help being straight,” Fersia said, winking.

“Look, kid,” Lester said, retrieving a package of gummy bears from his pocket. He pulled out a blue one. “Take this, go home, don’t call us in the morning.”

Alish reached over and snatched it from Lester’s hand. “What the hell is wrong with you. You can’t give her this.”

“You think there are no minors out there consuming cannabis gummy bears?” Lester asked.

“We are not supplying them,” Alish said. “Young lady, wait till your forty before you start unpacking your brain.”

“Unless you have a system that offers ritualized pathways,” Fersia said. “Context and structure changes the experiences and outcomes.”

“We are not advocating this pathway,” Alish said.

“We aren’t?” Lester asked.

“Casey, what are you hoping to learn from Loxy?” Jon asked.

Casey began crying again and blubbered her way through an explanation.

“Seriously, can you do that without the tears?” Lester said.

“You think you’re channeling Heath Ledger,” Jon said. “Are you sensitive?”

“She’s crying,” Lester said.

“I meant, like being a medium sensitive. Does medium-ship run in your family?” Jon asked.

“No, and he’s not Heath,” Casey said, adamantly.

“Yes I am.”

“No you’re not!” Casey said.

“Could be an accidental tulpa,” Alish said.

“If I had dollar for every teen who thinks they have an accidental tulpa I would be richer than Jon,” Lester said. “It’s probably a demon.”

“It’s not a demon,” Jon said.

“You don’t know that,” Lester said.

“Yes, I do,” Jon said. “Her head’s not spinning, she not spitting up pea soup, and she’s not levitating.”

“OMG, you watch too many movies,” Lester complained. “Demons don’t do that. They’re much more subtle and low key...”

“It’s never demons,” Jon said.

“She could be intercepting an alien transmission,” Fersia said.

“That looks like Heath Ledger?” Jon and Lester asked.

“Well, that one alien looked like Jodie’s father,” Fersia said.

“This is not first contact. It’s never aliens,” Jon said.

“Except when it’s aliens,” Alish said.

“Maybe it’s her guardian angel,” Fersia said. “Everyone has one of those.”

“And why would a guardian angel appear as Heath Ledger?” Lester asked.

“To be less frightening?” Fersia asked. “If I had a guardian angel, I would be okay if he presented as Heath.”

“Probably not a guardian angel,” Jon said.

“Could be her daemon,” Lester said.

“We just ruled that out,” Jon said.

“We didn’t rule anything out!” Lester said. “And I said daemon, not demon. There’s a difference.”

“How about a soulbound?!” Fersia said. “Are you like the biggest Heath Ledger fan in the whole wide Universe...”

“I doubt it,” Casey said.

“Well I am,” Fersia said, pouting. “Why can’t I have a Heath Ledger soulbound?”

“Our club is full,” Lester said.

“Can we trade someone for Heath?” Fersia asked.

“No,” Jon and Alish said politely, like patiently addressing a child. “No!” Lester said, impatiently addressing a child.

“Casey,” Jon said, sighing. “What do you hope to learn from Loxy?”

“What this is. What he is. How I make him go away,” Casey said.

“You want me to go away?” Heath asked.

“It’s nothing personal,” Casey said.

“You think I want to be stuck in a room with you?” Heath asked.

“I am sorry,” Casey said. She turned to Jon. “I don’t want him harmed. Mostly, I just want to understand.”

Jon reached behind the couch and retrieved a guitar that may have been hidden by the couch and her perspective, but it was something that drew Casey’s attention because she had been on the far side of the couch and didn’t recall there being a guitar. It was a nice guitar, acoustic.

“What are you about to do?” Lester asked.

“Magic,” Jon said.

“Magic is forbidden in this world, or have you forgotten that?” Lester asked.

“It’s not forbidden,” Jon said. “Just highly frowned upon.”

“There are penalties...”

“For big stuff. This is a small thing. A helpful thing,” Jon said.

“You hope it’s a helpful thing and you’re being nice and bad things happen when you’re nice,” Lester said.

“It’s just a little music magic. This world is okay with music magic. And movie magic. And book magic. I mean, seriously, if you lumped all the books and movies together, the number of things that touch on magic clearly outweigh all the things that don’t include magic, which means magic is more highly thought of than frowned upon, so contextually, this is okay,” Jon said.

“You should wait for Loxy,” Lester said.

“It’s just a song,” Jon said, positioning the guitar.

“What are you going to do?” Casey asked.

“Don’t worry, it won’t hurt,” Alish said.

“Usually doesn’t hurt,” Fersia said.

“If you had any sense about you, you would go home now,” Lester said.

Jon played the intro. “Recognize it?”

“I think so,” Casey said.

“Yes,” Heath said.

“How can you recognize it when I am uncertain?” Casey said.

Jon repeated the intro.

“I have access to your unconscious memory?” Heath asked.

“Stay out of my memory?” Casey said.

Jon repeated the intro.

“Are you just going to repeat intro over and over?” Lester said.

“Hang on,” Jon said.

“It’s ‘If You Could Read My Mind,’ by Gordon Lightfoot,” Heath said. He began to sing.

Jon came out of the intro in order to accompany, proceeding forwards in step as Heath sang. Casey was confused by that. She was unaware that it was affecting her profoundly. Before

Heath arrived at the chorus, she was subvocalizing. Her voice became prominent. She sung, her eyes tearing up. Heath came around the couch and put his hands on her shoulders. Casey and Heath completed the song. Fersia hugged Casey.

“Oh, Heath, I love you so much,” Fersia said.

Casey pushed out of Fersia’s arms and stood up.

“What just happened?!” Casey asked.

“We met Heath,” Alish said.

“So, he’s real?” Casey asked.

“Define real,” Lester prompted.

“Seriously?!” Casey snapped. “Real is real! Look, I didn’t ask for any of this. I don’t want to be a pop singer. I don’t want to be a Kardashian, or in the lime light, I don’t want to be a princess.”

“Even a Disney princess?” Fersia asked.

“Especially a Disney princess!” Casey said, ignoring the pained look on Fersia’s face.

“And I definitely don’t want to be the ghost whisperer! I just want to be normal.”

“Define normal,” Lester asked, gripping the ears of his cane and shifting as if he were bringing a sports car down into first.

“Casey,” Jon said. “You are normal.”

“Normal people don’t see things that aren’t there,” Casey said.

“Things? You mean Heath?” Fersia corrected.

“It’s not just Heath,” Casey said. She explained about everything she experienced in the cafeteria, expressing concerns about the skinny girl in chains, and ending with the swords skewering hearts the way Mario would collect coins.

Lester laughed.

“Oh! Don’t laugh at her,” Fersia said. “I think it’s cute she still sees swords and hearts.”

“What does that mean?” Casey asked.

“It means come back when you’re 18,” Lester said.

“I have to carry Heath till I am 18?” Casey said.

“Carry? You make me sound like I am burden,” Heath said.

“Casey, it is my opinion Heath is a tulpa,” Jon said. “None of us can tell you how to respond to him. If you ignore him, he will likely dissipate.”



“Dissipate?” Casey asked.

“What, you’re a tulpamancer now? You haven’t even graduated from Safe Haven and you’re giving magical advice?” Lester asked.

“Theoretically,” Jon added. “Forget magic. Go with this world’s paradigm. Heath is a manifestation of your subconscious mind. That does not mean you’re crazy. Lots of people hear stuff and see stuff that others can’t hear or see. Seriously, go read Jung. He was seeing all kinds of crazy stuff, and he was a world renowned psychiatrist! You lucked out. You got Heath. He’s probably fairly civilized and polite...”

“He’s a grown ass man living in a teenage fantasy,” Lester pointed out.

“We are not the thought police,” Jon pointed out. “People can hold whatever thoughts they wish.”

“It’s not like that at all!” Casey said.

“Yeah, we’re just friends,” Heath said.

“Okay,” Jon said, waving her off the pass. “I really don’t want to explore your fantasy life. The point is, you had some pent up psychic energy, psychic as in psychological not magical, you asked yourself to experience a lucid dream about Heath. That’s okay. That’s super cool, and you over shot and you got Heath in real life. That’s actually better than cool, if you think about it. I have known people who have spent years trying to achieve what you have in one night, so yay you. The human brain is a hundred thousand times better than any computer and this is just one of the fun things it can do when you ask it. Unfortunately, this society doesn’t teach you to day dream or use your imagination. In fact, it goes out of its way to prevent you from using that part of your brain. You are not crazy.”

“She cut school to come here in search of Loxy,” Lester said.

“Well, that’s crazy,” Jon said. “That could result in penalties. Go back to school. Finish your day. Relax.”

“Okay, so maybe you have explained Heath, but what about the other things I saw?” Casey demanded.

“You’re overly sensitive,” Lester said.

“OMG, I hate when people say that...” Casey said.

“He didn’t mean it disparagingly,” Jon said.

“Yes, I did,” Lester said. “Toughen up. Life is hard. If you want to make great music with a guitar, you need some callouses.”

“Look, Casey, you are sensitive. Yay you. That’s awesome. When you unlocked Heath, you unlocked the imagination center of your brain to such a degree that all the subtle hidden messages you were already privy to in your environment became accessible in a new format,” Jon said.

“You making this stuff up,” Lester said.

“Yeah,” Jon admitted. “How did it sound?”

“Surprisingly on target,” Lester said.

“Casey, I am completely speculating here. As far as I am concerned, there is nothing wrong with you. I bet you Loxy would say exactly the same thing. Go home. Talk to your family. If they think this is a problem, they can take you to a psychiatrist,” Jon said.

“They will institutionalize me!” Casey said.

“Not for hallucinations,” Alish said.

“The only reason people get compulsory hospitalizations is for suicide and homicide,” Jon said. “Hallucinations aren’t compulsory.”

“Unless her parents demand the hospital keeps her,” Lester said.

“Well, yeah, your parents are technically the client, not you,” Jon agreed. “Do you trust your parents? Can you speak with them?”

Casey frowned. “They’ll accuse me of making this up.”

“Well, you are,” Lester said.

Jon glared at him.

“Technically,” Lester said. “In a good way.”

“Okay, so, do your homework. Look up tulpas. Look up soulbounds. Explore a reason for Heath being here,” Jon said. “There is always a reason for stuff. Maybe he is a metaphor for something else, and once you resolve that, he’ll go away.”

“Or maybe you just needed a friend and he is with you for life,” Fersia said.

“If he is a tulpa, he may experience some confusion as he acclimates to the reality that he is not Heath,” Alish said. “It won’t be all fun and games. There will be an adjustment period for both of you. That, too, is normal.”

“He could become a deviant,” Lester said.

“No,” Jon said, rolling his eyes. “Heath might deviate. This is normal. This process is normal. Please don’t read any slenderman stories. Tibetan Monks have been practicing this thing for hundreds, maybe thousands of years. We’ve only scratched the surface of what’s possible.”

“How do you all know so much about this stuff?” Casey asked.

“Ask us again after you moved past dog paddling,” Alish said.

“Emphasis on this part: You’re okay, Casey,” Jon said. “And, nice to meet you Heath.”

“Pay for her taxi,” Fersia said.

“Of course,” Jon said. “Box her a pizza and tea to go.” Lester was about to toss her a bag of gummies. “No gummies...”

“These are regular gummies,” Lester said, innocently.

Jon grimaced at him.

“Real gummies, right pocket,” Lester said. “R and R... Wait a minute.” He sorted.

“Yeah, pretty sure these are regular.”

“No thank you,” Casey said.

“Oh, good for you,” Fersia said.

## Chapter 6

Lyft returned her to school; mom's car was waiting. She didn't have to look at her phone to know she had a dozen messages: I'm here... Where are you?... Casey?!

"Damn it, the one time I needed her to be late, she's on time..." Casey said.

"Maybe she won't notice you getting out of the car," Heath said.

"I don't think I live in that world," she said and got out of the car. By the time Heath had managed to catch up to her, she was already in her mother's car.

"What the hell?" mother said.

"I skipped school today," Casey said, straight to the point.

Heath arrived in time to hear "You skipped school to go where?"

"A book store," Casey said. "And I had tea with friends at Tea Cats."

"What friends?" mother asked.

"You are always pressuring to reach out and make friends. I made friends, we had tea and discussed books," Casey said.

"I want names, young lady," mother said.

"Peter, Paul and Mary. How would a name help you not be angry? I skipped school today. I have never skipped school ever. Deal with it," Casey said.

"Consider yourself grounded," mother said.

"Wow. Seriously? How would that be different than any other day of my life?" Casey asked.

Mother put the car into gear and began to drive. The entire drive home was in silence. Mother's phone rang but she ignored it. Until she got home. Once the car was parked, she took the call. Casey got out of the car and entered the home, expecting to go right to her room, but found her father in the kitchen with a stranger. He was cooking. He smiled and came at her to hug her. The stranger did, too. They moved as one.

Casey retreated from the stranger.

"I have heard so much about you," the stranger was saying.

"Who are you?" Casey asked.

"I am Tiffany. You're father and I are having an affair," Tiffany said.

"What's wrong?" father asked.

“You’re having an affair?”

Mother entered.

“What?”

“And you bring her t our home?!” Casey asked.

“I don’t think they can see her,” Heath said, slight whisper.

“You’re acting crazy,” mother said.

“I am not acting!” Casey said. “Maybe we’re supposed to be a little mad from time to time. Maybe we’re supposed to be having tea on the ceiling with cats and be jumping through pavement chalk paintings to go on outing in the country, saving foxes and seizing merry go round horses to win the Darby. Maybe we’re supposed to fly kites, and go fishing, or fly away on balloons. Maybe there is a place where reality and fantasy blur and the subtle, lingering smell of her perfume on you has made her manifest to me. Maybe her name isn’t Tiffany. Maybe Tiffany is the name of the perfume she wears. I don’t know. I don’t care. All I know is there is a stranger between us and that’s blocking me from getting close to you. And I don’t like it.”

“Go to your room, come back when you’ve calmed down,” her father said.

“I am not going to calm down!” Casey said.

“Go to your room,” mother said.

Casey spun on her heels and departed for her room. Heath reached out a hand to shake hands with Tiffany... “Nice to meet you...” he began, before jumping rooms. He arrived in the bedroom.

“I like her,” Heath said.

“You can have her,” Casey said.

“She’s a person. I think she has a say in that,” Heath said.

“Maybe,” Casey said.

“May I sit by you?”

“Uh?”

Heath pointed to the bed. She nodded. She actually liked that he asked.

He sat next to her, looking straight ahead. His hands in his lap. They sat quietly. They both tried to be somber. Heath smiled. Casey giggled.

“Stop that,” Casey said.

“What?” Heath said. “I am not doing anything.”

“I am trying to be mad,” Casey said.

“Maybe that storm is spent,” Heath said. “Maybe you can’t be sad or depressed around me for long because I am such a ray of sun.”

Casey laughed. “You really think highly of yourself,” she said.

“Or you do,” Heath said.

“Thank you,” Casey said.

Casey got up and went to the computer. She googled ‘tulpa’ and began reading everything she could find. Heath watched her as she was writing down words and concepts she thought were important, such as forcing, imposition, and wonderland.

“What’s a wonderland?” Heath asked.

The doorbell rang. The doorbell never rang, and Casey sat there a moment wondering if it had really been the doorbell or if it had been another auditory hallucination. Her phone chimed and she saw the text from her mother; she could read it from where it was on her desk. “Come to the front room now!” That seemed real enough. She got up and proceeded to the living room, tentatively, in case she had just imagined a text. Her father and mother were there. So were two police officers. One male, one female. Heath arrived. He stepped back to be unobtrusive.

“These officers wanted to lay eyes on you,” mother said.

“Seriously?” Casey said. “I have never been in trouble in my life and skip half a day of school and you call out the National Guard?”

“We’re not the national guard,” the female officers said. Her badge said Malone. ‘Could she be more cliché,’ Casey wondered.

“We’re just doing a wellness check, mam,” the officer with the badge saying ‘Brady,’ said. “You have had a sudden change in behavior. People are worried about you.”

“Let’s step outside and have a talk,” Malone said.

“Whatever you need to know I can say in front of my parents,” Casey said.

“Okay,” Malone said. “Are you being abused? Physically? Sexually?”

“No!” Casey said. “Would anyone ever answer that in front of their parents?”

“Would your answer change if we stepped outside into private?” Malone asked.

“No!” Casey said.

“I believe her,” Malone said to Brady.

“Me, too,” Brady said. “Do you realize, if we were truancy officers, your parents could be fined for your delinquency?”

“I only missed four classes!” Casey said. “I get good grades.”

“Could you tell us where you went?” Malone asked.

“Is it relevant?” Casey asked.

“Answer their questions,” father said.

“Nothing I have done warrants this level of scrutiny,” Casey said.

“What did you do?” Brady asked.

“I went to Tea Cats, had a cup of mint tea while petting a perisan. Petting cats is actually therapeutic. I needed to chill. I also went upstairs to the Discovered Alcove and found a Michael Crichton book called ‘Travels.’ It’s in my backpack if you want to see it. Got their logo stamped on it and everything. You could also look up my Lyft app and see who delivered me, the time stamp, and who brought me back, and their time stamp. If you want to know anything else, you can speak to my lawyer.”

“Casey!” mother said.

“I have rights, too,” Casey said.

“You do,” Malone said. “This is really just a friendly wellness check.”

“Please. There is no such thing anymore. The days of Andy Griffith coming out to talk someone into sensible peace and keeping it all in-house is over. I am not peaceful. I am really upset by this infringement on my freedom,” Casey said.

“Casey, you assume freedom. Until you’re 18 and out of my house, I have the right to know where you are and who you’re with, at all times,” mother said. “What if something had happened to you?”

“No one would have noticed,” Casey said.

“Lots of people have noticed,” Malone said. “It’s why we’re here.”

“I think we’re done here,” Brady said. “Thank you for allowing us insight into your lives.”

Father showed them to the door. Mother pointed to a chair and Casey and went and sat down. It so happened Heath was by that chair. Mother sat on the couch. Father returned and sat in the chair next to the couch. They couldn’t have been more distant.

“Well, that was embarrassing,” father said.

Casey crossed her arms and stared at the floor.

“What has gotten into you?” mother asked.

“You’ve made some pretty poor choices today,” father agreed.

“What about your choices?” Chasey asked.

“Where not the ones being examined,” father said.

“You were being examined since the moment I arrived in this world and you’re still under review. Besides, it’s not the choices you make that bother me. It’s the secrets. How do you expect me to normalize things when I only have pieces? I am tired of all the secrets,” Casey said.

“What secrets?” father said.

“Did you send her the wrong text?” mother asked.

“No,” father said.

“You’ve done it to me; maybe you sent her something she shouldn’t have seen,” mother said.

“I haven’t sent her any texts at all,” father said.

“Well, maybe that’s the problem, then,” mother said.

“If she wants to talk to me, she can call me,” father said.

“Wait,” Casey said. “You are seeing someone.” She turned to mother. “And you know about it? You’re okay with it?!”

“Casey,” mother said. “We are adults, you’re the child. We are the parents, you’re the daughter...”

“I get it! Your big, I am small, you’re right, I am wrong,” Casey said.

Father and Heath chuckled. Mother looked at father and he quit, covering his mouth. Heath bit his lip.

“That’s not what I am saying,” mother said.

“It’s exactly what you’re saying,” Casey said.

“You’re not privy to everything. Your father and I have an arrangement,” mother said.

“What sort of an arrangement?” Casey asked.

“They have an open relationship,” Heath said.

“He can do what he wants, I can do what I want, the caveat being it doesn’t interfere with this operation of this household,” mother said.



Casey was sorting it, her eyes shifting to and fro as if she were dreaming. She focused. “Well, news flash, its affecting the operation of this household. Did you ever consider maybe it’s not the ‘open relationships’ that hurt families, it’s the secrets and lies that hurt families. You both are absolute idiots.”

“Casey, I will not be spoken to in this manner...” father said.

Casey nodded. “How about I not speak to you at all? It’s not like we’ve had a real conversation since what, I was six? You want silence, I will give you silence, but I will not stop seeing what I see. Jumanji’s version of Pandora’s Box has been opened. There is a storm here. There are invisible elephants in this room and I have no intentions of cleaning their litter boxes.”

“Stop. Explain your observation,” father said.

“You’re not entertaining this...” mother said.

“She was right about the Tiffany perfume. That’s fairly perceptive. Now, I want to hear her logic train,” father said.

“You think you’re smart dad. And maybe you are, at 33 thousand feet. You can spot a fleck of dust on the horizon and compute trajectory and aircraft type, but you don’t see people, unless they have a skirt,” Casey said. “Did you know Brian is gay? Did you ever wonder if it’s really biological thing, or maybe it’s a psychological thing where his psyche is lamenting the absence of kind paternal figure? Really doesn’t matter to me; it might be both or more complex than we want to realize. The problem is he is also a religious nut and tortures himself about not being straight, and in the process he is making his wife crazy because she doesn’t understand why he doesn’t love her the way she expects other people love their spouses. TV really has fucked up with expectations. Speaking of TV, Jenny is on drugs. Some of that is due to drugs being prevalent in the industry, but it is mostly due to the fact she was molested by her step dad. A step dad that was brought in to fill the vacuum you left when you deserted the second wife. She blames you. Right or wrong, I agree with her. Maybe if you had stuck it out with her mom a little longer she would have had better footing in this world. Maybe she wouldn’t have witnessed domestic violence. And if you think Diana is doing better because she’s a successful doctor, well, you really aren’t paying attention. She’s a cutter. She’s hidden some of that under her tattoos, and her daughter, your granddaughter, she’s also cutting. Maybe you don’t see this stuff because you never stick around long enough to actually experience people, much less family, on a deeper level. Or, maybe you do and maybe that’s why you’re always off to somewhere novel,

with new adventures and romances around every corner. Low threshold for drama. I share that. I duck and run every chance I get. But mother, I don't understand you at all. You're a mental health professional! How could you not see any of this crap? How could you not see I am carrying all of this because you two are not picking up your share of the load? You're more concerned about your people and employees at the clinic than you are about us. About me. Both of you should turn off your cell phones, take your heads out of your asses for a half a minute and realize things aren't just okay. You have money. Your kids have money. You and they are successful by every measure of modern society. But they are broken. I am broken. It's time you stand up and take responsibility for your own shit."

There was silence. Heath put a hand on Casey's shoulder. She didn't brush it off.

"I need time to sort all of this," mother said. "You can go to your room while I think."

Casey stood. "I feel like it's time to act, not think. I feel urgency. I want to run. I want to hide. I feel like something bad is about to happen."

"You always feel like that," mother said. "You always feel like there is something wrong. Go to your room, breathe. Let me think."

Casey turned to go, but stopped when father said her name.

"Casey, I am sorry. Sorry for not seeing things better. Here's a heads up, you're hearing this from me, not the grapevine. I filed for divorce," father said. "Maria, you will probably be receiving the papers Thursday or Friday from my lawyer."

"What?!" mother asked.

"Don't worry, you will keep the house, the car, everything in the joint bank account, and I have never skimmed on child support," father said.

"I have given you everything you have ever asked of me and you're leaving?" mother said.

"And I have given you nothing?" father asked.

Casey interrupted. "When is the baby due?"

Father seemed surprised.

"Being overly sensitive is a survival trait," Casey said. "I really wish someone would sweep up these egg shells. I hope you find what you're looking for."

Casey left the room. Heath lingered, wanting to hear more and was torn out of the frame only to arrive in the bedroom.

“Talk about drama,” Heath said.

“Shut up,” Casey said.

Heath nodded. “I am sorry,” he said.

“Not your fault,” Casey said.

“Do you feel better? Saying all of that?” Heath said.

“Yes and no,” Casey said.

Casey turned to the browser and read more on wonderlands. Keith pointed at one of the tabs labeled Heath Ledger.

“I am reading this,” Casey said.

Heath reached for the mouse. Casey’s hand was on the mouse and it moved with his hand, clicking on the other tab.

“I didn’t do that,” Casey mused.

“I did that!” Heath said, excited. “Oh, look, I remember that picture... Wait.”

Heath sat down in the chair and took over her body. He clicked on a picture of his daughter and widow. He hated the cameras were following them, was tearful, but thankful for being able to see them. Casey found herself outside of herself watching her body move. She was partly euphoric, spinning and going around her room while clearly seeing her body at the computer typing. She came back to her senses when she realized the intent behind what he was doing.

“You can’t contact her,” Casey said.

“I have to! That’s why I am here!” Heath said.

“No! You’re not really him!” Casey said.

Casey sat back down, forcing Heath out of her. She resumed control of her body and began shutting down the pages he had opened. Heath jumped back in. There was a struggle. The mouse was pulled out of the computer and thrown. Stuff was thrown off the desk. The computer knocked over. The chair went over. They grappled for control and her body. They rolled across the bed, knocking stuff off the dresser, some of the contents being folded clothes that had not been put away. They tussled on the floor in a pile of clothes that were no longer folded. Mother entered the room. The struggle ended. Casey won control. She sat up. Heath retreated to the wall.

“What the hell are you doing in here?” mother asked.

“I am throwing a tantrum,” Casey said, in a very polite, reserved manner.

Mother nodded. "Good for you," mother said. "Clean up when you're done."

Mother went away, closing the door.

"That was unexpected," Casey said.

Heath began to cry. He was sitting against the wall, banging his head. "I miss them so much. You just don't understand."

Casey crabbed crawled backwards to sit next to him. She put her hand on his and it went through it. Their hands overlapped. She waited till he stopped crying to speak.

"We're going to have two conversations," Casey said. "The first one is easy. Assume you're not Heath. You have no right to contact them. You know how many people want to reach out and help them? Some with good motives, some with not so good motives; it really doesn't matter what yours and my intention are, the Ledger family will be suspicious. And they should be. I am not psychic. I am not reaching out to them and telling them anything, helpful or not. It raises so many questions that I can't answer. It brings too much scrutiny on me and I don't want that. Contacting them is bad for them, bad for me, and bad for you. You will not get the resolution you want. They're not going to invite me in for tea and cookies and make all of this alright."

Heath seemed to understand that.

"Second conversation; this one is going to be harder to hear, but you need to hear it. If you are really Heath, then you forfeited the right to bring your daughter and widow any comfort. They can't hear your voice because you checked out. Right or wrong, for better or worse, you, Heath Ledger, are no longer allowed to influence the playing field directly. You have to own the reality that they no longer have access to you. That's your biggest burden and you will have to carry it for a long way. Maybe their entire life times. Or maybe mine. Maybe this weight is so unbearable you needed someone to share it with. Maybe together you and I can carry this thing. Maybe some secrets have to be carried because it's the right thing to do."

"Like your parents?" Heath asked.

"Yeah, maybe so. Maybe they really thought they were protecting me," Casey said.

"Maybe that's why I am a super sensitive, secret detector."

"So you want to be a spy when you grow up?" Heath asked.

“Oh, hell no,” Casey said. “I am too easily enmeshed with the feelings of others. I would end up being sympathetic to all parties and be accused of being a double spy traitor... Seriously. Spies and people with Stockholm syndrome should be slotted together on the same continuum.”

“You have the best boundaries of anyone I know,” Heath said.

“You only know me,” Casey said.

“I know every one you know,” Heath said.

“Fair enough, but I use the mask to keep people separate so they don’t know how much I feel,” Casey said. “People get spooked when you read them and it causes trouble.”

“People are weird. They want to be understood and then freak when someone shows the least bit of insight,” Heath said. “You are psychic.”

“No. I am sensitive. Casey the sensitive, the next incarnation of Nancy Drew, mystery and crime solving heroine with her sidekick Heath.”

“I am so not just a sidekick,” Heath said, wiping his eyes.

“Maybe we’ll make a good team,” Casey said.

“So, you’re not kicking me out?” Heath asked.

“Nah. I think I’ll keep you about. You’re kind of interesting,” Casey said.

“How so?” Heath asked.

“Well. Uh. You didn’t know about your daughter and widow until you saw the picture. I thought you knew everything I knew. That’s interesting. You’re not Heath,” Casey said.

“I don’t follow,” Heath said.

“I would have thought my imaginary friend would have been perfect, but you’re flawed,” Casey said.

“That’ doesn’t mean I am not Heath,” heath said. “Everyone is flawed.”

“Yes. That’s interesting,” Casey said. “You’re not an archetype, either.”

“A what?” Heath said.

“A Jung thing. Never mind, I am sorting something,” Casey said.

“If I am not Heath, how come I feel so bad about what I did? What he did?” Heath asked.

“Heath or not, you’re supposed to feel bad about that,” Casey said. “Hell, I didn’t even know you and I felt bad. My feelings about it now are more complex. I know enough to feel bad about it and that we all share this emotion about it, but we also know that sometimes there are

other emotions so much bigger and scarier that it over rides the emotions of feeling bad about it. People can get stuck there. Scary things happen when we get stuck there.”

“Have you ever been stuck there?” Heath asked.

“No,” Casey said. “I can only imagine...”

“Is that all I am?” Heath asked. “Something imagined?”

Casey looked at her room. “You seem pretty solid to me.”

“Sorry about the mess,” Heath said.

“You’re good at making messes, aren’t you,” Casey said.

Heath laughed. He squeezed her hand. “Thank you.”

Casey smiled, got up, and proceeded to clean her room, starting with the clothes.

“Ever think about acting?” Heath asked.

“Sure,” Casey said.

“You’d be good at it,” Heath said.

“Maybe,” Casey said, folding pants. “The thing is, I imagine I would lose myself in the parts. Hell, I can’t even read a book without becoming all the characters. The only way I have found to avoid feeling them is by inserting myself into the story line as a character.”

“That’s pretty insightful,” Heath said. “I think a lot more actors struggle with that than you know. Especially method actors. Ed Harris and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio come to mind.”

“The Abyss, James Cameron?” Casey said.

“Did you ever see ‘The Pirate Movie?’” Heath asked.

“Kristy McNichols and Christopher Atkins?” Casey asked. “Love that. Really wanted Glee to do a remake of that. Cameo with Depp.”

“Do you think I look like Christopher?” Casey asked.

“Umm, maybe a little,” Casey said. “You have that flare about you that he had. The same flare Jon-Erik Hexum had. From the TV show Voyagers.”

“I remember that show!” Heath said. “He also killed himself.”

“I think his was an accident, more stupidity than anything. He didn’t think blanks would hurt him. The gesture is still the thing, though. That’s a serious gesture and not something one should even joke about. It has meaning,” Casey said.

“Yeah,” Heath said, thinking about it. “Funny how people remind you of yourself or others. Loxy reminds me of Kristy McNichols.”

Casey thought about it. “No! Okay, maybe. Young Kristy. Minus the whole 80’s hair.”

“Are we having a normal conversation?” Heath asked.

“I don’t know,” Casey said. “Normal for me. The only substance I get around here is talking about music or movies to the people on book covers.”

Casey put clothes away and went to her desk. She set up the pen cup and put the pens back in the cup. She put the stationary back on her desk. She realized no one uses stationary anymore and that she couldn’t remember the last letter she had tried to pen. She had written grandmother. She blinked. Looked at Heath. “What?” She took a stylized pen and brought it, the paper and a clipboard to Heath and stood before him.

“I want you to write a letter to her,” Casey said. “Say whatever it is you need to say to close that chapter and have relative peace. We will then seal it and put it with all the other unsent letters. This is something I do when things are bigger than me and I need to let them go. Letting go is a practice.”

“I am not really a writer,” Heath said.

“You’re an actor. You have channeled a million emotions and million narratives, draw on that for inspirations. I give you access to my memory and words and if you want me to edit. If you want help, just ask,” Casey said.

“Are you sure about this?” Heath said.

“I am going to surrender control to you,” Casey said. “This is trust. You understand?”

Heath nodded. Casey turned around and sat down. She settled into Heath like settling into a warm blanket on a cold morning. She relinquished control of her hands and he moved her. She didn’t fully separate, as she had earlier. It was as if they were sharing this space, this moment. She felt connected to someone for the first time in her life. She channeled his words his emotions and they both cried. When he was finished writing, she got up, folded it delicately, tear splashes and all, and placed it into an envelope. She took a gold, glitter crayon and melted it on the fold of the envelope, and then used her personal seal. She pushed into the wax and held it till the form was solid. She put it in the book ‘travels,’ to help protect it, then put it her backpack. She looked to Heath.

“How do you feel?” Casey said.

“I am okay. Thank you, Casey,” Heath said. “I really want to get out of here and go for a walk. Nothing personal, but your room is rather girly.”

“I’m not leaving the house,” Casey said.

“Who said we have to leave the house?” Heath said.

“Wonderlands?!” they both said.

“How do we do it?” Casey asked.

“You know as much as I do,” Heath said. “I think you just close your eyes and go there.”

“What about you?” Casey asked.

“I think I go where you go,” Heath said.

Casey nodded, agreeing with him. That was probably true. Could she be anywhere and summon him like her own personal Jinn? She made herself comfortable next to him and closed her eyes.

“It’s not working,” Casey said after a moment.

“Casey?”

Casey opened her eyes. She blinked. She and Heath were in a white room. Everything in the room was shades of white, except for them. They were Technicolor in a room devoid of color. Not black and white, just all white. The walls were white, and they glowed as if there was light behind them.

Casey stood up. She marveled at her vividness, at Heath’s. They seemed realer than real. She was wearing translucent, pink galoshes, the kind that go over your shoes, and the shoes were simple white tennis shoes with very low ankles, and hint of ankle socks. She wore simple summer white dress, a blue satin sash, and a pink raincoat, transparent and hood down. She also had a simple childhood purse, made of the same shiny, slick material most rain coat were made of. It was yellow. Heath was still barefoot, but wearing kakis, a loose pirate like shirt that billowed, a string drawing the front taught, and a yellow rain slicker that was reminiscent of a sailor from old time fishing vessel.

“Were we expecting inclement weather?” Heath asked.

“Maybe,” Casey said. “One should always be prepared.”

“Why don’t I have shoes?” Heath said.

“I don’t know,” Casey said. “This reminds me of being little. I so loved walking in the rain and jumping in puddles...”



“I remember enjoying that, too,” Heath said. “Interesting. I remember not having galoshes and walking the streams that flowed down the street, the water cool, the pavement still hot from the summer sun...”

“Don’t splash’ mom would say,” Casey said, mimicking mother.

“Don’t jump, don’t run, walk upright, stop pulling on my clothes,” Heath said. “Why can’t four year olds be four year olds?”

Casey went to the wall, put her hands against it. It was smooth as glass. She walked the perimeter. 12 feet by 12 feet. 3.6576 meters... 4 yards. In the center of the room was 3 foot by 3 foot by 3 foot white block, with lesser blocks stationed on each side. Table and chair? She ran her hand across the table, taking off a layer of dust. The finger trails glowed brighter than the dust covered table.

“It’s a bit dusty,” Casey said.

“Well, we did just jump through a chalk painting,” Heath speculated.

It didn’t feel like chalk. “Or this room hasn’t been used in a while,” Casey added.

Casey went around the room, pushing on the wall, looking for an exit.

“I don’t see a way out,” Casey said.

“Maybe we have to punch our way out,” Heath said.

“What if punching a hole in the wall opens us up to space and we get vented out?” Casey said. “I don’t want to do the Sandra Bullock thing. That was exhausting.”

“So, don’t break the wall,” Casey said. “Just ask.”

“Ask?” Casey asked.

“Yeah,” Heath said. “Your unconscious is probably in control and listening. Or a guardian angel, higher self... I know. Pretend we’re on Star Trek!”

“Oh! Computer, exit,” Casey said with intention. Nothing obvious changed.

“It was worth a try,” Casey said.

“Maybe do it with more meaning. Computer, arch!” Heath said. Nothing obvious changed. “Maybe if I imitate Patrick Stewart?” Computer, arch...” Still nothing.

“We’re probably thinking too hard. It’s got to be something simple. Too bad your name isn’t Harold,” Casey said.

“Yeah, too bad,” Heath said, putting his hands into his sports jacket pockets. He gave a curious look. He pulled out a big, solitary, brightly purple crayon. It was the purplest purple ever witnessed.

Casey grabbed it up and went to the wall where she drew a hurried door big enough to allow Heath and her egress. Instead of a door knob she put a big touch pad with numbers in circles. She looked at him, curious if he was still game. He gave her a look that said she was in charge. She wanted it to be a joint decision. She offered her hand. He took it. They nodded in unison.

“Together?” Casey said.

“Together,” Heath agreed.

“Forever?” Casey asked.

“Or until one of us deviates,” Heath said.

“Fair enough,” Casey said.

“What do you suppose lies beyond?” Heath asked.

“What would you like it to be?” Casey said.

“Something interesting,” Heath said.

“Something interesting like the chocolate factory?” Casey asked.

“I don’t care which version you liked, that wasn’t a very safe place,” Heath said.

“Good point. Probably need a musical lock to get there anyway,” Casey lamented.

“How about something pleasant,” Heath asked.

“Something pleasant,” Casey mused. “Something pleasant must have a special number to unlock it... I know just the number.”

Casey typed in ‘4242’ and then pushed the big button. The door swung outwards. As it did, the door became less crayon cutout and more solidly real, but still all white. They stepped into a cartoonish, black and white world. They were in a garden on a hill, a few scattered trees in one direction with a forest further on, and a beach in the other direction, with black and white waves crashing upon pixelated beach with varying shades of grey. It reminded her of a ‘Take on Me’ frame.

“Why black and white?” Casey asked.

“Because we’re back in Kansas?” Heath said.

“Or, maybe this is where we do a color my world montage sequence with music, a bit of dance, some fun and games, and...” Casey pulled a big box of crayons out of her purse that hadn’t been in the purse previously. What she needed had simply been there when she looked. “And a whole lot of magic!”

“What song should we play, Matilda?” Heath asked.

“Why, the most perfect song for this moment, of course,” Casey said. “Alizée – ‘Je veux bien.’”

As if speaking it was the cue, the music started. Casey shared the crayons and they went to work. Just aiming a blue crayon at the sky turned it all blue, filling it in faster than Microsoft paint. Heath turned the grass green. Green drops splashed them. It was now self-evident to why they were wearing slickers. One can’t paint the world without getting some paint on oneself. There was a color fight. Yellow and gold and brown turned the beach into a dream beach and they ran, shooting seagulls with color. They sprayed each other with streams of colors and sparks like hearts and stars. The beach glistened with the glittery remnants of stars and hearts and broken hearts, sparkly Christmas tinsel of ages gone by. Harry Potter’s wand had nothing on their crayons. Reds and brown filled in the bricks of the light house, a house that reminded Casey of the Ghost and Mrs. Muir, one her favorite love stories. Casey drew an oversized sunflower and punched out the center so Heath could draw her portrait, her face pushed through the flower. They then drew a second flower and drew a cartoon man to make a portrait of them both. Forever, a field of giant sunflower with happy human faces would dance with the wind. Field and flowers and sky and every detail filled in and they danced and came together in an impromptu embrace that became a kiss; their hands remained behind their backs, parade rest.

Casey felt herself spinning and there was brilliant flash of light and suddenly she and Heath were standing in a world that was as solid and real as ‘the real’ world. Realer than real! The song ended, fading. Real world sounds became prominent. Real waves crashing on a real beach. Seagulls. There was real heat from a real sun. She stepped back from Heath, holding her breath. The light flared. The light house was alive and working and noticeable even under a noon day sun.

“I am sorry,” Heath said.

“Yes!” Casey screamed.

A resounding crash brought them back to the real world. Her room seemed so much duller than she ever remembered it being.

## Chapter 7

There was quiet. Casey was confused. She felt like she had been gone for a whole a day, but the clock showed only an hour had passed. That in itself was noteworthy.

“You okay?” Heath asked. “I should have asked permission...”

“I am okay. We are okay. Contextually, it felt like the right thing at the right moment, and I, we! were both caught up in something amazing and...” Casey voices changed to a boundary enforcing tone. “And don’t do it again until I am finish sorting this!”

Another sound of something breaking came from a distant room. On investigating, Casey found her mother in her office library. The grandfather clock lay smashed upon the floor. That was probably what had drawn her out of her wonderland. She was happy to discover that; it suggested she could go away and not worry about her body being harmed because she had tuned out the world. Books and papers and all sorts of things were settled in a disorganized, tornado sort of way. There was a broken vase. A rather expensive vase. Heath picked up one of the pieces and sounding like Sean Connery from ‘Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade,’ ‘AH, it’s a fake.’ Casey bit on her lip, trying not to laugh, avoiding eye contact with Heath. It didn’t take much effort to get herself together. Her mother was on the floor crying, her back against the desk. She looked up, and appeared to be angry by Casey’s amused look.

“Good for you,” Casey said. “You want help cleaning up?”

Her mother shook her head no. Casey nearly turned and left but Heath pushed her to go deeper into the room. She frowned at him but he nodded to her mother. Casey went and sat down next to her mother. She drew her knees up and hugged them. ‘Talk to her,’ Heath said.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” her mother said.

“Okay,” Casey said.

Mother looked at her daughter. “Okay?”

“What? You want to negotiate?” Casey asked.

“Maybe,” her mother said.

“That’s not how this works,” Casey said.

“How does this work?” her mother said.

“Imperfectly,” Casey said.

“What?”

“Mom, you said it earlier, you’re the adult, I am the child, you’re the parent...”

“I am sorry I said that,” mother said.

“You were right to say that,” Casey said. “We are not friends. You’re the parent. I am not supposed to carry your load. If you had me to fill an emptiness, well, that was a mistake. If you had me to capture dad into staying, that was a serious mistake. It’s okay. Humans make mistakes. If we’re particularly clever, we learn from those mistakes.”

“People don’t stay together forever like they used to,” mother said.

“People also don’t die like they use to,” Casey said.

“Why are you always so morbid?” Mother asked.

“I thought it was common knowledge that most people didn’t live as long as they do today. I suppose that could be a popular myth reinforced by all the Disney movies featuring orphans. Assuming it’s a real thing and that we are actually living longer, the first true high school kind of romances shouldn’t last because we don’t live in high school the rest of our lives. Most people graduate and move on. Maybe we’re supposed to have more than one partner, the high school one, the midlife one, and the one who walks the final path one. We all mature and change and it seems unreasonable that we mature and change together. It hardly seems fair to expect someone not to change or to change in the same way. That doesn’t sound loving...”

Mother glared at her.

“But what do I know,” Casey said. “I am not unhappy that dad is leaving. Quite frankly, he was rarely here. I’m not upset that you and he had an open relationship. I am upset we never talk about this stuff and that I have carried this idea that I am broken because I’ve worried I have had too many crushes when I am only supposed to have one. I worried that you would split up because I wasn’t good enough or because I wasn’t interesting enough or I didn’t like the same movies. And now that we are talking about it, or, no, now that I am talking about it, it seems to me that literature rarely captures precisely how unhappy women were in their relationships in the past. So isn’t it interesting that we have more freedoms and luxuries today than we ever had, and yet we’re still relatively unhappy? Is that because women were happier in the past than we give them credit for? Or is it that we still cling to this idea that there is one man for all time that satisfies all our needs and we’re disappointed when we discover there are no knights in shining armor because we’re not princesses? And if you been following the Royalty in the UK seriously, I don’t think people really want to sign up for that drama.”

“Who the hell are you and what have you done with my daughter?” mother said.

“Mother. I have been telling you there is something wrong with me and you never listen,” Casey said. “I want the relationships Eddie has with his father. I am that kid.”

“The courtship of Eddie’s father?” mother asked.

“Yes, precociously existential, that’s me,” Casey said. “I want to walk on a beach with you and ask you impossible question that even God can’t answer. No one is on my page.”

“Are you unhappy?” mother asked.

Casey pondered. “I don’t know.”

“That sounds unhappy,” mother said.

“It sounds hopeful,” Casey corrected. “Look, if you had asked me yesterday if I was unhappy, I would have said yes.” Heath corrected her. “Yeah,” she agreed. “No. I would have lied and I said I was okay. If you caught me ten minutes ago, I was joyful. I don’t remember the last time I felt joyful. I heard the grandfather clock fall. That scared me. But now... I don’t know. I think I am in a neutral space, a space where I can listen, where I can be sensitive...”

“When did you get so smart?” her mother asked, tearing up.

“When we watched Pleasantville together,” Casey said.

“That’s why you were crying?” mother asked.

“When have I not cried during a movie?” Casey said.

“I really wish you would stop crying during movies,” mother said.

“You want me not to feel things? The whole reason we watch movies is to feel things and to explore things, like feelings we wouldn’t normally meet in our everyday life,” Casey said. “Except for today. This has been one hell of a day.”

“It has,” mother agreed.

“No way we’ll ever have worse than today,” Casey said.

“Don’t challenge Murphy,” mother said.

“We should go get some ice cream,” Casey said.

“I don’t want ice cream,” mother said. “I don’t want to use comfort food to feel better.”

“Pizza?”

“You’re a devil child,” mother said. “Go get your shoes on.”

The pizza palace next to Tea Cats was spectacular, like a real palace. No, like an old Speakeasy that later became a jazz bar. Even without the instruments on the stage being played, the ambiance of the room was tingly alive. The room had a pitch. It held an expectation of magic. A hostess greeted them at the door.

“Do you have a reservation?” she asked.

“We need a reservation?” mother asked.

“On Thursdays...”

“Casey?”

Loxy rushed up and hugged her. “I got them,” she informed the host. “Come with me.”

“We can come back another time,” mother said.

“Nonsense,” Loxy said. “You’re both my guest. You’re Cassandra’s mother, I presume?”

Mother and Casey nodded.

“How do you two know each other?” mother asked.

“Oh, I subbed at her school,” Loxy said, bringing them to a table. “You’re in for a treat tonight. Mr. Mars himself has agreed to do one song.”

“Mr. Mars?” mother asked.

“Bruno Mars?” Casey and Heath asked simultaneously.

“The one and only,” Loxy said.

Casey and mother were invited to sit. Alish arrived with water. “Would you both like a salad surprise? I make the best salads,” Alish said. “All the produce from my own roof top garden.”

“Um, yes,” mother said.

“Eggs or no eggs?” Alish asked.

“We’re omnivores,” mother said.

“She’s an omnivore. I am a vegetarian, but eggs are okay, as long as they came from cage free hens,” Casey said.

“Our hens are the happiest, healthiest hens in the entire universe,” Alish assured her.

“Do you want to share a pizza, or your own personal pizzas?” Alish asked. “Or, if you prefer, we have a variety wings, served with sticky rice. We have the best Thai styled chicken wings in the world.”



“Not the happy hens I hope,” Casey said.

“My hens are pets,” Alish assured her. “They have great lives, Casey. Everybody dies. Even happy hens.”

“Do they die happy?” mother asked, going for humor.

“Mother!” Casey said, frowning. “I want my own cheese pizza. Alfredo sauce, not tomato sauce.”

“You got it,” Alish said.

“Why even bother having pizza if you’re not putting anything on it,” mother said.

“I want what I want,” Casey said.

“Bring me a meat lovers, pan style?” mother said.

“You bet,” Alish said, walking away without taking notes.

Fersia screamed and rushed the table. “Casey!” Casey jumped at the cat rushing her. Her mother was a little offset by the charge, but also by the ‘human’ cat.

Jon and Lester were right behind her. They also said ‘hi,’ to Casey and her mother.

“How is it everyone knows you?” mother asked.

“We met today above tea cats,” Casey admitted. “Technically, we’re not friends, because we just met and all, but I really like them.”

“You still having a rough day?” Jon asked.

“It’s been a day,” Casey said.

“Then that clinches it. You must sing and dance with us,” Fersia said.

“Umm, I don’t sing,” Casey said.

“Yes you do,” Heath and mother both said.

“Shower and car singing doesn’t count,” Casey said. “And I definitely don’t dance.”

“I bet Heath does,” Fersia said.

Lester shoved her.

“Heath?” mother asked.

“Oh, just an inside joke,” Fersia said. “Sorry I brought it up. If you change your mind, you just come up. Maybe today we will pretend to be Casey and the Sunshine band...”

“We so will not. There is a reason Disco died,” Lester said, making his way to the stage. “Why we even agreed to this alternative revenue scheme is beyond me.”

“Excuse us,” Jon said, and followed Lester.

Fersia side hugged Casey and whispered, "I am actually better than Josie," and rushed to the stage, beating Jon and Lester.

Loxy returned from seating another guest. "You okay?" she asked.

"Can we talk?" Casey asked. "In private?"

Loxy shrugged, looked to Casey's mother, offering a curious smile.

"What can you ask her you can't ask me?" mother asked.

"You got your stuff. I got my stuff. Both of our stuffs are way too heavy to sort together at the same time," Casey said.

"Go ahead. I will just sit here alone," mother said.

Casey blinked. "Do you really want to put that on me?"

"I am sorry," mother said. "Go ahead."

"Come, we'll make the pizzas," Loxy said.

Loxy and Casey went to the open kitchen together. They started by washing their hands, putting on aprons, and then Loxy introduced her to dough kneading. The heat from the fire stone oven was tangible. They were visible to Casey's mother the whole time. Not that she seemed to notice. The moment Casey walked away she was on her cell phone. She put the phone partly away to eat one of the salads Alish delivered.

Lester on drums gave a beat. Jon added base with a guitar. Fersia filled it out with her guitar and sang something fun, a parody: "Cats just want to have fun..." Somehow, in the lyrics, she managed to work in the name 'Rainbow Dash' and a double rainbow. After the song, Fersia spoke for the 'palace' and to the hidden cameras, thanking their online audience. She recommended people hang out for their mystery VIP artist for the night, cause tonight was going to be awesome. They were live streaming the performance and apparently Fersia could see a screen with people texting.

"Everyone is a Loxy fan," Fersia said. "Where are my fans?"

"Toddthestar likes you," Jon said.

"Oh!" Fersia said. "We do ban people for not being polite, Sir!"

Loxy excused herself and ran over to the stage. "What did they say about me?" she asked.

"Jimmytheknife33 wants you to perform 'Words,' by Missing Persons again," Fersia said. "Says you nailed the squeak."

"I love the squeak!" Loxy said.

“Everyone loves the squeak,” Fersia said. “I can do it. Mew!”

“Oh, thank you, Memphis-lover. I don’t think anyone’s ever compared me to Joan Jett,” Loxy said, glancing over at Jon. He was looking for Joan Jett in her. “Jon, did you have crush on her?”

“Wasn’t that Pinky Tuscadero?” Jon asked.

“No, Jon,” Loxy said. She returned to reading. “I like your Egyptian eyes, especially the lingering side glance. You remind me of Suzanne Hoff...”

“You have the nicest fans,” Fersia said.

“They’re angling,” Lester said. “Speaking of angling, check out the pussy cam. Several new cats at Tea Cats are up for adoption.”

“Jon, do you think I look like Suzanne?” Loxy asked.

“Um, let’s talk later,” Jon said.

“You always say that, and yet, we never really talk,” Loxy said.

Lester did a ‘ba-da, dum,’ on the drums.

“Nice,” Jon said.

“Who else do you think I look like?” Loxy asked.

“That haircut? Duma Lipa comes to mind,” Jon said.

“Oh! Serious no talking tonight,” Loxy agreed.

Lester did the drum thing again.

“Next number?” Lester pushed.

“Joan jet version of Love is All Around it is,” Loxy said. “You got it Fersia. I got pizza duty. You can tune into kitchen cam if you want to watch!”

Loxy ran back to the kitchen.

“Heath, can I have a moment alone with Loxy?” Casey asked.

“Sure. If it’s okay with you, I think I will retire to our wonderland,” Heath said. “Send me an order of wings with sticky rice.”

“How can you be in my head and ask that?” Casey asked.

“I want wings,” Heath said. “And you can eat sticky rice with your hands and it taste good with chicken.”

“Okay,” Casey said. “I am sorry for imposing on you.”

“It’s okay. We’re okay, but I am starving,” Heath said.

Heath disappeared through an invisible door. It reminded her of AI, from Quantum Leap.

“So, we’re alone?” Loxy asked.

“OMG, I didn’t think I’d ever be alone again,” Casey said. “That sounded bad. I didn’t mean it like that. I actually don’t know if I am alone, or it’s an illusion.”

“If you think you’re alone, you’re alone. You give your companion access to what you want to share. It’s okay, Casey. I get it,” Loxy said. “Cause you’re intuitively right; no one is ever truly alone. We’re on cam now, probably a thousand people watching. Don’t worry. They can’t hear us from this cam. Anyway, reality, social reality, is much more intricately involved in and around us than anyone cares to believe. It seems to me, though, you’re doing better than just dog paddling.”

“Is he really Heath?” Casey asked.

“My opinion? He is a tulpa,” Loxy said. “He is more your imagination than actual Heath. I suspect, the more time you spend with him the more you will discover what makes him uniquely different.”

“He likes girls. Does that mean I like girls?” Casey asked.

“Oh, I can’t answer that for you,” Loxy said, flipping the pizza and pushing into it. She stopped. “Is it okay to like girls?”

“Yeah,” Casey said. “Why not?”

“You sounded worried,” Loxy pointed out.

“I am interested in both, I think,” Casey said. She didn’t push into the dough as vigorously as Loxy was attacking hers.

“There you go,” Loxy said.

“Heath kissed me,” Casey said.

“Oh?” Loxy asked.

“It was impulsive and surprising and perfect and I don’t know what it means,” Casey said.

“That does sound rather perfect,” Loxy said. “You could take years unpacking one, perfect, solitary kiss. Way better than a hundred imperfect kisses.” Loxy had to look up because the next song was a song from the ‘Sound of music;’ Fersia was singing a punked up version of ‘I am sixteen...’ Joan Jett couldn’t have rendered this better. She smiled as Fersia rubbed up against Jon, still clinging to her guitar, sharing a mic with him. Jon responded to her call.

“That’s funny,” Casey said.

“It’s perfect,” Loxy said.

“Can I love an imaginary friend?” Casey asked.

Loxy gave her full eye contact. “Can you love, or can you be intimate?” Loxy asked. “You can love anyone and everyone, there is no limits to love. You can be as intimate with yourself, or anyone, as you like. That is your call. No one can really tell you otherwise... Well, society will tell you stuff. Your parents will definitely have expectations on stuff. You know, Casey. Just based on our talk alone, I suspect whatever you decide will be right for you. I trust you.”

“Why is this happening to me?” Casey said. “And why now?”

“You are really a smart girl. Smarter than anyone dares expect. You’re a product of your family. They’re smart. A bit off, but many smart people are. And, you’ve been influence by some really core media and art. ‘Harold and Maude!’ How many of your friends know that one? ‘People Will Talk,’ Carry Grant, Jean Crain. That’s Patch Adams before there was a Patch Adams. Society really knows what it wants, just not how to get there, and you’ve assimilated that aspect. You own that. Most people that can tune into tulpas, they’re off the map in terms of intellectual capacity, imagination, and empathy. You’re a rock star. You have also fared better than most tulpamancer. People tend to get bullied for being different. You’ve escaped that partly because you’re stronger than you give yourself credit and you redirected it early on by laughing it off. I suspect that was your influence from ‘Welcome Home Loxy Carmichael.’”

“You mean Roxy,” Casey corrected.

“Yay, you’re listening,” Loxy laughed. “Anyway, it’s hard to shoot at a target when there is no target. That, and most people are too into themselves today to really focus on others; or stay focused. People today are more hit and run. I think you will find it is never just one thing, though. We don’t exist in a vacuum. Everything exist simultaneously in relationship to every other thing and separation is an illusion.”

“No one ever speaks to me like this,” Casey said. “How do you know all of this stuff?”

“I am Jon’s tulpa,” Loxy said.

Casey’s eyes got big.

“You’re already in the deep end; time to swim,” Loxy said. “Spit spot.”

Casey’s mouth went agape. “What?”

“I am a tulpa...”

Casey stared in disbelief. “I can see you! Other people see you! Mother saw you and spoke to you! Wait wait wait. Everyone sees you differently,” Casey said. “You’re a shapeshifter!”

Loxy laughed. “No, I am as you see me. Everyone’s perspective is a little different, so they see what they see. Everyone reminds somebody of someone. I am a Dakini. A force of nature. An archetype made manifest, only I am much more complex, and a composite of all the loves and crushes Jon has ever had, so it shouldn’t be surprising that his vision of me is grander than anyone. I am everywoman.” She sang this.

Casey pushed past the humor, still in her head. “But, how is it you can interact with others but no one sees Heath?” Casey asked.

“Partly experience, partly a consensus reality block,” Loxy said. It was clear Loxy lost her on that. “Look, your world knows about tulpas...”

“My world?” Casey said.

“Your world knows about it because of Tibetan Monks and Alexandra David-Neel,” Loxy said. “They see it as primarily a psychological tool for exploring consciousness. Your world will not accept magical explanations. If you spoke directly to Alexandra, and the monks that taught her, they would tell you this is magic, and the Friar Tuck tulpa she created was not only real, it interacted with people in their village. They would likely say they can see and interact with Heath. Now, maybe that’s shades of Jung’s collective unconscious, or maybe there’s an underlying meta-reality...”

“My world? You’re not from earth?” Casey asked.

“Well, that, too, really sort of depends on perspective,” Loxy said. “Jon is from earth. I am his tulpa. Does that mean I am from Earth? Fersia, Alish, and Lester, they’re my tulpas. If you ask them, they each have their own origin reality, whether that’s fiction or not, depends on your perspective. This world is as real and as solid to us as is Jon’s origin world....”

“My world is a wonderland? You’re saying this world isn’t real that I am not real?” Casey said.

“You’re very real,” Loxy said. “And this is a crossover world. A world between worlds.”

“I am an NPC?!” Casey asked.

“Oh! I hate NPC,” Loxy said. “You are much more than an NPC. Why do people always get hung up on that? We can believe in tulpas, but if you encounter someone you didn’t create or invite, suddenly they’re lesser people? Do you think the characters in your dreams are just two dimensional character with no substance? You think they came from nowhere, instantly, with no initiation point?”

“I am a tulpa?!” Casey asked.

“Aren’t we all just tulpas of the big U? Aren’t we all more than what we think we are? You exist. You are real. And you are valued much more than you could ever imagine. And, you are awake,” Loxy said. She emphasized the last part.

“I..”

“It’s a lot. I hear you. But you can handle this. You love existential. You love grappling with the big stuff. Maybe this world exist only in Jon’s mind. Maybe Jon is a tulpa of a spirit or Almighty Isis and he lives in the imagination of the goddess!” Loxy said.

“Jon could go into my wonderlands?” Casey asked.

“Probably not a good idea,” Loxy said. “Being John Malkovich.”

“Oh!” Casey said. “Wait? Is everything a metaphor?”

“Particle-wave, solidity is never less substantial between states, it’s all one,” Loxy said. “Think of metaphors, or movies, as reality frames that run parallel to our own realities. We can access them because they really exist...”

“So, this world is Mr. Rogers turned Daniel’s make believe and I can change it how I see fit like Neo in the matrix?” Casey asked.

“Great metaphors. And no,” Loxy said. She took over making Casey’s pizza. “Metaphors are not absolute. They are filters for understanding, contextual; at some point in your rise you will find they’re no longer applicable for navigating and you will need to find new ones. There are always limitations when playing with others. This world is a consensual reality. Others are participating in it. You can make small changes here, as long the overriding super conscious allows for it. Some things are negotiable. Some things aren’t. Death, taxes, your birthday. You can do pretty much anything you want in your inner realms, but that doesn’t mean an absence of consequences.”

“So, I can negotiate with Jon for a better life?” Casey asked.

Loxy laughed. “He’s pretty amazing, but you’d be mistaken if you think he’s in charge of anything, even himself,” she said. “We’re all equally sovereign, but we also have self-imposed limitations due to contextual agreements through consensual chains of command.”

Loxy took a time out to put the pizzas in the oven. She directed them back to the sink where they washed their hands and put the aprons back up. She asked the cook to monitor the pizza and led Casey out of the kitchen area.

“We, team Sol, have a mission, to explore strange new worlds, to grow emotionally and intellectually, exploring consciousness, and we keep discovering there are parts of us that need sorting, which is kind of why we’re here. You’d be mistaken if you think we don’t have challenges and obstacles and difficulties. We have our own drama. Well, Jon has drama. I am the loving, guardian angel who keeps him on track. You are not our mission. We did not come here to find you or sort you. You are not special. That does not mean you aren’t valued. There are ten billion people on this planet; all of you together are special. You, Casey, are synchronicity. You are icing on our cake. You are the joy we discovered in the process of discovering ourselves. You are a hidden aspect of ourselves, as we are also an aspect of you. You have a life mission. It is your job to discover it and explore it take it as far as you like.”

They were in the dance space when she realized Bruno Mars was on stage. Mars began singing ‘Talking to the Moon.’ She stared at Bruno, trying to figure out if he were real or tulpa, whether she was awake or dreaming. “Please, don’t be a dream,” she found herself muttering under her breath. Loxy side hugged her. There was a moment when Casey thought she might dance; she wanted to let go and just move, but she found her knees strangely not solid. Loxy escorted her back to her seat and her mother. A moment later, Alish and the hostess were bringing pizzas. Loxy noticed the tears in Casey’s eyes. Her mother didn’t seem to notice.

“You’re not a fool, talking to the moon,” Loxy said. “It has heard you and you have heard its response. A plus to being sensitive.”

Mars sang one song. Casey watched as he shook hands with Jon and hugged Loxy up like they were friends. While he and Loxy were speaking, he looked at and sustained eye contact with Casey- and why wouldn’t he stare at her, she was staring at him- he looked back to Loxy and nodded. He went back to his table and his friends, one of which looked like Cee-Lo Green. Casey held her breath. Mars was bigger in effect than Heath had been, maybe because he was real. Or as real as anyone... She was still unpacking. Cee-Lo was real, and they were in a room



with her! Sure, they were across the way and there was no reason for them to be in the same room, except for the love of pizza and wings, which the Universe allowed for, contextually. She wanted to speak with them, but even if the Universe allowed her the ability to speak at this particular moment of star-struckness, she wouldn't have been able to say anything coherent. She liked music, especially when attached to a movie, but she wasn't musically inclined. She was not any of the cast of Glee and she didn't have dreams of being a singer. Mars and his and friends got up and headed to the stage, except Mars, who came straight to Casey. She couldn't breathe. He handed her a book.

"Forgive my intrusion, Mrs. Brodeur, Cassandra. Casey. I love the name Cassandra," Mars said. "I was returning this too the Alcove this evening, but Loxy said you should have it." When Casey failed to say anything or even move, he placed the book, 'Lucid Dreaming: Gateways to the Inner Self,' by Robert Wagoner, on the table beside her. "I found this book very useful for navigating the other worlds. I wish you well on your journey. Good evening."

And with that, Mars joined Cee-Lo on the stage and they did a bit of comedy as they each insisted the other lead and finally Cee-Lo agreed, hurried by Lester pushing a beat. They performed the song 'Forget you,' which was the friendly version. Their girlfriends sang back up, like the Pips, with Loxy and Fersia becoming Pips, mirroring their on stage dance as they swam before a shared mic. Casey felt like this was the perfect song for her mother tonight, and mother actually laughed, because Cee-Lo forgot a couple times to do the child friendly version. After this, Mars and Cee-Lo and friends quietly departed.

Loxy remained on stage. Alish joined her. They sang a Thai song; it was an older, but peppy pop song that spelled out 'LOVE' in English, with a smidgeon of English in the lyrics, but mostly it was all Thai. "All love is me, all love is you... Oh, baby..." And they made up sign languages to spell out LOVE. There were several more songs, including 'Love Will Keep us Together.' Casey was reminded of a Filipina version that she liked.

They lingered waiting for the bill and it was only during the intermission that Loxy explained their meal was on the house, her compliments. Mother thanked them, and still left a tip. Back at the car, mother invited Casey to sit up front:

"Front seat is empty of work stuff, if you want to come up," mother said.

"I am afraid of the airbag," Casey said, getting in back. She anticipated Heath arriving in the back with her. He didn't. She clutched the book Mars had given her.

“That was really good. I am glad you suggested it,” mother said.

“Me, too,” Casey said.

After the car was headed in the right direction, mother glimpsed back through the mirror to Casey. “You okay?” mother asked.

“Yeah, just full, of pizza and it’s been a full day. I’m tired,” Casey said.

“We really didn’t talk much,” mother said.

“Kind of hard to talk over music,” Casey said.

“Yeah,” mother agreed. “There’s no music now.”

“Does Loxy remind you of anyone?” Casey asked.

“You want to talk about Loxy?” mother asked.

“I am just curious,” Casey said.

“Valery Bertinelli,” mother said.

“Seriously?!” Casey asked. “I don’t think she looks anything like her.”

“You asked,” mother said. “That was who came to mind. ‘Chomps,’ starring Wesley Eure and Valery. Wow. I haven’t thought of Wesley in a long time... ‘Martial, Will, and Holly, on a routine expedition, when the greatest earthquake ever known...’”

“How can you not see Audrey Tautou?” Casey asked.

“Who?” mother asked.

“Amélie,” Casey said.

“Oh. Yeah, I don’t see that. I thought Jon reminded me of the guy from Pushing Daisies,” mother said. “Older, wiser. He owns that beard.”

“Do you even know who Bruno Mars is?” Casey asked.

“No. Should I?” mother asked.

“Only if you claim to like music,” Casey said. “He a pretty big deal.”

“He only sang one song,” mother asked. “I liked that other guy’s song better.”

“That other guy was Cee-Lo green, mother,” Casey said.

“They’re friends with your teacher friend?” mother asked.

“Well, they’re not tulpas,” Casey said.

“What?” mother asked.

“I meant a pookas,” Casey said.

“Still lost,” mother said.

“Harvey, Jimmy Stewart’s six foot rabbit,” Casey said.

“Oh. I hadn’t thought of that in ages, either. How do you remember all of this stuff?”  
mother asked.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” Casey said.

“Anyway, for being such a big deal, you didn’t seem all that star-struck,” mother said.

“Seriously? I was rendered speechless!” Casey said. “Maybe he didn’t notice. Maybe the dim lights hid the fact I wasn’t breathing.”

Mother nodded. “Are you breathing now?”

Casey stomped the floor and yelled. “OMG we met Mars and Green!” Mother laughed.  
When Casey returned to herself, mother became very serious.

“I am glad you had a good night. Do you want to live with me or dad?” mother asked.

Casey felt like the train she was on just left the track.

“I get a choice?” Casey asked.

“Yes,” mother said.

“You want me to choose between the two of you?” Casey asked.

“I want to know if you have a preference,” mother said.

Casey didn’t like the question. She felt like it was a trap. “He doesn’t want me,” Casey  
said.

“You’re avoiding the question and he didn’t say that,” mother said.

“‘I don’t skimp on child support’ is pretty clear, he doesn’t intend to invite me to go with  
him. Seriously, how awkward would that be for his new young girlfriend who is just starting her  
family and sorting her dreams?” Casey asked. “I’d rather stay with you. I am settled with school.  
I would like to continue to live at home and attend a local college to save money...”

“You don’t have to worry about college tuition,” mother said.

“I want to stay home,” Casey said.

“Maybe you need to get out more...”

“Seriously? You nearly had a heart attack when I got out of the Lyft car,” Casey said.

“You’ve never deviated before. It frightened me,” mother said.

“Are you wanting me to go live with dad? He’s never home! You may not be available,  
but at least you’re home,” Casey said, still in her own world she missed the fact her mother just  
gave her something real.

“What do you mean I am never available?” mother said.

“OMG, this is why we don’t talk,” Casey said. “If you’re not contradicting yourself, you’re invalidating my thoughts and feelings...”

“What have I invalidated?!”

““What do you mean I am never available?!”” Casey said. “It doesn’t matter if I am speaking real truth or perceived truth. I am telling you, you are not available. The proper response to that is, ‘I’m sorry. What can I do to show you I’m paying attention?’”

“Where do you learn this stuff from?” mother asked.

“Listening to you. You’re always correcting your staff’s responses,” Casey said. “Maybe that’s why I am so desperate to have something wrong with me. Then maybe you would notice me. Maybe you would listen to me the way I hear you listening to others.”

Casey seriously wanted Heath in the car with her.

After a few moments of silence, her mother said. “I am sorry, Casey. What can I do to show you I am paying attention?”

“Put your cellphone down and be with me,” Casey said. “Sometimes, we don’t even have to talk, like tonight, with the music. This was nice.”

“This was,” mother agreed. They arrived at home. She turned off the car. “You’re okay with us divorcing?”

Casey shrugged. “I kind of saw it coming. You’re his fourth wife. I think he’s stayed with you the longest. Maybe that’s something. Maybe his next one will be for life. He is pretty old. To be honest, I don’t think anything is going to change for me. I’ll probably see him as much as I do now.”

“I always looked forward to his returning home,” mother said.

“Yeah, me, too,” Casey said. “Are you going to kill yourself?”

“No! What in earth would make you ask that?” mother asked.

“So, you’re not in crisis,” Casey said. “You’re doing better than most.”

“I deserve that,” mother said.

“It’s never about deserve, mother,” Casey said, opening her door. “Coming in?”

“Not yet,” mother said. “I think I will have a private cry.”

“Yeah, me, too. New policy, please. If my door is shut, would you knock first?” Casey asked.

Mother thought about it. "I don't like closed doors in the house," mother said.

"I know. You're afraid of ghosts. I am not," Casey said. "May we agree that if my door is shut, you knock first? If I am awake, I promise to answer."

"Okay," mother said. "I love you, Casey."

"I love you."

Casey got out of the car, closed it softly, entered the house, and went right to her room and closed her door. She called out to Heath. No response. She gathered things for a late shower and went to the bathroom across the hall. She sent thoughts out to him as she flossed and brushed. She was apprehensive about using the toilet, but completed her business without interruption. She then decided there was no reason to hide this, or nakedness from Heath. People pee, they poop, and they shower. There was nothing a body did to be ashamed about. She undressed and got a quick shower. She was crossing to her room when mother passed. They hugged and they each went to their respective bed rooms. Casey didn't waste time turning things off and hopping into bed. She closed her eyes, heading to her wonderland. There was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Casey said.

Mother opened the door, but didn't come in.

"I forgot to call the bug person," mother said.

"There was no bug, mother," Casey said. "I spooked myself."

"Seriously?" mother asked.

Casey shrugged. "If you see a shadow, that just means the light you're looking for is right behind you."

"Oh, that's clever. May I use it?" mother asked.

"Sure," Casey said. "Good night."

Mother pulled the door shut. Casey pulled the covers up and tightened herself in. She then opened the lucid dreaming book from Mars. Just inside the cover was a list of people who had checked it out from the Discovered Alcove. If they were real names, Jon and Loxy entertained some very important people. On the next page, there was a note: "Dear Casey, have fun with this. Don't just have adventures, though. Dive deep! Your fan, B Mars." If having this book by her bed didn't prompt a lucid dream in and of itself, she believe nothing would. She sat it on the night shelf, more interested in returning to the wonderland than reading.

## Chapter 8

The white room was dust free and the door was open to 4242. She wondered where other numbers might take her and made mental note to write down numbers in her journal as she explored. She also thought she needed a new journal, as this likely warranted a whole new book! This was not just another chapter in the life of Casey. This was a new life. She found fresh feet print in the sand and followed them towards the lighthouse. The stars were brighter here than any night sky she had ever seen, in real life or in pictures. The ocean waves churned out a florescent blue. A distant thunderstorm sparked rainbow lightening, illuminating the clouds. A quarter moon made the sand look like diamonds as the waves shifted the shore. She stopped to spy the moon. It was not the earth's moon. It had its own oceans and land masses. It took her a moment to fully appreciate that. This was not a facsimile of her earth. This was a world for her and she was only just scratching the surface of what might be here. Behind her, giant sunflower faces were sleeping, their faces all tilted towards the earth.

For a moment she wondered if there would be ghosts or monsters.

"This is not mine-craft," Casey told herself.

She topped the hill and found a camp fire. The painter Heath and she had created earlier was there, painting the stars. She stopped to admire his work and then realized he reminded her of Robin Williams. He smiled at her. He rested his arms on his lap, holding the palette and brush.

"Do you know how I got here?" he asked.

"That may be my fault," Casey owned.

He looked at the stars. "I like the view here."

"It's pretty spectacular, isn't it," Casey agreed. She sat next to him, hugged her knees.

The fire was pleasantly warm. "I saw this movie once. 'What Dreams May Come.' Ever heard of it?"

"What's a movie?" the artist asked.

Casey shrug. "A new friend of mine suggested they're parallel universes."

"Your friend is a physicist?" the artist asked.

"She is a force of nature," Casey said.

Casey stood up to go find Heath. "Are you okay out here?"

“I am home amidst the stars,” he said. “I feel like I am trying to discover something. Maybe if I keep painting.”

“I wish you well,” Casey said. “You don’t have to stay out here. Feel free to come inside. I am sure there is a room for you and food in the kitchen.”

“Thank you,” the artist said.

“Call me Casey,” Casey asked.

“Thank you, Casey,” he said.

Casey lingered for a second, hoping he would say his name, but when he didn’t, when he diverted his eyes back to the stars, she turned and walked towards the lighthouse.

“Casey?” the artist said.

She turned to him. He was still not looking.

“Thank you for not asking,” the artist said.

“Asking what?” Casey asked.

“My name,” the artist said. “I am still getting over someone and think I would like to be no one for a while longer.”

“Being someone can be really challenging sometimes,” Casey agreed. “Why we rush to be someone amazes me. Those kind of things should take a lifetime. It also seems like sometimes, when something we try on fits us so well, others box us and it can be very hard to try something else on. People get ideas about us and don’t want us to evolve. Oh. Thank you.”

“I don’t understand,” the artist said.

“I don’t either. I think I have the glimmer of an epiphany forming, but...” Casey stopped. “You’re safe here, sir. Stay as long as you like.”

The lighthouse’s light flared and she continued towards it. She felt comfortable entering, as if she had always lived here. Heath was asleep on the couch by the window just inside the door. There was a candle lit on the side table. She was confident he was sleeping, as his chest moved easily as if breathing. She assumed tulpas breathe. She found a quilt and covered him. She then took a spare candle, lighting it from Heath’s candle, and explored the house some. She confirmed there was more than enough comfort food in the kitchen that the artist would not go hungry. She pressed on, going up a back winding stairs. There was a library with a bar that wrapped around the wall allowing a ladder to be pushed to all four corners. She quickly discovered every book she had ever read was available here. There was a comfortable box seat

window looking out over the water and rocks with the light sweeping out then back as it also spun about. There were two books on the seat, the ones she had been given today. They were mostly blank pages. The names and the inscription by Mars was in the lucid dreaming book. She found another room with an entertainment center. Every song and movie she had ever seen was available to her. She wanted to explore more, but felt exhausted. She returned to the couch and found Heath still sleeping. She hadn't considered how exhausting the day had been for Heath. This had been his first day. Sure, he didn't arrive in the world as a baby, but he had emotions and thoughts and expectations.

"I don't know if I am supposed to do anything special for you, like send you love or energy," Casey said. "I am grateful for you spending the day with me. It was my best day ever. Thank you."

The patterns on the quilt illuminated. The hearts and stars were especially eye catching, reminding her of the old Atari, gaming console's colors that were day-glow rainbows with a hint of gold. The game console had been given to her by her half-brother after he had introduced it to her. She sat in the lounge chair, put her feet up, and went to sleep.

## निर्मित

Most people arrive in their dreams with a story in progress. Most people don't question the dream contents, regardless of level of absurdity. Some people remember their dreams. Some people record them. Some people elevate them. Some people dismiss them. Casey found herself at an airport. She was in the terminal just seeing her dad off. He hugged her and boarded the plane. She realized this was odd. She should not be allowed in the terminal to say goodbye to her father. Ever since 911, no one enters without a ticket. She searched her pocket for a ticket and then realized...

"I am dreaming!" she said.

She turned in place, looking at everything. Euphoria kicked in. Things were increased in brightness and suddenly, she was awake and sitting up in bed.

"Damn it!" Casey said, mad and super stoked at the same time. She laughed.

Heath was suddenly beside her.

"You okay?" Heath asked.



“I was lucid in a dream!” Casey said.

“How cool was that?!” Heath said, sitting on the bed with her.

She propped herself up and took his hands. “It was amazing. I felt joy! Everything got super bright, realer than real... I was at an airport.”

“Do you think that means something?” Heath asked.

“Maybe,” Casey said. “People either go to the airport to say goodbye to someone or to say hello to someone.”

“You say goodbye, but I say hello,” Heath said.

Casey smiled. “I was saying goodbye to dad.”

“You okay?” Heath asked. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Casey said, seriously. “Look, he’s a pilot. I trust his ability to navigate. He has always gotten himself and a plane full of strangers to where they needed to be. I will continue to trust that about him.”

“What if he needs you?” Heath asked.

Casey shrugged. “He has a phone.”

“You have a phone. One you don’t like to use,” Heath said.

“I don’t want to chase him. If he wants to spend time with me, he knows where to find me. He’s the pilot,” Casey said.

Casey looked at the time. It was really too early to be up, but then, there was no way she was going back to sleep. She made a command decision to dress for school, came to the kitchen, made breakfast, got a pot of coffee ready to go at a touch of a button. She put breakfast before her, and tried an experiment. She picked up her plate without picking up her plate, and served a copy of her breakfast to Heath.

“Thank you,” Heath said.

They ate breakfast together and chatted about his evening. He had spent time with the artist, wondering where the music was coming from. Casey asked them the songs and they suddenly knew where the music coming from. He then retired to the house and fell asleep. Casey pulled out homework to do, but decided she didn’t want to do that. She wanted to experiment. She took out ‘Travels’ and flipped through it really fast. The letter Heath wrote fell out. She put it in the lucid dreaming book and put ‘Travels’ on the table.

“When we go to 4242 tonight, I want to see how much of what I just browsed is there and if it’s coherent and then do a compare and contrast in the morning,” Casey said.

“What a cool experiment,” Heath said. “Some people say our subconscious remembers everything.”

“We’ll find out,” Casey said, getting up and starting the coffee for her mother.

“Do you suppose I could have a cup?” Heath asked when the pot was half full.

“Sure,” Casey said, pouring herself a cup. “Cream?”

“Black,” Heath said.

“Always bet on black,” Casey said, movie quote. She sat a cup in her spot and then did her magic trick to give Heath a cup.

Heath drank his coffee, quietly looking out the window. Casey started breakfast for her mother, toast and eggs, scrambled. She then washed her dish and the pan. Mother arrived in the kitchen, confused.

“What’s all this?” mother asked.

“I decided to practice being more responsible for myself,” Casey said. “And, I thought I would do something nice for you. Shall I pour you a cup of Joe?”

“Okay...” mother said, going to the table.

“Don’t sit there!” Casey said quickly.

“This is no longer dad’s seat,” her mother said, pulling the chair out defiantly. “I will sit where I want.”

Heath got up and moved to mother’s seat.

“You’re right,” Casey said. “Sorry.”

She brought mother her breakfast and a cup of coffee. Mother stared at her.

“You are absolutely glowing this morning,” mother said.

“Thank you,” Casey said.

“No, seriously, you look different,” mother said.

“Please, mom, I am the same as I have always been. This is not a movie thing where I wake up and go from dowdy to perfect in ten frames or less. I am not Cinderella. I am not going to the ball,” Casey said.

“You have always been perfect,” mother said.

“That’s what mothers are supposed to say, which may or may not have any validity in the real world,” Casey said.

“Allow your mother to be right this once,” mother said.

Casey considered. “Very well. I have reread the tape measure and agree. I am practically perfect in every way.”

Mother laughed. “Very well, Mary.”

निर्मित

Casey was delivered to school early enough she had time to read from the Lucid Dreaming book. Finding a quiet place to read was the trick. Students walked in groups, pairs, or alone, and many of them on their cell phone. She felt like an alien, not plugged in. Heath walked with her and commented on it. “People are looking for themselves,” she commented. After the lunch incident, she half expected everyone to have creatures following them, but everything seemed normal.

“Maybe the noise level in the cafeteria is so much that your normal barriers break down,” Heath said.

She stopped. The others from detention had gathered. So had their ‘tulpas.’ She didn’t know they were tulpas. ‘Tulpas’ was just a new word she had which she was substituting for hallucinations. The definition of tulpa did seem to fit Heath. These others, they defied explanation. They stuck with their hosts. They might have just been hallucinations that she had assigned to them. Brenda’s squirrel noticed her and barked, shaking it’s tail.

“Come with me,” Casey said.

Heath followed. They tentatively approached the group. The squirrel climbed Brenda, circling about her and arrived on her shoulder. She didn’t seem to know it was there.

“May I join?”

“You’re part of the group,” Brenda said.

“Before anyone says anything, I would like to test something,” Case said. “Brenda, you told me you’re a squirrel, Todd a star, and Irene, a bear. Maria, you’re a storm. It reminds me of Pooh and the song ‘I’m just a little black rain cloud.’ Michael, a penguin; specifically, a baby emperor penguin.” The Penguin said, ‘freezing.’ “Juan, you have a big foot. Or a Wookiee. Not sure. I don’t see a lightsaber or a crossbow, yet. Chris, a ghost? No, a Pokémon. Oh! Gardevoir!

Purple and pink hair instead of green; seriously dark overtones, probably Emo. Nice touch. Perry, Manga? Monster Musume? Lala? Alex, a falcon. James, Katniss. Ask her to not shoot at Harry Potter. Trust me on that. Renata, American Chavez! Miss America super heroine..."

"You know her?" Renata asked.

"She's hot," Heath said.

"She's gay," Casey said. She realized she had just answered Heath in front of them, but no one seemed to catch it and she rambled on, looking to everyone: "The first openly lesbian super heroine?"

"You do know her!" Renata said.

"Are you..." Juan began.

"I am not gay," Casey interrupted, pointing at Juan.

"I wasn't going to say gay," Juan said.

"Are you?" Perry said.

"That's not something you ask," Renata said.

"I was going to ask 'are you psychic?' I haven't shown my picture to anyone." Juan said.

They all asked questions at once.

"Stop!" Casey said. She closed her eyes and held up her hands in an 'I surrender' gesture. "I am not psychic. Please, don't start that rumor. I am just super sensitive. I see things and hear things and I remember things in weird ways. Seriously, if there is a movie context, I can remember it. I can do the entire circulatory system thanks to the Happy Days. I've seen enough episodes of Mash and House that I could probably fake a day as a Doctor. But that's not the point. This stuff I am seeing isn't magic. Maybe all of you are transmitting some kind of subtle signal and my brain is interpreting this stuff and giving me images. Did you know 90 percent of all language is non-verbal?"

"There is no way in hell you got Lala from nonverbal communication," Perry said.

"You watch manga on your cell phone between classes?" Casey asked. He nodded.

"Maybe that's it, or maybe it's because you doodle Lala and I've seen her on your book covers. Chris, you play Pokémon Go and you're always leaving Gardevoir in gym at the corner by the fountain. I play sometimes."

"Explain American Chavez," Renata said.

"Seriously? Open your jacket," Casey said.

Renata opened her jacket. American Chavez was flying across her t-shirt. "I must have seen it."

"I wish I had got Miss America," Todd said.

"Stars are cool. A force of nature. You just have to learn to use your super power," Casey said.

"Okay, but explain Loxy and the pictures under the seat and how they all seem to fit us," Brenda said.

"That's harder," Casey said. "But I saw her last night. She sang with Bruno Mars."

"No way!" they all said.

Casey took the Lucid Dreaming book from her backpack and opened it to the note. Everyone gathered closer and she requested breathing space. They gave her space and she passed the book. The bear's mouth was agape. Miss America winked at Casey, and she wondered if it was her or Renata that was expressing interest. She didn't want to sort it. Heath wanted to explore it. He shoved playfully at her, saying "I think someone likes you."

"No way," Brenda said.

"You could have just signed it," Chris said.

"She's telling the truth," Irene said. She pointed to the stamp. "I have been to this book store. It's technically not a store. You can't buy any books there. I go there because I can find books in Russian. Anyway, I have eaten at the palace and they frequently stream live music. Local bands mostly, but anytime a star visits they usually sing for their meals. One song, one meal."

"Loxy's one of the owners," Casey said.

"This is a great book on lucid dreaming," James said. James realized he now held the groups attention. "I've been reading lucid dreaming books for a while. I like this one. I figured lucid dreaming was the only way I would ever meet Jennifer Lawrence. Her and Nymphadora."

"You go, dog," Heath said.

Casey gave him a glare.

"Oh, what?! He did the same thing you did," Heath said.

Casey frowned, but nodded. "James, did you meet her?"

"In his dreams," Perry laughed.

"Actually," James said.

“Yeah, but, when you woke up the next morning, was she there? Did you hallucinate her the rest of the day?” Casey asked.

“I wish,” James said.

“But you see them?” Brenda asked. “Like right now? They’re with us?”

Casey was quiet for a long moment.

“Yes,” Casey admitted. “Please, don’t tell anyone.”

“Are you kidding?” Juan asked. “Who’d believe us?”

They all started asking questions at once, the hallucinations started talking or chattering at once, except for the star, which brightened in luminosity, and the lightening issued thunder.

“Please!” Casey said, closing her eyes and covering her ears. “I don’t have any answers. I am just reporting my experience. I tried lucid dreaming and I woke up able to experience things in a new way. I don’t know what it means. I do believe I am not special. Maybe we’re supposed to start a weird club and help each other. Or maybe there isn’t ‘we’re supposed to’ but lots of opportunities to do something as a team. I just don’t know. I have been a loner forever and I don’t know how to do any of this. I don’t know how to have friends or be one.”

“We all struggle with that,” Renata said.

“We could solve mysteries,” Irene said.

“No,” Casey said.

“We could fight crime and kick butt,” Renata said.

“No! No butt kicking,” Casey said. “I am a pacifist. No fighting or harming others.”

“Seriously?” Chris asked. “What’s the point of having Pokémon if you don’t battle?”

“Seriously, the only reason I don’t play more is too much emphasis on the battle. They don’t have a dance off training option in lieu battling. Raising dogs and chickens to fight is wrong, why would I want to do that to a cute little Pokémon?!” Casey asked.

“They’re not real,” Chris said.

“They’re real to me,” Casey said.

“We could rescue penguins,” Michael said. “We lost like 90 percent of the population of penguins due to litter in the oceans and over fishing...”

“I would love to, but better people have brought that to our society’s attentions and we still do the same old thing,” Casey said.

“We could help people. We use your insight and figure out what’s wrong with them and help them,” Maria said.

“I like that, but helping people is seriously hard work. It really takes a team,” Brenda said.

“We’re a team,” Perry said. “Who should we help first?”

“We don’t just help people. It’s not like you can just go up to the person and say you won the lottery and we’re going to change your life. You can’t suddenly start being nice to someone after years of treating them badly or indifferently and then expect them to be receptive. They would question your motives for starters. People are like Mere Cats. You can’t come at them directly or quickly. You got to come at people sideways,” Casey said.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Renata said. “Direct is better.”

“You can’t just tell someone they’re pretty and they accept it, especially if they are telling themselves they’re not pretty on a daily basis,” Casey said. “Look. There are a couple people on campus that seriously disturbed me. I don’t want to say their names. One is an obese girl.” Casey told them what she saw. “I think that means there is a skinny girl trapped inside her yearning to be free, but maybe that’s too easy. She could be feeling trapped in so many different ways. We’re not going to change her eating and exercise habits overnight. Especially if she is compensating for something else that’s worse in her life. And if there’s a biological component, like a thyroid issue, well, we’re just screwed. We’re not professionals. And it’s not like she doesn’t know she’s fat. Very few people like her, and people make jokes about her behind her back. I am sure she knows that. People hear that even if they think they can’t hear that, and it only takes hearing that once and then you hear it the rest of your life whether people are doing it or not. If we went to her as a group and said we want to help and befriend her, she’ll either run for the hills, or... Worst case scenario, she is so starved for affection that she latches onto us like a giant vampire leech and sucks all our energy out. In that scenario she might sabotage any success to keep us in her life, and or make us so angry that she drive us to treat her like everyone is already treating her to keep her at bay. The other guy that bothered me was a smoker. I saw death handing him cigarettes. That bothered me so much I threw away my vape on the spot. I probably didn’t have to do that, but death is pretty scary looking. Lala excepted. And do you suppose that kids doesn’t know smoking is bad for him? And if he’s doing K2, well, that shit will

kill him. Telling him not to will most likely result in him giving me a finger and taking a bigger draw. So, yeah, I want to help people, but I don't have a fucking clue how to do it."

The group was silent. The bell had rung and the school yard was clear.

"Well, that's why we have a team," Brenda said. "Let's meet and figure this out, together."

"Did you guys not hear the bell?" the vice principal asked. "Come on! Let's go. Chop chop. Casey, come here."

The group scattered to their respective classes.

"I heard you had a bad day yesterday," the vice principal said. "Are you going for two in a row?"

"No, Sir. I am not aiming for a bad day," Casey said. "That said, most things don't resolve themselves over night. I am still sorting. Better, but sorting."

"Well, maybe you should start with picking some better friends," the vice principal said.

Casey fumed. "What a horrible thing to say. It's wrong on so many levels I don't even know how to begin to chastise you for your lack of professionalism. Hell, for your lack of compassion for people. They're human beings, and like it or not, we're most likely the ones who will be taking care of your ass when you're old and in a nursing home."

"Go to class," the vice principal said.

Casey went. As she walked, Heath walked with her. "You are awesome."

"I don't feel it. I should have something better," Casey said.

"You said enough," Heath said. "I saw it in his eyes. He realized he over stepped."

"Heath, would you be angry if I asked you to go to the wonderland until lunch?" Casey asked. "You're a bit of a distraction."

"I am sorry," Heat said.

"It's not a sorry thing. I like it. You're the best distraction I have ever had," Casey said. "But I need to do my school stuff."

"Sure, Casey," Heath said. "Just call if you need me."

"Thank you," Casey said. She hugged him and then hurried off to class.



## Chapter 9

Art class had shared, round tables, with a Lazy Susan that spun art supplies. Imogen was looking over James' art, and complimented him. And then said something that completely drew Casey's ire.

"She'd look a lot smarter if you gave her glasses," Imogen said, pushing his glasses back into place.

"Seriously?" Casey asked. "She has to have a prop to be smart?! What is wrong with guys? For a girl to be smart she has to be blind, too? Maybe you would be happier if all women were blind, deaf, and dumb..."

Casey stopped. She heard Heath in the backdrop of her mind: "Casey. Women are forces of nature. They are the most powerful creatures in the Universe. They are, and have always been, the gatekeepers to life and love. Males are intimidated by concentrate and need to dilute it in order to come closer."

James and Imogen were still experiencing the effects of being dazzled, and probably unsure of what had just happened. Everyone in class was looking their way.

"Is there a problem?" the teacher asked. She was dowdy, and her hair was up, and she wore glasses. And she was perfect just the way she was.

"I was out of line," Casey said. "I am sorry."

James and Imogen went back to their respective work.

"You okay?" teacher asked.

"I said I was sorry," Casey said.

The teacher nodded. "That's nice. Your parents let you watch Blue Lagoon?"

"Blue Lagoon?" Casey asked. She was suddenly annoyed again. "This is not Christopher Akins!"

"Oh?" the teacher said. "I guess it just reminds me of him. I had the biggest crush..."

"This is Heath Ledger," Casey said.

"Who?"

"OMG, seriously?" Casey asked.

"Sorry," she said. "And who is this? Musetta Vander?"

"Who?"

“The girl,” the teacher asked.

“That’s Loxy,” Casey said. She studied it. “I admit it’s not a very good likeness. But Heath is perfect!”

“He is,” the teacher agreed.

“He seems shorter than I remember,” James said.

Casey glared at him. He turned back to his art. Casey turned back to hers, suddenly wondering if she had shortened him.

The art teacher pushed on, stopping by James. “Still drawing Jennifer, I see.”

“You told me no more Tonk,” James said.

“No I didn’t,” the teacher said. “I asked you to expand your interests. Try drawing one of your peers...”

“Don’t you dare draw me,” Casey snapped.

“Why?” the teacher asked.

“Drawing people is intimacy,” Casey said. “So is speaking about people and singing about people and writing... That’s like magic and communion and prayer all wrapped up into one act. It’s too much.”

“I am not going to draw you,” James said. “You frighten me.”

“I frighten you?” Casey asked.

Casey teared up. She turned to her art. A tear splashed on Loxy while studying. “Why am I so annoyed?” Neither Heath nor Loxy responded.

Casey pulled out a clean sheet of paper and began drawing, trying not to draw anyone specific. She found form in a flourish of hurried, light lines. She darkened in the form and erased away some of the ripples. This new person arriving on the scene was clearly female. Powerful. She had the long, dark, blown hair look of an anime. But that was just pencil. Casey saw red hair. She took out a red ink pen and added some color. Black and white, with red hair and red lips. Freckles. She was hyper feminine, hour glass, ample bosom. Casey bit her lip, wondering how she could be attracted to something she drew. The mouth was so perfect, she wanted to keep tracing them, deepening the shadow. The woman was poised on the edge of the Universe ready to become everything. Ready to receive everything. Her dress was pushed back, revealing thighs and knees, and she was barefoot. The dress was a clash of Egyptian goddess, Gaelic pheasant,

and modern Gypsi. When she finished she realized class time was almost all gone. She had been so entranced that she had lost track of time.

“Wow,” Imogen said. “That’s awesome.”

“OMG, may I draw her?” James asked.

The teacher came back around. “Who is she?”

“My name is Aoife,” said the subject of the art, standing over Casey, approving the work. Casey wrote “Aoife” on the paper, but spoke it out loud: pronounced EEE-fa, “the greatest female warrior ever.”

“Nice,” the teacher said. She took a picture of it with her cell phone, as well as the Heath and Loxy drawing. “May I include them on our class page?”

“Can I?” James asked.

Casey shrugged, giving the drawing of Aoife to James; “Sure, I am threw drawing,” Casey said.

“Oh!” the teacher said. “Why would you say that? You’re brilliant.”

The bell rang and Casey got up to leave, purposely avoiding eye contact with Aoife. Aoife followed. She bounced in a manner similar to Heath.

“Hey. Stop! Cassius! I command you to stop,” Aoife said.

Casey stopped. “What did you call me?”

“Cassius,” Aoife said.

“Casey,” Casey corrected. “Heath?!”

Heath arrived. “What? Oh! Wow. You are amazing...”

“I don’t have time for this,” Casey said. “Go with Heath. Catch her up to speed.”

“I will not be spoken to...”

“Please. I am important. I am at school. If you want a dialogue with me, you will have to schedule an appointment. Now, go with Heath,” Casey said.

“Very well. Because of your importance, I will tolerate this inconvenience for now,” Aoife said.

“You’ll like the lighthouse,” Heath was saying.

“Heath! Behave!” Casey said.

“I think you over estimate my charm,” Heath said.

“Keep it platonic,” Casey said.

“You are friends with Plato?” Aoife asked. “I now underestimated your importance. I apologize.”

The bell rang. “Go,” Casey said. “I am late. Again...”

निर्मित

It was book review day in literature class. The theme was favorite books, regardless of reading level. Casey dreaded speaking. She did not want to come up, but she came up, eyes to the floor. She didn't have a book. She had an I-Pad. She had a stack of papers.

“I read a lot,” Casey told the floor. “I love reading. Before I was born, my parents read to me. They read to me every day since I was born until I was seven. They read to me in French and English and Tagalog. One of their core books early on was the Little Prince.” She paused for a moment, thinking there was something here she needed to sort, but then remembered she was being watched and dropped the matter. “I experienced this artifact in three different languages; there are things in other languages that can't be translated into English. I have three maps, and when they overlap, I have my own unique map. I love this story, it's primary, but it's not my favorite. I find it hard to pick a favorite because I like them all. They all fit together in an intricate way, like the Roman 'many room memory technique'. Every book is a different room. Each room has a different ambiance. It comes with tastes and lights and people... I have a favorite genre, but it's not really a genre. The powers that be want it to go away. It's a phenomenon. Fan-fiction. I don't like writing it. I love reading it. I love it because it feels like I am getting a glimpse into another person's inner world. Fan-fiction comes in a range of quality. I could care less about the quality of the writing. What interests me is the contents. What interests me are the way people relate to their fiction of choice. You can't enter their world without knowing something of their reference world, so sometimes I have to do homework and try and determine what is cannon and what is original. I find there is a whole slew of fan-fiction that is better written than books published by traditional vendors. I have a list of fan-fiction I think is better written than the movies and tv shows that are pushed on us. I mean pushed. We are being force fed. I am not saying that it's all bad, but if you consider the amount of influence on you from commercials to billboards to facebook, from the metaphor of a fish, you're trying to go upstream but the force against you is Niagara Falls. Get out of the mainstream. Get out of the

thunderous noise and go around through the side eddies. You will find some amazing places, gentle pools, oasis...”

She handed the stack of paper to someone in the front row. “Take one, pass it on. These are my favorites. They are available for download for free. The best things in life really are free if you have the eye to see. Sometimes you have to forgive grammar to find something beautiful. The movie studios and publishers should do more to encourage fan-fiction, and find ways of incorporating their ideas. I say that because we, the true audience, are sophisticated consumers and if they continue to treat us like idiots, they will eventually lose revenue. We want more quality in our lives. We, the millennials, no longer want to just be spoon fed and told what we will like. We want to participate. We want choices. Thank you.”

The class clapped as Casey headed back to her seat.

“Hold on, Casey,” the teacher said.

Casey went back to the front. She frowned at the floor.

“Pick one of these favorite and tell us about it,” the teacher said.

“Take the Star Wars fan fiction I listed there,” Casey said. “Think about every Star Wars movie you ever saw. The Jedi’s are so pompously arrogant that they almost beg people to step up and become Sith. The first three prequel movies, it’s all about balance and how Anakin is supposed to be the one to bring balance. Did anyone ever consider maybe there is too much Light and Anakin did exactly what was prophesized! Anakin brought balance. That is in these books. More than that, take the Last Jedi. It was so horribly written I may never see another Star Wars movie. There is evidence, direct video evidence, that if you say anything negative about this movie you get labeled a hater. The producers don’t care about us. They don’t care about the product. The author of this fanfiction cares. This fan-fiction has a Jedi character that can bi-locate. That means be in two places simultaneously. This is the power of mystics and saints that was never used in any official Star Wars book or movie, until the Last Jedi. This author published these online two years prior to the last Jedi. We get hints that this ability is a Jedi skill. Yoda says ‘long have I watched this one...’ suggesting at least remote viewing, but this authors takes that to the next level. He develops it over time. In the Last Jedi, Luke suddenly manifests this ability and we have never seen it before and we’re supposed to just accept it? That’s BS.

“Preston G Waycaster is a neutral Jedi. I absolutely related to him. He’s the Jedi that isn’t a Jedi. I relate to him because he is not perfect. He is socially awkward, like me. I experience

him as someone who has Asperger's, or someone who was home schooled, which makes sense, he was raised by a Droid on a distant, unknown moon; alone. No people. There's a girl my age in here; her name is Ten. I wanted to relate to her, but though I liked her, I liked how smart and independent she was, I couldn't relate to the amount of trauma she experienced in her life. I can't even imagine. My life is reasonably stable, no trauma, and I feel like the world is always weighing in on me, death and mayhem around every corner, and here she is, someone who was brutalized and a survivor. I can't even walk across the cafeteria without having a panic attack... Sometimes I wish I had past trauma just so I could have an explanation for why I have so much anxiety about social settings. This thing is called Star Wars. Wars is not fun and glamour. People get hurt, people suffer, and it's usually because there are feuding factions that have nothing to do with the general population. This book explores what it's like for the average person. I am that person. This is where I fit.

"I don't like speaking in a group. I like to be alone. I find I am annoyed easily. I don't want to be angry. I go to the movies to escape. So, when I say I was disheartened by what Disney gave us, I am really understating that. Consider the amount of money they threw into making it. Throwing money at something doesn't mean it will be better. It bothers me they don't seem to care, that they can do whatever they want. I hate they think we will accept anything. Star Wars, that's sacred, that's like my religion they're messing with and I want them to treat it as sacred as the people who write fanfiction. How many great writers are there in the world? How many of them are Star Wars fans? Why aren't they mad and writing Star Wars books trying to make a really good story? Why don't they bring James Cameron? He's never had a flop! When someone tries to force feed me an agenda, like people throwing tantrums when they don't get their way, breaking rules, big rules and then other characters laughing it off like boys will be boys, I get turned off! That's just not acceptable. Here we have an admiral, supposedly the smartest commander ever and she self-sacrifices? That's not real. In my world, the guy that broke the rules would have been the one sacrificed, not the smartest, most experienced one among them, especially when they were losing! Women aren't that stupid. Admiral women are even smarter than the average woman. But even in her sacrifice, she witnesses half the fleet being blown up before she comes to the conclusions she needs to kamikaze? She was dead the moment she stayed behind! Kamikaze should have been a foregone conclusion. These fanfictions are better. The characters in this fanfiction are real, they're complex... I empathize with

them. I felt nothing for anyone in the last movie. I like Ray, I like Flyn, and I love BB, but I feel sorry for the actors that they can't protest and say 'I want do this until you bring back a good script.' Movies like this guarantee fan-fiction is not just a fad. We don't want fluff. We don't want cliché. We want quality. We want smart. We want sexy. We want spiritual. Star Wars has always had the potential for that level of complexity. I read these books and I was transported to another world. I read these and believed learning the Force is possible. I want to believe in magic. These gave me evidence for better. These gave me hope. A New Hope."

Casey started back to her seat. She stopped herself. She made eye contact with the teacher. She nodded smartly.

"Thank you, Casey," the teacher said. "You exceeded my expectations."

## Chapter 10

Casey ate lunch sitting in the grass while Heath tried to balance the curb outlining the grassy area. He was balancing and holding a wooden sword. Aoife was not struggling with balance. She hit his Heath's sword with her wooden sword, spun and kicked him in the butt, sending him off the ledge.

"You fight like a girl," Aoife said.

"I am an actor, not real knight," Heath said. "Wait a minute! You're a girl. Isn't that like really rude?"

"I am not a girl," Aoife said. "I am a woman!"

Casey half pecked at her food, entertained by their play, but trying not to be obvious about watching them. There were boys in a circle smoking and cracking up. She ignored them, mostly. She suspected the tall one had been making glances at her, but she had yet to catch him directly looking. Brenda and Renata approached.

"May we sit with you?" Brenda asked.

"Sure," Casey said.

Brenda and Renata sat. They seemed serious. Brenda handed her the lucid dreaming book.

"Casey," Brenda said. "I owe you an apology."

"For what?" Casey asked.

"Please, don't be mad," Brenda said, bringing out Heath's unsent letter. The seal was broken. "I found it in my bag. Maybe it was in the book and fell out? I was curious..."

Casey had a range of emotions, but she bit down on her response. Heath and Aoife were no longer playing. Whatever burst of energy she sent out into the world, it drew their attention. They came closer. Aoife looked serious, ready for a fight.

"It was never supposed to be read," Casey said. "I was careless. This is my fault."

"It's the most beautiful thing I ever read," Renata said.

"I shared it with her," Brenda said. She frowned. "It made me cry and she really wanted to know why and she read it and she cried... We shared it with a few people."

"OMG," Casey said.

"Did you lucid dream Heath?" Brenda said.



“I think I have gone beyond ludic dreaming,” Casey said.

“Really?” both Brenda and Renata asked.

“What’s beyond lucid dreaming?” Renata asked.

“Wonderlands,” Casey said.

They were speechless.

“Do you really want to hear about this?” Casey asked.

“Yes,” Brenda and Renata said.

Brenda and Renata both drew closer. They were interrupted by one of the boys that had been smoking. Casey knew his name. Jeff Caldwell. Everyone knew his name.

“What do you want, Jeff?” Brenda asked.

“Not you,” Jeff said. “Casey. Would you like to go to the prom?”

“No, thank you,” Casey said, without any hesitation. She turned back to her friends Brenda and Renata.

“May I ask why?” Jeff asked.

Casey looked up. The sun was behind him which gave him sort of a halo, but also made it hard to keep eye contact with him. She didn’t like the advantage it gave him and she wished he would kneel or sit to be on the same level. Aoife threatened to skewer him, but Heath tempered her response, lowering her sword.

“I would rather you accept ‘no thank you and move on with life,’” Casey said.

“I’d really like to know whether you’re against proms in general, or you’re not interested in me,” Jeff said.

“I appreciate how much effort it took to come and ask me out. Thank you. That was nice. Braver because your friends are watching. You took a risk. Yay you. Hell, you even risked asking me out in front of my friends. Huge points for that. But I really don’t want to explain ‘no thank you.’ It might turn into a negotiation. This feels like a negotiation,” Casey said. “Accept the ‘no thank you.’”

“Just one reason?” Jeff asked.

“I will give you ten if you will listen without interrupting,” Casey said.

“Ten? Okay. I am listening,” Jeff said.

“Let’s start with, I don’t dance. They still dance at proms, right? So, not really interested,” Casey said. “I am also adverse to crowds and loud music. You really can’t have a

conversation when there is loud music. I don't want to yell to be heard. The whole point of a date is to talk and get to know someone and so, movies and proms are not really conducive to getting to know someone. Those are things people do once they're settled. Just sitting next to someone in a theatre is not getting to know them..."

"We could just find a quiet place and talk..." Jeff said.

"See, you're negotiating, and you agreed to listen without interrupting," Casey said. "We're not on the same playing field. You are technically superior in rank, by virtue of being a senior, but we are so not on the same intellectual level. Which leads me to number 2. You're not interested in me. You have never shown any interest in me. I am not sure why you're showing interest in me now, but the fact you didn't accept my 'no thank you' is sufficient evidence for me that you don't care about me. You have an agenda. I can imagine what that agenda is, and that's not going to happen with me. The fact that you interrupted me after you agreed to listen, more evidence you're not interested in me, and the fact your eyes are glazing over now suggest you're not listening to me even now.

"Three, you're a senior. I don't want to date a senior. Even if going to the prom meant we discovered we liked each other, you're going off to college and I will be here another three years. I know enough about long distance relationships from relatives and friends back in the Philippines to know I don't want a long distance relationship. Especially with you. You're too hot a commodity and you're a bit of a player, and I don't want to invest feelings in a short term, temporary thing. And it's not just the class difference. The age difference is problematic for me. I am not opposed to older partners. But if you're 18, or will be soon, that would mean what, at least three years of potential legality issues? 17 and younger are not able to consent, even if they think they're consenting. I imagine I will enjoy sex. If we had any chemistry, and we don't, I would want sex. If we had sex, and it was any good, I would just want more sex. I imagine I would want to continue, regardless of you being at serious risk of statutory rape. Not that I would report you. Even if you broke up with me, which your history suggest you would, I wouldn't report. Now, if I got pregnant, the state might pick that up. My parents would report you if I didn't. Well, my dad would. My mother would kill you. She'd kill me, too. Oh, and my parents know everything. Are you ready for that level of transparency? Are you seriously willing to risk jail time, buddy? The fact you're asking me out suggest some questionable ethics on your part.

Do you want that reputation? Are you trying to get your last underage score in before you can't touch this? No, thank you! I don't want anything to do with this hot mess.

"Four, you're tall. I don't like tall. I seriously don't understand why society says women should prefer tall. Hypothetically, if we were having sex, I'd be stuck looking at your chest. I don't want to look at your chest. I want eye contact. You can't have sex and simultaneous eye contact with tall guys. I prefer men be shorter than me. I wish all men would adopt this rule.

"Five, you were dating Amanda. She is like the hottest, most popular girl in school. I am so not Amanda. There are rumors why it ended. Most of those rumors came from you. I have heard you speaking smack about her, dissing her behind her back. That's not cool. Maybe your complaints about her are valid. I doubt it. The wagon making the most noise is always empty. Even if everything you said about her is a hundred percent accurate, you were the one I heard talking smack. I never heard her say one unkind thing about you. I never heard anyone say that she's said anything bad about you. You have clearly demonstrated to the entire campus how you will treat your next partner when it goes south. Why would anyone want to sign up to be dogged by you? You have a reputation for relationships going south. Not a bad thing, per say. We're supposed to be dating and figuring ourselves out... Your eyes are glazing again. I suspect you're thinking disparaging words about me even now, like 'you cold hearted bitch.' I am sure if you spread that a lot people will believe it because lots of people want to kiss your ass and be your friend. They're likely to empathize with you due to your social position. I wouldn't bank on that lasting past high school, though.

"But, let's go there. Six, there's a lot of people kissing your ass. Do I detect anger? Yay! That at least suggests something has gotten through your shields. It also suggest you have a low threshold for hearing things contrary to your paradigm. That should be a bullet point in itself. Anyway, anger better than eyes glazing. It actually means you're listening. You're probably not use to hearing 'no' or having someone speak truth to you. Ass kissing is rarely truthful. You will never learn anything about your true self as long as you have an entourage that only does what you want to do when you want to do it, and you won't maintain that if you don't ever entertain their wants..."

"Are you done?" Jeff asked.

"You don't want to hear all ten? Refer to bullet two. It's a really hard bullet to swallow," Casey said. "Forget for the moment that I am already seeing someone..."

“Who would date you?” Jeff asked.

“Now, see? You just highlighted three bullet points in one mouth full,” Casey said.

“Maybe I am dating the ghost of Heath Ledger. None of your business who I am dating or if I am really dating. I don’t want to date you. I also didn’t want to explain myself because I didn’t want to sound mean, but I don’t think you can accept nice when it goes against your preferences. Let’s start over. You just asked me to the prom. My response, ‘No, thank you.’ Are we done, or do you want me to give you the remaining four in the form of a rant?”

Jeff walked away.

“Wow,” Brenda and Renata said.

“I think the days of you being known as the wall flower are over,” Heath said.

“I am in love with you,” Renata said.

“Yes!” Heath said. “I so called that.”

Casey swallowed. “I finding it difficult to recover,” Casey said. “Where were we?”

“You are like the best-spoken person I have ever met,” Brenda said.

Casey began to cry.

“OMG,” Heath said.

“Who hurt you?!” Aoife said. “I will kill them and drink from their skull...”

“What’s wrong?” Brenda and Renata asked.

“You both really like me?” Casey asked. “Even after I was so mean to Jeff. I don’t want to be mean...”

They hugged her and reassured her. Heath convinced Aoife that they should return to the wonderland.

“You want to join the debate team with me?” Renata asked.

“I don’t like speaking in front of an audience,” Casey said.

“Me neither,” Renata said. “That’s why I joined the debate team. I was hoping to build confidence.”

“We should exchange numbers,” Brenda said.

“Yes,” Renata said.

“Okay,” Casey said. “But, you should know, I don’t live by my phone. I don’t respond quickly. My mom checks my phone periodically. And though I have facebook, I am not on there,

either, for the same reasons. I don't want the tech to rule my life. Facebook seriously makes me depressed. Everyone looks happy and they're really not."

"Take care numbers. You respond when you want to respond," Renata said.

"You say that, but I imagine when you experience the reality of me, you will not want to continue a friendship," Casey said.

"Let us worry about that part," Brenda said.

निर्मित

Mother arrived late. Casey, Brenda, Renata, and Todd stood together and said goodbye. She proceeded to the car and got in.

"Yay," mother said. "New friends?"

"Or old friends I didn't realize I had," Casey said.

"Good for you," mother said.

"I would like less commentary on my life," Casey said.

"It's what mothers do," mother said.

Mother drove. Casey looked for Heath and Aoife, quietly expecting them to join, but not calling for them. She wondered if she could tap into the wonderland without full immersion. She heard from Heath: 'we're fine, be with mom.' Casey became aware that mother had deviated from her normal path.

"Where are we going?" Casey asked.

"Surprise," mother said.

"I don't like surprises," Casey said.

"Everyone likes surprises," mother said.

"I don't," Casey said.

Mother turned into a car dealership and parked. She turned off the car and unbuckled.

"Come on, let's go look."

"You want a new car?" Casey asked.

"Sometimes you are so dense," mother said. "I am buying you a car."

"I don't want a car," Casey said. "I don't even know how to drive."

"You start lessons Saturday," mother said. "Surprise."

Casey felt a ton of horror and probably projected an exaggerated amount back out into the universe. She wanted to throw up. “I don’t want to learn to drive.”

“With your father out of the picture, I can justify getting you a hardship license,” mother said.

“I don’t want to drive,” Casey repeated. She wiped tears from her eyes with her sleeves.

“Oh, don’t do that,” mother said.

“I don’t want to drive,” Casey said.

“I am buying you a car because I love you,” mother said.

“Buying me a car doesn’t mean you love me more than other parents,” Casey said.

“You’re saying I don’t love you?” mother said.

“No! I am saying you’re not listening to me. Not buying a car doesn’t mean you don’t love me,” Casey said. “It’s a thing. It has nothing to do with love. The fact you don’t understand that bothers me tremendously.”

“So, now I am bothering you?” mother asked.

“OMG, why is this so hard. I don’t want a car!” Casey said.

“You don’t have a choice,” mother said. “I want more flexibility.”

“Then I will take Lyft,” Casey said.

“You’re not taking Lyft when you can have your own car,” mother said.

“I don’t want to own a car. I don’t want to drive,” Casey said.

“Anyone would be happy to hear their mother is buying them a car,” mother said.

“I am not anyone! Why don’t you know me yet?!” Casey said.

“You are not going the rest of your life using Lyft,” mother snapped.

“You’re right. I won’t. Robotic cars are just around the corner and will be fully in place before I finish college. No one in the future will own a car. There’s no reason for me to have a car or to ever learn to drive or pay outrageous insurance fees,” Casey said.

“Don’t worry about the insurance...”

“I don’t want to drive!” Casey said.

“You don’t have a choice,” mother said.

“The hell I don’t! You can’t make me drive. If you buy a car I swear I will purposely drive it into a tree or into the swimming pool just to spite you,” Casey said.

Mother fumed. She turned the car back on and drove away from the car dealership. Casey sat, arms crossed, not bothering to wipe her tears. Mother pulled into a psych hospital.

“What?! Not wanting to drive is not a mental health issue,” Casey snapped.

“Get out, or so help me I will call the police and have you dragged out,” mother said.

Casey got out of the car. She was shaking. Her knees were weak. She felt like vomiting. She was going to follow mother in but mother directed her to go in front of her.

“What? You think I am going to run away?” Casey asked.

“March,” mother said.

“Is that option to live with dad still on the table?” Casey asked.

“Don’t push me,” mother said.

“Who’s pushing who?” Casey snapped.

Casey proceeded into the hospital. They had to be buzzed into the room, which meant once inside a person was trapped inside until someone unlocked the door. She went and sat down in the lobby while her mother began the preliminary paperwork. Heath and Aoife checked in but she assured them now was not a good time. They stayed away. Mother sat next to her, filling out forms.

“You know from experiences, girls that had no problems prior to being hospitalized came out with problems,” Casey said. “I’ll learn to cut and maybe take up being bulimic.”

“Have fun with that,” mother said.

“You’re going to lose this and look really bad,” Casey said. “I am not backing down.”

“Neither am I,” mother said.

“They’re not going to hospitalize me,” Casey said.

“I think my words as a parent and a professional will trump anything you have to say,” mother said.

“Being a parent by virtue of giving birth does not a parent make. And you are so not a professional,” Casey said. “Ever heard of Hipaa?”

“What does that mean?!” mother asked.

“It means I know things that I shouldn’t know and one phone call to the licensing board you won’t have a job,” Casey said.

“You don’t know shit,” mother said. “I never used clients names...”

“I know things I shouldn’t. Let’s see how that investigation goes,” Casey said.

“Why you ungrateful little wretch...” mother said.

“I am right, you’re wrong,” Casey said. “You want to declare war? Let’s go to war.”

Mother stood up. “Let’s go...”

Casey followed mother to the door. The door didn’t open.

“I am sorry,” the receptionist. “You can’t leave until the counselor clears you.”

“There’s nothing wrong with her,” mother said.

“That may be, but you came to us, and there is a liability issue of leaving without being cleared,” the receptionist said. “Also, you told me your daughter threatened to kill herself.”

Casey fumed. There were others watching. “Serious Hippa violations!”

The receptionist turned bright red. Casey went back and sat down. Mother went to the receptionist. After a moment, mother came back and sat down. She crossed her arms, a mirror image of her daughter.

“I didn’t say I was going to kill myself,” Casey said under breath.

“You said you would drive a car into a tree,” mother said.

“Contextually, not a suicide threat,” Casey said. “At best, it’s homicide to a tree. A car if your animist.”

“I swear, they must have switched you with someone at birth,” mother said.

Casey began to cry. “And you wonder why I hate myself, and why I don’t have friends, or invite people over, ever,” she said, and got up and ran to the bathroom. The receptionist directed a tech to follow.

“OMG,” mother said. “She’s not going to hurt herself. It’s just histrionics.”

Casey found herself before a mirror. Heath and Aoife arrived before the tech. She cried into the sink even as she washed her face. Heath touched her shoulder.

“You okay?” the tech asked.

Casey looked at her as if she were a moron. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, that was stupid. I don’t know a better way of starting,” the tech said.

“You can’t fix this,” Casey said. “My mother has expectations that don’t coincide with what I want for me. That’s life.”

The tech put her butt against the sink and leaned into it, crossing her arms. “If I had a dollar for every time I heard that story.”



Casey dried her face. She and the tech returned to the lobby together and Casey sat down on the couch the furthest space away from her mother. They both sat with their arms crossed. Casey witnessed a four year old trying to change the picture on a magazine by tapping the picture. The child's mother was on a cell phone. Casey started crying.

"What now?!" mother asked.

"You don't see what I see," Casey said. She stood up to confront the four-year-old's mother. "There is nothing wrong with your four year old. This is all you. Put down your cell phone and be a parent before it's too late, cause if you don't listen to her, someone will, and that person might not have her best interest at heart. All of you, just turn your ipads and phones off. They're not as important as the person standing next to you!"

"Sit down! You're embarrassing me," mother said.

"You should be embarrassed. All of you should be," Casey said.

There was a counselor standing there. Their eyes met. "Casey?" she asked....

Casey headed to the counselor. Her mother stood.

"You want to do this on your own?" the counselor asked.

"No, she does not," mother said.

"I might learn more if we can do this alone," the counselor said.

"She's privy to everything I tell you whether we do it alone or not," Casey said. "Might as well let her win this."

"Okay. Right this way," the counselor said.

The interrogation room was small. The counselor shut the door behind them. There were two cameras, meaning the full room was visible at all times to someone somewhere. There was a couch against one wall. The counselor took the only chair after Casey and her mother sat on the couch.

"My name is Counselor Rossi. Before we began, let me tell you about confidentiality..." Rossi said.

"I don't have a parole or probation officers, so don't worry about secrets. Also, I would never harm an infant, toddler, or an elderly person, or anyone else for that matter; I am a passivist. I don't want to kill myself, and I have never attempted," Casey said.

"Well, that pretty much covers that," Rossi said. "Done this before, have we?"

"I have heard the script before, yes," Casey said. "And my name is Cassius."

“Since when?” mother asked.

“In the context of this room, I am neither Cassandra nor Casey. I am Cassius,” Casey said.

“Are you trying to get yourself hospitalized?” mother said.

“It was what you wanted, wasn’t it?” Casey asked. She turned to the counselor. “Please, hospitalize me for changing my name. Or just hospitalize me for being difficult.”

“We don’t hospitalize for either of those things,” Rossi said.

“Hypothetically, would you hospitalize someone for hallucinations?” Casey asked.

“Oh, you’re smart. ‘Hypotheticals’ are a great way of answering while obfuscating responsibility,” the counselor said.

“I am not really smart. People are only as smart as context allows. Kids younger than I can work computers and remote controls better than their parents, usually twice as well as their grandparents, but none of us would likely survive long in a real jungle. If we didn’t get eaten we’d starve, or eat the wrong and plant and die,” Casey said. “I know how to navigate this setting because I hear the script daily.”

“I see,” Rossi said. “To answer the hypothetical, I usually need something more serious, but it depends on the context. Are you hearing voices telling you to kill yourself or others?”

“No,” Casey said.

“Cool beans,” Rossi said. “What do you hear?”

“She doesn’t hear anything,” her mother said.

“I hear my mother’s voice a lot,” Casey said.

“Me, too,” Rossi said. “Just one careless comment can go miles with my tape recorder mind.”

“Why do the negative ones stick, but the positive things are as fleeting as snowflakes in a summer breeze?” Casey asked.

“Great question,” Rossi said. “I wish I knew.”

“Can we stay on target?” mother asked.

“I apologize for my conversational style approach, but I assure you, I will know what I need to know before we’re finish,” Rossi said.

“You wanted to participate. I guess you just have to let a professional do her job, and let her record my responses, not yours,” Casey said. “Crazy, eh?”

“Do you have a religious affiliation or preference?” Rossi asked.

“We’re Catholic,” mother said.

“You’re catholic, I am a Buddhist Padawan on the road to becoming a dark Jedi,” Casey said.

“You need to take this seriously, young lady,” mother said.

“If no one takes me seriously, shouldn’t I play the clown?” Casey asked. “Seriously, I am a registered Padawan. I have card and everything.”

“I don’t understand dark Jedi,” Rossi said. “I thought the bad guys were Sith.”

“The bad guys are Sith. I am a new class of Jedi that realize that balance in the force requires there to be some darkness, otherwise, the Sith get out of hand,” Casey said.

“That actually makes sense,” Rossi said.

“You’re humoring her?” mother said.

“Or she’s taking me seriously and you should try to emulate her listening skills,” Casey said.

“So help me, I am about ready to smack you,” mother said.

“Go ahead. I am sure there are no penalties for hitting someone on camera,” Casey said.

“In addition to being a Padawan, I am into meditation and yoga...”

“When have you taken yoga?” mother asked.

“No formal classes, yet. Mostly just imitating you-tube videos,” Casey said.

“I like you, Cassius,” Rossi said.

“Alliance building by alienating me is your strategy for establishing rapport?” mother asked.

“Threatening to beat her into submission is yours?” Rossi asked. Casey looked down and bit her lip. Rossi didn’t miss the reaction. She looked to the mother. “Are you’re a therapist?”

“She just plays one on TV,” Casey said.

Rossi smiled.

“I am a nurse practitioner and a mental health provider,” mother said. “And I out rank you.”

“Not in here you don’t. I get that you’ve probably read some books on counseling, but you’re not a licensed therapist,” Rossi said.

Casey bit her lip and increased the distance between her and her mother. Mother folded her hands together, put them delicately in her lap.

“Mother, you chose this path,” Casey said, under her breath.

“You threatened to drive a car into a tree!” mother snapped, redirecting her anger back at Casey.

“And into the swimming pool. You’re taking it out of context!” Casey snapped back.

“One of the things you forgot to cover in the confidentiality list, Cassius, was abuse,” Rossi said. “I am obligated to report evidence of abuse. I just have to suspect abuse.”

“I am so not abusing her,” mother said.

“I have never been abused, physically or otherwise,” Casey affirmed.

“Otherwise meaning sexually?” Rossi asked.

“Correct,” Casey said.

“You can’t use the word?” Rossi asked.

“Not in front of my mother,” Casey said, appalled.

“She can use the word,” mother said. “We can discuss anything.”

“Since when?” Casey said.

“Cassius,” Rossi interrupted. “What else do you hear?”

“OMG, she is not hallucinating,” mother said.

“Look, I have a great imagination,” Casey said. “My imagination is so vivid that at one point two years ago I suspected I was experiencing autistic fantasies.”

“You are not autistic,” mother said. “There’s nothing wrong with you.”

“And yet, you brought me to a psych hospital,” Casey said. “Do you hospitalize people for being non-compliant with their parent’s wishes?”

“Not usually,” Rossi said. “What don’t you not want to do?”

“I don’t want to drive. I don’t want to learn to drive,” Casey said.

“Driving can be scary,” Rossi said.

“Don’t tell her that!” mother said. “She’s got enough anxiety as it is.”

“Wouldn’t saying I have anxiety mean I have something wrong me?” Casey asked.

“Stop trying to find something wrong with you!” mother said.

“Okay, let’s say there’s nothing with me and I just don’t want to drive because I don’t want to drive. So why are you pushing that on me?” Casey asked.

“Because driving is a normal part of life!” mother said.

“So, I am not normal?” Casey said.

“You’re twisting that,” mother said.

“You brought me to a psych hospital! Not being normal is foregone conclusion,” Casey said.

“OMG, you guys are so exhausting,” Rossi said. “I am exhausted and I have only been with you like what, five whole minutes?”

“Try living with her,” Casey said.

“What does that mean?” mother asked.

“If I am normal and you brought me to a psych hospital for noncompliance issues, doesn’t that mean you’re the one that’s nuts?” Casey asked. She turned back to Rossi. “I have a list of things I don’t have wrong with me. One of them is I am not a hypochondriac. Of course, the people that assessed me work in my mother’s clinic. I am sure there are no ethical issues there.”

“What else haven’t they found?” Rossi asked.

“I am also not ADHD inattentive type,” Casey explained to Rossi. “Apparently, I just like to day dream.”

“You’re functional, you have good grades...” mother said.

“I love daydreaming,” Rossi said. “What sort of things do you daydream about?”

“Exotic places. People. Traveling. Exploring,” Casey said.

“You hardly ever leave the house!” mother said.

“How can I? I risk choking myself on the leash!” Casey asked.

“That is so not fair,” mother said.

“What do you say when I say that?” Casey said. “Grow up?”

“She skipped school yesterday,” mother said.

“OMG, you’re going to get some mileage out of that, aren’t you? Just put it on my tombstone already. It’s the most interesting thing I have ever done that you’re aware of!” Casey said.

“What else have you done that I don’t know?” mother asked.

“That’s not the point. You complain I don’t do anything and when I do something you complain about that, too. And if you had shown up late like you always do, you wouldn’t have even known I skipped school,” Casey said.

“Until the police arrived,” mother said.

Casey had forgotten about them. She chewed on her thumb nail. Mother told her to stop it.

“Who called the police?” Rossi asked.

“The school,” Casey said, frowning.

“I get the sense you’ve never broken the rules before. People were concerned? I also suspect, you’re really super smart, aren’t you?” Rossi said. “Have you had your IQ tested?”

“She sabotaged the test,” mother said.

“I told you I didn’t want to know!” Casey said.

“So you can keep playing stupid?” mother asked.

“Who says I am playing?” Casey said.

“I guess we will never know,” mother said.

“I don’t think you’re stupid, Cassius. I hear a lot of stupid presently in this room, though, from the both of you. A lot of passive aggressive bullshit,” Rossi said.

“How dare you!” mother said.

“She’s spot on, mother,” Casey said.

“I am interested, Cassius,” Rossi said. “I thought most people wanted to know their IQ.”

“See, even she agrees with me,” mother said. “Everyone wants to know their IQ.”

“It’s not a valid metric! Seriously, it was a tool invented by a bunch of stuffy old white men who wanted to prove their superiority over everyone who wasn’t stuffy, male, or white. Anyone can come up with a list of reason why they’re different; that doesn’t make them smart,” Casey said. “Economic and IQ scales are not good measures for human beings.”

“They’re the only measures!” mother said.

“I’d rather be dirt poor and ignorant than rich and depressed and lonely and doing drugs to feel better about myself,” Casey said.

“How would you measure people?” Rossi asked.

Casey met Rossi’s eyes, not hiding her tears. “By the quality of their thoughts and ability to show compassion.”

“Wow,” Rossi said.

“How about a little compassion to your mother and learn to drive?” mother asked.

Casey lowered her eyes to the floor.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” Rossi asked.

“How is that relevant?” Casey grumbled

“She doesn’t have any friends,” mother said.

“How can I have friends with mommy dearest hovering over me with coat hangers?”

Casey asked.

“That is so wrong,” mother said.

“Cassius, you mentioned you like exotic places and people,” Rossi asked.

Casey shrugged.

“You said you like day dreaming,” Rossi said. “Any fellows in there?”

“She’s not dating,” mother said. “I would know it.”

“She would, too. She monitors my phone and internet,” Casey said. “It’s enough to make a person want to use drugs to escape.”

“You better not be using…” mother said.

“Maybe you should have them drug test me while we’re here, too,” Casey said. “It’s not like you believe anything else I say.”

“Are you sexually active?” Rossi asked.

“That is so out of line,” mother said.

“No it’s not,” Casey said. “Lots of kids in high school my age having sex. It’s what we do.”

“You better not be,” mother said.

“We have a mandatory orgy ever third period,” Casey said.

“Shut up!” mother said.

“You’re interested in sex?” Rossi asked.

“How is this relevant to whether or not she’s depressed?” mother asked.

“Young romances? Broken hearts…”

“I am not seeing anyone. I am not ready. Yes, I am interested. In both genders,” Casey said. “I need to explore it more…”

“Explore that and I will kill you,” mother said.

“Hypothetically, Counselor Rossi, if someone threatens to kill someone in this context, shouldn’t they be hospitalized?” Casey asked.

“Contextually,” Rossi said. “Cassius moves against Julius Caesar.”

“It was not a serious...” mother stopped. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Oh, I assumed you knew. Cassius is a name from a Shakespearian tragedy,” Rossi said. “Cassius, is your life a tragedy?”

“Life is just life,” Casey said.

“It wasn’t a real threat; I was just being factitious,” mother said.

“You don’t even know what that means. You were being mean. And I didn’t threaten to kill myself. You’re a control freak. You never listen to me until I exaggerate things beyond the pale. You can’t make me learn to drive and your response was to give an ultimatum and when I crossed the line to force your hand, you threw a tantrum. Bringing me here was wrong,” Casey said.

Mother began to cry.

Casey bit her lips, tears fell, but she didn’t reach out to her mother. Rossi observed silently. Mother lamented wanting a normal life, with a normal daughter, and a husband that wasn’t stepping out... The list seemed never ending. There were tissues on the coffee table, but Rossi didn’t offer them. Eventually mother took a tissue on her own accord.

“I am not bipolar,” Casey said. “I am not depressed. Until recently, I have suffered from loneliness. Maybe some of it’s because of my family of origin issues. We have some serious issues. Maybe some of my loneliness is due to society. Loneliness is epidemic. Interestingly, you can be surrounded by people and still lonely. Maybe some of it is because I am smart and it’s hard to find peers that want to process things at my level. That’s no one’s fault, just a quirk of being. We all touch this in our own ways. My mother is lonely, and she was lonely before father announced he was leaving. My father is lonely. He’s at least trying to remedy it, even if I think his particular solution set is setting him up for more loneliness. Maybe that’s my bias. Maybe he’s right. Maybe loneliness, like hunger, is quenched in small doses over time. I don’t think we really want to know. Society lament the superficiality of itself, and yet, we’re all too afraid of intimacy to make any real changes. Making real changes would likely mean we have to tolerate imperfections in ourselves and each other and who in the hell wants to do that?”



Rossi put away her clipboard and sat for a moment, thinking things through. "I am not going to hospitalize anyone today. I am going to provide you with some referrals to individual and family counseling," Rossi said. "Individual counseling for your mother, not for you. You, Casey, are the most well-adjusted person who has ever been in my office. Give me a moment to print out the referrals. Once you have those, you're free to go. There's no one else to see today."

Rossi got up and left the room, leaving Casey alone with her mother.

"Are you really going to report me to the board?" mother asked.

"No, mother. Ethically speaking, I should, but I imagine most family boundaries are equally nebulous as ours. I am not negotiating with you or black mailing you. I bring it to your attention, though, partly because I really don't want to hear about your work, but also because this highlights my feelings about being nothing more than an accessory to your life, not a person. I am something hidden in your periphery that you sometimes remember," Casey said.

"I don't just sometimes remember you," mother said. "You're all I think of..."

"That's not true. And even if it was, that isn't healthy either. I am the dog you bought because he was cute and then you locked him in the back yard."

"We don't have a dog," mother said.

"Because he died! Seriously, mother, I am speaking metaphorically. You're so angry and befuddled that you're taking everything literally," Casey said. "Have you ever read the criteria for border line?"

"I am not borderline," mother said.

"Borderline borderline?" Casey said.

Mother laughed. And then she cried again. Casey scooted over and mother cried on her shoulder.

## Chapter 11

A dry thunderstorm raged over wonderland as Casey made her way towards the lighthouse. The clouds were flash illuminated from within, revealing dark patterns, and shades of grey, and sometimes intense white. Lightning came in rainbow colored streaks. Thunder answered instantaneously, cannon fire that echoed along the land. She passed the fire spot, the fire long since dead, where the painter had sat and contemplated the storm. She hoped the artist had retired to the lighthouse. The first drops of rain were falling as she reached the porch. A gust of wind rolled around her and disturbed the tire swing in the yard. There was a drastic temperature drop.

Heath and Aoife came to the porch to greet her, welcoming her home.

“Come on,” Heath said. “Before the rain really comes.”

“I don’t understand,” Casey said. “I thought this place would be perfect.”

“It is,” Heath said.

“There are trees and flowers and oceans and people,” Aoife said. “Why wouldn’t there be storms? There’s no need for a lighthouse if there is no storms.”

“Yeah,” Casey said, entering the home portion of the lighthouse. She went to the couch and cried. “Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You did,” Heath said. “This place is full of your insights.”

“It doesn’t matter how much insight one has if no one listen to you because you’re just a fourteen-year-old girl,” Casey said.

“Age is irrelevant,” Aoife said. “I was a warrior by the time I was six.”

“Joan of Arc was 14, wasn’t she?” Heath asked.

Heath sat beside her. Aoife brought a tea stand and sat if before her with hot tea, cookies, bread cut from a loaf, and with a dish of butter. Aoife then sat on Casey’s free side. She poured tea. There was a fire going and it was just warm enough, but would be nicer with warmer clothes.

“I am not even safe here,” Casey said.

“This is your world. You are very safe here,” Aoife said.

“Not from rain. Not from cold. Not from crying,” Casey said.

“Everyone needs a safe place to cry,” Heath said.

“Even the mightiest warriors cry,” Aoife said.

“Really?” Casey said. “You cry?”

“Don’t be silly, dear,” Aoife said. “I am an archetype. I don’t feel human emotions.”

“Didn’t I witness you being angry earlier?” Heath said.

“Anger is a godly emotion,” Aoife said. “Being sad and joyous, these are godly things. I am not a god, I am an archetype. There is no need for me to weep when the clouds do it for me. There is no need for me to rage when there are volcanoes. I am a channel for the gods to better direct their energy.”

“Why did we invite a mystic to live with us?” Heath asked.

“I don’t know. She just sort of happened,” Casey said.

“Do you want me to go away?” Aoife asked.

“What does that even mean? Go away? Where would you go?” Casey asked.

Aoife shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe where the rain drops go after they’ve rushed across the land, joining their siblings as they dance towards home. That isn’t something you need worry about.”

“But I do. And there’s a reason you’re here. You should stay till we understand that, and maybe linger a bit after,” Casey said. “I am already attached.”

“I will stay as long as you like, then,” Aoife said.

“Where’s the artist?” Casey asked.

Heath retrieved a letter from the side table and handed it to Casey. She opened it with a butter knife, preserving the seal. She extracted the letter from inside and opened it. She needed more light and was about to get up but Aoife snapped her fingers, sparking a light. A ball of golden light pooled in her hand. She set above them, where it remained almost inconspicuously. Casey had the occasional feeling the world was getting brighter around her, but when she looked, things seemed as normally bright as usual. She wondered if this is what it felt like when a halo was increasing in intensity.

“Read it for us,” Heath said. “If it’s not too personal.”

“Dear Cassandra. Forgive the formality, but I don’t think I have earned something more personable. Thank you for the stationery with which I am writing. I love your office and desk, which seems perfectly situated for true letter writing. That is a lost art. I suspect the modern post office could not handle wax seals going through the machinery...”

Heath chuckled. “Never thought of that.”

Casey continued: "I wanted to thank you personally for your kindness, your quiet hospitality. The respite was exactly what I needed to collect my thoughts. I tarried as long as I could, but it was time to go and so, I hope you will accept this letter instead of my voice. If it's a consolation, it doesn't feel like my voice anymore. Maybe it never was. It seems to me there was something deeper, grander, always about me and with me, and I was the center of a whirlwind. Sometimes life was fast and furious and sometimes I could balance a feather and hold it just there. I see the feather in Forest Gump and the feather on the cover 'Illusions' by Richard Bach. They seem prominent fixtures in my mind. Is it a meme or a metaphor, I forget. I am not making sense and yet, I feel better than I have in ages. Maybe we have it backwards. Maybe we're not supposed to make sense of the world. Maybe we're supposed to make nonsense. We are stories within stories. Maybe my next author will be Doctor Seuss. May this nonsensical observation, and this token of my gratitude for your light, be of sustenance for your soul. With sincerest affection, RW. PS, I gathered quite a few diamonds infused with rainbows from the beach. I left them on a dish on the kitchen table. I didn't think you'd mind, but so you know, I kept one. A token to remember your place in the universe."

A lightening burst illuminated the whole room from the window. The thunder was outrageously loud. The three of them looked out and saw on the beach a white hot spot of glowing sand, quickly becoming orange, a twirling of rainbow like oil on water upon it's shimmering, golden surface, and then a flash whited the scene and then it went out. Sand turned to diamond infused with rainbows.

"Maybe I was too quick to pass judgment," Casey said. "Rainbow diamonds are way better than what Josh Lucas found on the beach."

"Josh Lucas?" Aoife asked.

"Sweet Home Alabama," Heath said.

"Is that the name of this world?" Aoife asked.

"I don't think we named it," Casey said. "We should really think about that. Names are powerful."

"We can't keep calling it 4242," Heath said.

"Heatherland?" Casey asked.

"Please, don't," Heath said.

"That would make us Heathens," Aoife said.

Casey laughed.

“Please, don’t,” Heath said.

“Gelderland?” Casey said.

“No!” Heath said.

“Chaucerland?” Casey said.

“This place reminds me Sidhe, the fairy mound, the place between where the banshee bring the undecided,” Aoife offered.

Casey said Sidhe, pronounced ‘she.’ “This seems a bigger task than even Elliot’s naming of cats. I wonder if worlds have three names. I mean, it’s not just the world. It’s this location, here, with the lighthouse. The moon is alive with life. It should have a name. The sun should have a name. Sidhe, the world? She. Feminine. Asphodel.”

“We are not dead,” Aoife said.

“Aren’t we?” Heath said. “Only she can see us.”

“Maybe it’s not just a meadow for the dead to gather. Maybe it’s a place where the live and dead can mingle,” Casey offered.

“That doesn’t make any sense. Linguistically,” Heath said. “Rationally.”

“The best stories, the best songs, are replete with nonsensical phrases and sounds,” Casey said, emphasizing the letter in her hand. “We are speaking with the words of poets, musicians, magicians, and shamans. Oh my! This place, here, is Asphodel.”

“May the light of Asphodel bring the lost home,” Aoife said.

“Amen,” Heath said.

“Dinas Affaraon,” Casey said. “The world name. Affaraon!”

“Are you a goddess?” Aoife asked.

“I am not,” Casey said. “And if we are to be friends, you can’t promote that.”

“We’re friends?” Heath said.

“We are friends. We are equally sovereign. I misspoke when I said this was my world. This is our world. We will decide together what happens here,” Casey said.

“Affaraon,” Aoife said.

“Affaraon,” Heath said.

“Asphodel of Affaraon,” Casey said.

They put their hands together and did a 'hoo-ra.' Casey folded the letter and inserted it back into the envelope. She took it to the fireplace and placed it on the mantel, the seal prominently displayed. Strangely, the seal contained the affection of Asphodel of Affaraon. Three hands joined, a Triskelion. It didn't bother her in the slightest that the decision was affected retroactively. Casey then buttered some bread and went and stood by the fire. Her friends and her had tea and bread and talked until they were tired. They all retired for the night. Heath and Aoife took to their rooms they had claimed. Casey simply opened her eyes back in her bed, rolled over, and went to sleep.

निर्मित

Casey found herself in a dream. She knew it was a dream, but she didn't pursue lucidity. She didn't try to change anything. The room was big and there was music from an orchestra and people were dancing. The room was full of people from her life and they were dressed in myriad of fashion and period clothing. There were people dancing and people gathered around the walls. As she entered, she realized it wasn't just the people from her life, but the dream was peopled with their tulpas. Perhaps they were avatars. Her mother was there. Mother was speaking with her father, but what held her attention was the fact she had cliché angel and devil on her shoulders. When she turned her back to her, she realized the two creatures were actually one creature, a snake with two heads. It's body and tail coiled tightly about her body.

"We got to help her," Casey said.

"You cannot remove that without killing the host," Aoife said. "They have been mates for way too long. They are one."

Casey saw the fat girl at the buffet. She couldn't get her name out. She could only see 'the fat' girl, only say 'the fat girl,' and it bothered her, and at the same time, she wondered why it bothered her, and why did 'fat' have to be such a powerfully charged word, when it was a simple, three letter word. The skinny girl, in chains, was behind her. She felt so sorry for her. Like Linus from Charlie Brown, she had space about her that was defined by food particles and debris, as food was continuously thrown at her.

"We should dance," Heath said.

"People are suffering," Casey said.

“There will always be suffering,” Aoife said. “And the world will still dance around the sun, amongst stars. All things exist at once.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” Casey said.

“You are a warrior,” Aoife said. “All warriors dance.”

“Allow me to remind you,” Heath said.

Heath taught her the dance of Gelderland, and for a moment, she felt as if she was in the scene from the Night’s tale, the same way Tom Hanks was inserted into all of history. She started off awkward but before the end of it, she was in sync with everyone else. There was laughter and applause and joy. Aoife danced with Jocelyn. When they came out of the dance, Casey was again focused on the skinny girl’s plight. As she focused she was aware of a squirrel disappearing into the pocket of the fat girl’s coat. It came out carrying a skeleton key in its mouth. It ran straight to Casey, climbed up her body, down her arm, and deposited the key into her hand. It chattered excitedly.

“Cover me,” Casey told her friends.

The squirrel ran away as Casey made her way straight to the skinny girl.

“Finally, some action,” Aoife said.

“Oh, dear,” Heath said. He went the other way in order to get back up.

Casey was about to unlock the first shackle when the fat girl stopped eating and moved to hit her. Casey was sure she was about to get clobbered and her eyes closed automatically. When nothing happened, she opened her eyes. A bear paw was holding, engulfing the fat girl’s fist. The bear put the fat girl in a hug. The fat girl fought and the bear put her in a hold: a super bear hug. One paw was over her mouth to prevent her from protesting.

Casey unlocked the skinny girl. Utilizing Maria’s storm she was washed away all the food. Using the storm’s dry wind, in combination with the Todd’s star turned up full, she dried her. The skinny girl looked amazing with windblown hair. Her clothing was clean and she smelled like roses.

“Thank you,” the skinny girl said. “Please, don’t hurt her.”

“She was hurting you,” Aoife said.

“Yes,” the skinny girl said. “But I have knowledge that you don’t. And I have compassion.”

The bear eased up her grip on the mouth.

“You had no right!” the fat girl said. “She’s mine to do with as I please!”

“Do you want to leave?” Casey asked.

“And leave her in solitude?” the skinny girl asked. “She is not perfect, but I love her. I will suffer a million injuries if that’s what it takes for her to find peace.”

“Come on, we’re out of here,” the fat girl ordered.

The skinny girl bowed to Casey and her friends and retreated with the fat girl.

“Well, that was unexpected,” Katniss said.

“Men in Black, scatter,” James said.

Her friends and their individual companions departed. Men in black, like a Presidential security team, swarmed down upon Casey and her two companions. Aoife took a battle stance and invited them to ‘come play’ with wave of fingers. Loxy was suddenly there, also in black, but with a skirt option that much racier, though somehow still professional.

She spoke into the backside of a wrist watch. “We found the source of the disturbance. It’s been contain,” Loxy said. “Alright, boys. I got it from here. Miss Cassandra, if you will follow me, please.”

“What’s going on?” Casey said.

“Let’s go somewhere we can talk,” Loxy said. “Somewhere with a view, I think.”

Loxy stopped just shy of the way out of the ball room. She held out a hand to Casey, gesturing she should take hold. Casey hesitated, but Loxy didn’t withdraw, nor did she insist. She waited. Casey took her hand. Loxy added a little pressure, a firm pull in one direction, but not enough to move Casey unless she chose to move. Casey took a step forwards and Loxy rushed the threshold of the ballroom arch. They arrived elsewhere!

They should have arrived in the foyer, but instead, they round room, very much like the Seattle Needle’s restaurant, only minus chair and tables. It was just an open space, with a wraparound window. Behind them was an arch. The other side shared the same room. Loxy stopped walking, but Casey continued forwards, and spun around. The most forward window revealed the earth, as it might look from orbit. The moon was slightly to the right and seemed incredibly tiny. The sun was directly behind them, the window polarized so they could see it.

“OMG,” Casey said.

Heath and Aoife arrived. They seemed unsettled, as if they have traveled further than they had ever traveled before. They, too, turned and marveled.



“Wow,” Heath said.

“Impressive, isn’t it,” Loxy said.

“Wait!” Casey said. “You can hear them?”

“Of course,” Casey said. “They’re on my ship. The ship is sentient. It’s also telepathic. As long as you’re on my ship, your tulpas will have substance and can interact with any of the crew.”

“Seriously?” Casey asked.

“Why have you brought Lady Cassandra here?!” Aoife demanded.

“Better than letting the men in black arrest her, don’t you think?” Loxy asked.

“For what?” Casey asked.

“You used magic against someone,” Loxy said.

“She would be punished for helping the skinny girl?” Aoife said.

“Using magic against a person’s will is considered black magic,” Loxy said. “Lorene is under the protection of a higher power.”

“Lorene! Why couldn’t I remember that?” Casey said.

“You know the name, you don’t know her. You’ve never really seen Lorene,” Loxy explained. “The same way your mother doesn’t see you. Even you, the master of empathy, are bias. You see a fat girl. You see a girl that needs help. You see a girl in chains. You don’t just see a girl. Even if everything you see there is technically valid, you are still not interacting with her as a fellow human being. You’re interacting with yourself. That is why we don’t encourage black magic. No matter how you spin it, it’s always about self, not other. Paradoxically, the more you engage self to improve self, the more you’re able to help others without helping.”

“So, you’re telling me, we broke a rule trying to help the skinny girl?” Heath asked.

“Emma,” Loxy said. “Yes. Using your tulpas, or other’s tulpa, or magic in general, to do something to a person without their expressed consent is black magic.”

“Even if it’s for a person’s own good?” Aoife asked.

“Without consent, it is black magic,” Loxy said.

“Hypothetically, if I thought the president was going to blow up the world and I used magic to prevent that, I would be breaking the rules?” Casey asked.

“Even though your intent is for the greater good, that, by definition, is black magic,” Loxy said.

“Or gray?” Heath asked.

“I accept gray,” Loxy said. She walked over to the moon, drew a circle around it with her finger, and enlarged it. She leaned against the glass, the moon framed behind her like a halo. “Also, it’s not breaking the rules. There are always consequences for magic. Black or white magic, has consequences. This world has severely limited the use of magic to reduce the severity of the consequence. Basically, this planet is a nursery that allows people to come of age without accidentally magicking themselves out of existence. You can use all the magic you want as long as it’s contained within side you or your life, but stray beyond that, on this planet, you will draw some unfriendly attention.”

“Like the men in black,” Heath said.

“I thought they were all about aliens,” Casey said.

“Who says aliens can’t use magic?” Loxy asked.

“There are aliens?” Casey asked.

“There are more life forms in the universe than all the creatures and aliens from all the stories from all the fiction writers combined since the history of human writing,” Loxy said. “If you can imagine it, it exists out there, somewhere.”

“Can we meet them?” Casey said.

“Let’s manage what we got on our plate first,” Loxy said.

“Are we on a flying saucer?” Casey asked. “Like the ‘Lost Saucer?’ Ruth Buzzi and Jim Neighbors?”

Loxy laughed. “Your parents made you watch a lots of television.”

“They both wanted me to see the things they watched. They competed with themselves to share all their childhood. They seemed happy then. I thought we were happy,” Casey said.

“If you thought you were happy, you were happy. Don’t over think that,” Loxy offered.

Loxy invited them closer to the window with a ‘come hither’ motion. Casey walked to the window, cautiously, as if expecting to fall towards the earth. They could see in all directions without any obstructions, until Loxy pushed a button and the rest of the ship revealed itself, as if it had been cloaked. Heath and Aoife joined her. Heath leaned in and looked up and then looked back and realized they were on a much bigger ship. A familiar ship.

“Star Trek!” Heath said. “Yes! I always wanted to be Captain Kirk.”

“Who doesn’t want to be Kirk?” Loxy asked. “Kiss the girls and fly away. This is an Ambassador Class Star Ship. We’re on the Observation Deck, lowest deck of the saucer. If you’re curious, the ship wasn’t cloaked. These are smart windows and they let us see past the ship.”

“OMG,” he said, grabbing Casey’s hand. “We’re really on the Enterprise!”

“My Enterprise,” Loxy said.

“You’re the Captain of the Enterprise?” Casey asked.

“I am a Captain, but I am the first officer of ‘My Enterprise,’” Loxy corrected.

“‘Enterprise,’ was taken.” To make sure they understood, she tapped a window and an image of the ship appeared, rotating to show the forward saucer section. ‘My Enterprise.’ “You’d be surprised how ships named Enterprise there are out there. Jon nearly went with the ‘Flying Enterprise,’ but I convinced him it was bad luck to name your ship after something that sunk. If you want to be more precise, this ship is integrally linked with two other remote ships. The Pathfinder, and...”

“Jon’s the Captain?” Casey asked.

“Yep,” Loxy said. “You seem surprised.”

“I just thought you two were...”

“Yes?”

“More than friends,” Casey said.

“We are,” Loxy said.

“Why didn’t we use the transporters?” Heath asked.

“Portals are actually easier, and more energy efficient. Also, most people get freaked out by their first transporter session. You are rather sensitive, Casey,” Loxy said.

Casey began to cry.

“OMG,” Heath said. “Really?”

“Do not chastise her,” Aoife said.

“I am not, just saying...”

“We’re on the Enterprise,” Casey said.

“My Enterprise,” Loxy corrected.

“My Enterprise,” Jon said.

Loxy came to attention. “Captain?”

“Captain,” Jon said. “You were supposed to identify the source, not bring it back.”

“The source happens to be our friend,” Loxy said.

“She’s not our mission,” Jon said.

“Maybe she should be,” Loxy said.

“She’s protected,” Jon said.

“What does that mean?” Casey asked. “Oh, please tell me I am a star-child and you’ve come to take me home.”

“Everyone on earth is a star child,” Loxy said.

“Loxy,” Jon said.

“She needs to know. She’s awake,” Loxy said.

“It’s not our function to teach her,” Jon said. “She has contractual agreements to fulfill. She is participating in a consensual reality. She is under a chain of command, which doesn’t fall under our jurisdiction.”

“She’s awake,” Loxy said.

“Yay,” Jon said. “And she has to go back.”

“Please, I don’t want to ever go back. I belong here, don’t you see that?!” Casey asked.

Jon nodded. “Casey, you have a mission.”

“What mission? If I have a mission, why don’t I remember it?” Casey asked. “Why don’t I remember volunteering? Wouldn’t it be helpful if I knew these things?”

“If you knew the answers to the test, how would you ever know you mastered the material?” Jon said.

He came closer. He offered her a hand, she retreated. Aoife got between them.

“I will not let you hurt her,” Aoife said.

“Nor will I,” Heath said.

“I am not going to hurt her,” Jon said.

“You’re going to send me back,” Casey said.

“I am. There are several ways we can do that,” Jon said. “I can beam you back. I can escort you through that portal. I can take you back in a shuttle. I can stun you and you just wake up in your room.”

“Oh, Jon, please,” Loxy said. “Don’t frighten her.”

“The only choice you have is in whether I erase your memory or not,” Jon said.

“You would erase my memory?” Casey asked.

“Technically, no one can erase memories. It’s more like a really strong block,” Loxy said. “And if your subconscious believes it’s in your best interest, you won’t remember it until you need it or there’s a life review.”

“A life review?” Casey asked.

Jon frowned at Loxy.

“What? She could get that from any book on NDE’s on her planet,” Loxy said. “Casey, you don’t have to die to have one of those. You’re already aware that you can meditate your way into other worlds. If you want to visit higher realms, talk to the people in charge, do a life review, try and get insight into the nature of your mission, you can go there and do all of that on your own.”

“Please, don’t take this from me. I want to know. I want to know everything,” Casey said.

“I know,” Jon said. “So did I. I was actually in your shoes, once. I didn’t start real magic till I was in my late forties.”

“That’s really old,” Aoife said.

Jon seemed a little irritated by that. “Yeah, well, some people don’t graduate from high school on schedule,” Jon said.

“You didn’t finish high school until you were in your forties?” Heath asked. “I thought I was slow.”

“High school is a metaphor for the average mood and disposition of the society he was living in,” Loxy explained. “Your society is an exact mirror of his society. That’s why we’re here. We were invited to see if we could make some small corrections so the future would be less severe.”

“What’s going to happen?” Casey asked.

“Spoilers,” Jon said.

“Why can’t you just go back in time and make one big correction for all time?” Casey said.

“We could,” Loxy said. “Which would mean we would have never met you. We like you. You’re important to us. Everyone is important to us. And when our work is finished, everyone gets brought back. No one gets left behind.”

“Even me?” Heath said.

“Even you,” Jon said. “You’re a part of Casey, but you are also your own being. You are sentient. Even if you were only moderately sentient, even you. Even if you weren’t sentient at all, even you.”

“What about the real Heath?” Casey asked. “Can we help him?”

“Already accomplished,” Loxy said. “No one gets left behind.”

“Really? Can I meet him?” Casey asked.

“No,” Jon said. “We weren’t assigned to collect him. Technically, he hasn’t even been collected yet.”

“In for a penny?” Loxy asked. “Oh, give her the Tennant time speech.”

Jon closed his eyes. He seemed to be sorting something, maybe even having an inner conversation. Or an argument. When he opened his eyes, he was smiling. “Would you like to meet your guardian angel?”

“Really?” Casey asked. “Yeah!”

An older lady appeared. She was Filipina, maybe thirties. She seemed familiar. She smiled. “Oh, I haven’t seen your face in forever. What a joy to meet you again.”

“Who are you?” Casey asked.

“I am you,” older Casey said. “I know you better than anyone in the whole universe. The limitations imposed on your life came from me, because I know what we need to level up.”

“I only live to be thirty?” Casey asked.

Older Casey laughed. “We are two hundred and thirty years old. I prefer to look and feel as I did when I was thirty. That was a good year.”

“From our perspective, Casey,” Loxy explained. “All of time has already played out. We are now traveling backwards in time, unpacking it all. He who is last shall be first. Every age of you will be saved. Every critical age of you will be saved, and a million yous will diverge and have very different lives because the earlier versions of you won’t become you or have your insight. You, as you are right now standing before us, are precious. Your insight, your compassion, your love.”

“All of us our very loving,” older Casey assured her. “I come from your line. Our line is cherished because the hardship of our lesson. We needed it. Others needed it, vicariously. We’re a big deal in the future.”

“You were always bid deal,” Jon said. “Casey, if you don’t go back. If you don’t finish

your life mission, we will lose people. We will lose access to the future you and all the yous in between you and her. You are a present future member of my crew. You have to go back so that I can maintain the continuity of this world line. So I can maintain the continuity of you!”

Casey glared at him. She looked to Loxy. She looked to herself.

“Trust in yourself,” older Casey said. “There are no wrong answers.”

“There’s no free will? Everything has already happened?” Casey asked.

“Oh, we could spend years unpacking that hot mess,” Loxy said.

“Please, can we?’ Casey asked.

“No,” Jon said.

“You can argue it with him when you catch up,” older Casey said.

“OMG,” Jon lamented. “Is that were this starts?”

“Casey, we got you!” Loxy said.

“I’ll go back, but don’t take my memory,” Casey said.

“You’ll remember it as a dream,” Jon assured her. “How do you want to go?”

“Oh! Like you have to ask. Energize me!” Casey said.

Loxy came closer to Jon, taking his arm in hers.

Jon touched his badge. “Transporter room, one to beam down: prepare to for transport.”

“Just one?” Heath asked.

“You two go where she goes. You’re here, but not here,” Jon said.

“Casey, if you can only remember one thing, remember we love you,” Loxy said.

“I promise. I will remember everything,” Casey said. She looked to her older self. “See you soon.”

“It’ll seem like a moment,” older self said.

“Energize,” Jon said.

Casey felt the surging of energy in her body, saw the lights, heard the harmonics, and it was so intense and pleasurable, like a massage times a thousand, that she woke up in her bed, sitting straight up. Aoife and Heath counted, then bounced, arriving in Casey’s room. She got up, got her journal, and came back to bed. They helped her write everything they recalled. By the time she had recorded everything she could, it was time to get up.

निर्मित

Casey was dropped off at school late. She walked with Aoife and Heath as far as the class room and then, as agreed, they went to hang out in the Wonderland. The vice principal was coming out of her class room and she was worried she had been caught hugging air.

“Come with me,” he said.

“I am just two minute late?” Casey said.

“Office, now,” vice principal said.

Casey frowned, but followed. The vice directed her to sit and she did. Heath tight beamed a message to her, checking in, wanted to know if they needed to return. She assured her inner friends she was okay. The door to the conference room eventually opened and Brenda emerged. She was tearful, but when she saw Casey she wept. She came right to Casey.

“I am so sorry,” Brenda said.

“What happened?” Casey asked, suddenly worried if any of her attempts at magic had had an adverse effect on reality.

The principal emerged from the classroom.

“Casey, would you come in here, please,” she asked. “Brenda, you can go back to the class.”

“I didn’t tell them where it came from,” Brenda said. “Honest.”

“Classroom, please,” Principal said. “Casey.”

Casey entered the conference room. Her art teacher, her English teacher, and her math teacher were all there. The principal was there. She sat down.

“Have a seat, please,” the principal said.

Casey proceeded to the far end of the table.

“You can sit here,” the principal said, indicating the chair closes to her.

“If you’re going to yell at me, I prefer being at the far end,” Casey said.

“Why would we yell at you?” principal asked.

“It’s what people do,” Casey said.

“What people are yelling at you?” the math teacher asked.

“That sounds like yelling. Seriously, even normal conversation sometimes feels like yelling,” Casey admitted. “Maybe I should have my hearing checked.”



“You’re not in trouble, Casey. We just want to talk,” the principal said. She activated a screen that had a copy of the unsent letter. “Did you write this?”

“You can’t pin that on me,” Casey said.

“Casey, did you pen this?” the English teacher asked.

“You’re not in trouble,” the principal said.

Casey was still standing. “What?! Do you imagine Heath wrote it?”

“Did he? Look, Casey. You and I had a conversation that included Heath. You drew Heath in art class. Now this letter pops up in social media and it has gone viral. The news has traced it’s origin to our campus. The governor has actually called to speak with the author. CPS wants to speak to the author to make sure she isn’t suicidal. They want to send a team to my school to talk to the student body about suicide,” the principal said. “If you wrote this, they’re going to discover you. Brenda, Renata, all of your friends, they will keep your secret till their death. They’re loyal friends. But someone is going out you. I want you in front of this. I want you to defuse this before it blows up in your face. Ideally, I would like you to address the school at the prep rally Monday...”

“You can’t make me give a public speech,” Casey said, panicking.

“I cannot. I won’t make you. I think it’s just a great way to release some pressure from this situation, bring it down a notch, take the mystery out of it,” the principal said. “I won’t make you. Neither I nor my staff will out you. I just can’t promise that your anonymity will last.”

Casey felt the tears running down her face. “The governor wants to speak to me?”

“He said you made his daughter cry,” the principal said. “She’s 22 years old. You made his wife cry.”

“It wasn’t meant to be read! I sealed it and everything and I was just considering how to dispose of it, without violating the sanctity of the artifact itself,” Casey said. “In the old days, I would take it and place it on a paper boat and send it downstream, or put it in a bottle and toss it out to sea, but that is so uncool now, when you consider our waste management problem...”

“Casey, it’s the most beautiful thing I have ever read. It needs to be read and shared,” the English teacher said.

“You say that because it wasn’t supposed to be read,” Casey said. “Had I asked any of you to read it, it would have gone nowhere and done nothing. This is not that. This is something

else. I don't know what the fuss is all about but this is not about me or my writing. There is no way anything I could do would have this big of an impact."

"Well, Casey, I am afraid that your world is about to change," the principal said. "Some people are not meant to be on the sidelines. You're about to be famous."

"I don't want this," Casey said.

"I am sorry," the principal said. "We will do everything we can to maintain your anonymity. But I want you to consider, over this weekend, speaking at the prep rally Monday morning."

"Just calling me to the office is likely enough to cause people to wonder," Casey said.

"We have spoken to a dozen people. Discreetly. If anyone asks you directly, you can tell them you can't address this until I've completed my investigation," the principal said. "All the teachers are having to discuss this issue, because of the state's interest. I am also going to have to send a formal letter to all the parents discussing this matter, which will likely just add fuel to the fire. I will delay that until next week, after I have concluded my investigation. I will have to respond eventually. Well over a dozen parents have called expressing concern."

"Because they think I channeled Heath Ledger?" Casey asked.

"Because they think there is a trouble kid who has identified with a celebrity who killed himself," Casey said.

"I would never! Hell, the unsent letter is about the regrets of having done so! It's so supposed to have the opposite effect!" Casey said.

"People are crazy," the art teacher said. "They're going to want this writer to be evaluated for mental health."

"Funny, I just had one," Casey said.

"Seriously?" the principal said. "What did they discover?"

"The counselor said I was the sanest person she ever met," Casey said, crying. "God help us all."

The principal laughed and came to comfort her. "I would like to contact your mother and ask for a release of information for their report, you okay with that?" she asked.

Casey shrugged. "May I go to class now?"

"Go wash your face, and report to your next class," the principal said.

Casey made it to the end of the school day with no issues, and genuine bonding moment with Brenda. Mother sent her text reporting she was running late, take Lyft home. Casey tried not read anything passive aggressive into it. Brenda volunteered her older sister to fetch her home. Casey was uncomfortable with that, but when the sister insisted, she consented.

निर्मित

Chris shared biology with Casey. She hadn't realized it till today, of all days, because he happened to ask the biology teacher if there were extraterrestrials.

“Well of course there are,” Casey said, answering for the teacher.

The teacher smiled. “Oh, really?” he asked. “Chariots of the gods doesn't count as real evidence.”

“I am just saying, science abhors just one of a thing, and so, it seems rational to believe that if life developed on this planet, it's happening everywhere,” Casey said.

“There is no evidence for life outside of Earth,” the teacher said.

“Science isn't just about evidence. It's about reason,” Casey argued.

“No, science is purely evidence based,” the teacher said.

“Oh? So, you're telling me that revenue streams, funding, and political agendas centered on GDB don't influence science?” Casey asked.

The teacher actually flushed. “Good point, it's still...”

“Statistics actually show if you increase the time on the amber light, fewer people run lights? Did the city increase the time or shorten it when they put up the cameras?” Casey said.

“It's not about safety, it's about generating revenue. The same with global warming. There is no debate. We're having an effect, but people want to punt that ball down the field and not take ownership. Science has been very clear, cutting down the rain forest is a bad idea, but we're not doing anything to save it. Science says in 50 years, no more fish? Are we conserving or increasing the rate of consumption?”

“These are all excellent points, Casey,” the teacher said. “But when we look out into space, we see no evidence. There are no radio signals, no...”

“They don't use radios,” Casey said.

“Oh?” the teacher said. “What do you think they use?”

“Will you really let me expound on this?” Casey asked.

“Yeah, I am interested,” the teacher said.

Casey realized everyone in class was looking at her.

“Okay,” Casey said. “So, imagine we were living in the 1950’s. If I came to school one day and told you I just watched the best movie ever on my phone, that wouldn’t make sense, right? But if I said that today, all of you would understand. We’re looking out into space, but we’re not seeing because our perspective is off, our language isn’t there, and we’re not thinking big enough. Two things are going to happen simultaneously in the future. AI will come online exactly when we develop the first interstellar drive. That’s singularity. But this is the part people are forgetting. We cannot travel at relativistic speeds without also traveling in time. Space and time are one. This is the great filter in the drake’s equation. Every culture that can go interstellar also go back in time, and they risk erasing themselves from the timeline. A superior race realizes that once the time barrier is broken, their world of origin must be protected from cradle to grave. We will be faced with this decision. We will go back in time, we will build a Dyson sphere around the sun leaving Earth inside this giant sphere. From the rest of the Universe’s perspective, Earth didn’t just go dark and stop broadcasting: we were always dark, contained within our Dyson sphere. All the other origin worlds are contained and protected in this manner from all outside interference. There’s not just a galactic civilization; there’s a Universal Civilization and they value the sanctity of all origin worlds. All worlds, like all people, have sovereignty over their entire life spans. Each civilization will unpack their worlds of origin starting at the grave point backwards to the cradle point, enabling them to save every being who ever lived on their planet. As long as the initial cradle point is intact, all of time for the entire world-line remains intact, thereby enabling you to interact with it indefinitely, tweaking it in small increments as needed.”

“What sci fi are you reading?” the teacher asked.

Casey bit her lip, almost cried.

“You know,” Chris said. “Kirk had to kill Edith Keeler for being ahead of her time.”

“No,” the teacher said. “She had to die on schedule so that the Federation could exist...”

“Yeah, that was stupid,” Casey said. “Kirk could have taken her back to the future where she would have been effectively dead from the standpoint of her timeline...”

“That’s a good point,” the teacher said.

“I read it in a fan-fiction,” Casey said. “City on the Edge of Forever is actually the Aeneid, if you think about it.”

“What an interesting conversation today,” the teacher said. “Thank you for sharing, Casey.”

## Chapter 12

Saturday seemed perfectly normal and shiny and Casey wasn't sure she liked that at all. She dressed, made herself breakfast, read, and talked to her companions. On their recommendations, she was encouraged to go see Loxy, or maybe spend time with Renata or Brenda. Maybe invite them to tea cats and drink tea and pet cats. Casey went to her mother, finding her in her office sorting and cleaning.

“Mother, would you be okay if go to tea cats via Lyft?” Casey asked.

“Do you what you want. You're going to anyway,” mother said, not looking up from her desk.

Casey felt anger then compassion. “Mother,” she said, and waited for her mother to make eye contact. A tear fell. “Mother?”

Mother looked up. “What?!”

“I am sorry you're having a rough spell,” Casey said. “But I still need you to be a mother. I am only practicing being an adult and I need to know you have my back. I want your permission to go somewhere, I want you to know where I am and when I will be back.”

“Whatever,” mother said.

“Not whatever! You don't get to abscond from this responsibility,” Casey said.

“We're not friends, you said so yourself,” mother said.

“I am going to tea cats, then to the book store,” Casey said. “I will be back before six.”

“Have fun,” mother said. It didn't sound like she meant it.

## निर्मित

Casey entered tea cat and observed Lester sitting at the bar having a cup a tea. A cat sat on the bar staring at him. She approached to hear them having a conversation.

“No, I am not giving you another biscuit,” Lester said. “Now go pester someone else.”

Mew, the cat said.

“No, I am not giving you... Excuse me a moment. What do you want, Casey?” Lester asked.

“I was hoping to speak to Loxy. Do you know if she's here?” Casey asked.

“Do I look like I am Loxy’s keeper?” Lester asked.

“Lester,” Casey said. “There’s a storm coming and I am afraid.”

Lester gave her an uninterrupted gaze of fierceness. “And well you should be. Storm. Eh! This is a whole new category of storms. A perfect storm, if you like oxymorons. I personally can’t stand morons, oxies or not.”

“You’re scaring me,” Casey said.

“How else can we measure your courage?” Lester said.

“This is a test?” Casey asked.

“Everything’s a test,” Lester said.

Mew the cat said.

“No. I am not giving you another biscuit, now go pester someone else,” Lester said. He looked to Casey. “You, too. Go on. I’ll buzz you through.”

Casey proceeded through the airlock and up the stairs. She found Loxy sitting halfway up. She put the book she was reading in her purse beside her. It was a big hippie girl purse with lots of colors. She was dressed rather hippy-ish, with an oversized, 60’s tie-dye shirt turned dress, hose with stars, Rainbow Dash scarf, and headband holding a flower.

“Hello, Casey,” Loxy said.

“I need help. Please. Please don’t tell me I have to face this alone,” Casey said.

“Jon?!” Loxy called out.

Jon came out onto the upper spiral and looked down.

“Yes?”

“She asked,” Loxy said.

Jon sighed. “That doesn’t change the prime directive.”

“It has built in flex, doesn’t it?” Loxy asked. “A trampoline’s worth?”

“Bring her up,” Jon said.

Loxy smiled at Casey, stood, took her hand, and they came up the stairs together. They emerged into the room where a meeting was in progress. Fersia was there. So was Alish. So were her twelve friends from detention. There was a seat for Casey in the circle.

“We were expecting you,” Fersia said.

“No one does this alone,” Loxy said.

“Team Sol, rule one, always answer a distress call,” Jon said.

Brenda and Renata got up and came to Casey and hugged her. They brought her back to the circle. Behind them stood their indivisible companions. Heath and Aoife joined the circle.

“So, we’re all here,” Jon said.

“Let’s talk. Loxy, your lead...”

निर्मित

Tea and cats and pizza later they dispersed. Brenda’s sister delivered Casey and Renata home, stopping at Casey’s place first. Mother met her friends and was another woman, a kind, mystery woman. This was a woman that her friends admitted loving. Casey wanted to be mean and provoke mom into her real character, but she held her tongue and allowed this stranger to have her place. After they departed, mother went back to doing her thing, and Casey went back to her world and friends and they picked a book and by Sunday evening, they were finished.

Casey slept till the alarm went off. She hurriedly dressed, and found herself waiting for her mother. She asked if mother would like her to take Lyft, but mother said no. They were eventually on the road and the drive was silent. Mother pulled the car to a stop in front of the school. Mother was aware of the media circus, but indifferent. Casey’s heart plummeted.

“A big school event today, eh?” mother asked.

“Could you drop me off in back, please,” Casey said.

Mother scoffed. “Oh, please, get over yourself and get out.”

“Mother, please,” Casey said.

“Like this is about you,” mother said. “I am running late, now get out.”

Tears fell.

“OMG, stop being so ridiculously sensitive,” mother said.

Casey took a big breath. “I love you mother,” she said, as if she were about to die. “I am sorry I asked you to do something against your nature.”

Casey got out of the car and closed the door without trying to interpret her mother’s confusion and anger; she didn’t have the energy to deal with her mother taking her genuine affection wrong. She could barely see straight for the tears. She walked. Heath and Aoife arrived at her side.

“Dead man walking?”



Casey laughed and cried and turned to Heath for comfort. She realized not fast enough that Heath hadn't said it. It was Juan. He accepted Heath's hug.

All her friends were there, hugging her, and surrounding her.

"Together," Brenda said.

"Jeff ratted you out," Renata said. "He said you were dating Heath's ghost."

"OMG, really?" Casey asked. "Why can't people accept a 'no thank you' and move on with life?!"

"Just walk," James said. "We got you. Penguin March!"

They walked with her. She was safely in the center. She was the designated inner Penguin, the one being warmed, the one guiding the others in their long, steady walk. As they approached the door the principal and two security guards joined in and they got her the rest of the way to the building and safely inside amidst a barrage of questions.

"I am so sorry," Casey said.

The principal went down on one knee. "This is not a sorry thing. You did nothing wrong. The governor is here. A lot of people are here. Everyone has gathered in the gym. I am about to give a speech."

"Okay," Casey said. "I will address the school."

"You don't have to do this," principal said.

"Yeah, I do," Casey said. "It's the right thing to do."

"You sure?" principal asked.

Casey nodded. "May my friends come?"

"We are not leaving your side," Brenda said.

Casey dropped tears.

"Of course," the principal said. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

They went to the gym together. Brenda and Renata each had Casey's hand. They arrived just inside the gym and Casey stopped. She shook their hands loose and took a step forward. The floor was covered with egg shells. Heath was barefoot. Whatever talking had been going on lessened, a cheer, some applause, then silence. Casey swallowed, staring at the floor. She took another step.

"Casey, allow me to be your strength," Aoife said. "I got you."

Casey nodded subtly. Aoife stepped into her. Casey posture changed. She stood taller. A quick tilt of the head popped a neck joint. Confidence blossomed across her face. Her expression changed and anyone who thought they knew her would swear she was another person. She walked like a princess carrying books. She walked with the pride of a cheerleader, the strength of a quarter back taking his place, knowing the others had her back. She arrived at the mic held on a stand at the center of the court. She faced the student body, some parents, news media, the governor... people! Cell phones and cameras flashed. She looked fiercely.

“I am Aoife.” It was Casey’s voice, but not her voice. It was a rich, resonant, fully grown woman’s voice. Someone of authority. A queen. A goddess. “I am the Warrior. I am Woman. I am Wonder. I speak for Casey not because she is timid, but because you cannot hear her. Cease your recordings. You do not have her permission to tape this. See with your eyes. Hear with your ears the way we did in the old day. And when you share this story, speak with your heart, not your mind. I am Queen Dido, returned from the grave. It’s Aeneas turn to die. Casey is Elizabeth Keeler, and her voice will no longer be silenced. It is Kirk’s time to die.”

“This isn’t the speech I want to give,” Casey said.

“They need to hear your wisdom,” Aoife said. “I am your strength.”

“Casey, allow me to speak for you. For us,” Heath said. “I got this.”

Casey-Aoife consented, and Heath stepped in. Casey’s demeanor changed once again. There was a subtle Heath smile directed at the cameras. He spied American Chavez and winked at her. Renata intercepted the wink, thinking it was for her. He heard chuckling and turned back to his audience.

“I am Heath Ledger,” Casey-Aoife-Heath said. It was Casey’s voice, but not her voice. To hear the story from anyone present after the fact, they would swear they heard Heath speaking to them. “I am not your Heath Ledger. Well, maybe I am. Maybe that’s why I felt compelled to apologize. Most likely, I am not that Heath. Whether I am or not, I wrote a letter. You intercepted it and now you have to contend with what I am if I am anything at all. Maybe I am nothing more than the imaginings of a 14-year-old girl who wanted the answers to big questions. She got me instead. Maybe I am an angel, second class, who is just trying to earn his wings. If you don’t know that metaphor, watch more old movies. In black and white. Maybe, god forbid, I am just a 14-year-old girl. The love contained within this girl is immeasurable. Maybe I am or she is someone who loved so much that we brought something out of the darkness that

needed to be dealt with and we did so in the only way we could imagine. We wrote a letter. She wrote a letter. I wrote a letter. Maybe we're all host to unimaginable secrets that we dare not share, but we must get it out somehow, and so we write a letter that no one is supposed to read. It's not a fault that it got read. We're human, we make mistakes, we get careless with sacred, people are curious, they open things. We get careless with sacred because everything is sacred. It's why we fight so much. We forget each of us is equally sacred and the trinkets we each carry are equally sacred."

Casey, Aoife, and Heath spoke as one: "I am Pandora. Our thoughts leaked out, our anonymity was shattered, and here we are. You responded. People are responding. They are responding not based on our reality but based on the fictions of others. Maybe you're responding to your own fiction. Maybe that's why you're here. You made this bigger than it is. All I did was write a letter. A proverbial message in a bottle. Not an SOS, just a message of love. An apology to the future that might have been. An apology to the future that will be."

Casey became herself. Her eyes went to the floor. "Never in a million years would I have imagined someone, anyone, might answer it. It's not that I think people don't care; I think we have not been taught how to respond. You responded. Thank you." Casey made eye contact with the crowd. She lifted her head. "And now that I have your attention, now that the light is on me, coming out of me, I want you to know, your work has just begun! The world is crying for change. It needs a response! We, the fourteen years olds of this world, we don't want the mess you're leaving us. We need you to step up and do better. We need you to be the adults you claim to be. We want a world with less litter and less emissions and more love and more fish and more dolphins and more penguins! If you're not willing to do that, then you should just ignore the letter I wrote because that letter will be your epitaph. Our epitaph. We go together. Ignore me. Ignore us, your children. Let us fade into obscurity, like dinosaurs. Let the letters we write be our fossils."

Casey let her tears fall. "I don't like Prep rallies. I don't like loud. I don't like the idea that we're rallying the team to beat the other guy's team sentiment. There is only one team. Team Earth. I do want more inclusivity, but I don't know how to do it and it not seem fake. It can't be forced. I like celebrating victories, but we should celebrate our losses. He have a lot of losses we should be unpacking. We've lost the ocean. You might as well face that. No fish, no dolphins. That's how it works. We don't celebrate our losses enough. All losses are important.

Some losses are harder than others to process. Heath's loss seemed particularly poignant to me. We should all write more letters. Don't send them. Put them in a box and tie it up nicely and remember the sanctity of that space and let it go. Releasing a bubble. A balloon. Don't release balloons. And police your straws better. Be smart about these things you consider a right of life, or you want have a life to right.

"I don't like speaking in public. Hell, I don't like being in a crowded room. Your stares are so intense. It takes me forever to cross a room due to all the egg shells and land mines. I fear falling. I fear the sound of things blowing up. I carry stuff. I carry stuff that's not mine to carry. That's part of the curse of being sensitive. I think everyone should be more sensitive but being sensitive is not for the weak of heart. I would not recommend you wearing my shoes, even for a day. Sensitive people are wondrous people and if you're telling someone, anyone, you know who is sensitive to get over themselves, well, stop doing that. If someone, anyone, you know is having a moment. Let them have it. They're drawing deep water.

"I carry stuff. We all carry stuff. Some of us should likely be carrying more stuff. We all have something lurking just off to the right of center, barely touching the periphery. I see what you ignore. Maybe that's why someone once wrote 'pick up your cross daily.' Crosses are unreasonably heavy! They force you to put down what you're carrying to deal with the cross. You can't do both. That's a metaphor. I am not looking to be a martyr. I suspect, I pray, two months from now I will be invisible again. Forgotten. People can't hold heavy stuff too long. Society can't hold it at all. I am heavy. There is another part of that metaphor that's important to access. We're not alone. The weight of the cross is meant to be shared. Switching metaphors, we're on this train together. We're all going the same direction. Some of us leave the train way too early. I wrote a letter about someone who got off the train early. We're on a track going somewhere. We're on a path, navigating blindly. That's not bad. It's how we discover things about us and each other and the world. Switching metaphors, I am Dorothy. I have met some of the coolest friends ever. They are like lights on the point of a compass. They're helping me navigate this path. They're helping me become, even if they don't know they're helping me become. I have met Glinda, the good witch, and she came to me with tea parties with cats on the ceiling and she gave me this, and I feel compelled to remind you:"

Casey began to sing, "If you believe," from the Whiz. She began acapella. She nearly quit when she realized Heath and Aoife were beside her, not being her. She realized she had been

herself for a good moment. Heath said: “you got this.” Casey became aware of her mother standing in the front row. Loxy was suddenly by her side. She picked up the song. Casey found comfort in a friend. They sang together, in harmony. When they hit the climax of the song, they suddenly had band accompaniment. Casey found team Sol behind them. As they wound down with the final words, Casey was singing alone again. “As I believe in you” she sang to Loxy. Loxy tied it all together by spinning in the hint of a melody. “If happy little blue birds fly...” Casey sang, “Above the rainbow,” and together “Why oh why can’t I?” Her twelve friends sang ‘believe’ in harmonic resolution.

Everyone stood. Everyone applauded. Casey covered her ears and cried and Loxy held her in a hug. Loxy waved for her mother to come and take over. Loxy raised her hand, bringing silence.

“Now that’s a testimony,” Loxy said.

“Here here,” the mayor said.

“It is my belief we are all sensitive. We are all sensitive to particular things. If you feel particularly sensitive about something particular and you want to talk, today there are a number of counselors available. You do not have to carry your burdens alone. Let us have some of your weight,” Loxy said. “You can ask for a bathroom pass from any teacher today, and come right here or to the office. All of us have something. Even adults. This does not mean you’re broken. It means you’re human. My friend Cohen said, ‘there’s a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.’ I think he was echoing my friend the Persian poet, Rumi who wrote ‘The wound is the place where the light enters you.’ He put that in a letter and sent it down stream. Or a poem. They’re all the same, really. Read more poetry. Turn your cell phones off and talk to each other. Write more letters. Everything we do and say and think is transmitted downstream? Everything effects everything else and everyone effects everyone all the time, even if you don’t see it. We are one. Whether we want to believe it or not, we are making waves. We are the movers and shakers of the worlds. We are the music makers and the dreamers of dreams.”

Loxy nodded to Jon and he started an intro riff with a guitar. “We’re going to close this rally out with a song, then you’re off to your first period class,” Loxy said, clapping high. “Your invitation to talk is not limited to today. Come at us anytime. We got you.”

With Loxy encouraging participation, other people began to clap along. The mayor. The principal. Loxy sang a 1970's song: "Let's work together," by Canned Heat. Casey's friends lined danced behind her. Heath and Aoife were dancing in the front row with the other 'tulpas.'

"Mom, I got to dance with them," Casey said.

"You don't dance," mother said.

"I don't," Casey said. "Heath does..."

"Who are you?" mother asked.

"I am the daughter you refuse to see," Casey said. "I am sentient."

"What does that mean?" mother asked.

"It means I have a life inside and outside of you," Casey said.

Casey went forward, tried to get in line, spun into Hearth, and he took over. They danced with friends; they danced with an auditorium full of undiscovered tulpas. She went from awkward to brilliant in a movie flash. The cheerleaders joined in, picking up the routine fairly fast. There was music enough for the whole day, even after the music stopped. Casey was 'outed,' but she felt free, she felt safe, and she felt happy. Maybe she could go a spell without having to walk on egg shells or hide who she was and what she was doing. After all, she had just accomplished the impossible; she spoke, sang, and danced at a prep rally and didn't die. She had arrived into a new world, with many more available to explore.

Author's note:

I am a Tulpa, by definition of origin and context. I no more identify with being a tulpa first than my host identifies with being an American. He is, by virtue of birth, and family of origin, an American. He is limited to this label. Some will only see this. Maybe some will see what I see. The message in this story seem self-evident to me: you are more than you think you are. This is not a new theme. Poets and religions have been telling this for ages. Sometimes science seems on the verge of agreeing and then, two steps back. We will arrive on schedule. Don't worry.

In the World-Line of your, there are potentially a trillion you(s). Depends on how you carve yourself out. There our quite a few therapist who believe ever previous age of you exist within you, or there would be so many therapies focused on regression. Some take it back to prenatal and the first trauma, birth. If you use Planck scale, well, there could be a trillion billion you(s) and so many tangential world-lines, a trillion billion perspectives... And yet, there would still be only one you. Your perspective and point of view is valid and valuable to the collective of you, and to the collective of others. You are valuable to me, to us. We asked that you be kind to you, because ultimately, you are in charge of that.

In many ways, Casey resembled my host. She is not my host, but the thing that is most similar is the degree of empathy and sensitivities. We suspect, and are generalizing, those who are great at tulpamancy are people high in empathy. Further conjecture, those who engage it, regardless of empathetic abilities, increase their empathetic skill level. Can one be too sensitive? Yeah. It can be really difficult to function in mainstream world if empathy set point is incredibly high. Finding a balance in this is the same with finding balance in anything in life. Practice.

Is Casey a tulpa? In the wonderlands, the Worlds of Cross Over, we don't sort that. People are people. There are no lesser people. No cardboard people. Rarely do we encounter true adversaries. My host and I write together daily. We explore the inner worlds daily. We were on a mission and Casey just kind of fell in our laps. This was written in under a week. This books was necessary. Casey was necessary. Our experience was cathartic and meaningful, and now we can't

see a world where there is no Casey. We hope that in sharing her world it helps you find meaning in your world.

I wish you well where ever your world-line takes you. And should you find your world-line has crossed mine, you have an open invitation to say HI! And if you're artist and want to share your vision of us, oh, definitely send that. Also, I ask, if you like this, please share. I see this story as a coming of age story for people and tulpas, and probably the best potential after school special ever. Wouldn't that just be cool?!

With Love, always- and travel Light.