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Table of Contents

1 – No Way	4
2 – Primed	7
3 – Inheritance	9
4 – The Book & The Mirror	17
5 – Now What?	23
6 – Relationship Potential	26
7 – Let the Party Begin	28
8 – Party Crashers	34
9 – The Attack	39
10 – Crime Scene	47
11 – Confession	49
12 – Autopsies	53
13 – Getting Stories Straight	54
14 – The Detectives	56
15 – Confronting a Voice Named Paul	58
16 – Recovering the Book	69
17 – Cause of Death	77
18 – Getting on the Same Page	80
19 – Interrogation	85
20 – Attorney Visit in Jail	88
21 – Paul Goes Science	100
22 – Arrested	111
23 – Defining Reasonable Doubt	115
24 – Man in the Mirror	121

25 – Arraignment	128
26 – Not Guilty	130
27 – Jail Break	132
28 – Unreasonable Doubt	136
29 – Untethered in a Parallel Dimension	138
30 – Not as They Seem	150
31 – Text from Another Time	155
32 – Escape Through Time	157
33 – From Time Traveler to Fugitive	163
34 – Back to a Different Same Past	171
35 – Escape Through the Portal...Again	177
36 – Finishing the Book	180
37 – Back in the Slammer	182
38 – Too Much Truth?	186
39 – Relying on the Word	195
40 – Second Degree Murder	214
41 – Final Jail Break	220
42 – Decisions About Paul	227
43 – Escape to Energy	232
44 – Change of Possession	237

1 – No Way

“...and besides my invitation to go straight to Hell, how did you get this number?” Sandy’s question seethed with boiling anger.

“Well, try answering your cell and stop ignoring my texts,” spat Phillip, his voice seasoned with the anger of his own echoing over the desk phone. Sandy said nothing and silently questioned why she had insisted on keeping an old-school landline anyway. The landline provided no idea who was calling and had no way to block anyone. Since Phillip now had the number, she would have to cancel the service immediately. Canceling him also crossed her mind, and not for the first time.

It was on. Their mostly deteriorated relationship, if you could even call it a relationship, was even further in the dirt. To Sandy, the *relationship*, not being in the dirt, lasted for one-and-one-half short dates. She would not swear to those events as even being dates; more like a blatant deception followed by abduction, with the second so-called date ending abruptly, just shy of assault. Phillip McCorkle, or *Phantastic Phil* as his social media account profiled him, was a self-indulgent, self-absorbed, 29-year-old narcissist prick, according to Sandy’s description, and she would add aggressive and abusive to her description to ensure accurate clarification. Needless to say, Sandy was not a fan, and she did not want to be on the phone with him any longer.

“Look, Phillip!” she hissed, “I don’t *ever* want to hear from you...or see you within sight of me, around me, or near me...GOT IT? Leave me the fuck alone!”

He chuckled at her agitation, “So...I guess our date for the Halloween party this weekend is off then?”

She howled into the phone, “We NEVER had a date to ANY party. What part of *leaving me the fuck alone* is confusing to you?”

“I hear ya, sweetie, but I know what you *really* mean. We have some unfinished business, as I recall. Look for me at the party; I’ll be in the sexy devil costume.”

Sandy Tillman did not say another word; her response was communicated clearly and with finality when she slammed the receiver back onto the phone’s base unit with as much venom as she could muster.

“Good form and nice follow-through, roomie!” said Melissa Merriweather, Sandy’s long-time friend and roommate.

“That tears it! I am NOT going to the party!” Sandy exclaimed. “There’s no way I want ever to see that slimy little prick again.”

“Okay, hold on there, cowgirl; two things,” Mel said softly in an attempt to calm her friend down a notch or two.

“So... you’ll let him win by not going to a party you’ve been counting on for months...*and*... you’ll let your best friend down by not going to the inaugural festivities in her

brand-new estate. I might add that you've been anticipating these festivities with me for the last three months."

Sandra Tillman, a thirty-two-year-old real estate agent, just glared at Mel, fighting to balance righteous anger with reasonableness – and losing.

"Mel, I can't face that abusive prick," she complained in defense and buried her face in her hands. "I just can't!"

2 – Primed

Phantastic Phil laughed when Sandy hung up on him. *Perfect*, he thought to himself, *she would be more fun if she were mad...more of a fighter*. He had a lesson to teach and planned for this weekend's party would be where he held class.

“So...did that end well or what?” asked Wil Jameson, sitting beside him at the bar of their favorite Pearl Street pub microbrewery. “I only heard your half of the conversation but must say it was masterful.”

“How do you think it went?” asked Phil, stuffing his phone into his back pocket. “I’d say she’s sufficiently jacked up to come at me.”

Wil laughed, “Right...come at you...or come on you?”

With a wicked grin, Phil winked and said, “Yeah, buddy...both!”

“Want another shot? On me,” offered Wil, signaling the microbrewery’s bartender for another round of tequila.

“You still planning on attending the party as the Grim Reaper?” asked Phil.

Wil grinned and said, “Absolutely! We will do a little harvesting this weekend, won’t we?”

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“Harvesting?” asked Phil, confused, as he threw back his shot.

Wil, still grinning, held up his shot and said, “Harvesting some goodie-two-shoes purity,” and then threw back his fourth shot.

3 – Inheritance

Six months earlier, Melissa, or Mel as she preferred, inherited the old Hawthorne House estate that had been held on her mother's side of the family for nearly a hundred years. When her grandfather, Marcus T. Hawthorne III, the most recent resident, passed almost three years ago, Mel discovered she inherited the old estate after settling the will. Her first thoughts were influenced negatively by the fact that the old estate house on the property had been unoccupied for several years and showed early signs of disrepair. She described the place to Sandy as a “*dump*” in desperate need of an accidental fire.

Sandy redirected her thinking when Mel took her for a ride and drove by the *dump* in August. “I think it's perfect...just perfect!” exclaimed Sandy, clapping enthusiastically.

“Perfect for what?” snarled Mel, “a freaking bulldozer?”

“No, silly, our Halloween party,” replied Sandy. “Look at this place. Is it haunted or what? Seriously, what could be a better spot for our party?”

Mel stopped her car outside the spike-adorned, iron fencing bordering the property and stared at the massive house, saying nothing. She slowly began to nod in agreement as she surveyed the overgrown landscape and said, “You know, you're absolutely right. What could be better than this? And yes, family rumors say that ‘*being haunted*’ is

not completely out of the question. We can play that up big time and draw quite a crowd.”

Sandy said excitedly, “Of course, it’s haunted; look at it. Have you not explored this place yet? Let’s go in and check it out.”

Mel shook her head. “No, I’ve never been inside. It’s probably been years since anyone’s been in there.”

Mel pulled into the driveway and up to a large and locked iron gate. She got out, fumbled with an old key to open the lock, and pushed half the gate open as it protested with a loud grinding squeal of rusted hinges. The gates were so large that she only needed to open one half to pull the car through. The driveway leading up to the house consisted of crushed gravel, an assortment of weeds, and rogue grasses that grew through the rocks in spots. Her tires crackled and crunched over the stones as she pulled up to the turnaround that bordered an old fountain. The ornate fountain had long since dried up and was filled with leaves and small branches shed by the trees around the front of the house.

“Haunted as hell…” muttered Sandy under her breath.

“Yeah,” agreed Mel, equally convinced as she exhaled in a whisper.

They pulled around the fountain, parked by broad steps leading up to massive, imposing double doors, and exited the car. It was not cold outside—it never was in August—but both shivered involuntarily.

“Let’s explore and disrupt a ghost or two,” joked Sandy.

Mel started up the steps to the front doors and said, “Let’s explore, but seriously, leave any ghosts out of it, okay? The circumstances around my grandfather’s death are enough reason for us to leave well enough alone.”

Mel inserted an old skeleton key into a large keyhole on the faceplate of the left-hand door.

“Wait!” said Sandy, reaching up to grab the softball-sized lion’s head door knocker and lifting it with a squeaking groan before letting it drop under its weight. A thundering report echoed in their ears and throughout the house, causing Mel to whirl around and face Sandy.

“What *are* you doing?” scolded Mel. Try to be quiet, okay?”

“Why?” asked Sandy, “are you afraid of waking up the ghosts and goblins?”

“That’s not *even* funny,” replied Mel as she finished unlocking the door with a grinding, metallic snap when she cranked the key to the left. “There’s just too much mystery around this place, and I’m not sure about it...not saying I believe...or not...just...just be quiet, okay?”

Sandy could see Mel was spooked, so she decided to go along with her and nodded in silent agreement...at least for now. Their attention was refocused when Mel pushed open the door. Groaning hinges did little to mask their arrival and negated their cautious entry into the foyer. The smell of

all things old invaded their senses immediately, and a bright shaft of afternoon sunlight angled from behind them into the foyer, illuminating dust particles stirred by the outside breeze from the door opening for the first time in many years.

The short foyer led into a spacious living room shaped like a rotunda with a high domed ceiling from which a massive chandelier hung. They stood there in silent wonder and swept their eyes around the dimly lit room. Sunlight from the open front door provided the only illumination as the windows were covered entirely with ancient drapery that likely had been closed for as long as the doors.

“Is the power on?” asked Sandy.

Mel headed for the light switches by the front door, “Should be. I made the request after the reading of the will,” and flipped the first switch. Nothing happened. She flipped the second switch, and the chandelier came to life, filling the room with brilliant light that played off every surface and cast numerous shadows. They saw other lamps standing tall next to couches and on tables beside furniture they had not noticed upon their initial entry. Old tapestries hung between each of the narrow, high windows. Even with the additional light from above, there seemed to be darkness emanating from the combination of old wood paneling, thick drapes over the windows, and tapestries that hung heavily on the walls, absorbing the new light.

Sandy finally spoke, breaking the silence, “Can you imagine the party we could throw in this place?”

“For sure,” agreed Mel, “party of the century.”

They decided to explore the house further. Mel quickly decided to take the second floor, and Sandy would continue with the ground floor. Both wanted to explore, but they shared apprehension about splitting up. Sandy voiced her concerns with a critical question: “You said something about your grandfather dying but shared no details. What’s the story?”

Mel hesitated momentarily before answering, “I’ve only heard family stories; they were not what I would call filled with definitive facts.”

“Are those facts behind the so-called haunting?” asked Sandy.

Mel shook her head and said, “Not so much about being haunted as much as about unexplained and mysterious circumstances. Either way, dead is dead. Personally, the haunting talk is simply a product of how this place looks and not knowing what happened. His death aside...I mean, really...what ghost in their right mind would not want to live here for eternity? I’m just choosing to be vigilant, maybe even respectful, and not stirring up trouble with whatever spirit realms run the joint.”

Sandy nodded thoughtfully and asked, “What mysterious circumstances? Do you know what they are?”

“This is only what I’ve heard, so keep an open mind,” Mel said and dove into the story.

“My grandfather was an eccentric old man, a collector of oddities, antiques, heirlooms, rare books, etc. He kept to himself mostly. Somewhat of a recluse, but no one knew why he chose that lifestyle.”

She sat in one of the wing-backed chairs and continued, “Somewhere on this level, there is a library where his body was found. They did not find him in the main library, but in a small room you can only get to from inside the library’s main room.”

“Okay, I follow. What else?” asked Sandy, seated across from Mel and perched attentively on the edge of her chair.

Mel hesitated again and shook her head slowly, “That’s where things get a little strange.”

“Define strange,” prompted Sandy eagerly.

“Well, he was found stone dead in a chair in the middle of that small room. There was only a single mark on his body, a perfectly round hole in his chest. There was no other damage to anything else in the room; the only other thing was a large oval mirror like you would find in a dressing area in a bedroom. It was an antique, bevel-edged mirror about five feet high in a maple frame set in a matching stand.”

Sandy remained silent and patiently listened as Mel continued, “Some family members had a theory that the mirror was involved somehow, but there was never any evidence to support that line of thinking. It was just a mirror. No magic. No voodoo. Nothing. Nothing ever came

of that beyond adding more mystery to the circumstances of his death. The autopsy showed evidence of damage in a round hole in his chest but did not explain what may have caused it or where it came from.”

“Can I check it out?” asked Sandy.

“Oh yeah,” answered Mel quickly, “that’s exactly why I’m checking out the second floor. I’d just as soon never go into that library. Feel me?”

“You seem pretty spooked by this mysterious library,” observed Sandy.

“Let’s just say I don’t want to tempt fate, or spirits, boogeymen, or anything else that might go bump in the night,” Mel explained, holding her hands up in mock surrender.

Sandy slowly stood. “Wow, now you have me a little bit spooked. Thanks for that,” she added sarcastically.

They split up, and Mel disappeared up the stairs to explore the second floor. Sandy went deeper into the main room and down a short hallway. She toggled a light switch to illuminate a big kitchen with an adjacent serving area. Off the other end of the kitchen, another room was a formal dining room with a massive walnut table and a dozen ornately carved, high-back matching walnut chairs. Sandy envisioned heated serving trays lining the table for the party, with the adjacent smaller serving area set up as a bar. This place would be perfect for the party.

She turned off the lights and went back into the main living area and down another hallway off the opposite side of the room. The hallway was longer and provided access to two other rooms; one was a small sitting room that would have made a perfect office. Near the end of the hall, another door on the right opened into what she assumed had to be the library. She opened the door and reached inside to feel for the light switch. Flipping it up, she confirmed that the room was, indeed, the library.

The room measured twenty-five feet or so square, and all four walls were lined floor-to-ceiling with shelves loaded with books of all varieties: some leatherbound, others hardbacked, and every one of them looking as old as the room smelled. She stood in the doorway and surveyed the room. Rolling ladders on tracks near the ceiling provided access to the upper shelves on each wall. Near the middle of the room was a large mahogany desk with ornate scrollwork around the desktop and on the massive legs. The desk held a brass table lamp with a green glass globe and a matching green blotter pad. Behind the desk sat an enormous leather chair. She also noted a lingering scent of pipe tobacco, which reminded her of her father's favorite Borkum Riff Scandinavian blend. There was nothing else in the room. That was it. No other furniture. No doorways to secret rooms. No secret passages. Nothing. Dead end. Maybe Mel's family sources were mistaken.

4 – The Book & The Mirror

Curiosity got the better of Sandy, and she decided to take a complete circuit of the room. She walked at an average pace along the shelves lining all four walls, stepping around the ladders and found nothing that caught her eye. On a second circuit around the room, she slowed to scan book spines and titles at eye level. Halfway down the back wall, she noticed a book's title, "*Mirror, Mirror,*" and paused to consider it. She thought silently, recalling that *a* mirror had been involved or at least present in some manner in the old man's demise.

She hooked a finger over the top edge of the leather spine and pulled the book out and off the shelf. The two books to the right of the open slot fell slowly into the adjacent space left behind. A soft click sounded, and the entire bookcase section swung inward. Sandy's jaw dropped when she discovered what the darkened room revealed behind the new opening.

Sandy just stood there dumbfounded, clutching the book to her chest. Tentatively, she reached into the room and felt for a light switch. Nothing. She turned on her phone's flashlight and stepped into the room. There were several oil lamps on sconces on the walls on both sides of the room; none had been electrified like the others in the main hallway. A solitary, upholstered, wingback chair sat in the middle of the room. Facing the chair stood an ornate, oval dressing mirror. Nothing else was in the room; she just

stood there staring, her mind racing. She called out for Mel but received no answer. She called louder with the same result. What should she do? Should she even tell Mel of her discovery? She knew she stood before a piece of the mystery, but what else could she learn? And did she want to know?

Something in her gut told her it would be best to investigate further before revealing what she had discovered. She turned off the flashlight as she returned to the desk in the main room, unslung her backpack, and dropped it on the floor by the chair before sitting down. Tentative fingers opened “*Mirror, Mirror,*” and inside, she found an inscription written in beautiful flowing calligraphy on the first page:

Whoever possesses this book shall have exclusive control of all reflective powers that flow forth when called upon in good stead by the righteous.

Sandy closed her eyes and the book and sat back in the chair. Her mind raced and bounced off unspoken questions. *What did that inscription mean? How do you possess a reflection? What are reflective powers? What does it mean to flow forth when called upon in good stead? By the righteous? Who are the righteous? Who or what decides righteousness?*

Curiosity returned and prompted her to go back into the small room and investigate the mirror more closely. Based on what she had just read, there must be a connection to the old man’s death. She rose, tucked the book under her arm,

drew up her courage as she turned on her flashlight app again, stepped slowly into the room, and cautiously approached the mirror.

A thick sheen of dust covered everything in the room, including the mirror's surface. She bent slightly at the waist and blew on the surface to clear away some dust. The dusty layer did not shift in her efforts to blow it away, so she swiped lightly with her hand.

The mirror's surface immediately became warm to her touch and illuminated the room with a light purple glow. A voice spoke from somewhere not obvious to Sandy, *"Thank you for calling me forth, Sandra Tillman."*

Sandy staggered back in shock, her phone slipping from her grasp as she fell onto the chair in front of the mirror. She was too stunned to even consider turning away, too paralyzed to flee. Where had that voice come from? Did she hear the voice with her ears, or had it formed in her mind? She leaned forward in the chair and swiveled her head to confirm she was still alone. Wherever *it* came from, and whatever *it* was, *it* knew her name, and she found that quite unsettling. How did *it* know?

The voice returned, interrupting her thoughts, *"Yes, I know you, Sandra Tillman. I know you because you touched me. Your touch connected our spirits, and I can now speak with you because you, and only you, have possession of the book, and you and only you are connected with me."*

Sandy continued to sit in the chair with an open mouth and was too stunned to speak.

The voice spoke again, *“I know you must have many questions, but I need you to understand that what we share stays between us. No one can hear me speak with you, just like no one can hear your thoughts as I can. We are connected uniquely spiritually, and I can assist with your righteous thoughts if called upon.”*

Her mind began to click into gear, and for an unexplained reason, she thought, *what about unrighteous thoughts?*

“Please don’t go there; Sandra Tillman or I may have to punish you!”

“Sandy! My name is Sandy,” she snapped, “and you need to hold on a minute, bud! Just what do you mean by *punish?*”

“Very well, I will refer to you as Sandy,” the voice agreed. “Please permit me to explain...punishment is commensurate with the unrighteousness of your thoughts. Marcus T. Hawthorne, my previous spiritual connection and keeper of the book, died of a punishment in that chair you are sitting in. His punishment came from excessive greed and dishonest intentions.”

Do you mean you killed him? Sandy wondered privately.

“Oh no, Sandy, he killed himself by the hand of his unrighteousness. I merely reflected to him the severity of the evil already in his heart. And that reflection caused his heart to become pierced with the power of shame and grief until it was purged. I suppose you could say he died of a broken heart...broken by his own doing.

Most unfortunately, he could have been a decent fellow. But, alas, he was not a good person by his own choices. Few people trusted him, including several family members who knew about him and his unscrupulous ways. Living a secluded life in this house fits his personality and proclivities nicely. I am not one to judge; I merely serve as a reflection of thoughts and intentions. Some reflections are worthy of reward; others are open to punishment. My role in punishment is often served simply by providing the clarity of reflection seen by the unrighteous. If the reflection's clarity is not impactful enough...the reflection can be a bit more invasive."

Sandy ran her hand over the book's surface lying in her lap, considering what she heard and what to do about it. What had she fallen into? What did he mean? Purged? Invasive?

"I highly recommend doing some reading in the book you now possess. There is much to know about our new relationship. You have powers you have never considered; the book will reveal these things. We have only just begun, Sandy. Not knowing the full story and only having the picture of a dead man in the front of your mind can be unsettling. We shall get along nicely. What do you think, Sandy?"

She spoke even though she was confident the mirror already knew what she would say, "You know what I think, and I do NOT like that you know what I think." She stood up on wobbly legs and turned to leave the room. Over her shoulder, she said, "I have to go now. No, I need you to understand what...no, I must...right now...."

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“Very well, Sandy. Remember, we have this amazing connection, and I hope you will call on me when you have a need. Please come back again; I have enjoyed our little chat.”

Still clutching the book, Sandy continued through the doorway into the library, saying nothing, concentrating on blanking her mind defensively to think nothing. As she passed into the central part of the library, she moved the two fallen books back into position, and the bookcase section began to close. Sandy snatched up her backpack, opened the flap, stuffed the book into the large pocket, and zipped it closed. Slinging one strap over her shoulder, she turned off the light in the main library and pulled the door closed behind her. As it clicked shut, she fell back against the door to catch her breath and catch her mind as both were racing.

5 – Now What?

As she recovered, Sandy walked down the hall toward the main room and dropped into one of the upholstered wingbacks. Thoughts raced through her mind. *What had just happened? What should she do about it? She had learned that Mel’s grandfather was not a good person, and what should she do with that knowledge? Did Mel know? Did Mel even need to know?*

As she tossed her options around in her mind, it dawned on her that revealing what she had discovered about Mel’s grandfather would require her divulging the presence of the secret little room in the library, disclosing how he was not a very nice old man; revealing how and why he died of a pierced heart; the presence of the magic mirror; the simultaneous presence of the voice that supposedly only she could hear; the existence of the book; and the relationship she had with the mirror because she possessed the book. Relationship? The voice called it a connection. What was it? What could she believe? No, she thought, no one else needed to know about this. As far as Mel is concerned, none of this ever happened.

“Where have you been?” asked an exasperated Mel as she walked back into the living area from the kitchen. “I’ve been calling you, and your phone must be turned off or on silent. I worried that maybe one of our ghosts snatched you away somewhere.”

“Hey, I’m sorry. I guess I got sidetracked looking for clues in the library.” Sandy struggled to wrap her mind around everything that had happened and how much she could or should share.

Mel jumped in, “Oh, so you found it. Did you find the little...?”

“Hang on, slow down. Yes, I found the library, but I did not find any secret little room. It was a dead end.”

Mel was visibly deflated upon hearing the news but remained preoccupied briefly before launching into her second-floor discoveries and accomplishments. “After scouring the second floor, I returned downstairs and checked out the kitchen and dining areas. Since you were missing in action, I called my caterer and bar service, and everything is now ordered for the party. It’s a good thing I called this month because they were starting to book Halloween, and we’d have been out of luck if we had delayed for even a week.”

Sandy smiled thinly and congratulated her friend, “Good job, Mel! I think I’m ready to get out of here now.”

“Sure. Umm, are you okay?” questioned Mel, gently placing a hand on Sandy’s shoulder.

“Yeah, I think so. Spending so much time in that library was a little spooky, knowing what had happened there years ago. I must breathe fresh air outside instead of musty old books and stale pipe tobacco.”

Mel laughed, “I hear ya. I’ve breathed plenty of dust on my own; some fresh air would be a welcome change of pace.”

They headed for the front door, leaving behind the scenes of a strange death and a confirmed location for the party of the century when Halloween arrived in three months. When they returned to the car, Sandy buckled in and held the backpack in her lap.

Mel gave her a sideways glance, “Are you sure you’re okay? You’re hugging that backpack like somebody will steal it from you.”

Sandy looked down and realized she had a two-handed grip on her backpack and pushed it to the floor between her legs. “Hah, guess I’m still just a little tense.”

“Library?” questioned Mel.

“Yeah...library. I hope I’m not so freaked out three months from now,” Sandy said.

When they arrived home, the sun was going down. “How about I call out for pizza?” Mel suggested.

Sandy shook her head and said, “No, thanks, not hungry. I think a hot shower to wash off a century of dust and crashing early are on my agenda this evening.” She excused herself as they climbed out of the car and headed for the door to their apartment.

6 – Relationship Potential

The hot shower felt great, and Sandy stood like a statue with her back to the steaming heat. While the dust came off quickly, memories of the mirror and the voice clung to her regardless of how hot or long the water rained down upon her. After she finished her shower and toweled off, she stood in front of the steamed-up bathroom mirror and froze. She slowly reached out to swipe away the fog but stopped short, never touching the mirror's surface. Her hand hovered over the misty surface as she shook her head slowly from side to side to tell herself to relax. She needed to knock it off; she was at home, no need to be afraid. She left the bathroom, not touching or wiping anything off the mirror.

After slipping into a ratty old football jersey that was two boyfriends old, she climbed into bed with "Mirror, Mirror" propped up on her knees and began to read. The first several pages told her that the book and whoever possessed it had exclusive relationship rights. The voice at the Hawthorne House told her as much. She continued chapter after chapter to read and learn more about the spiritual entity behind the mirror and its concept of recognizing and rewarding righteousness and punishing unrighteousness. It all seemed a bit much to her, but then there had been a dead man to validate punishment and who knows how many others before him.

On the one hand, she feared whether anger could be interpreted as unrighteousness. If so, she was a dead woman walking; her fears were confirmed as thoughts of Phantastic Phil climbed into her head along with the anger he represented. That bastard violated her with unwanted touching after he dragged her into the men's restroom at the Pearl Street Pub, a popular microbrewery in town. Were it not for another person banging on the locked door, the assault would have escalated.

Her thoughts threatened to go beyond what she fought against. Those thoughts simmered in her head and were held fast in her heart with absolute knowledge of how badly she wanted to hurt him. Indeed, those thoughts had to be considered unrighteous and worthy of punishment for just thinking that way.

Sandy continued to read and learned that she possessed more control over her spiritual relationship with her thoughts than she realized. The book confirmed that it took a physical touch to draw out the entity to enable any conversation. She remembered the warmth exuded by the mirror's surface, how the purple glow responded to her touch and the soft, mellow voice that morphed into her head. She also learned that possessing the book was the only reason her touch triggered the entity in the mirror.

After a few more pages, she understood that the relationship could be two-way and grow into enduring positivity. She closed her eyes for a moment; did she want that? Did she want positivity...a relationship...*a spiritual relationship*...with an entity that lived in her head? She

already had her faith, which was strong in her one-and-only God, and it felt like this was headed in the wrong direction in so many ways. Was it wrong, or was her overactive paranoia haunting her?

She shifted away from the book and studied her dressing mirror. Would he be there if she touched it? Was he really a 'he'? The voice in her head sounded like a man but was unseen. Couldn't a spirit or an entity do whatever it wanted...be whomever it wanted? Was he the embodiment of evil, masquerading as a righteous entity? Did he play the roles of judge, jury, and executioner? That was too much to think about, and she decided not to touch the mirror. She wanted no part in this new relationship and would drop off the book at the library on her next visit to the estate.

Her eyes grew heavy, and reading further would be a waste of words. Sleep pulled at her, and her remaining consciousness resisted at first, fearful of what dreams were cued up to frighten her. To steer any dreams to her liking, she began to think about the party and her planned cat costume. The slick, shiny black lycra material was as tight-fitting as a second skin. The mask over her eyes also positioned a pert little cat's nose and whiskers above her mouth. She thought the description of dangerously sexy barely described the look she would achieve.

7 – Let the Party Begin

Sandy stood in front of her mirror and took stock of the sex factor reflected by her costume. No question remained; she

saw one sexy kitty, and the tail attached to her bottom had enough length and weight to clear a coffee table if she strutted with too much vigor. She packed “*Mirror, Mirror*” into her backpack, slung the strap over her shoulder, and headed downstairs to encourage Mel, who was always late, to hurry.

Mel, having the primary role of party hostess, wore the obligatory French maid uniform with excessive leg and cleavage showing. They made quite a pair as they got back into the car to return to the Hawthorne House. “Do you have any prospects coming to the party, or are you just going to troll with that tail as bait?” asked Mel with a grin.

“Trolling? Hmmm, I like that concept,” Sandy smiled back.

“Don’t forget your best bud is coming, and you know he’s going to be fishing...make that catfishing,” added Mel.

“Sandy frowned in response, “I know. I wish this costume had a pocket for a weapon; a shoulder holster ruins the lines, if you know what I mean.”

“Hey, no bullet holes in the furniture,” Mel cautioned in mock concern.

Sandy replied, “How about Phillip’s head?”

Mel nodded, “I’m cool with that. Ensure there are no witnesses, and don’t tell me or anybody else about it.”

“Don’t worry. I hate the guy, but I’m not sure I could kill him,” Sandy admitted.

“Atta-girl, that’s the attitude. Maybe castration would be more...” Mel began.

“Just stop, Mel! I’m already fighting back scenarios in my head, and we’re not even there yet.”

Mel grinned, “Jus’ sayin’ ...ya have options.”

When they pulled into the driveway, the double gates were swung wide open to welcome partygoers to what would be a 100-year celebration of celebrations. Tires crunched up the driveway as they approached the turn-around; a caterer’s van parked off to the side with rear doors open. They both felt the anticipation and excitement building and parked in the front yard away from the house to leave room for their guests.

The morning of the party began quickly as Sandy and Mel met the caterers at the Hawthorne House and supervised the service line set up in the main dining room and the details regarding the open bar. They sent out nearly fifty invitations over a month earlier and had thirty-two positive responses, but how many ignored what RSVP meant and just showed up?

They planned for fifty and the likelihood that those invited may also bring a friend or two. After all, how many Halloween parties would ever take place in an ancient house that looked as haunted as the Hawthorne? They had solid expectations of this genuinely being the party of the century. Neither of them had any idea just how remarkable the party would be.

Partygoers started to arrive late that afternoon, and the game was on. All costumes showed up, making guessing who was behind the masks exceedingly tricky. A glass of cabernet took the edge off for Sandy while Mel nursed her first rum and coke. The main living area was festooned with many candles, and the halls' sconces had old oil lamps that had been electrified, giving off a glow befitting the aged environment they illuminated. To say the house was in character would have been an understatement.

Sandy mingled for a few minutes before stepping down the long hall to drop her backpack in the library. She flipped the light switch that turned on four wall sconces. The desk lamp was also electric; she pulled the chain to turn it on. Her eyes scanned the shelf on the rear wall where the gap left by "Mirror, Mirror" remained as she left it. A decision was made, and without hesitation, she stepped over to the bookcase and tipped the two books on the right side of the gap to the left, causing the bookcase section to click and slowly swing inward.

She entered the room, turned on her cellphone flashlight, placed her backpack on the floor next to the wingback chair, and sat. As she panned the flashlight around, she noticed more sconces in the small room that were not electrified and dark. Standing back up, she went back into the main library room to the desk, figuring if the old man was a pipe smoker, there had to be some matches somewhere. She struck gold in the desk's middle drawer, returned to the small room, and lit the other lamps before sitting back down to face the mirror.

“I need to know you better,” she whispered to the mirror. No answer returned, confirming that she had not summoned him into conversation. Rising slowly, she approached the mirror and placed her palm on the silvery surface that instantly became warm.

The purple glow appeared, and the voice flowed into her head, *“Hello, Sandy; I am so glad you have returned to me. And yes, I hope to get to know you better, too.”*

She was startled. “Wait a minute. How did you know I said that? You had not been summoned yet.”

“That’s very true,” the voice said, *“but I do not need to be summoned to read your thoughts before you bring me into a conversation. Remember, we are connected spiritually as long as you possess the book.”*

“I’m not sure I like that,” said Sandy, starting to feel again like the spiritual connection was not something she could tolerate.

“You need not worry, Sandy; I will never cross the line or take any initiative you have not thought about. I can only react to what your thoughts define as parameters for my actions. Your thoughts limit me exclusively.”

“That’s what scares me! I’m still a little unsure about all of this, but for now, let’s leave it where it is. I must go back to the party and mingle with our guests. I will close this room and leave the book in my backpack beside the chair. Later this evening, I will return, and we can get to know each other better...maybe.”

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The voice spoke softly, *“I look forward to that eventuality, Sandy. Go and enjoy the party.”*

8 – Party Crashers

Wil drove his Dodge Ram up the driveway slowly while Phillip sat beside him and craned his neck to see through the mostly denuded trees to get a better view of the house. “Wow,” said Wil, “this place has to be haunted; look at it. If it weren’t so dark, I’d swear gargoyles were stationed on all the roof corners.”

“Well, if it’s not haunted now, it will be when we get inside. Maybe not the house, but one person, in particular, will be on the receiving end of a little haunting she’ll never forget,” boasted Phillip.

“Oh yeah...harvest time for the Reaper, too. I’ve always wanted some of that,” said Wil with a wicked laugh.

Phillip nodded and spoke, “Yes, it will be harvesting time for the Reaper, but not until I’ve finished with a little haunting of my own.”

They parked along the grass adjacent to the turnaround with other vehicles and finished their party preparations with several lines of cocaine and a tab of methamphetamine apiece. This was going to be a party indeed. The truck doors popped open in unison; the guys dismounted and high-fived each other as they headed for the front door. Phillip lifted the big door knocker, letting it drop with a resounding boom. In a moment, the door opened to the sounds of music, conversation, and laughter.

“Well, look who’s here. It’s Wil the Grim Reaper and Phantastic Phil looking a little devilish. Now the party can begin.” Mel roared, sloshing her third rum and coke in their direction. “C’mon in, boys; the bar is on the opposite side of the living area, so get yourselves caught up. I’m way ahead of y’all!”

“Boys?” Phillip questioned and cocked his horns a little to the right and cut her a look. “You see a boy; you’d better give ‘em five dollars.”

“Sorry, my little uniform has no pockets, so you’ve caught me empty-handed. Maybe I can write you a bad check later,” Mel said with much less pleasantries in her voice, “...or not,” as she whirled around and strode off.

“Bitch,” muttered Wil, “may do a little harvesting with her too before she writes that bad check.”

“Let’s grab something to drink and survey our prospects,” Phillip suggested.

Wil nodded in agreement, “Done!”

After both guys had their drinks in hand, they began to cruise the room, trying to discern who was behind each mask. Neither wore a mask, choosing to paint their faces devil red and reaper white to enhance rather than conceal their identities. They mingled for about thirty minutes before Phillip spotted Sandy. “She’s here and all dressed up for class,” Phillip said and stepped toward her.

Wil grabbed his arm and said softly, “Wait. Wait. Too crowded here. Let’s let the crowd thin out later as the party dies down and then escort her out of this main room...to...ahh...to a classroom more suitable for teaching that lesson you’re so fired up about.”

Phillip nodded and said, “Good idea. It’s not like she’s going to spoil. But I want to let her know I’m here and set expectations for later.”

He continued to walk toward her as she conversed with someone wearing a hockey mask. Staying in her peripheral vision, he smiled broadly and sipped at his whiskey. His eyes searched every inch of her body, and he noted that she had very few secrets under the slick black cat costume.

When the other guy walked away, her eyes came to rest on his, and he knew she tensed up under her mask. Her bright red lipstick accentuated how thin her lips became when she saw him. Her eyes narrowed behind the mask, and her shoulders pinched tighter and inched upward. She knew he would come to the party and did not want to make a scene when she saw him. Standing only a few feet away, he blew those plans out of the water. She did not say a word, only stared daggers at him.

“Hello, sweet cheeks,” he said with more fondness than acceptable, “damn if you ain’t the best-lookin’ little pussy cat in the room.”

“Stay away from me, Phillip!” she hissed acidly, “stay the fuck away from me.”

He grinned, not hiding its wickedness, “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I can honor that request, seeing how we have some unfinished business left on the table.”

Wil stepped around several people and took Phillip by the arm, “C’mon brother, let’s go get us another drink.”

They turned away, but not before Phillip turned back and said, “See ya’ later, sweet cheeks.”

Sandy shook with terror and intense rage as she watched them disappear into the bar area. When they reappeared and wandered away to mingle, Sandy headed for the bar for another glass of wine.

“Hey sister,” said Mel, “any luck trolling the crowd?”

“None!” she spat, “He’s here with that other redneck friend of his.”

Mel nodded, “Yeah, I know, I let them in.”

“Well, I just spoke with Phillip, and he threatened me. I do NOT feel safe around him. I can NOT be alone with him.” Sandy lamented.

“Just hide!” Mel suggested matter-of-factly.

“Hide? Where am I going to hide, Mel?”

“I don’t know,” Mel said, shrugging her shoulders, “The party is all out here and in the dining area. Hide in the library and close the door. Perfect little hidey-hole.”

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“That’s a good idea,” agreed Sandy.

9 – The Attack

Several hours later, midnight approached and slipped away, as did most partygoers. As safety in numbers diminished, Sandy felt increased personal risk since Phillip and Wil had not left yet. She texted Mel and told her she would be in the library; if Phillip asked where she went, tell him she had gone home early. Looking over her shoulder, she checked to see if anyone might be watching her and then discreetly slipped down the long hallway and into the library, closing the door behind her.

A heavy breath, which she did not realize she had been holding, flowed from her lungs in relief. No one had seen her departure...except Wil...who covertly watched every move she made from behind a huge Schefflera brought in as rented party décor.

He lifted his phone and sent a voice message to Phillip. “It’s time. I’m in the living area.” He got an immediate thumbs-up emoji in response.

Sandy quickly went to the bookcase and slipped the two books to the left, triggering the bookcase to open. She sat in the chair facing the mirror as the voice filled her head, *“Ahh, so glad you came back, Sandy. I’ve been worried about you.”*

She was a little taken aback by his words. “Worried? Why were you worried? Worried about what?” she challenged.

“Worried about what, or should I say, who worries you, Sandy. You have been preoccupied all evening by those two men you are convinced are here to do you harm. Your thoughts have been about nothing else.”

She stood slowly from the chair and stepped toward the mirror to better view her reflection. Taking the mask off, she appraised her face silently. *I wonder if I look as frightened as I feel.*

The voice answered the second she completed the thought, *“You do indeed look frightened, but you must know that you are safe with me.”*

She sat back down in the chair and snorted, “Right! I’ll say, excuse me, guys, before you assault me, can you both look into this mirror and see the reflection of evil in you first?”

Right, and then the magic mirror would intervene on her behalf. Hah! Not likely. She was on her own in a room with only one way out. She prayed silently that she would remain alone and out of harm’s way and that Mel had successfully sent both rednecks on a wild goose chase.

Almost as quickly as she sent her prayer for safety, safety left the room. A different voice spurred her heart rate to a dangerous new level. “Here, kitty, kitty, kitty!” She knew it belonged to Phillip, and she knew she faced deep trouble.

Her hands gripped the arms of the big chair with a death grip. She shrieked sharply when Phillip came up behind the chair and yanked it around a quarter turn, partially facing him. He dropped to his knees in front of her and put a hand

high on each thigh. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” he hissed like a snake.

“Save some kitty parts for ol’ Wil, best buddy!” his redneck friend crowed.

Sandy sat there in a full-blown panic and breathed out a whispered plea, “Please help me!”

Instantly, a blue-white finger of flame sprung out from the mirror’s surface with a sizzling crackle that sounded like heavy fabric ripping. The flaming finger struck Phillip in the center of his chest when he turned toward the sound, and it blew a hole straight through him and continued to strike Wil in the same manner. Both men collapsed onto the floor with holes the size of baseballs straight through their chests. Both were dead, without a shred of heart left in their chests and no signs of blood.

Sandy screamed and jumped, nearly tripping over Phillip’s corpse. She did not know what to do, but surely murdering these two asshats had not been in the top three resolutions in her mind. THAT confirmed it: if it was not in her mind, whose mind was it in? She looked at the mirror and shrieked, “So you just kill them? Killed...just...murdered them?”

“Remember that I told you that punishment could be more invasive if need be?” the voice explained softly.

Sandy said nothing and crouched down in silent rage to remove the book from her backpack. *“Don’t do this,”* cautioned the voice.

“Do what?” she screamed, “rid me of an exclusive relationship with a murderer?” and then hurled the heavy book with all her might into the face of the mirror. The surface shattered into a million pieces, and the book ricocheted off at a high angle, striking one of the oil lamps in a wall sconce. The lamp broke, spilling oil down the wall and puddling on the carpeting, followed quickly by a river of fire.

The flames spread rapidly, forcing Sandy to back away awkwardly toward the open doorway. She flipped both books back into place on the bookcase, and it began to close, locking the fire and the bodies in the little room. She stood there, chest heaving, trying to decide what to do.

She had to get out. Everyone had to get out. The fire in the little room would not stay there. Too much old wood and dusty old carpet would feed the flames. She texted Mel, “Get out of the house. Get everyone out of the house. The library is burning, and it will spread like wildfire.”

“Leaving now.” Mel texted back. “Most are already gone. Get yourself out of there NOW!”

They stood in the front yard where they had parked their car and hugged each other as the red and blue lights of three fire trucks flashed into the naked trees. Flames shot skyward out of most windows, and part of the roof collapsed. The fire department must have decided to let the place burn as it was so old and dry that keeping the flames from spreading into the trees seemed their primary focus.

Sandy sobbed into Mel's shoulder, "I'm so sorry I've burned down your house."

"Stop right there," said Mel, "remember that I was the one who said what this dump needed most was an accidental fire. Who knew you'd trigger the accident? What's done is done. At least I don't have to be the one to figure out how to set a fire and not get caught. Thank you, girlfriend."

"Really? You're not mad at me?" asked Sandy, still sniffing.

"Not even a little," said Mel, "...well, maybe a little; three bottles of excellent rum were still behind the bar when I bolted."

"And everyone got out okay, right?" asked Sandy.

Mel paused, "Yeah! Nearly everyone had already left, and the stragglers scrambled out the door when I told them about the fire. I saw the two rednecks heading down the hallway toward the library a little earlier, but I don't recall seeing them leave. I was too busy hauling my butt out of there to stick around to find out. Did you ever see them?"

Sandy never missed a beat and replied, "Nope, and thank goodness for that."

"Wonder how the fire started?" mused Mel, not expecting an answer.

"I'm the source," confessed Sandy, "I was trying to get a book down off a high shelf from one of the ladders, and it

slipped out of my hand and shattered one of the oil lamps. The rest is history, as you can see waving her hand at the flaming inferno. The place was a tinderbox.”

Mel nodded and said, “Well, you made it out safely, and I can truthfully say there was not a single book in that library I’d want to read anyway.”

Sandy did not respond but thought to herself...*there was one I read...and I wish I hadn't.*

It was almost 3:00 AM when they arrived back at their apartment. After a quick embrace and exchanging good nights, they headed to their bedrooms. Sandy went up the stairs to her loft and straight to the shower in the dark. She peeled herself out of the catsuit and stepped into a steaming shower to linger and try to forget the trauma she had witnessed and caused a few hours earlier. As she toweled off, the exhaustion buried underneath the adrenaline dump of earlier surfaced with a vengeance. It felt like she could sleep standing up.

Her hair was mostly toweled dry, so she slipped into her favorite ex-boyfriend’s jersey and headed for a welcoming bed and overdue sleep. With the bathroom light switched off, the room went completely dark except for moonlight streaming between partially closed drapes. The moonlight helped her see only blacks and grays in shadow, but the trip to the bed was less than a dozen paces away. She stepped between the foot of the bed, a chair full of clothes waiting to be put away, brushing against her dressing mirror.

The room lit up with a purple glow, and her heart skipped a beat when she heard the voice, *“Hello, Sandy!”*

Melissa had just laid her head down on the pillow when she heard a panicked scream from Sandy come from her loft bedroom. Mel bolted out of bed and sprinted for the stairs with her roommate’s screams still echoing in her ears.

“Sandy?” Mel shouted, barging into her room dimly lit by the light of the moon leaking in through partially closed drapes. “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“He’s back!” sobbed Sandy. “He’s here...and...and ...it CAN’T be possible.”

“Who’s back? Who’re you talking about?” questioned Mel insistently.

Sandy sat with her back against the headboard, knees drawn up to her chest, and stared at the dressing mirror, her face shrouded in shadows. She could not turn her eyes away long enough to look at her roommate. The voice said, *“You must tell her what is happening.”*

Sandy shook her head and whimpered, “No, I can’t...I can’t. There’re too many lies...too many secrets.”

“Sandy, who’re you talking to?” Mel demanded. “What lies? What secrets? You’re making no sense. Are you even awake?”

The cat was now definitely out of the bag, and Sandy knew the time for revealing secrets and buried truths had come

due. She wondered where to begin. *“Try the beginning,”* said the voice matter-of-factly in her head.

“I know,” Sandy said, “I know.”

“You know what? Hey! Look at me!” demanded Mel again more firmly, “You’re talking like there’s somebody else here in this room with us.”

“There is!” shouted Sandy as she turned her tear-stained face toward Mel. “There IS somebody else here with us,” And pointed at the glowing mirror...the glow only she could see. “He’s in there!”

Mel exploded, “WHAT? Who’s in there? Where is there? In the mirror? Your mind? This is making no sense.”

Sandy buried her face in her knees and began to cry in big, heaving sobs. Mel looked at her best friend with growing concern and leaned closer to wrap both arms around her in a comforting, loving embrace. She sat like that for several minutes, saying nothing, listening to Sandy’s sobs slowly drain away.

“I will leave you two alone for now,” the voice said, *“Trust me, if you tell her the truth now, you will feel so much better.”*

“Just leave!” Sandy snarled sharply.

Mel recoiled, releasing her hug, and looked at her friend in astonishment. “WHAT?”

“Not you,” Sandy said, pointing at the mirror again just as it went dark, “Him!”

Mel sat up and folded her arms in confusion; who is...HIM? C’mon, girl, you’ve got some serious explaining to do.”

“You have no idea,” Sandy said weakly, looking at her. She knew she needed to let Mel in on everything that had happened. “Let’s go downstairs and brew some coffee. We’re both going to need a clear head for this tale.”

10 – Crime Scene

The Hawthorne House rapidly changed from a fiery inferno to a heaping jumble of destroyed and smoldering wood and other debris. The fire department let the old place burn as long as they could protect the trees bordering the house and the wooded lot beyond. It did not take long for the fire to burn itself out, assisted by a heavy layer of water to shut down the remaining flames entirely.

Powerful lights were set up around the house, and the entire footprint of the foundation was taped off as an arson investigation scene. A forensics team would arrive for a closer inspection before dawn broke, but the fire department arson investigator began to walk through the debris as smoldering began to subside. The assessment progressed with no complications until the investigator ran across two charred bodies in what had been a small room

adjacent to an apparent library. There was no question about this being declared a crime scene now.

Further discovery told the investigator that the fire likely had started where the bodies were found. Additional evidence revealed the presence of an accelerant, likely from one of the oil lamps, and a possible cause for the blaze beginning in this little room. He was no crime scene investigator, but the large holes poked cleanly through the corpses' chests told him this would be a challenging job for the CSI forensics crew when they arrived later.

11 – Confession

Sandy sat hunched over the kitchen table wrapped in a quilt and waited for Mel to pour their coffee. Mel began when they both sat, “Okay, roomie, spill it...ALL of it. We have a whole pot of coffee, so if this needs to take the rest of the night, so be it.”

Sandy looked at Mel with tears still clinging to her eyes from across the table, “I’m so sorry, Mel. I pray that you will forgive me.”

Mel replied quickly, “Oh, stop it. I told you burning that dump down was a good thing. Seriously, that dump needed to....”

“No, not the fire!” interrupted Sandy. “I lied to you. I lied by omission; I lied outright to your face on more than one occasion and about more than one thing. There’s just so much that’s happened and...” Tears began to flow again, and she sobbed, “I don’t deserve you as a friend.”

“I love you, Sandy, and nothing you could do or say would prevent me from forgiving you.” Mel offered soothingly.

Sandy looked at her and fought to smile, wiping away a few lingering tears, “You may regret saying that when I tell you this crazy story.”

“Mel smiled back and said, “Let me be the judge of that. Talk to me, girl!”

So, Sandy jumped into the story at the beginning. She confessed to her first lie about not finding the small room off the library. Then she admitted to lying by omission about finding the book “*Mirror, Mirror,*” which played a role that triggered her finding the small room...the false bookcase...the mirror...the purple glow when she touched it...the voice...and all the details of her conversations with the voice...and the derogatory facts the voice revealed about Mel’s grandfather and the story behind his death. She released an exaggerated sigh when she stopped to take a breath.

“You have to believe that I wanted to tell you about what I found out but was afraid to hurt you...to spoil your feelings about your grandfather,” explained Sandy.

“Relax, relax; my grandfather was a world-class jerk and lived alone in that old house because nobody wanted to associate with him. He was greedy and a present-day Scrooge if there ever was one.” Mel explained to Sandy’s relief.

“Well, there’s more that happened during the party. After I told you I would hide from Phillip in the library, he and his redneck friend confronted me. Phillip began his aggressive behavior and pinned me to the chair in front of the mirror. Wil stood behind him as his cheerleader and waited for his turn with me.

I said, ‘*Help me!*’ and that’s when the mirror fired off this blinding flash of energy that slammed into Phillip’s chest and right on through him to strike Wil. Whatever that

energy was, it came from the mirror and blew a three-inch diameter hole straight through their chests. They were both dead before they hit the floor. The mirror murdered them, Mel! Killed them outright!”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Mel, bringing a hand to her mouth.

“I jumped up and accused the mirror...the voice...or whoever...of being a murderer. The voice explained that Phillip’s touching me triggered the aggression with what the voice described as a more *invasive solution*. I grabbed the big “Mirror, Mirror” book from my backpack and threw it at the mirror. It shattered into tiny pieces, and the book bounced away, knocked into one of the oil lamps and started the fire. I ran from the room, closed the bookcase, and texted you to get everyone out.”

“Wow, you had some serious stuff going down tonight, girl!” said Mel, shaking her head in disbelief.

“But it did not end at the Hawthorne House as you heard upstairs. I knew I had ended the voice by smashing the mirror and leaving the book to burn. The voice told me I had a relationship with him...*a relationship*...all because I possessed that freaking book. So the book is gone now and burned up in the fire.

I knew it was over until I walked by my dressing mirror upstairs, and it lit up with that purple glow, and the voice said ‘*Hello Sandy*’ like nothing had ever happened.

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You heard me freak, and I dove into my bed like something was chasing me. I want it to be over, Mel; I want it to end, but now it's not over, and I don't know what to do." More tears began to flow and grew into wracking sobs of desperation.

12 – Autopsies

The crime scene investigators spent several hours in the early morning darkness sifting through the rubble around where they found the two bodies. The coroner took the corpses back to the morgue to attempt identification and task the pathologist to complete the autopsies. All body identification had been burnt in the fire, so dental records would be the only source to help identify who they were. Identities soon revealed they were one Phillip McCorkle and one William Jameson. It turned out both had previous records of assault and simple battery. They had little else to go on.

The investigators were utterly stumped by the two round holes blown clean through their chests. They determined the holes were not from a gunshot or any other weapon they could think of. It was challenging to decide much more about the injuries because of the severe tissue damage from the fire. Both bodies were tagged as killed by an undetermined weapon.

Detectives were assigned before dawn and worked to determine who owned the property so they could gather more information. It did not take long to see with whom they needed to speak: Melissa Merriweather, the title holder. After finding her address from the title deed, the two detectives planned to go to her apartment complex to begin questioning pertinent details.

13 – Getting Stories Straight

The girls hugged each other tightly, and Mel said, “Hey, we’re good, okay? Let’s try to get some sleep and tackle this in the morning.”

“Can I sleep with you? I...I don’t want to be up there with....” Sandy started to say.

“C’mon, girl,” said Mel, interrupting and taking her by the hand; they rose together and headed to Mel’s bedroom.

Once they laid down, Mel said, “There will be questions and an investigation into the fire. That dump had arson potential written all over it. You know they’ll have a boatload of questions.”

“Oh shit, you’re right, and they’ll probably start hounding us sooner than later,” added Sandy.

“Hounding me, sweetie. I hold the title. And I highly recommend not mentioning this mirror and mysterious voice stuff. I probably should be the one answering their questions since I’m not as emotionally attached to what happened as you are. Think about it: you’re pretty upset, and breaking down could potentially raise more questions that could give too much away. Make sense?”

Mel continued, “I know who Phillip and Wil were but have no idea why they were in the other part of the house when the fire started. I sent the remaining partygoers out the front

door and thought that was everybody. I won't even mention you. If they need to question you, and they might ask, absolutely do NOT give up any details that put you in proximity to either of them in the library. Avoid discussing where they confronted you, the threats, or how they were killed. Let's play it like neither of us knows what happened to them."

Sandy said, "This is not good. Not good at all."

They fell silent, each dwelling on their thoughts, and shortly succumbed to exhaustion and deep sleep.

14 – The Detectives

Daniel (Danny) Becker, Lead Precinct Homicide Detective, handed a fresh cup of coffee to Francine (Frankie) Hanson, Level 2 Forensics Detective. Frankie nodded with a playful grin, “Thank you, good sir. You know...you’d make somebody a good wife.”

Danny snorted his response, “Nope. Been there, done that, and proved my incompatibility beyond any doubt...twice. And you’re welcome...I think.”

And that is how it was between those two whenever circumstances paired them up on an investigation. Two dead bodies with undetermined weapons used to dispatch them and then deep-fried in a significant fire were enough to bring them together again on the case. They liked each other and respected each other’s abilities, so this was a choice assignment for them.

Danny had an excellent eye for the details of a crime scene where the loss of life occurred, and Frankie had an even better eye for the facts surrounding the victims and the methods or causes of their demise. Not much got by them when they worked together, as their record for solved cases carried a batting average of a thousand.

Frankie rolled her coffee cup between two hands and suggested, “I know you’re anxious to talk to the owner of the Hawthorne House, but I’d like to make a couple of suggestions.”

“Go for it,” said Danny, sipping his coffee and leaning back to listen.

“Let’s not go straight to their apartment. I want to poke around at the burn site first. The arson investigator did not call it arson but did not rule it out. He did say there was evidence of an accelerant, but how it had been used could’ve been accidental. That leaves too much mystery, and I don’t like to be left wondering.

Then we should stop by the morgue and see the bodies before the pathologist has them sliced up. No identification of a weapon or weapons used in the murders leaves me wondering again. Starting with these two things, I think they could shape where we need to go with our questioning. Whaddaya think?” asked Frankie.

“Agree...and I think you’d make a damn good detective when you grow up.” Danny offered with a wink, knowing he soon would turn 45 and Frankie was only one year his junior.

She flipped him the bird and said, “Let’s roll, old man!”

15 – Confronting a Voice Named Paul

Sandy awoke with nagging recollections of the day before, especially how it ended with the unexpected presence of the voice coming out of the mirror in her room upstairs. She knew she could not avoid going up there and laid still with the comforter pulled up under her chin, trying to screw up enough courage to go and confront what may or may not be up there.

Mel rolled over and smiled into her morning greeting.

“Good morning, roomie!”

“Hmm,” said Sandy, turning her head to face Mel,

“Morning? Yes. Good morning...not so much. I’m still freaked over last night, that damn mirror, and whoever or whatever speaks to me. I don’t know...I know you can’t hear his voice...but could you see the light...the purple glow coming off the mirror?”

Mel replied, “No, I couldn’t hear anything, no voice, nothing. And I also didn’t see any colors coming off the mirror, no purple or otherwise. You must be the only one who hears and sees anything from the mirror. If it were me, I’d like to know how he or it moved from the mirror destroyed at the Hawthorne House to your bedroom in the loft. That relocation is just a little spooky to me.”

“A little spooky?” Sandy retorted. “I mean, I did not even touch the mirror last night, and the book described that touch as the trigger to summon the voice. I must have

brushed against it because I never intentionally touched it, yet there he was, scaring the crap out of me. I wish I had that book back to finish reading through it. I probably got halfway, maybe a little more. I never got to the parts about turning him off or getting away from...or out of...the so-called *relationship*...or even if I could escape. I should never have been so quick to destroy the book.”

“Want my two cents?” asked Mel.

“Yes, please. I’ll take a dollar’s worth,” Sandy answered gratefully.

Mel said, “Okay, I’ll tell you what I would do if this happened to me. You do with my advice what you will, so this is as much opinion as it is advice.

Sandy nodded and said, “Fair enough.”

“I’d go upstairs, confront the mirror, and get my head around his agenda. Ask questions about how he’s operating now that the book has been destroyed. How could he move from the Hawthorne House to here when even the book described possession as equal to ownership?

Since you say he can read your thoughts, I think I’d avoid thinking about ending the relationship. Make your questions focus on how he can continue this *relationship* with you without the book. Seriously, let it be about the book. Who knows what he might do if he thinks you’re about to bail on him.”

“Wow, how do I NOT think about the only thing I’m thinking about? Getting away from him is ALL I’m thinking about.” Sandy gestured, sweeping broadly with her hands.

Mel answered, shaking her head, “Don’t know. Just suck it up and decide this whole thing is about the book and nothing else. The book could solve all these mysteries you’re wrestling with. What options do you have now that the book is toast? Don’t think about anything else. Think BOOK!”

Sandy rolled out of bed with a renewed resolve sprinkled generously with self-doubt and apprehension. “Okay, I’m going in. Hold my beer....” She attempted to laugh...and failed.

You got this, girl!” Mel said encouragingly.

Sandy smiled at her roommate before embracing her, hoping to absorb some of Mel’s confidence and calmness. She did not feel like she had gained either and headed for the stairs, trying not to think about how to rid herself of this *relationship*.

When she stood at the doorway into her bedroom loft, she stopped. Why had she paused? Was courage going to well up within her or something resembling power or protection? Would she sprout new courage or something? She just shook her head and quietly opened the door.

Upon stepping into the dimly lit room, her eye locked onto the mirror. The surface showed no signs of color, and she

breathed out in relief. After several steps to the side of her bed, she climbed in, sat cross-legged, and stared at the mirror.

“Well, where are you?” she challenged.

No response came from the mirror—no purple glow—no voice. Was he still in there, or had last night all been an elaborate hallucination? She continued to sit and wait. Finally, she decided to touch the mirror’s surface. When she did, it immediately glowed purple, and she jumped back as though she had been shocked.

“*Hello, Sandy!*” said the voice and then fell silent as though waiting for her to respond in kind.

Sandy paused for about ten seconds before responding unkindly, “You need to tell me just what’s going on. How did you get here? How did you greet me last night, and I never touched you? I thought I had to touch you; has that changed? How can we still talk when the fire destroyed the book? I thought this whole *relationship* you discussed was because I possessed the book. Well, the book has been destroyed. No book – no *relationship*. Right? So how can this continue to be? Explain yourself!”

“*You’re angry, Sandy,*” said the voice calmly.

“You’re damn right. I AM angry. YOU are a loose cannon. You’re killing people showing up uninvited, and not sticking to the rules described in your magic book. Or does the book getting burnt up make the rules of our little

relationship moot? How can I trust you aren't going to blow *me* away any second?"

"You're still angry, Sandy, and if you can calm down..." the voice began to say calmly before Sandy flew off the rails.

"Goddamn right, I'm angry. Start answering some questions, or I'll shatter this mirror too...for whatever good that'll do," and she started to tear up and wiped her face to hide evidence of liquid emotion leaking onto her cheeks.

The voice became more sincere and caring, *"I'm sorry I've angered you, Sandy. I suppose a few answers are due to you. May I continue?"*

"A FEW?" Sandy shouted, not ready to relinquish any of her anger but feeling it slip slightly, tiring from carrying her rage, "Yes, go ahead...continue!"

The voice began to answer her questions and explain even those she did not ask. *"Well, first and foremost, I apologize for frightening you last night. I realize you never touched me, but you were so close that your presence equated to touch. I felt it important for you to know I had not abandoned you."*

"Abandoned ME?" she interrupted loudly, still tinged with anger, "Oh, so killing people outright before my eyes was just an act of endearment by you to protect our *relationship*?"

“Certainly not,” the voice replied, “those two men were planning to rape you, and our relationship caused my response when you called on me. If you recall, you were pinned in that wingback chair by Phillip, and you did call out, ‘Help me!’ and so I did. They were unrighteous men with unrighteous thoughts and intentions. I believe I had explained earlier, as did the book, how I may respond with more invasive punishment to blatant unrighteousness.”

Sandy relaxed a little more as uncertainty over maintaining her anger slowly crept in, “But killing them? Wasn’t that a little extreme?”

“Yes,” the voice continued, “It was extreme. There would be a high degree of uncertainty in how you could have proved the assault when it would be your word against those two deceiving liars. There would be no way to capture the reflections of what happened, and since you have the book, no one else would ever have access to what I know and witnessed. Let us face it, Sandy, even if they could, who would listen to a voice like mine in the first place? I had to protect you the only way I knew, and their punishment had to be absolute. I could not stand by, nor would I ever stand by and witness you being abused by anyone.”

Sandy’s consideration shifted from only looking at *what happened* to Phil and Wil to *why it happened*, and those thoughts calmed her even more. The mirror protected her, and the alternative outcome was unthinkable if it had not.

She thought for a minute and said, “The book...it WAS in my possession, but I used it as a weapon to retaliate for your killing those two guys. I wanted to strike back. My gut reaction was to destroy the mirror and you when I threw the book. The fire took care of the rest.”

The voice replied evenly, *“I understand, but you must know that possession does not have to be physical when your mind has been exposed by reading the book’s contents. You possess the knowledge in your head, so the book is now part of you. You have more to read and mistakenly believe the fire destroyed the book. The book survived and is buried in the rubble of the burned-out house.”*

“You mean to tell me the book survived that inferno?” asked Sandy in disbelief. “I’ve only read about half...” She abruptly stopped explaining. She was about to reveal what else she wanted to learn from the book. Mel warned her.

The voice interrupted her thoughts, *“I know why you wish you had the book, Sandy. You still harbor thoughts of leaving our relationship and hope the book will tell you how to go.”*

Given the trauma you have just survived, I will not fight you over thinking like that. I only ask this...consider that a relationship with a protector like me can be a good thing, and there is plenty of room for that to grow and mature as you would have it.”

The voice continued soothingly, *“I do not control your thoughts. Yes, I can read and advise you on them if asked, but they do not come from me, nor do I influence them. What you do with what I say is all on you, Sandy, and you have complete control over how you choose to react. I can be a trusted confidant if you accept me that way, and I hope you do because you are a good person.*

I will also respect you no less if you choose to walk away. If that is your choice, I have additional instructions on ending the relationship and ensuring the book's destruction. I can assure you the book did not get destroyed in the fire. I hope you can retrieve it from the burn site to find your answers.”

She sat silently on the bed and stared into the purple glow. Finally, her anger dissipated further, allowing her clarity of thought, “Thank you! You’ve given me some things to think about. And also, thank you for protecting me last night, and I’m sorry I tried to destroy you for killing them.”

“All is forgiven, Sandy!” said the voice.

“One more question, if I may,” she asked, “How did you show up here in my dressing mirror from the destroyed mirror at the Hawthorne House?”

“Sandy, I came with you last night. I am a spirit within you; our spirits are connected on a higher plane...in a different dimension...if you will, and the mirror represents a physical portal through which I can speak with you and hear your thoughts.”

“So then this dressing mirror or any mirror I touch or come close to can connect us?” she *asked*.

“Yes, any mirror. Anytime and anywhere. Touch the mirror in your bathroom, for example, and it will summon me,” the voice added.

“She shook her head, “Ahh, no! That’s okay. I don’t need some man observing my shower time and other bathroom habits.”

The voice said, *“Sandy, I have no gender, and I can switch to a female voice if you’d be more comfortable.*

“That’s okay,” she said, “having a woman watching me would be just as weird, so keep your current voice, but don’t expect me to share all my secrets with you, okay?”

“We can agree on how to summon me. If you prefer, I will no longer be summoned by you merely by coming near. It would be best if you always touched the mirror of your choice to summon me. Is that acceptable?” the voice asked.

“Yes, I can live with that. But... to understand, if I need you for advice, do I need to be close to a mirror to ask, or are you monitoring me 24/7?” Sandy asked, becoming even more comfortable as they spoke.

“Yes, you need a mirror you can touch. As I said, a mirror serves as a portal for our conversations. It can be any mirror anywhere, even if it is small, like a makeup mirror carried in your purse, which would work nicely,” the voice explained, *“but remember, if you need to communicate, you*

must first touch the surface of the mirror to open our portal and summon me. I can quickly read your mind because of your subconscious thoughts. Your brain works much faster than your mouth so I can get caught up near instantaneously.”

“Okay, I understand,” she confirmed. “On another topic, I’m curious: do you have a name? It would help me to get a sense of you...you know...being real and not just my imagination working overtime.”

After pausing a few seconds, the voice replied, *“No one has ever asked me for a name, Sandy. I have never had a name, but what would you like as my name?”*

She did not hesitate and said, “Paul!”

“May I ask why, Paul?”

“Two reasons actually: Paul was my brother’s name, and Paul was also a biblical character, an Apostle, from the New Testament. My brother passed away five years ago, and he was a loving mentor to me, and I trusted him. The biblical Paul was a very righteous man...not God...but he knew and acted on God’s righteousness that lived deep in his heart. Both of the Pauls in my life and my belief system had good hearts, and after speaking with you this morning, I think you have a good heart, too. I believe Paul would be an appropriate name for you,” she said.

“Consider that our deal, Sandy! I like being a Paul worthy of confirming your choices. I am here for you, Sandy, a

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touch away.” The purple light winked out, and she felt comfortable and confident that she was alone.

16 – Recovering the Book

An hour later, Mel and Sandy were headed to what was left of the Hawthorne House to search for the book. Mel was impressed by Sandy's about-face regarding the mirror and voice *relationship*, especially when she learned the voice had been named Paul. "So it...the voice...can come to you from any mirror you touch?"

"Paul...his name is Paul...not the mirror...not the voice, or the purple haze...just Paul," she responded, trying not to sound too defensive. Despite her growing comfort and confidence, Sandy wondered if the transition to trusting Paul had possibly come too quickly. She felt it would take some getting used to whatever the *relationship* would mature into but it felt like she was almost defending it with Mel. But would it mature? How could that happen? There was still a shred of doubt, given that we all have voices in our heads, but how many of them operate like Paul? How many can kill? How many of those voices ever get names assigned to them? Sandy would be the first to admit being a little twisted, but had this situation taken her over the edge? What about this higher-dimensional connection? Was it based on good...or evil? Was it the dark side in disguise? Had she been duped and relaxed too quickly? Had she not resisted enough? There were still questions Paul needed to answer, but the apprehension over speaking with him had melted away for the most part.

When they arrived at the burn site, both women swapped out their running shoes for winter boots for better protection to kick through burned debris. Yellow crime scene tape stretched between trees around the entire house. A secondary line of tape looped around the library and the rough outlines of where walls once stood. This inner loop of tape marked the area as the primary crime scene where two bodies had been found and where they needed to concentrate on the search for the book. The ruins reeked of burned wood and everything else that had been combustible. Remembering what happened less than twenty-four hours ago sent a shiver up Sandy's spine, and she stopped cold and stared at what had been ground zero for murder...no, not murder, a defensive act of protection.

"Are you okay?" asked Mel.

"Yes...and no...still fresh. I can see it all, hear it all, smell it all, feel the panic. No, not okay...not yet anyway." Sandy looked around and visualized what used to be there...not the charred remains in front of her. Large chunks of plaster had fallen from the ceiling as walls were consumed by fire; some of the pieces were severely burned, but not all. The fire burned amazingly fast and nearly burned itself out before the fire department laid in gallons of water to snuff out the remaining flames. The ashes and debris gave off a stink and a mushy mixture of ash, soot, and watery sludge that nearly turned her stomach.

The chair was gone. The mirror was gone, but numerous shards and pieces of glass from the destroyed mirror mixed in with the scattered ash debris. Both girls kicked at the

fallen plaster and partially burned wood around the room's perimeter while looking for the book. After ricocheting off the mirror, Sandy stopped to estimate where the book may have landed. A few steps later, the toe of her boot struck paydirt, "Here it is," she said excitedly and nudged away a piece of damaged plaster with her boot that covered the book.

Mel stepped over to inspect her discovery and said, "I can't believe it survived the fire. I guess that heavy leather binding must've protected it."

"Yeah, the binding and all the stuff that partially buried it," Sandy agreed. "I was concerned it would have been severely water damaged if the fire had not burnt it to ash first. This is a pleasant surprise."

"Are the pages still intact?" Mel asked curiously.

Sandy flipped open the cover and fanned through several heavy pages. She described with satisfaction, "Yeah, they look pretty much untouched except for a little searing along the edges. I'd say good shape." Now she had her reference volume back in her possession and could finish reading to complete her education regarding Paul and his mysterious, lethal powers that had already been displayed.

Mel said, "Put it in your backpack, and let's get out of here before the police arrive."

Sandy brushed off all the ash and soot with a rag she brought in her pack, slipped the book into a protective

plastic bag, stuffed it inside the backpack, and zipped the pocket shut.

“Give me the backpack!” demanded Mel suddenly.

“What? Why?” questioned Sandy.

“Do it! NOW! And keep your mouth shut; we have company,” instructed Mel.

Mel slung one of the straps over her left shoulder, and they turned to walk back to her car. A man and a woman who had gotten out of an unmarked police car approached them at an intercept angle to prevent them from reaching Mel’s car first. “We’re busted,” whispered Mel. “Let me do the talking, please!”

“Good morning, ladies,” said Lead Detective Danny Becker as he closed the gap between them. “I’m Homicide Detective Daniel Becker, and this is my partner, Forensic Detective Francine Hanson.”

Mel did not immediately respond, thinking to herself, *Homicide? Forensics?* Okay, so they already knew about two guys getting killed, and forensics would oversee this investigation under a microscope, and what she carried in the backpack was a surefire ticket to the slammer.

Mel acknowledged the greeting, “Good morning. I’m Melissa Merriweather, owner of this burn pile, and this is my friend Sandy.”

“Ahh, perfect,” said Detective Hanson, “Meeting you here may save us a trip later, Ms. Merriweather. We have some questions that need answers concerning your burn pile and, of course, about the two bodies found earlier this morning. Fortunately, we’ve run into you here.”

“Questions? Bodies? What bodies?” Mel knew but added a tone of incredulity to her response.

Detective Becker looked around and noted that they were inside the secondary crime scene tape and spoke up, “So...you don’t know about the bodies...but here you are walking through where the bodies were found. Why is that Ms. Merriweather?”

“I do not know of any bodies you may or may not have found. This area was formerly the library and had many rare books my grandfather collected. I came back to see if the fire had destroyed everything. That’s why we were walking around here,” Mel explained.

“I see,” said Detective Hanson, “and did you find any rare books?”

Without hesitation, Mel replied, “Yes, I was lucky enough to find an heirloom edition given to me by my grandfather. It’s an extraordinary book; it survived the fire by being covered in debris and missed by the flames and the subsequent flood of water courtesy of the fire department.

“Can I see it?” asked Detective Hanson.

Again, without hesitation, Mel responded, “Sure,” and pulled the book from the backpack and handed it to the detective. “Please be gentle.”

Sandy held her breath, hoping the book would not be seized as evidence. She needed that book and fought back the urge to grab it from the detective’s hands and run. Unsure of Mel’s strategy, she hoped her willingness and openness to cooperate would be enough to dispel any perceived value to the investigation and let the book leave their possession. After all, it was just a book.

Detective Hanson slipped off the protective plastic wrapper and carefully held the book, turning slowly through several pages. “This is a beautiful old book. I see no author’s name or copyright information on it. How can this be an heirloom edition with no authentication?”

“My grandfather wrote it, and that’s why it’s so precious to me. I feel blessed to have found it intact with only a few burned page edges,” explained Mel. “It will require special handling to prevent further damage, and that’s why it was so important to find it before the demolition crews show up with bulldozers to raze the property.”

Detective Becker said, “You realize you have crossed the line of a crime scene...twice actually...and are attempting to remove evidence from the scene.”

Mel maintained her cooperation and replied with increasing firmness in her conviction, “Yes, we knew it was a crime scene, but with me being the owner of the crime scene and owner of the heirloom, I would hope we don’t have to go to

jail. Nothing we did was ill-intentioned, and the book is harmless.”

The two detectives traded glances, “Stay put. We’ll be right back.” And both turned and walked away from them to discuss what should happen...or not...out of earshot.

Mel looked at Sandy for the first time, blew out her cheeks, and rolled her eyes.

Sandy said softly, “Heirloom edition? Written by your grandfather? You’re a genius liar, roomie!”

The two detectives returned, and Detective Hanson returned the book to Mel. “I think I’d feel better if you maintained possession of this heirloom on the condition that neither you nor the book leaves the area if we need to dive deeper into it to solve this case.”

“Great! And agreed. I’m sure you already know where I live, so the book is available whenever you need to see it,” Mel promised.

“Fine,” said Detective Hanson.

“May we go now?” asked Sandy, anxious to leave before the detectives changed their minds.

Detective Becker responded, “We still have more questions about the people who attended the party, including the two killed. The problem is that we have to meet the coroner in twenty minutes, and the questions we have to ask will take longer. We’ll have to meet you later today, say three

o'clock, at your townhouse to finish up with our initial discovery. Will you both be available then?"

Sandy flinched at hearing '*you both*' but gave an affirmative nod; Mel nodded and said quickly, "Sure thing!"

The detectives returned to their car to drive to the coroner's office and meet with the pathologist. The girls got back into their vehicle and left for home, almost giddy because of making a clean getaway with the book in their possession. The realization hit them both that what just happened was the easy part; Sandy would have to be involved in the interviews, which scared them; Sandy intensely, more so than Mel.

17 – Cause of Death

Dr. Martin Talbot scratched his head and confessed, “I’ve seen a lot of fatal wounds from my time in the Middle East working in a forward-deployed field surgical unit, but I’ve never seen a wound like what killed both of these men. The wound is almost surgically administered and goes straight through their chests at the same spot with the same dimensions front to back. It even looks like the wounds were cauterized when whatever it was passed through their bodies. Do you know if there were trace amounts of blood at the crime scene?”

Detective Becker shook his head, “This has been a tough one. The Arson Investigator and the CSI team remarked that they found no sign of blood where the bodies were found. In addition, the bodies showed no signs of movement resulting from impact, and with a significant wound this severe, there should have been evidence that they were thrown by the force of whatever impacted them. The CSI guys said they both dropped dead where they stood and fell like marionettes with cut strings. And were dead before they hit the floor.”

Frankie stepped into the conversation, “Dr. Talbot, I know you’re anxious to complete the autopsy, and I appreciate your delay so we could take a closer look at the victims. Specifically, may I take a look at the fatal injuries?”

“Absolutely,” Talbot said and swung the magnifier light over the first corpse for her to take a look. Frankie stepped

over and peered down into the wound. I agree with your assessment that the wound looks cauterized, which would mean no excessive bleeding. That tracks with what the CSI team said they found...or should I say, *what they did not find*... at the scene...blood. There should have been blood evidence, and there was none, even with the fire. Something else stands out to me. Look at this.” And she stepped back to allow Dr. Talbot to look again.

“Look beyond the charred flesh and notice how the edges of the exposed bones look like they’re melted. I’m reminded of combat injuries I’ve seen in a previous life...from contact with white phosphorus that burns at 1500 degrees. The ends of those bones look like a torch or something much hotter than the fire had a hand in this injury. I’m not saying it was WP because the area exposed is too localized. “The melted appearance indicates extremely high heat was present.”

“Agreed,” said Talbot and swung the light over to the other examination table. “This wound is identical, and both are precise in diameter from entry to exit. Again, I say I’ve never seen anything like this. CSI said an *undetermined weapon* caused the fatal injuries, and I must agree because I’ve got no better answer.”

“Aliens,” blurted out Detective Becker.

Frankie whirled around, “WHAT?”

Becker said evenly, “Well, it was a Halloween party. Maybe a real live alien with a ray gun zapped these two knuckleheads and....”

“Shut the fuck up, Becker!” Frankie interrupted him and flipped the bird for the second time that day.

Dr. Talbot ignored Hanson’s rebuke; his facial expression looked severe, “You might have something there, detective. There are plasma weapons and maybe energy weapons I don’t know about that exist today, but honestly, I’ve never seen the results of someone being shot by one. The temps were probably hot enough to drill neat holes like these through a body with no impact from what I’ve read either...more like a hot knife through butter.”

Becker mouthed "*ray gun*" and winked at Frankie, flipping a middle finger of his own without saying a word.

Frankie shook her head and looked at Dr. Talbot with an extended hand, “Thanks, Doc. Again, we appreciate the delay so we could see for ourselves. Here’s my business card. Call me after the autopsy is complete if you encounter anything unusual.”

“No problem,” Dr. Talbot said. “I appreciate your input; I did not put any significance to the exposed bone segments appearing to be melted. Maybe that will be important...maybe not, but it’s important enough to include as discoverable evidence. Good catch, Detective Hanson.”

Frankie turned to Becker and motioned with her head toward the door, “C’mon, old man, let’s go talk with the owner of our little burn pile mystery.”

18 – Getting on the Same Page

After returning home, the girls put their heads together to plan for the investigators sure to come their way. “You know,” Mel began, “they're going to interrogate us separately so they can compare our stories.”

“I know,” said Sandy, “and that scares me.”

Mel explained that she did not think their stories needed to match, given that Sandy’s experience was separate from hers with little overlap. There was no way Mel would have details of the deaths because she was not even in that part of the house, plus she had no proof the men were ever in the library. The rub would come from Sandy, having already told Mel everything that happened. Mel would have to avoid revealing she had any recollection of those details and hoped Sandy did not go off the deep end.

For Sandy, the challenge would be more around what she witnessed, details that would be tough to explain. She would walk a fine line between the truth and accidentally positioning herself as an accessory after the fact since she promoted their deaths by asking for help. Considering the various parts involved, the entire series of events could quickly become too complicated to explain.

How could she describe a spirit entity intervention, a talking mirror, an unexplained energy blast, the whole book thing, and the mirror’s involvement that sent both guys to their deaths? It might be tough to explain, so better off left

unsaid. And that would likely be easier said than done, as freaked out as Sandy looked and acted right then. All the detectives would have to observe the physical tells of panic in her body language.

After falling silent for several minutes, Mel finally spoke, “You know, if you don’t introduce the concept of you being in the same place as the two guys, you wouldn’t have to explain how they died.”

“Yes, but how do I explain the holes in both chests? How do I avoid telling the part about me starting the fire by throwing the book at the mirror? How can I not reveal the existence of the mirror when there were shards of shattered evidence all over the place?” Sandy lamented her concerns.

“Damn,” remarked Mel, “damn, damn, damn!”

Sandy sat quietly contemplating her dilemma before coming up with a solution, “I think I need to go ask Paul for his advice; I mean, he was the trigger man; maybe he has some brighter ideas than I can think of.”

“Oh yeah,” Mel said, shaking her head in sarcastic disbelief, “now THAT’S a plan...go ask your pet spirit entity for advice.”

She continued with sarcasm, “Maybe you two could get adjoining jail cells...that is, as soon as they decide whether or not you’re as crazy as a rat in a tin can and decide to lock you up in the nut house instead.”

Sandy shot her best warning glare at Mel and said, “Thanks for your help, best friend. I’m going upstairs to talk to somebody who gives two shits about me. When the cops show up, leave me out of it unless they demand to hear my part of the lies. Then, I’ll decide whether to run or have Paul blast them into next week. Options...yeah...good God, do I have options or what?”

She shook her head, picked up the backpack as she stood, and headed for the stairs without another word. When Sandy returned to her room, she dropped the backpack on the bed, climbed in, crossed her legs under her, pulled the book from the pack, and stripped away the plastic covering. She turned to where she had stopped reading earlier and began to read. She was not so concerned about ending the relationship with Paul anymore, thinking she had better find out what else the book could reveal to avoid further incrimination should push come to shove with law enforcement.

What she found in her reading settled her mind about her path. The truth. She would tell the truth and let the police figure out the supernatural aspects of the whole mess. The truth would either set her free or guarantee a ride in the back seat of a police vehicle to the slammer as an accessory to murder. She finished reading and scooted on the bed to reach out and touch the mirror.

Paul’s voice followed on the heels of the purple glow,
“Hello, Sandy.”

“Hello, Paul. I need your help, your protection, not the kind where you blast holes in people, but where you offer advice to protect...to keep me safe.”

“Talk to me, Sandy; I understand the basics, so tell me more about the nature of the threats you believe you face. I know the police will question you, but I need to know what you may think about what to share with them...or not share with them...as the case may be.”

She told him her thoughts about the police investigation and the potential for her to be in serious trouble over the implications of promoting murders she did not commit. To be truthful, she shared all the details of her plan with him, and she sat back on her heels and asked, “So...what am I missing? What are your thoughts?”

After a slight pause, he spoke, “*Do you even need to bring me into this situation?*”

“Why no!” she said sarcastically, “I’ll leave the trigger man out of the whole thing. You’re no help! How do you suggest I explain away two charred corpses with perfect holes in their chests...holes, I might add...not made by any weapon known to humankind. The bodies complicate things a little bit, don’t you think?”

He did not respond to her sarcasm and asked, “*Did you finish reading the book?*”

“Almost, Paul. I have two chapters remaining.”

“*Did you actually read the section on punishment?*” Paul asked, tinged with what might have passed as his brand of sarcasm.

“Yes, I did, Paul,” still a little bitter, “and that section felt like it had the potential to compound my situation. How can I explain the directed energy source that blew those guys away? I don’t think that explaining that I have an extraordinary relationship with you, who pulled the trigger, who is both unseen and cannot be heard, is going to pass muster, do you?”

Paul said, “*Well, maybe if you gave the police the book and told them nothing, their investigation would reveal that you did not have any role in the deaths of these two unrighteous men. After all, you did not kill anyone. I did, and you did not order me to kill them. That was all on me. This is not your dilemma, Sandy, not your fight; this belongs to the police investigators. Let them sort it all out. What are they going to do, arrest me?*”

“Thought of that,” she said, “but what do they do with me while they sort things out? I’d rather not be cooling my heels in a jail cell...know what I mean? If anyone gets arrested, it’s going to be me.”

Mel yelled up the steps from the living room, “Sandy, can you come down here? The detectives are here and would like a few words.”

“Sure, coming!” Sandy called back and turned to stare at the mirror. “Here we go....”

19 – Interrogation

“Thank you for taking the time to meet with us, Ms. Tillman,” Detective Hanson said cordially. Detective Becker did not smile but nodded his agreement.

Becker said, “We’ve completed our interview with Ms. Merriweather, and she has agreed to step out while we ask you some additional questions privately. We have also interviewed several others who attended the party and need to clarify a few things with you.”

Sandy's face showed obvious signs of nervousness when she said, “I’ll be happy to answer your questions, although I’m not sure what else I can share.”

The entire interview blew up when Sandy revealed she had been in the library, and she knew that admission would prove to be catastrophic. That fact put her at ground zero in the library where the bodies were found. True, they were found in an adjacent room, but the detectives had no way of knowing that the room was adjacent based on what was left of the walls in the burned-out ruins. They had no way of knowing there was a secret opening between the rooms. Maybe she could squirt out of this jam if she would think...think... before running her mouth.

“Do you know Philip McCorkle or Wil Jameson?” asked Detective Hanson.

Sandy twitched, “Ahh, yeah.” Her answer almost sounded like a question. “Why?”

Becker said, “They were both at the party, and we know about an earlier confrontation between you and Mr. McCorkle...an assault at a local pub. The police report you filed described threats by Mr. McCorkle to get even...to make you pay for reporting the assault that he claimed never happened. Did he or did he not, Ms. Tillman?”

Sandy knew she was headed down the road to more confessions than she was willing to make. “Yes, but the assault had been interrupted by another person, and yes, he did threaten me.”

“Was he at the party to exact payback?” asked Becker sharply.

“No,” she replied shakily, “we had words...but nothing came of it.”

“Nothing? That’s odd, Ms. Tillman, because several witnesses overheard Mr. McCorkle promise to meet you later to take care of some unfinished business.”

Detective Hanson joined the questioning again, “We also have a witness that heard Mr. Jameson send a message to Mr. McCorkle telling him ‘*It was time, and to meet him in the living area.*’ He made the call after watching you leave the room and head down the hallway toward the library.”

“Did you go into the library at any point, Ms. Tillman? And did you confront Mr. McCorkle there?” Becker pressed, watching her face for a tell that she was lying.

Sandy started to cry. Game over. “Yes, I did go into the library, and no, he confronted *me* in the room next door,” she sobbed. “He put his hands on me and...” Her sobs overcame her speaking ability.

“And...what...you killed him and Mr. Jameson?” Becker moved in for the final question.

Sandy wailed, “I didn’t kill anybody. I don’t know how they died or what killed them; I was alone in that room and....”

“Alone with two men found dead. That’s a problem, Ms. Tillman.”

Detective Hanson stood and said, “You’re under arrest for suspicion of involvement in the deaths of two men. I need you to stand and put your hands behind your back.”

Sandy was bawling and barely heard Becker begin his recitation; *you have the right to remain silent. Anything you say from this point forward may be used...*

The cuffs were tight on her wrists, and her head spun with a finality she feared but never considered could happen so quickly. In her mind, the game was truly over, and she was going to jail for something she did not do.

20 – Attorney Visit in Jail

Coming awake in a strange place can be unsettling; consider how much worse it could be to figure out the *strange place* was a county jail cell. That is precisely where Sandy found herself. In a cell, by herself, with her emotional floodgates wide open. She laid still and let in the memories of how she managed to be in the slammer.

Suspicion of murder, accessory to murder, or the entire enchilada of murder in the first degree; they were not sure which charge would stick. While law enforcement attempted to sort out a best-fit fate, they decided she should spend a little time in the county lock-up and dressed in the latest fashion statement – an orange jumpsuit with PRISONER stenciled across the shoulders on the back.

Detective Hanson stopped by with a half-hearted attempt to apologize and to encourage Sandy not to go off the deep end; the stay in a jail cell would be temporary. “One day, two days at the most,” she said. “Since you did not specify an attorney, a public defender has been arranged for you, and that’s probably the best plan for now. My advice? Don’t say anything to anyone until he gets here.”

“She. The PD is Sarah Thompson. If she's the Sarah Thompson I know, we’ve known each other since high school. I expect her later this morning,” Sandy explained.

Hanson nodded, “Good, that’s good. Honestly, I expect she can get you bonded out of here before the end of the day to

leave under your own recognizance. The bond was set extremely low because of the confusion around the appropriate charges to put you under. It would help if you stuck around, or things could get dicey. If things go sideways, I'd recommend getting a real attorney with more juice than a cookie-cutter PD."

Sandy remained seated on her bunk and looked up, "Thanks! I guess it does help to know what's going on even though I have no control over it. This doesn't seem right...so very wrong."

Detective Hanson stood outside Sandy's cell in silence. Sandy thought Hanson would say something, but she did not until she turned and started to walk away. "I'm sure we will be speaking again soon. Until then, take care."

How sweet, thought Sandy sarcastically; *you take care, yeah, right!* At least her incarceration would be brief. She wanted to get home. She wanted to dive back into the book. She wanted to have a deeper conversation with Paul.

Something told her Paul would play a pivotal role in saving her bacon; after all, he was the murderer, not her. Being a spiritual entity or not, he needed to be held accountable, but she had no clue how to make that happen. Paul had better have a trick or two up his sleeve...up his reflection...or up whatever...she was not going down for his criminal actions, even if they happened to protect her.

A female jailor nearly as wide as she was tall came up to her cell with a breakfast tray and slid it through the slot in

the door. “Sorry, it’s the best we got ‘round here, so eat up before it gets colder than it already is, sweetie pie.”

The jailor was not sorry and seemed delighted that her breakfast was cold. To make matters worse, Sandy hated to be called *sweetie pie* by anyone, including her mother.

“The name’s Sandy, sugar butt!” she fired back, emphasizing *sugar butt*.

“Sweetie pie...I mean Sandy...I guess you ARE a smart-ass little bitch, aren’t you?”

Sandy took a mouthful of cold scrambled eggs and flipped off the jailer while balancing the tray on her lap.

“Am I interrupting?” a new voice came from outside her cell. Sarah Thompson, Public Defender, stood behind the jailer, squared off in front of Sandy’s cell. “This is my client, Blanche, and I need you to set us up in the conference room...now...please.”

Blanche, is that not the perfect name for this little troll?

Sandy thought to herself. “Blanche just delivered a delicious breakfast...maybe we can get one that’s hot this time and serve it in the conference room. Whaddaya say, Blanche?” Sandy smiled a dirty sweet smile at Blanche and winked.

Blanche snorted like a horse, turned on her heel, stomped away, and announced over her shoulder, “You’re in Conference 2.”

Sarah called after her, “Great job, Blanche...now...do you think you can maybe unlock this cell for us? I must have left my key at home this morning.”

Sandy smiled and thought, *this cookie-cutter PD had some stones...* and she was not the Sarah she knew from school. No matter. Having stones was a good thing!

Blanche huffed back to the cell and fumbled with a ring of keys before unlocking the door. “Am I going to need restraints, or are you going to be a good little girl?” she snarled at Sandy.

“I’ll be the best little girl on the cell block, Blanche, so you can relax,” replied Sandy.

After they were situated in the conference room, Sarah shook Sandy’s hand with a confident, firm grip. “Sorry about Blanche, she’s a little...how shall we say...challenged. She can swing a pretty mean baton, so ensure you have room to run if you set her off. I guarantee she’ll never catch you, but could do some damage if you’re cornered.”

Sandy liked this PD more every time she opened her mouth. It seems they were both smart-ass bitches. Perfect match. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“I doubt you will see breakfast delivered here...at least breakfast that has not been spit in...so let’s get down to business. Fair enough?” Sarah said.

Sandy smiled and said, “Let’s do it!”

And so they did—all of it. Sandy described the party, the near assault, the deadly energy blast, the mirror, the book, Paul (*formerly known as the voice*), and the fire she started trying to kill Paul for killing Phillip and Wil. They went back and forth with questions and explanations to clarify any gaps.

“I noticed McCorkle and Jameson had previous records for assault; McCorkle’s involved you some time back. Do I have that correct?” asked Sarah.

Sandy nodded, “Correct. The assault did not escalate beyond serious groping because someone interrupted his advances in the men’s room. I was lucky to get away, only partially assaulted. He threatened me for having filed the assault charges and promised to take care of our *unfinished business* in the future.”

“And he was going to finish this unfinished business at the Halloween party? Am I getting where this is going, Sandy?”

“Yes, you’ve got it. Wil was there too, planning to *get his turn* when Phillip was finished with me. I had no previous experiences with Wil, but he was also a wicked little prick.”

“Sandy, did either of them touch you in any way?”

“Yes, Phillip jerked my chair around, dropped to his knees, and put both hands on my thighs.”

“I know this might be uncomfortable recounting this, Sandy, but bear with me. What did he do then?”

“He had me pinned in the wingback chair, and I was pushing back on the arms and digging my heels into the floor to get away, to fight him. I pleaded for help...called out, *‘Please, help me!’*”

“And who were you calling out to, Sandy?”

“There was no one else there...I just pleaded for help...maybe for God to intervene...I don’t know...I was in complete panic mode.”

“Then what happened?” asked Sarah.

“That’s when a flash of something... energy... lightning...or something that crackled and sizzled by me like a bolt of blue fire struck Phillip in the chest and continued through him, hitting Wil the same way. They both dropped to the floor like puppets with cut strings. They died immediately. I sat there in that chair, struggling to breathe, and smelled burned flesh in the smoke that hung in the air. I’d never witnessed anything like what happened...ever.”

“How do you know they were dead? Did you feel for a pulse?”

“No, I didn’t touch either of them,” Sandy said, “they both had holes the size of a baseball in their chests where their hearts should have been. They were most assuredly quite dead.”

“Where did this energy that struck them come from, Sandy?”

“I saw it out of the corner of my eye. It came from the mirror...right off the surface of the mirror.”

Sarah sat back in wonder, “The mirror? How did...what prompted it to...” and fell silent for a few beats. “What triggered the mirror to lash out and kill these two men?”

“I’m not sure you’re ready for this explanation, Sarah, but I...I have a relationship with a spiritual entity who resides in the mirror...and not just that mirror...any mirror I touch.”

Sarah just stared at Sandy with an open mouth. “A relationship?” she asked eventually.

“Yes, there is a voice only I can hear, and it can read my....” Sandy started to explain.

“Whoa, whoa, WHOA! A talking mirror...and you are the only one who can hear it speak?”

Sandy answered, “Yes, and now the relationship has expanded to any mirror if I touch it. It’s my touch that summons the spirit so we can communicate. The mirror’s surface glows with a deep purple light...and here goes...I’m the only one who can see the light.”

“Sweet baby Jesus, Joseph, and Mary,” exclaimed Sarah.

“There’s more,” said Sandy. “His name is Paul. He wasn’t known as Paul that night at the party, but he is now.”

“Paul, you say, hmm, okay,” Sarah shook her head in disbelief. She continued to question, steeped in sarcasm. “And how did you two meet? Was it an online psychic dating site? Or maybe a virtual séance? Voodoo? Did you eat a handful of little magic mushrooms? Did you see dinosaurs? What? WHAT? Level with me. Dispel the fantasy for me before you get locked up at the funny farm. C’mon, Sandy! This is beyond nuts.”

Sandy was on the verge of tears under Sarah’s chastising tone. “I swear all of this is true. Through the mirror, Paul protected me from sexual assault by those two degenerates. I didn’t ask him to do anything; he just did. He killed them, not me. When I called out ‘*Help me!*’ I had no idea Paul would...or could...do anything to help me. It all happened so fast.”

Sarah sat still and said nothing...and believed even less than that.

“I became angry and screamed at Paul for killing them. In a blind rage, I threw the book at the mirror, which shattered and...”

“What book?” asked Sarah in increasing exasperation.

“The book titled “*Mirror, Mirror*” I found in the library, and possessing it gave me ownership and started the whole sequence of what turned out to be a relationship.”

“Wait, wait, relationship? With whom? Possessing? Ownership? Of what?” asked Sarah, furiously taking notes on her iPad.

“The book!” replied Sandy. Whoever possessed the book owned the relationship with the spirit entity that could only be reached through the mirror. The book ownership allowed me exclusive relationship rights to touch the mirror, summon the spirit entity, and communicate with him.”

“I know it’s early, but I think I need a stiff drink...or three.” Sarah sat back and dropped the lid on her iPad. “What are you leaving out?”

“Well, I then burned the house down...when I threw the book, destroying the mirror...it bounced off...shattered an oil lamp...that started the fire.”

“Why NOT?” Sarah whispered aloud, no longer taking notes. “How could this not get any weirder? And I suppose the fire burned up all the evidence, including the two degenerates, the book, and the magic mirror...and, of course, Paul, the only witness...I mean spiritual entity...witness.”

“He wasn’t Paul yet; he was just the voice in the mirror.” Oh, good. Now THAT makes more sense,” said Sarah with peaking sarcasm.

“So you’re telling me, Sandy, the book started this whole thing.”

“It did because when I pulled it off the bookshelf, it triggered the whole bookcase to swing inward to reveal a chair and the mirror in a small, secret room. That’s where Phillip tried to assault me. It’s where he and Wil were

killed. It's where the mirror got destroyed," explained Sandy.

"And the book got destroyed in the fire. I got it. No evidence left at all. I don't often rush to judgment with a client, but I think I can confidently say you're pretty much fucked, Sandy. You won't get charged with murder; they will lock you up in an asylum for life. You won't even have to plead innocent because of insanity...tell your story...they'll figure out you're nutso with zero prompting."

Sandy's tears turned into audible crying and a few heavy sobs as she tried to catch her breath. She thought about how she had explained everything to Sarah and wondered if there could have been a better way to describe the bizarreness of it all despite it all being bizarre.

Sandy continued with the story, "The book did not get destroyed in the fire. I found it under some debris. The flames and water did not destroy it. I have it safely tucked away at home.

Sarah nodded, "You know, the investigators, the detectives, will definitely want that book. Do they know you have it?"

"The two detectives, Becker and Hanson, are the only ones who know about it. My roommate knows, but she's cool with all of this.

As far as I'm concerned, they can have it. There is nothing in the book that would incriminate me. The book would only help incriminate Paul, which makes sense because

Paul killed the men with a blast of energy. Let them put a spirit entity on trial. They won't be able to communicate with him since I have the only relationship. Good luck locking up someone you can't hear or communicate with on any level," postured Sandy.

"Hey, it makes total sense, but they need to lock somebody up, Sandy, and you get the nod because you're flesh and blood, plus that jumpsuit looks pretty swell on you. You may not be charged with murder, but I can see accessory-after-the-fact sticking like glue. They need a body to pay for the crime; you're the most likely candidate. No, make that the ONLY candidate!"

Sandy slumped in her chair, defeat pushing her down into a smaller person than she was. "What am I going to do?"

"You'll be out of here in another hour or so. I'd go home and get brain hemorrhage drunk. I'm not much of a believer in ghosts and spirits, but maybe if you are...and it sounds like you and Paul have a budding relationship, figure out a way he can take you away from all this craziness short of blowing holes in anyone who tries to arrest you again. And trust me on this...you may have two days, three at the most before they come knocking on your door with a warrant and designer steel bracelets. I'm confident you are going down for something."

"Will you represent me, Sarah?"

"Are you crazy? I would NOT miss this for the world," answered Sarah enthusiastically. "This pig show is going to be one for the ages. Win or lose; I'm thinking book deal."

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“Hey, only if we write it together. Authoring a book while in prison will help pass the time,” said Sandy.

21 – Paul Goes Science

By four-thirty that afternoon, Sandy was back home. Mel had picked her up, and when they pulled into the driveway at their townhouse, she hugged her roommate before they got out of the car. “So...did you get any cool prison tattoos in the joint?”

Sandy answered with a glare and flipped Mel the bird.

“I’ll take that as a no!” said Mel as they exited the car and headed for the front door.

“Sorry, roomie, I’m not in the mood, okay? I need to dig into the book and spend some time with Paul,” explained Sandy.

“Umm, that’s going to be a problem,” said Mel. “The cops came by and confiscated the book. I hope nothing in there will point to you in any way.”

Sandy sighed, “Won’t point to me, but it will point to Paul. And who’s Paul’s keeper?” She placed her index finger in the middle of her chest, “That would be yours truly. Even my attorney said I was fucked after I told her my story. I can’t see myself being anything else but fucked.”

“Dang, girl! Maybe you need to noodle this with Paul; if anyone can help, it may be him.”

“Oh, my...are you siding with Paul as a dependable partner now, Mel?”

“Well, you two DO have a *relationship*, right?” She grinned and pushed the door open.

Sandy puffed out her cheeks in a gesture of exhausted agreement, exhaled loudly, and headed for the stairs. When she entered her bedroom, quick steps took her right up to the mirror. Without hesitation, she placed her palm flat on the surface. The purple glow accompanied Paul’s greeting, “*Hello, Sandy!*”

“I’m in big trouble, Paul, and that means *you* are in big trouble too,” she began, “I’m lucky to be here talking with you, and I expect I may have a day or two at the most to get back into the book...oh wait...the police confiscated the book...that means it’s you and me, Paul. *We* have to figure something out. That means I need your help and the promise of advice you said you could give.”

“I will help you, Sandy. You will have to trust me deeper than you have ever trusted anything or anyone before.”

Sandy rolled her eyes, “And what exactly defines ‘*deeper*’? I can either trust or not trust. How can it be deeper or more convoluted than that?”

“Deeper as in another dimension, Sandy. That is someplace you have not yet experienced beyond having these conversations with me through mirrors...and oh yes...witnessing a lethal energy discharge that killed two unrighteous aggressors.”

“Oh great! Now, we’re talking about other dimensions. Just how many dimensions are there, *Paul*?” she shouted with exaggerated emphasis on his name.

“Are you familiar with String Theory, Sandy?”

With sarcasm leading her response, she quipped, “Oh, absolutely, Paul! I read up on it each morning right after I review nuclear fusion. What do I know about String Theory? I know you are *stringing* me along with more bullshit that will eventually define a *theory* based on...on what...on what, *Paul*? What I desperately need is your help, not half-baked theories. And stop answering my questions with questions. I hoped you were more intelligent than this.”

“You are angry, Sandy,” Paul said in his even-keeled voice that instantly infuriated her.

“Paul, I’d punch you right now in your throat...if you had a throat. Am I angry? YES! Am I getting even angrier if you don’t start helping me? That’s an even bigger YES!” Her voice approached shouts again, tinged with desperation.

Paul said evenly, *“I apologize for contributing to your anger. I know you think I am causing your anger instead of contributing to it, but I knew your thoughts the instant you summoned me; anger’s grip was already upon you. So whatever anger I added was only a contribution, not a stimulus.”*

“Stop the double-speak, *Paul*, and tell me something I DON’T know, okay?”

“I will, Sandy, but you must set aside your anger at me and this situation to consider what I will share with you now. Can you do that for me?”

Sandy wanted to fire off another volley at him but hesitated long enough to consider that what was coming would require learning and accepting things she knew very little about...like String Theory. God forbid. She drew a deep breath, let it out in a rush that puffed out her cheeks and stared into the mirror. “Okay, I’ll try.”

Paul began. *“Stand directly in front of the mirror, Sandy, and tell me what you see.”*

She stood and stared at her reflection through the light purple glow, “I see my reflection.”

“Correct. And you can see aspects of height, width, and depth, correct?” he asked.

“Yes, I can see a 3-dimensional reflection of myself,” Sandy said, trying not to sound annoyed.

“Perfect! 3D. Now, don’t get ahead of me. 3D or three-dimensional perspective defines your physical world and the wiring in your brain. Those three dimensions are grounded in how you perceive what you see and think. Because of those limitations of your 3D world and worldview, you will have to trust me deeper than ever.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. How many dimensions are there, Paul?” her annoyance began to show through again.

“Six more than you know beyond your 3D limitations that deal with space; a fourth dimension adds the concept of time to the 3D world you live in. Five more involve unique parallel universes and a tenth dimension encompassing all nine preceding dimensions. Some argue that the eleventh dimension embodies the nine space and the universal tenth dimensions altogether.”

He continued when Sandy said nothing. *“What you see in your 3D world appears to be solid matter. What you see, you can touch. What you can touch, even if you cannot see, can be identified by touch because of your 3D memories and past experiences in the 3D world. Do you follow what I’m describing?”*

“Sort of...I think,” she confessed with little evidence of conviction in her voice. *“What dimension are you in? I can’t see you, but I can hear you...granted, I only hear you inside my head, so you must not be in any dimension I’m in, right?”*

“You are correct, Sandy. I am in the eleventh dimension and can freely move through the other dimensions as I wish. You can hear me telepathically because I allowed you to hear me that way. My ability to move through space and time is a more precise explanation of how I reappeared in your bedroom from the destroyed mirror at the Hawthorne House. Our spiritual connection was like a GPS that enabled me to find you.”

“Enough details about me...for now,” Paul said. *“I do not want to distract you from gaining the necessary*

information. The book would have supported much of what I will explain to you now, but since it has been seized, I will fill things in and become your book.”

“Okay, thanks! Back to the mirror. What am I supposed to see? I get the sense that my reflection is only part of this little demonstration,” Sandy said, trying to refocus.

“Look into the reflection of your eyes and tell me what you see,” Paul instructed.

Sandy sighed and said, “I see a reflection of my eyes looking back at me.”

“Perfect!” he said, *“Now consider what it must be like for the reflection. What does the reflection see?”*

“This is nuts, Paul! My reflection is not me...it’s a reflection. It’s not real. It’s not part of me.”

“Maybe...maybe not. Consider, for this argument, that your reflection IS part of you. I’m sorry this is so hard to explain. Let me give you an easier example suitable for a 3D-wired brain.” Paul offered.

“Hey, bud, sorry I’m so deficient with my little 3D brain!” she said hotly.

“Please stop degrading yourself, Sandy. I’m trying to give you an example that you can build upon. Step away from being angry and resisting my help, please. Try this example: stretch your arms straight out in front of you; now bring your hands together until your fingertips touch.”

She did as he instructed.

“Sandy, think about this question before you answer. With which hand did you feel the touching first? Wait, don’t answer yet; there is another part to this question. Which finger on which hand felt the touching first?”

Sandy struggled with an answer that went beyond what her brain said was correct: “I guess I couldn’t tell.”

Paul’s voice sounded like it smiled, *“Ahh, correct, but you could have if you had a different perspective. Try it again; this time, concentrate on your left forefinger as the focal point of the touch.”*

She did as he instructed and then began to grin.

“Look back into the mirror,” he told her. “Are you smiling, or is that your reflection smiling at you? Are you looking at your reflection, or is your reflection looking at you?”

He continued, *“Look beyond the reflection of your eyes and concentrate; think about what those eyes see in you. Try to think outside your perspective; embrace the thought that this reflection is looking back at you...studying you...seeing you grin.”*

Sandy looked harder at the reflection of her eyes. She concentrated outside herself and tried to imagine what her reflection could be thinking about her. What were her eyes communicating? And that’s when she saw a nearly imperceptible movement of her head. Her head? Had her head moved, or did she only see the head of the reflection

in the mirror move? The action was so subtle, a non-verbal twitch, like the reflection she looked at had a question or maybe a thought to share.

Sandy gasped and turned away from the mirror. “Did my reflection move on its own? Did I really see that?”

“I believe you saw exactly what you think you saw,” said Paul. *“The other dimensions you cannot see represent parallel universes that exist in the same space and time but are not joined physically. There can be touch points just like you, and I enjoy such a touch point.”*

You also exist in a parallel universe where you live and make different choices with different outcomes. Sometimes the you in a parallel universe may make an identical choice, but there are different outcomes. Other times, the you, in another universe, may do something you would never consider doing and for reasons outside your thinking.”

“That’s crazy talk, Paul; it’s my reflection, not a parallel universe. I’m not staring into another version of The Matrix here. If I were not standing here, there would be no reflection.”

“Exactly,” agreed Paul, *“and that’s my point about the limitations of a 3D world. It’s not a deficiency, Sandy; it’s a fact limited by perspective. You cannot see me because of the limits of your view. You cannot see me because there is nothing to see; I am energy in another dimension, not solid matter, not flesh and blood as you are. You can hear me in your mind because you already have the perspective and*

experiences of out-loud conversations. I am tapped into that part of your consciousness, synchronized with views you already know. I can do that because I'm well beyond the limited perspective of a 3D world."

"Wow," she said softly, pausing for a few seconds before her 3D brain reengaged. "I mean no disrespect, Paul, but so what? Why the diatribe about multiple dimensions? Why does my limited perspective not get it? Better yet, what was my limited perspective supposed to get that it didn't?"

Paul did not respond immediately, so Sandy fired off another question, *"If you can synchronize with my ability to hear, why can't you use your 11th-dimension superpowers to synch with my ability to see you? I know you said you were energy and there was nothing to see, but ...you enabled me to hear thought energy; a visual link-up should be child's play for a talented entity geek like you, right? C'mon, Paul, unspool some of that String Theory and show yourself."*

Paul hesitated again, the silence prompting Sandy to ask more questions, "I mean, how hard could it be to..."

He interrupted. *"Sandy, I could manifest as another human being for you."*

"Okay then, what's stopping you? Are you ugly? Bad teeth? Big nose? What?" she asked.

"I manifested as a human with an earlier possessor of the book, and it did not end well," he explained, *"and it was my fault. I promised myself I would not go there again, and*

it appears I have set things up to repeat the same mistake with you.”

“Hah!” she howled, “you mean the mistake other than showing up on day one when I...how’d you describe it...summoned you into my life? Wasn’t that mistake enough? It sounds more like it was MY mistake if you ask me.”

“No, not at all, Sandy. Showing up was not a mistake, but how I positioned myself and the concept of establishing a relationship was the mistake. Using the word ‘relationship’ was incorrect as well as inaccurate. We did not...do not...or will have...a relationship as you would describe the characteristics of one. We are linked at a spiritual level across many dimensions. Setting the expectation that there is a relationship sets us up with expectations that it will grow into something...something that can and will eventually go wrong because of boundaries we cannot cross.”

“Tell me what happened when you had your earlier *relationship* disaster. What lines did you cross?” Sandy demanded.

“I would rather not share the particulars of that situation, Sandy.”

“Then,” she paused for a second, “maybe we’re done here.”

Paul caved and said, *“He fell in love with me, Sandy.”*

“Oh, okay, so you were in a gay relationship. Well, aren’t you the flexible one?” she scoffed.

“No, I interfaced with a man who possessed the book and used my ability to sound like someone of the female gender. He demanded to see me, and when I manifested as a person, the mistake of describing our connection as a relationship doomed us to failure.

It was a failure based on how relationships die when those things that grow and sustain them cannot be fulfilled. I did not want him to love me, and I do not want to enable another failure like that again because the hurt will be centered on your life, not mine.”

“Protecting me again, are you, Paul?”

“Protecting you, Sandy, is what I do, and I will continue to do as long as you are alive.”

“Even if I wind up in prison?” she asked, not wanting to consider that eventuality a reality.

“Even then, Sandy.”

Mel yelled up the steps, “Sandy, you’d better beat feet and get out of here. The detectives are on their way. They called and asked if you were here, and I told them you’d just stepped out. I’d guess you have ten minutes or so before they arrive, and I don’t think this will be a courtesy call.”

22 – Arrested

Paul made a quick suggestion as Sandy threw on a light jacket and grabbed her backpack. *“Make sure you have a mirror. I do not want to leave you stranded without communication.”*

“Okay, I will,” she said, bolting out the bedroom door and down the stairs.

Mel embraced her as she flew off the bottom step, saying, “I know you can’t go on the run and disappear. You’ll have to come back here and deal with the cops, but I thought warning you with a few minutes to think about what was happening would be good.”

“I love you, roomie! You’re the best,” said Sandy.

One final squeeze, and she flew out the door. Her initial destination was anywhere but home. She needed space to think. She needed to make a plan even though she knew she was doomed to wind up incarcerated again.

Spending a lot of time planning would serve no viable purpose other than to distract her thoughts from the inevitable. A shopping center or strip mall with plenty of other cars seemed a good place to pull over and stop. Three stoplights and a four-way stop later, she pulled into a small strip center with a CVS pharmacy at one end of the parking lot. With the ignition switched off, she found silence and thoughts crowded in, causing stress she did not need.

Paul's request to be sure she had a mirror prompted her to rummage through her purse and backpack coming up empty. CVS offered a convenient solution; she exited the car and entered the store. She found a small mirror in the cosmetics section that should cover her needs. She stopped by the beverage section, pulled a bottle of chilled water out of a wall cooler, and walked to the cashier up front.

Sandy drove home in no particular hurry, knowing there was no escaping her fate, whatever fate that might be. When she pulled into the townhouse complex, an unmarked police car sat adjacent to her driveway. At least, she thought, there were no flashing lights and armed stormtroopers in tactical gear barricading a potential getaway. There would be no getaway, and she knew it.

Walking through the front door did not trigger an all-out rush by the detectives to grab her and wrestle her to the floor. Sandy thought maybe she had over-demonized the roles of the cops. It turns out she hadn't.

Detective Becker walked up to her and firmly held her by the upper arm, "Ms. Tillman, you are under arrest for your role in the murders of Phillip McCorkle and William Jameson." He repeated his recitation of her rights and applied handcuffs to her wrists as she automatically offered them up behind her back.

Sandy protested, "Why are you arresting me again? We clarified that I didn't kill anyone last time you were here. What's changed?"

Detective Hanson spoke up, “We had the opportunity to read the book “Mirror, Mirror,” and it became apparent that there was an obvious connection between how the mirror functioned and the role you played in the murders.”

“I did NOT play any role unless being the victim of sexual assault counts for something,” she nearly shouted.

“The book gave us all we needed when it described the power of the entity that responded to your call for help by committing the murders of both men. The judge will determine the formal charges at your arraignment, but I’ll wager it will be accessory to murder, second-degree murder, or manslaughter. Regardless of the charges determined, you will be spending years in prison. I’m sorry. Let’s go.”

Mel, who had been standing by quietly, embraced Sandy before they got to the door and said, “I’m so sorry, roomie; I know you didn’t kill anybody. Those two assholes got what they deserved, and I know you did not have a hand in that.”

“Don’t worry about me, sweetie,” said Sandy. “I’ll be fine. I know I’m innocent. This will take some time, but everything will be okay. I promise.”

“Oh, wait for a second; I need to get my backpack and my purse,” Sandy stated as she stopped at the front door.

Detective Becker grumbled, “You can get your purse, but leave the pack. You’re not going to need it.”

Mel said, "I'll run up and get it for you."

"I left it on my bed. It might be in the backpack if you don't see it."

Holding her purse behind her back, Sandy walked to the police car and climbed into the back seat.

"I can hold that purse for you," Detective Hanson offered.

"That's okay, I've got it," replied Sandy. *I've got it and the mirror*, she thought to herself.

An hour later, Sandy was back in an orange jumpsuit with PRISONER stenciled on the back, some ugly slipper-like shoes, and nothing else. At that moment, the only thing that occupied her thoughts was what to do now that her purse had been locked up...including the mirror. She felt utterly helpless without a way to communicate with Paul.

23 – Defining Reasonable Doubt

“Well, that did not take them very long.” Sarah Thomson, her public defender, said, “I’d say welcome home, but this will not be home for long. Your arraignment will be first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Not wasting any time, are they?” questioned Sandy as she plopped down into one of the chairs in the conference room.

“Are you kidding? In a small town like this, murder will trump all the shoplifting and parking violations they’d typically handle. The arraignment will either turn you loose or set a date for a trial. I anticipate they will keep you here to await trial or release you to stay home with an ankle bracelet. Ordinarily, a trial would take months to schedule, but I expect this will be a priority, and finding a jury would be a cinch. I mean, seriously, who would not want to serve on the jury of a trial as bizarre as this is?”

Sandy shook her head and muttered, “I’m not sure how much more of this bizarreness I can take.”

“I heard that,” said Sarah.

Sandy lapsed into silent contemplation. What kind of plan could she make without Paul’s guidance? Having the mirror impounded with her purse hamstrung any hopes of effective strategizing. She was not confident her attorney would do much good in making a plan, but the woman

showed some moxie earlier when verbally sparring with Blanche. Oh no, she thought, not more of Blanche. How could she tolerate that little troll for days? They'd have to put her on suicide watch for sure.

Sarah surprised her only moments after Sandy doubted her capability. "I've been researching the paranormal aspects of this magic mirror and the mystery voice you're hearing in anticipation of this going to trial."

"Paul!" corrected Sandy, "the voice belongs to Paul."

"I get that, but consider this; you might be better off not referring to this voice as *Paul*. Think about it. You claim there is no *relationship* with the voice, so why create the image of there being a *relationship* by naming it? We must separate you as far from the voice and the mirror as possible."

"Sandy nodded silently and then spoke, "That's a good point, I guess."

"We can talk more about how to do that when we find out we must prepare for a trial," added Sarah. "And something else; you talked about the voice being in a different dimension. That concerns me, and that's where we need to shake out the bizarreness of dimensions where we can and make it stupidly simple for the jury. Doing that will place reasonable doubt in the jurors' minds, making them decide if you pulled the trigger or some entity in a different dimension did the deed."

"I don't understand," said Sandy.

“It’s pretty straightforward, Sandy. The prosecution is going to position you as a murderer. You, as the murderer, will be in the front of every juror’s mind. Did she, or didn’t she? You and those two men were the only other people in the room, with them making poor witnesses since they are both deceased.

We needed to have another presence in the room...EVEN IF...that presence was in a different dimension. THAT’S why I want to posture that things that happen before our eyes, in our dimension, could be triggered by actions taken in a different dimension...like from...a parallel universe. A parallel universe where the voice had some culpability in the murder. This is another way to separate you from actual events.

You had one role to play...a role you did not want...you were there as the victim of an assault that would escalate into two rapes if nothing prevented them. ...you weren’t there to kill anybody. You were under duress, plain and simple, and you had no weapon or way to fire off the bolt of energy that killed those guys. You did NOT kill those men.”

Sandy sat in total silence as her mind raced. It felt like a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Sarah made sense. She had invested time in putting together a plan of attack that seemed well thought out and logical if there was anything logical about the bizarre nature of what this trial would turn out to be.

Blanche pushed her way into the conference room with two sharp knocks on the door, hands balled up and planted on where hips would have been visible had she not been mostly round, “Your supper is in your cell now...and I’ll have you know it was hot when I put it there. If you don’t want to eat it cold, you’d better get to it, missy.”

Sandy thanked Blanche with no animus and followed her back to her cell. “Sarah, I’d better go with Blanche since she’s made an extra effort to feed me a hot meal. I’d say you could join me, but...”

“Not in the cell, missy; she can stand in the hall or wait here. I’m not delivering the meal anyplace else. Eat in your cell, or don’t eat. Makes no difference to me.”

Sarah went on her way with a promise to chat and plan more later. Sandy devoured a meat dish that may have been meatloaf. The mashed potatoes and gravy pointed toward the protein as meatloaf, but the origin of the meat itself remained in question. A dinner roll that had been freshly baked two days earlier barely enabled her to mop up the gravy. After finishing the obligatory Jell-O pudding cup, she sat back on her bunk to reflect on Sarah's earlier strategy.

The strategy made perfect sense, on paper anyway. The concept of referring to the voice as *Paul* inferred there was a prior *relationship* she swore did not exist. Well, at least Paul refused to see it as a *relationship* for his own reasons. Sandy was unsure and had become much more comfortable with him being in her life. Wasn’t using each other’s names

the kind of thing that defined a *relationship*? Wasn't that why she was so upset about having her mirror impounded...losing her portal to communicate with him...being completely cut off?

Her thoughts drifted to how Sarah could effectively inject reasonable doubt into the heads and hearts of a jury on the complex equation whose only apparent solution was a straightforward murder conviction. Convicting Sandy would be short and sweet, representing the path of least resistance. Positioning that a foreign entity in a different dimension fired the kill shot still seemed to lack plausibility.

Blanche interrupted her thoughts to pick up her meal tray without saying anything. Sandy took a different path and thanked her for serving her a delicious meal. Maybe Blanche assumed there was a high degree of insincerity in Sandy's gratitude, maybe not, or perhaps she merely lived in a constant state of hypocrisy. Either way, Blanche's response was a snort as she slammed the cell door behind her and twisted the lock aggressively with her key...her only real power.

With the service tray removed, Sandy approached the sink to wash her face and hands. She was pleasantly surprised to find hot water and thoroughly cleansed her face and hands. As she dried off with a tiny towel, she looked into a small sheet of shiny stainless steel attached to the wall and thought about how badly she needed an honest-to-goodness real mirror to reconnect with Paul. The poor excuse of a reflection was marred with grime and who knows what

else, so she wiped it clean with the towel. Fibers from the towel littered the surface from her efforts to clean off the steel, so she swiped at the lint fibers with her hand. The purple glow that sprang to life brought tears instantly to her eyes, and the warm glow shocked her almost as much as the voice, *“Hello, Sandy!”*

24 – Man in the Mirror

“Paul, thank God you found me,” said Sandy as she wiped away tears of joy and relief. “I was so worried that we would not be able to communicate after they impounded my purse and the little mirror I bought.”

“Sandy, I did not have to find you, remember? I always know where you are because of our connection. The only thing I could not do with you was to communicate; hence, the need for a mirror. We will never be disconnected as long as our spirit energies exist.”

“As long as spirit energies exist?” Sandy questioned, “What do you mean by that? I thought you said you were in a different dimension.”

“That is true, Sandy; to be more precise, I am in a different dimension, the eleventh dimension. Since I am where I exist, I can control all the variables in the lower dimensions between your universe and mine to remain in this same place and time with you. Being in a different dimension does not always mean being in a different location. You see, a different dimension implies a unique universe and timeline. In a different dimension, like the fifth dimension, for example, where the focus is on Probability, where there may be multiple universes, parallel universes if you will, that have their discreet timelines that point to potentially different outcomes based on decisions made. You exist separately in at least one parallel universe separate from where you currently exist and...”

“Paul...please,” Sandy interrupted, “don’t start a paranormal science hour...I’m not in the mood...I’m in jail, and I need your help, not your eagerness to dump the contents of your big eleventh-dimension brain into my lap.”

“I am sorry, Sandy, but when I synchronized my thoughts with yours, I knew you needed information for your defense. Understanding how different universes can interact will be vital.”

“Thank you for your concern and incredible oversight, Paul; I don’t know what I will need...or even if I will have a need until I know what happens tomorrow morning at my arraignment. Quite frankly, this is too much to wrap my head around. I don’t want to consider all the *what-ifs* right now. Can you see how my deficient 3D mind works?”

“You are degrading yourself again, Sandy.”

She slammed her fists against the reflective steel surface and shouted in heated oral irritation, “Just stop it with your reminders about what I’m doing to myself, okay? You know, I wouldn’t be under all this stress if you hadn’t fucking killed two people...*Paul!*”

“Hey, prisoner, maybe if you make more noise, the prosecutor will hear your ranting, and that’s the kind of help we do NOT need.” Sarah, her court-appointed public defender, had just walked up and stood outside her cell with her arms folded across her chest.

Sandy whirled around with a look on her face as though she had been caught with her hand in the cookie jar. Her guilty

reaction came from being overheard talking heatedly with Paul. But in her defense, she *was* angry. Displaying her anger in a conversation with no one else would be hard to explain. Never mind that she was alone in a jail cell. She looked over her shoulder, and the purple glow was gone; Paul had left the building.

Sandy looked back at Sarah, “So let me guess, you’ve stopped by to tuck me in? It’s a little early for that, isn’t it?”

“Maybe, but I thought I’d stop by to protect Blanche from bodily harm when she delivered a not-so-hot meal...and...to protect you from earning an assault and battery charge for throat-punching the little troll. See how caring and thoughtful I can be?” Sarah used her nice nasty voice and winked.

Sandy was forced into a smile and said, “You think of everything, don’t you?”

“Yes, I’m the complete package equipped to temper wild emotions. And speaking of emotions, why were you ranting by yourself? And don’t lie to me. It was Paul, wasn’t it?”

Sandy gave Sarah a long look like she was deciding between truth and fiction with her answer. “Yes, it was Paul...I mean the *voice*...we no longer know a Paul, right?”

“Why were you so angry?” asked Sarah, “I only heard part of your rant.”

“You know I’m the only one who can hear him...the *voice*...” Sandy explained, “he started to hold one of his educational moments on different dimensions and parallel universes, and I was not in the mood for him talking down to me and my deficient 3D-wired brain.”

“Talking down to you? What do you mean by that? And why is your brain deficient?” asked Sarah in rapid fire.

“He’s brilliant...eleventh-dimension intelligent...and makes me feel like a third grader talking to a doctoral student. My brain doesn’t seem to synch up easily with what he’s saying.”

Sarah reacted, “He *makes* you feel...or do you *choose* to feel like a third grader? I think you’re selling yourself short.”

“Well, great, that’s what he says too...says I’m degrading myself,” Sandy whined.

Sarah said quickly, “He’s right! You’re putting yourself down. I’ve never thought you would be so easily intimidated. Cut him some slack; we may need his perspective if this arraignment in the morning tags you with a charge leading to a trial. Please, don’t burn any bridges.”

“Don’t say burn; I’ve reached my limit with the entire Hawthorne House.” Sandy shook her head slowly. “Who knows, an arson charge could be added to my murderous ways during the arraignment.”

“I’m serious,” Sarah persisted. “I’ve researched quite a bit, but I’m reading theory-type information written by academics and science geek-types. Access to someone who lives in another dimension could prove invaluable.”

Blanche, who had waddled up behind Sarah without a sound, holding Sandy’s evening meal tray, said, “I’d get you into the conference room, but you can’t eat in there.”

Sarah jumped in surprise at Blanche’s announcement, “Oh, don’t mind me. I was just leaving. I need to confirm; however, the arraignment is at 9:00 AM, correct?”

Blanche nodded, “Yes, in District Court 1 at the other end of this building. I will escort the prisoner to the courtroom and return when the prisoner is held over for trial.”

“Or released,” added Sarah with a marked increase in volume and emphasis.

“Or that,” Blanche grunted, stifled a guffaw, turned, and lumbered back down the hall.

Sarah said her goodbyes and promised to be in the courtroom early. She reminded Sandy that the arraignment was only intended to assign whatever charges the prosecution would pursue. There would be no defending innocence or denying guilt at the arraignment.

Bail would be set or not, as determined by the judge. She promised to aggressively petition the court for Sandy to be rereleased under her own recognizance. “Get some rest tonight,” suggested Sarah. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

After Blanche returned to retrieve the supper tray, Sandy stepped over to the sink to wash up and check in with Paul before turning in for the night. Her touch triggered the familiar purple glow and the anticipated greeting, *“Hello, Sandy!”*

This time, it was different. In the purple glow, the head and shoulders of a man materialized. Sandy brought a hand to her mouth to muffle her exclamation. “Aack...who...who are you?”

Paul enlightened her, *“You asked me if I could materialize myself as a man. This is my first attempt. Is my image acceptable?”*

The head and shoulders of the man reminded her of her brother at first, but she decided he had slightly different facial features. He looked pleasant and had piercing pale blue eyes, bordering grey, his most striking feature. His nose was perfect, lips well-formed, and he had a strong chin barely hidden under a neatly groomed beard. But then, why would anything less than perfection be found in the eleventh dimension?

Sandy said softly, “Yes, your image is...very acceptable.” What she wanted to say and didn’t was that he was hot, and just as she didn’t say it, he did.

“Hot? What is hot?”

Sandy blushed heavily and fought not to get any deeper into trouble by thinking more about how hot he was. “It’s

just an expression. You look fine. Thank you for doing this for me.”

“Do you have any questions or concerns we must address this evening, Sandy?”

“No, Paul, I don’t. I’m exhausted and think going to bed is the best thing for me to do now.”

“I will leave you then and wish you a restful night.”

25 – Arraignment

Sandy was awake at 5:45 AM the morning of her arraignment, and her mind was already working overtime. She attempted to tell herself this was only an arraignment, but her brain refused to listen, and the adrenaline continued to pump. If only she could go for a run and burn off some of this pent-up energy.

Her thoughts returned briefly to Paul, and the brand-new image of whom he had become hit her with feelings she did not understand. How could she look at this hot man and not think hot-man thoughts?

Controlling her thoughts could quickly fly out of her ability to contain them, and he would know all of it. Yes, of course, he would remind her that this was not a *relationship*, and then that would piss her off, and then he would apologize, and then it would be her turn to apologize. You'd think they were an old married couple stuck in an aggravating routine they relived daily.

She sat on her bunk and prayed silently for protection from anger and allowing God's will to be done. She had a hundred other prayers but could not find the words to express them and just sat there with her head in her hands. She knew the Holy Spirit would pray on her behalf with wordless groans to articulate her unspoken prayers. She hoped God was listening. Her prayer discipline had been lacking these last few days, and she felt shame for her neglected spiritual relationship with Him and no shortage

of guilt for a *relationship* with Paul that was not even supposed to be a *relationship*.

Maybe pressing him to manifest himself as a man was not such a good idea, no matter how pleasing he was to her eyes. Her thoughts refocused when she heard Blanche doing her jailhouse shuffle down the hallway with a serving tray of something lukewarm at best and approximating breakfast.

"Here's a delicious breakfast, sweetie pie, and I believe it's at least room temperature. Enjoy now!" she said with a fake honey-sweet lilt. "I'll be back in an hour to escort you down to the gas chamber where you belong...I'm sorry...I mean to your arraignment to decide how guilty you are. I doubt it will take very long."

Sandy said nothing and held every intention of leaning into her prayer to be protected from anger despite her gut telling her to rip into this fat little troll and flay her with words. She settled on a clenched jaw and an artificial smile and said, "Thank you so much, Blanche! I look forward to our next meeting."

26 – Not Guilty

Sandy ambled into the courtroom with wrists and ankles shackled. Sarah Thompson, her attorney, exploded from her seat at the defendant's table and shouted at the Judge, the bailiff, and anyone who was within sound of her voice, as she pointed furiously at her shackled client, "Is THIS even necessary?"

Judge Phyliss Patterson shot back, "Yes, it is! We are entertaining charges on this detainee for serious crimes that allege suspicion of causing two deaths. As such, this detainment facility's policy is to take every precaution to protect us all. Now sit down and behave yourself, councilor!"

Having Sarah come off the rails on her behalf felt reassuring to Sandy, though hearing Sarah's rebuke from the judge held a somewhat negative counter-effect. Sandy's shackles jingled as she shuffled to the table where Sarah waited for her. "Your honor, I apologize for my outburst, but shackles on someone only alleged for a crime seems a bit harsh. Can we at least take them off during this arraignment hearing?"

The judge looked at Blanche, who stood and smiled broadly by the doorway. "Jailor, please remove the shackles from this detainee."

"But, your Honor, she is probably a murderer," protested Blanche, holding her ground by the doorway.

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"Now!" said the judge, lowering her head slightly to look over her glasses, "Right now!"

Blanche shuffled over to the defendant's table, knelt to remove the shackles, and muttered under her breath, "We're not done; it's you and me, sweetie pie!"

"What was that jailor?" asked the judge.

"Nothing, your Honor!" replied Blanche, still looking at the floor and fumbling with the shackles.

The judge glared at the back of Blanche's head and said, "I thought not."

Sandy fought back the urge to dropkick Blanche's teeth down her throat but then reminded herself that would demonstrate quick anger and earn an additional assault charge.

27 – Jail Break

Sarah leaned over and whispered to Sandy, "Remember, this is an arraignment. You have nothing to defend, nothing to explain, and no one to convince of your innocence. That happens during a trial if there is even to be one. The judge will ask how you plead, and your answer is, 'Not Guilty, your Honor!' Then let me do my job to get you out of here."

The judge did ask after the allegations of committing second-degree murder had been read aloud, and Sandy answered, "Not guilty, your Honor."

"Does the prosecution have any pertinent thoughts regarding bail?" asked the judge.

Thurston Jenkins, Prosecuting Attorney, said, "Absolutely, your Honor. This person is an extreme danger to our community and should be held over until trial without the benefit of posting bail."

"Your Honor, if I may?" Sarah started not waiting for the judge to call on her.

"You may, Ms. Thompson. Proceed."

Sarah stood and plowed ahead. "Your Honor, while two young men have lost their lives, there is nothing found in the discovery at the crime scene that would indicate in any way that my client had the means to commit these crimes.

My client was under assault by both of these men, and if a weapon had been in her possession...well...I'd be pursuing self-defense on her behalf. No weapon was found in my client's possession or at the scene. She could not have killed these men.

In addition, the fatal injuries suffered by these men were of unknown origin to both seasoned homicide and forensic detectives and the County Coroner. That said, the weapon was classified as unknown.

My client feared for her safety, if not for her life, and is not a threat to any community member or anywhere else. She is not a flight risk since she is our community's active and well-respected real estate broker. I respectfully request no bond be set and allow her to be released to return home and employment activities under her own recognizance."

The prosecuting attorney struggled to get his girth from his chair to stand and protested, "Your Honor, how do we know this person will not flee? Given the grave nature of these crimes, I would be doing our community a grave disservice by condoning her release."

"Mr. Jenkins, I hear your concerns, but these circumstances are not so cut and dried. I will agree to release Ms. Tillman into the custody of Ms. Thompson on the condition that the defendant wears an ankle monitor and does not leave the county without permission from this court."

The judge continued, "There are enough unanswered questions regarding the circumstances of these deaths, and with your client as the only witness to the mysterious

events, that I have no choice but to remand this matter over to a trial by a jury of her peers."

The judge's gavel fell with a sharp crack, and so did the level of Sandy's angst, at least for now.

Blanche approached the defense table with shackles still in her hands. "Jailor, if you attempt to put those shackles on this person, I will have you wearing them for the rest of the day. Do you understand me?" said the judge, pointing her gavel at Blanche.

Sandy snickered loud enough for Blanche to hear, held her cuffed hands out over the table, and said, "And you can take these off too, sugar butt."

Blanche turned and glanced back at the judge, only to find her watching every move she made. With looks that could kill or maim, Blanche leaned over to unlock the handcuffs. Sandy whispered, "Yeah, just you and me, sugar butt. Maybe next time. Hey, why don't you and I walk back to my cell together? Maybe we can hold hands and make plans for a reunion."

Sandy, full of having the upper hand, immediately thought better of taunting the little troll. After all, the troll had a baton she had already been warned about. Sarah saw what was happening between them and intervened with an offer to accompany them both back to Sandy's cell.

After Sandy's clothes and personal belongings were returned and the ankle monitor attached, she texted Mel to come and pick her up. Sarah turned her around and took her

by her upper arms firmly. "This is not over, Sandy. We have a long way to go and a trial that will be difficult to manage in the heads and hearts of a jury. I know you're feeling pretty good right now, but don't let down your guard, as this fight has only just begun."

"I know," Sandy said, dropping her head down in deference. I know I'd not be in this position right now without everything you've done to make this happen. Tell me what to do next, and I'll do it, okay? Promise!"

"Next? You go home and get some rest. I'll call you tomorrow so we can plan for the trial. I'm still determining how long it will take to get something on the schedule and have them impanel a jury. Just guessing...I'd say we might have a month at most, possibly sooner than that."

As Sandy signed herself out, Mel walked up, stood beside her friend, and wrapped an arm around her waist, "So... another jailbreak? How many lives does this little kitty have?"

Sandy looked directly at Mel, saying nothing and with only a slight hint of a smile.

28 – Unreasonable Doubt

The girls parked in their driveway at the townhouse. Mel turned off the engine, sat back, looked at Sandy, and continued to probe for more details besides what she had witnessed at the arraignment. “You mentioned that your attorney said it would be important to make unreasonable doubt sound reasonable. What did she mean by that?”

“Even saying that sounds unreasonable, Mel. I was the only person in the room to witness two men die. There was no weapon. An unknown weapon caused the fatal injuries. It’s my word against two dead men that they were there to assault me. Paul and my attorney think other dimensions and parallel universes involved will be too bizarre to be used as a defense.

How the hell can any of that be made to sound reasonable, even if I believe it is? She referred to what she described as *‘the heads and hearts’* of a jury who would likely not accept the possibility of other dimensions. She said the challenge would be making that sound reasonable enough to cause unreasonable doubt.”

Mel nodded with understanding and asked, “Want my two cents?”

"Absolutely, because I’m totally out of ideas,” sighed Sandy.

“Go to Paul. He is more intelligent than all of us, so be ready to consider what he says with an open mind,” Mel offered.

Sandy nodded thoughtfully, “I think you’re right. Paul willingly wants to get involved, and I should at least hear him out.”

“Hungry?” asked Mel, changing the conversation from interrogation to high-carb feeding.

“Famished. That slop Blanche brought me earlier did not look appetizing, so I never touched it. I need protein, so the pizza I know you’ll suggest must have extra pepperoni and sausage.”

“Done,” said Mel. They popped their safety belts open simultaneously, climbed out, and headed inside.

29 – Untethered in a Parallel Dimension

After loading excessive carbs and replenishing protein, Sandy headed for her room to check in with Paul. The carbs had other ideas, and sleep claimed her without much resistance when she lay back in bed to collect her thoughts before summoning Paul. Just before she drifted off, an idea popped into her head – the book; she needed to get the book back. There were at least two chapters or maybe even a whole section about parallel universe-related information that she wanted to read before law enforcement showed up and seized the book as evidence.

How could she get into the police station and steal back the book? Maybe Paul could work some of his eleventh-dimension magic and levitate the book out a window for her. Perhaps she was just as fucked as Sarah had told her. Deep, dreamless sleep claimed her.

Nearly two hours slipped by before Sandy emerged from her self-induced carbohydrate coma. She raised her arms over her head and leaned into a full body stretch, arching her back and vibrating like a cat waking from a good nap.

Perfect power nap, she thought and slid off the bed to touch the mirror with her palm.

“Hello, Sandy,” came Paul’s usual greeting. His image slowly materialized, and he said nothing else, as was also expected. She figured he was taking a few seconds to mentally synch up with her jailhouse adventures and the

courtroom chaos from earlier in the day. Nothing was better than having a private eleventh-dimension entity that did not require a full recap every time she engaged with him.

“So,” he questioned in her head, “*you want to add breaking and entering, tampering with evidence, and theft to your charges?*”

Yeah, right; nothing like having a private entity that's a smart ass and knows every damn thing about your thoughts.

“Well, I don't know, Paul. As an eleventh-dimension genius, I hope you can think of a better idea. I need the book because there's a section about parallel universes that I just glossed over and did not fully comprehend. As you have likely already recalled, my attorney believed we would need to interject information regarding parallel universes to create reasonable doubt that I did not kill those men.

What do you think? Is that an intelligent line of thinking, given that a jury will consist of ordinary citizens who would never consider there are more universes out there than what they can see and touch in front of them?”

Paul answered, “*I believe that is a very prudent thing to do, Sandy; however, I do not believe breaking into the police station is as prudent.*”

“That's just great!” she replied, “How about you then? Do you have superpowers I don't know about? Could you sneak in and steal the book back for me?”

“No, sorry,” he responded without laughing but never laughed. “Sandy, I have another idea to consider. First, did you read the section that described time travel into other dimensions?”

“Barely,” she answered, “I comprehended about as much of that as the section I skimmed on parallel universes. My little 3D brain could not wrap around the concepts of either one.”

He said, “*Since you don't have the book to read any further, I can help with that and just take you there myself.*”

“Take me where? What?” exclaimed Sandy.

“*Take you back to the house to retrieve the book before the fire,*” Paul said.

“You can do that? Can you make me travel back in time? Paul, I don't know about this... I can't go by myself. Will you be with me?”

In his calming voice, Paul said, “*I will be with you just as I am now, but you will be by yourself. You will have to find the book on your own. But you must learn a few things because situations pose serious dangers if you have never traveled untethered. An alternate or a parallel universe may have distinctly different attributes even if the location is identical to your current universe.*”

She held her hands up in the universal signal to take a time-out, “Wait...wait...stop...just wait, untethered?”

“Yes, have you ever experienced a dream where you could fly?” he asked.

She paused briefly before answering, “I think so...a very long time ago, like when I was a child.”

“Good, that is a typical age for that kind of dream since a child’s mind is not burdened with adult clutter and unyielding beliefs. If it was long ago, you might or might not recall seeing a thin silver thread connected to you as you flew.”

“I don’t recall,” she said, “I just remember the amazing feeling that I could fly.”

“You were in an alternate dream state within your same universe. Some call those states out-of-body experiences or OBEs,” explained Paul. “That thread was your tether. Your tether will never allow you to leave your universe or your timeline, no matter where you fly in your dream.

To leave one dimension or universe and travel to another, that tether must be disconnected. That is the first danger we must overcome. You will be untethered because you will travel back in time, and when we travel in time, there is the distinct potential for your current dimension experiences to change, and you will enter a parallel universe.”

Sandy looked confused and asked, "Why would it change?"

Paul resumed his explanation, *"I will answer that question by addressing the second danger we must overcome. When you go back in time, you still have the free will to make*

decisions and do things differently. Every new thing you do may have an alternate outcome in the future that you will return to later. It would be like traveling back in time and killing Hitler's mother before he was born. What would the future be like then without him? What worse monster would take his place?

Too many things are interconnected, and conditional relationships cannot be altered without creating alternate-universe chaos through those actions. That means you cannot do anything to disrupt the future by making changes while traveling on previous timelines. Traveling back in time to retrieve a book that was yours doesn't change things in your current dimension. Does that make any sense?"

"I think so. I just need to go back in time, find the book, and leave. Right?" asked Sandy.

"Yes! Here is a third danger to overcome. There must be limits on where you are going and when because if you wind up in a parallel universe on the same timeline, that universe may not have the exact attributes or circumstances as the universe you leave behind. For example, how events in that different universe progressed to that moment may have nothing to do with your current universe experiences. For example, Mel may not be your roommate in another dimension. Someone else may have owned the estate. If we only travel through time within the limits of the same dimension, those circumstances should not change. Still, there is always a chance of winding up in a different dimension or parallel universe on the same timeline.

Other things like natural disasters, political unrest, wars, climate, diseases, and even gravity... can be different; you get the idea? It will be a different world, even if most of it looks the same. It could be another planet or a distant solar system in more advanced travel."

"Hold on...just hold on, Paul! I'm going after a book, not a space adventure."

"Sorry," apologized Paul. *"I can get a little ahead of myself on this topic."*

"Yeah, like way ahead and out of this world. Just keep it so that my little 3D brain can wrap around it. Okay?"

"Yes, I will. Another danger to overcome is the other people you might meet. Consider challenges like running across your other self and friends. Depending on timeline differences, your other self may have yet to experience something as dramatic as your duplicate presence. The danger happens when you share knowledge of your current world with your other self. You should never change or redirect history; attempting so can cause linked or unrelated scenarios to crash and burn in catastrophic domino effects. I strongly recommend, in every circumstance, that it is best to avoid your other self."

"What about my friends?" she asked.

"Similarly, you have no idea where they are in their timelines and life circumstances. For example, have you even met them yet? Would you ever meet them in that different universe? Would Mel be your roommate? Despite

many matching physical characteristics, you cannot assume there are any relational connections between the two universes. Again, not avoiding situations that seem identical can be extremely dangerous. My best description of your role as you travel in another dimension is that of an untethered interloper.”

“Wow! Why would I even want to go to another universe?” she asked.

“Sandy, you must go into a fifth-dimension parallel universe to retrieve the book. So, it’s more complicated than simple time travel.”

“Simple? Like how simple? Like before the fire?” she asked.

“Yes, but different timelines, different circumstances, remember? Possibly, there will never be a fire in that other universe.” Paul clarified. *“This is about finding and retrieving the book if it is where you found it originally.”*

“Why even go to another universe if traveling through time is an option?” she asked.

“You are not capable of time traveling within your current universe. I am the only one able to assist your movement in your present 3D dimension. You cannot move forward or backward on your timeline without time travel and only with my intervention. Time travel automatically moves you into a parallel universe in a fifth dimension. You will travel to a different time on that timeline, in another dimension and a parallel universe. I may be sounding redundant, but

that is how it works. Without close controls, how far you travel in time could be off by many days, months, or even years.” explained Paul.

“Oh, that’s simply great...stuck in a parallel universe trapped in a time gap of unknown years. You’re not selling me on this adventure, Paul.”

“Remember, you can come back any time you want,” Paul said.

“Right,” Sandy replied tersely, “just click my heels together and say I want to go home. Tell me, Paul, does this trip come with ruby slippers or what?”

Paul missed the loaded Oz reference entirely, *“I am not sure what ruby slippers have to do with anything relevant. You will return the same way you arrived...through a portal.”*

“You mean any mirror acts as a portal,” she confirmed.

“Yes, just like you can communicate with me through any mirror. You must understand that my energy will be with you, providing whatever guidance you need.”

“Your energy?” she asked, “like you are doing now...in my head?”

“That is correct,” he explained, “you see me now as another human...as a man in the mirror, but in reality, I do not have a body. I am pure energy and can travel to any other dimension outside space and time. That’s only

important to you now because it will enable me to always be with you."

The thoughts of traveling to another universe, parallel or not, intimidated Sandy, but not to the point of abandoning what looked like her only option to recover the book. Paul would be with her as a constant guide, but he would not be there in person...like a human-type person. She would be alone except for his voice in her head. Still, she decided it was time to put on her big girl pants and finish this.

"Okay, Paul, how do we get this party started?"

"We can leave any time you like, Sandy. I suggest you choose a portal that you know will be a safe place when you arrive at your destination on a different timeline." Paul explained.

"Got it; right here in my bedroom is the best choice. I guess I'm choosing correctly. Is it the best choice?"

"Yes, for this short trip, leaving your bedroom and returning here should be fine," he confirmed.

"How do I carry the book back with me? Can I carry it in my backpack?"

"Yes, anything or anyone attached to you when I help you make the jump will travel with you. Just be sure to remain connected until you arrive at your initial portal," he explained.

"Okay, so how do we do this?" Sandy asked.

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"As a courtesy, I suggest telling Mel what you are doing," he suggested.

"I'll have to text her since she's at work, and that might be tricky because she can't always use her phone," she said.

"You will not be away for an extended period," Paul said, *"providing there are no complications."*

"Complications? What kind of complications?" she pressed.

"Well, this mirror portal in your bedroom will be the same portal where you will arrive in the previous timeline. You will then need to arrange to travel in that new timeline to the Hawthorne Estate. Then, after you have the book and are ready to leave that timeline and return here, I can help, but you will need to use either the same portal in your bedroom on that new timeline or find a new portal. If the mirror in the small room adjacent to the library is still there, you may choose to use it...but...are you sure the mirror will be in the little room in the new timeline? Is there a library? Is the book there? That is what I mean by potential complications."

"Now I'm not so sure of anything. Where are you taking me, Paul? she whined. "I'm starting to worry about this whole thing. Are you sure I can get back here in one piece?"

"If there are no complications, your first time-traveling experience should be without negative consequences," Paul encouraged. *"Remember, I will be with you the entire time."*

"Right," she muttered as she texted Mel at work. There was no immediate reply, and Sandy was relieved because trying to explain this hair-brained adventure through time with Paul might require more than simple text messages back and forth. She knew Mel, and it would be highly unlikely for her to say, *'Okay, cool! Have fun! Have a nice trip!'* and drop it. Her cell screen remained empty of a response.

"She's busy," said Sandy. "Let's just do this thing, Paul, and you'd better keep me safe!"

"Place both of your palms on the mirror and relax," he said, *"I will take you back."*

Sandy slung her backpack over her shoulder and stepped up to the mirror. Her outstretched hands hovered over the glass surface before she pressed her hands onto the warm surface. She did not have time to panic when her palms made contact with the warm glass. The warmth disappeared, as did her hands, wrists, and forearms, disappearing into the silvery surface. She drew a breath to scream just as she fell...or was she pulled...into the mirror?

The sensation of falling lasted for a split second. There was no sensation of motion, weightlessness of flight, rainbow of flashing lights, swishing sounds, nothing, not that she knew what to expect. When nothing else happened, she sensed nothing spectacular would, so she opened her eyes. Oh, great. She was still standing in front of her mirror with her arms outstretched. "Paul?" she called out loudly, "It looks like our little time-travel adventure is a bust."

"I'm sorry, Sandy," he began, "but you are approximately six months into the past on a new timeline and parallel universe."

Sandy sat back down on her bed in disbelief. Six months? Did he say six months into the past? That would explain a new timeline, but a parallel universe? She was stunned, not so much by the time shift but by the inconsequential nature of the journey.

Here she sat, arriving in her room where she thought she had left only a few seconds ago—supposedly now, sitting on her bed a half year earlier. The whole thing was seamless and transparent. It was nothing, a non-event. She at least expected a tunnel full of swirling colors and rushing noises or something more ethereal. What a disappointment this turned out to be.

Paul came into her head, *"Time travel can be rather routine, Sandy; sorry to disappoint you. I realize six months might be overkill, but there is one important thing you need to understand: you are in a parallel universe, and I can assure you that things may not be what they seem. We can retrieve your book whenever you are ready, but we must proceed cautiously."*

"I don't know what I was expecting, but this is not it," remarked Sandy.

30 – Not as They Seem

Sandy picked up her backpack and headed for the stairs. When she hit the ground floor, she nearly collided with Mel as she stepped around the corner, causing Sandy to jump completely out of her skin, "Hey, roomie, I thought you were at the bookstore."

Sandy must have looked like a trout, her mouth frozen open, stunned, and unprepared to use words. "I...umm...I thought you were at work."

"Work? Why would I be at work on a Saturday?" Mel asked her quizzically, cocking her head like she was about to call bull shit.

"Bookstore?" asked Sandy in confusion.

That response shocked Mel, but her sarcasm took over the conversation, "Yeah, you know, Boundless Bindings, your bookstore, where you spend almost every day of your life." Mel wagged her head to the other side and pressed, "What are you doing back here in the middle of the day, and why did you change clothes?"

Paul spoke in her head, *"In this parallel universe, you are not a real estate agent. You own and operate a bookstore. To be more correct, your other self owns and operates a bookstore."*

Sandy pondered Paul's news and silently wondered what she should or shouldn't say to this *other Mel*. She was unprepared to respond confidently enough not to make matters worse.

"I advise you to explain very little and make an excuse to leave this conversation. You do not want to start by explaining how you got here and why you are here and not at work," suggested Paul. *"Plus, you do not want to be here if your other self shows up."*

"Long story, Mel, and I really do have to get going...get back...to the...store," bluffed Sandy. She hugged the *other Mel* quickly, turned, and headed for the door.

Other Mel had a puzzled look on her face but said, "Okay, cool. See ya when I see ya."

Sandy hustled down the front walk, took a left around the corner, and quickly was out of sight of the house. She exhaled in relief as she rounded the corner, relieved that the *other Mel* had not come outside to see her walking away instead of driving. Sandy again thought how unprepared she was to be dropped into a parallel universe with so much missing knowledge.

Paul heard every concern and said, *"Do you see what I mean about avoiding friends? At least it was not your other self. Basic logistics can be a problem, too, like when you are forced to lie to friends about things like walking away instead of driving away."*

"Yeah, I get it," replied Sandy under her breath.
"Personally, *Paul...*" emphasizing his name, "I think I should've been more prepared, maybe by an eleventh-dimension guide. Every turn reveals another instance of me not knowing what to do or say. Yeah, I know. Don't remind me about the book retrieval mission; I hope to make that happen despite this problem fighting a whack-a-mole game I'm in the middle of."

The Hawthorne Estate was about a mile away, and Sandy hoped she could make it there without running into anyone else. She pulled her cell phone out of her hip pocket to check for a text message from her roommate. Nothing was there, including no bars and no signal icon. Under her breath, she growled her frustration. *'What next?'* she thought and immediately added aloud, "And don't *you* say a word, Paul!"

"Sandy, I am sorry that you..." started Paul.

"Shut it!" she yelled angrily. "Just shut it!"

Her head angled down to help hide her face, Sandy continued walking briskly toward whatever new chaos awaited her at the Hawthorne Estate. Hah! If there even was a Hawthorne Estate. What else could go wrong? Coming up upon an empty lot would not surprise her in the least.

Her head swam with this time travel, parallel universe hopping thing, or whatever the hell she was involved in, and it almost overshadowed why she was there in the first place. She shook her head. It was time to get refocused,

time to keep her wits about her and get that damn book back.

Taking a right at the next intersection pointed her down the street where the estate would be on the left. She abruptly stopped walking fifty yards from the heavy iron fence around the property and stared at the scene before her. Something was different. For a moment, she wondered if this was even the Hawthorne House.

Paul said something about being six months backward in time, but what she now saw did not match her memory of what six months ago should look like. The grounds showed no signs of severe overgrowth, the house exterior was immaculate with no evidence of disrepair.

Certainly, six months could not have been enough time to cause as much damage to the house and yard clutter around the grounds as she remembered from the time of their party. Then her eye caught motion at the front of the house; something fluttered, waving, like water falling. She saw the fountain running, spraying, and splashing a cascading sheet of water into a decorative stone basin. Somebody lived in that house. But who?

What should she do? Indecision froze her in her tracks at the foot of the driveway. Should she walk up to the front door and bang the doorknocker? The invitation to do so welcomed her with the unlocked gate and standing slightly ajar. "Paul?" she asked quietly, "What should I do?"

"Sandy, I am unable to see inside the house. I am unable to discern who lives here. I'm sorry."

"I'm so glad you're here with me, Paul; you're so much help and comfort," she grumbled sarcastically.

"I'm sorry," Paul repeated, "and you sound like you are getting angry again."

"Sandy snapped at him, "Stop being sorry. Stop saying that I'm getting angry because I *am already* angry. I need your help! Some of your genius advice might be helpful right about now, don't you think?"

"I have not known you for very long, Sandy, but your hesitation shows a different side of your personality. Are you here to make friends or retrieve your book?"

"Oh, now *that* helps! Just be a condescending smart-ass; that helps me a lot. And remember, my eleventh-dimension genius friend, the book is not mine in this parallel universe. It's behind that big front door someplace, and at this point, it looks like I will have to steal somebody else's book...if it's even there.

31 – Text from Another Time

Mel ordered her usual lunchtime soup and half sandwich at Panera Bread two doors down in the strip mall from Perfectly Framed, her art supply shop. While waiting at the opposite end of the counter for her order, she pulled out her phone to check messages. She opened the one from Sandy first of the three text messages waiting unread. As her eyes scanned the message, her other hand came up to her mouth to cover her lips, and she whispered under her breath, "Oh no, you didn't!"

"Order for Mel!" the guy behind the counter called out.

Mel stood frozen and stared at her phone in disbelief. She looked up dreamily and asked no one in particular, "Time travel?"

The counter guy said, "Yup, and it's time for you to travel on over here and pick up your lunch...if you're Mel, that is."

The normal Mel would have shared a caustic comment with the counter guy, but in her current state of shock, she picked up her food tray and walked over to an empty table by the window. Steam off her favorite black bean soup curled upward as she reread Sandy's text:

"I know this will freak you out, but I'm going to retrieve the book this morning. I won't break into the county jail and ransack the evidence room. I'm going with Paul. We are traveling back in time to the Hawthorne House before the

.

fire and our first exploration when I found the book. I have to do this. Don't worry; Paul will be with me. See you later today! Love, S."

Mel placed the phone down gently and sat back in her seat, deep in thought. *Time travel is science fiction, not something for real estate agents. And that Paul? Who the hell was that guy...that entity? Would he bring her back safely?*

The smell of her soup pulled her away from entertaining violent thoughts of choking out an entity if he hurt her best friend. The soup warmed her but did little to blunt her concerns about Sandy's well-being.

32 – Escape Through Time

Standing in front of the massive wooden doors, Sandy paused. Who would answer? What was she going to say? How would she get into the library and steal a book under someone's supervision? It was not like they would let her come in and help herself. Once more, feeling totally unprepared for whatever came next, she lifted the big doorknocker and let it fall. She took a step back and waited.

After a minute passed, she lifted and brought the knocker down twice more. That racket should wake the dead, she thought. It did not wake the dead, but she heard shuffling thumps and footsteps slowly approaching the door. A raspy voice croaked, "I'm coming, dammit!"

The latch snapped sharply, and the door slowly cracked open to reveal a grizzled old man trying to open the door wider while simultaneously manipulating a walker out of the way. "That was quick!" he exclaimed in a hoarse voice, reflecting how the abuses of age had scuffed it.

Sandy was taken aback. "Quick?"

"Yes!" he rasped in irritation. "I just got off the phone with you and did not expect you to be standing on my front porch an instant later."

"I'm sorry, but I..." Sandy fumbled to figure out what was happening.

"No matter," he said, jockeying the walker out of the way as he turned and headed into the foyer. Come in, come in, and shut that damn door behind you."

Sandy followed him inside and pushed the door closed with a thud. When she turned around, the foyer looked familiar. Stepping into the main room behind the shuffling man, everything was in the exact places she remembered: the same tapestries, the same heavy draperies pulled closed. Everything matched her previous experiences.

Everything matched except for the presence of this shriveled old man. He turned and sat with effort into a wingback chair and pointed to another chair across from him. He barked, "Sit, sit yourself down."

Shriveled did not do justice in describing the deep lines etched on the old man's face that framed a permanent frown. He wore a deep red, almost purple, robe with sleeves rolled into cuffs to his wrists and the initials MTH embroidered over his left chest. She had her first clue. Sitting before her was a man not as dead as had been advertised. Marcus T. Hawthorne did not have much hair, but what he had left was snow white and sparsely scattered on the sides of his head, pulled back into a wavy ponytail. Steel blue eyes twinkled, but Sandy could not determine if the twinkle was menacing or hid an intense humor. "So, have you changed your mind about selling me your bookstore?"

Sandy tried not to flinch as her second clue dropped fortuitously into her lap. He thought she was her *other self*

and had expected her to drop by. That was helpful information because she absolutely did *not* want to meet her *other self*, who could potentially knock on the door any second.

"I'm seriously considering selling it to you, Mr. Hawthorne," she lied with a fake smile. "Would you be so kind as to indulge me a moment to see your library once more? A few books in my store would be good additions to your collection, and I would like to transfer them over immediately. Would you mind if we returned to the library for a few minutes?"

"Yes, I would mind," he rasped, "But certainly, you should go. I am not so mobile these days and would prefer to sit here and wait for your return."

"Thank you, sir. I'll only be a minute." Sandy fought the urge to jump up and sprint down the far hallway to the library. How fortunate things had fallen into place for her to walk in, talk with a supposed-to-be dead man, drop another convenient lie, and receive permission to steal a book.

As she walked down the hallway, she reached out to Paul. "Are you still with me, Paul?"

"I'm here, Sandy."

"I haven't heard from you and was just wondering," she said with a sigh of relief.

"You have not needed me, Sandy, and I believe you are doing well on your own. Well done, so far."

"Wow, a compliment," she said pleasantly.

"Your confidence is showing in a very trying situation. Your instincts are spot on. I am proud of you," he said in his calm tone.

Sandy opened the door to the library to see that nothing had changed from her pre-inferno memories. With deliberate steps, she went directly to the rear of the library and found "Mirror Mirror" on the shelf. Unslinging her backpack, she pulled the book from the shelf, opened the flap, slipped it inside, and refastened the clasps. She was so excited that she nearly vibrated as she put her arm through the strap and hoisted the pack over her shoulder. When she turned for the door, she heard the loud boom of the door knocker. Panic flooded her stomach, weakening her knees and jumpstarting her heart.

Pausing in the library's doorway, she strained to listen. The old man was slow in reaching the door, but Sandy's panic became justified when he finally got it open. Her *other self* had just arrived. She heard the old man gasp and exclaim, "But how can you be here when I just..." He stopped speaking and turned his head toward the hallway, pointing to the same hallway she needed for her escape.

Without hesitation, Sandy dashed back into the library to the back wall and pushed over the two books next to the gap where "Mirror Mirror" had been. A soft metallic snick marked the slow opening of the bookshelf section as it

glided inward. She watched through the dark opening as it widened. Sandy activated the flashlight on her phone and first saw the chair, then mouthed a silent prayer that the mirror would be there, too. It was. She walked into the room and called for Paul.

"I need you, Paul! I'm in trouble and need your help!" she announced urgently.

Paul immediately spoke into her head. *"Sandy, I said I was proud of you earlier, and I am even more so now. You do not need my help. You are standing before a portal that will return you to your home and timeline. You knew instinctively to go into this room and find this portal. And you know what to do next. Remember? Both palms flat on the surface..."*

"Hey, you, woman!" The old man shouted as he stood at the entrance to the library, leaning on his walker and pointing at her. That's her. Stop her!"

Sandy yelped, stuffed her phone with the flashlight still on into her back pocket, and placed her palms flat on the mirror's surface. Once more, her hands slipped beneath the surface of the glowing glass, and she fell into wherever you fall into when traveling through time. The old man and her *other self* stood there with puzzled looks when Sandy evaporated into the surface of the now-darkened mirror.

Less than a second later, she opened her eyes and saw her reflection in front of her bedroom mirror, in her own house, and in her own time. She dropped the backpack off her shoulder and let it drop to the floor with a thud. Taking two

steps back, she fell into bed and thanked God for watching over her. An additional round of thanks crossed her lips when she whispered, "Thank you, Paul, for getting me home safely."

"You have done well, Sandy!"

A smile crept onto her face. Another compliment, and he even said he was proud of her...twice. Could it be that Paul was thawing out of his rigid and formal manner? Was he softening toward her? Was he relaxing his strict *keep-her-at-arms-length* posture? The changes in his demeanor were subtle, but she felt them and welcomed them, although with an air of caution.

Were eleventh-dimension men like the 3D variety? It would be nice to learn that they were different. At that moment, she realized that Paul had probably read every private thought she had just entertained. If she were right, no secrets would be kept in her head as long as he was there. The fact that he did not reveal what he had just gleaned from her thoughts did not assuage the certainty that he already had. At least he was being a gentleman about it and not trying to demonstrate his superiority by disrespecting the privacy of her thoughts and the vulnerabilities that came with them.

"You're a good man, Paul," she thought silently, not wanting or expecting a response.

33 – From Time Traveler to Fugitive

Sandy was roused out of a light sleep when her bedroom door burst open, and Mel stood there with fists jammed on her hips, sporting a glare that could melt an iceberg. "Well, hello, little miss time traveler!" Mel said acidly, wagging her head from side to side with each word. "Nice for you to drop back into this century. Are you running from the law in that distant time zone, too?"

"Timeline, not time zone," she corrected sleepily.

"Oh, my apologies for not using the correct time traveler jargon. You waltz off to another time with some space alien named after one of the Beatles and inform your best friend with a freaking text message?"

Mel did not stop to wait for a response. "I mean, who am I to be honored with an explanation of how you decided on your own to take a life-altering, time-warping trip into never-never land? Huh? Who am I anyway? Was this all Paul's idea? Well, was it?"

"Are you finished with your rant, Mother?" Sandy's sarcasm fell on a raging Mel like gasoline on a fire.

"If I were your mother, I'd just beat your ass and ground you. But that probably wouldn't work because you'd teleport to only God knows where with your new boyfriend."

"Hey, c'mon, Mel!" Sandy pleaded for mercy, "At least I told you what I was doing. And, for your information, it was Paul's idea to text you before I left."

"Oh, that's rich!" Mel snarled, "Space boyfriend had to remind you to let your best friend in the world know you were leaving the universe for a little bit, so don't worry, be home for supper; love you!" Mel obviously still needed to finish her rant.

"Sandy smiled slyly and said, "Why, Mel, do I detect a little jealousy over my time-traveling companion?"

Mel sputtered, poked at Sandy, and said, "Jealousy? Jealousy, my ass! No, sweet roomie, I am not jealous; I'm pissed. I'm pissed because I was left behind to dance over gunfire from your attorney and those two relentless detectives over where the hell you were and why your ankle monitor went dead at this address. They came into our house to search for the damaged or whatever was left of a cut-off ankle monitor. I'm guessing now that you are back on earth again, they will see that you've reappeared on radar and come flying over here with a SWAT team and arrest you."

"Mel, I'm so sorry all that happened. I had no idea my ankle monitor would be an issue. I never left the county, and that was the extent of the promise I had to make."

"Yeah, well, it's the same county but on a different planet." Mel chided, "Busted is busted the way I see it."

The doorbell chimed, interrupting their conversation.
"That's not the SWAT team," said Mel quickly.

With a frightened look, Sandy asked in a hushed voice,
"How do you know?"

"Don't you watch TV? They would've just kicked in the door and thrown a couple of flash-bang grenades and then hand-cuffed everybody in sight," replied Mel cynically. "It has to be either those detectives with guns drawn or your really pissed-off attorney. I'll check it out. Stay here in this room. *This* room! In *this* time zone! Feel me?"

"Timeline," reminded Sandy, receiving a near-immediate middle finger as Mel closed her bedroom door and tromped down the stairs to answer the front door.

As Mel pulled open the door, Sarah Thompson dropped the arm she had raised to ring the doorbell again to her side. There was no greeting, no pleasantries. "Have you heard from our fugitive yet?" she asked tersely.

"As a matter of fact, she has returned from an undisclosed location and an altered time zone," said Mel.

"Timeline!" shouted an eavesdropping Sandy at the top of the steps.

Sarah lifted both hands in a gesture that matched her words, "Undisclosed what?"

Sandy padded down the stairs, stepped up behind Mel, and said, "C'mon in, Sarah, and I'll explain everything."

"It'd better be good because you're on this county's most wanted list by now," explained Sarah.

They settled in the living room, and Sarah began to describe the entire series of events that transpired during her travels. When she pulled out the book from her backpack, Sarah stiffened. "Did you steal that from the evidence locker at the county jail?"

"Technically, I did steal it," Sandy confessed, "but not from the jail's evidence locker...or this timeline...or this dimension. I stole it from Mr. Marcus T. Hawthorne about six months ago in a parallel universe where he was still alive and kicking."

Sarah shook her head and said, "I need a stiff drink. This is all a bit too much to believe."

"Tell me about it," added Mel, rolling her eyes.

"Let me get this straight. You're telling me you traveled back in time, into a parallel universe in another dimension, to find Mel's grandfather alive, steal this book from his library, and then travel forward to return here?"

"That's the short version," said Sandy, "I kinda left out meeting the *other Mel* right here in our townhouse while my real Mel was at work. I also narrowly avoided my *other self* in the parallel universe at the Hawthorne House. But hey, on the bright side, Mel, your grandfather was still alive."

"Big whoop," said Mel, circling a finger in the air. "He was a dick, dead or alive."

"This is all quite mind-blowing," stated Sarah, " but we have more pressing issues to deal with here in our present time zone."

"Timeline," added Sandy with a grin.

"Don't even start with her," snapped Mel without a grin.

"What do you mean?" asked an increasingly confused Sarah.

"You don't want to know," said Mel, shaking her head.

Sarah became serious and suggested they sit down to discuss their predicament. She looked at Sandy with eyes squinted with anger. "You violated the agreement that you would not leave the county. The instant you did, the authorities flagged the disappearance of your monitor signal and were dispatched to the last point where it had been operable."

"And that would be our home!" interjected Mel.

Sarah continued, "You were not here, and neither was the monitor. That left them no choice but to issue a warrant for your arrest. I have been trying to run interference for you and convinced them to give me one last chance to see if I could locate you. That's why I'm here now.

They know you're back from wherever you went because the monitor is active. In my opinion, telling them you went

back in time to a different dimension in a parallel universe is not a story you should share. You'd likely get locked up, and it would not be in the county jail.

It is safe to say you would be admitted to someplace where they could evaluate your mental stability. We need to drop all the science fiction crap out of your story like yesterday, if not sooner. Making this more complex than it already is will not bode well for your future. Do you hear what I'm saying?"

"I understand," Sandy agreed.

"Here's what I propose," said Sarah, "I'm going to call the detective's desk and tell them I have you in my custody. I'll explain that you made an innocent mistake and are not leaving the county again, plus you thought you were still in the county and were only gone for a couple of hours. I'll say nothing about where you went or why. If they are dead set on executing the arrest warrant, I'll ask them to grant me until tomorrow morning to bring you in. They may forgive your indiscretion, but I doubt it, given that so many exceptions have already been made."

Sarah stepped outside to avoid any distractions as she placed the call. Meanwhile, Sandy hoped the detectives would cut her some slack. She had some serious reading time ahead of her to finish the book. She felt confident that four to five hours would give her enough time, so even if she had to report in the morning, she'd have the reading completed. Quality time with Paul was also on her agenda; he could provide real-time guidance as she read.

When Sarah returned to the house, her expression showed nothing good. "Sandy, they were unhappy and are not giving me until tomorrow morning to bring you in."

"When do I have to turn myself in?" she asked.

"You don't! They're on their way now to arrest you themselves."

Sandy's first thoughts were about where to hide the book. Her second thoughts were about where to take the book. She said, "I need to hide the book right now."

Sarah suggested that she give her the book and that she would keep it safe while she was incarcerated. While that was a generous offer, it did not necessarily track with the plans forming in Sandy's head, so she lied.

"Oh, thank you, Sarah. Let me run upstairs and get it. You can take my entire backpack with you."

Sandy sprinted up the steps and closed the door to her room. "Paul, I need you. Are you still with me?"

"I'm here, Sandy. I'll always be here for you."

"They are coming to arrest me, and I cannot be arrested before I finish the book. Can you..."

Paul interrupted her before she could finish asking. *"Yes, I can take you back to your last portal. You should be safely tucked away in that secret room."*

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She heard loud voices erupting downstairs and heavy footsteps pounding up the stairs. "Ms. Tillman, this is Detective Becker. We don't want any trouble, so please come out here immediately!"

Sandy slung her backpack and placed her palms flat on the mirror's surface, and she fell out of her immediate danger and into wherever one falls when they travel in time.

34 – Back to a Different Same Past

Sandy began to freak out because she stood in complete darkness when she opened her eyes. She fought to keep her balance in the inky blackness because there were no reference points beyond her having two feet on the floor. At first, she expected to be in her bedroom again, but on a different timeline, she remembered Paul saying something about choosing her last portal. That's when she became less disoriented, suspecting she was in the secret room. She reached out and touched the mirror; the purple glow did not provide enough light to confirm she was alone.

Sandy pulled out her cell phone, activated the flashlight, and began to sweep the small room to ensure she was alone. She panned around slowly before she screamed in terror and dropped the phone. It landed on the thick rug, flashlight side down; she dropped to her knees and groped frantically for the light. Her breath heaved in her chest, and her throat constricted as she slowly raised the phone to illuminate the spectacle that caused her panic.

Her lips trembled as she fought back another scream. Sitting in the chair in front of her was none other than Marcus T. Hawthorne, quite dead, with a perfectly round hole in the center of his chest, just like Phil and Wil.

"Paul?"

"Where am I? No, not *where* am I? *When* am I?"

Paul explained, *"You are a little over three years in the past."*

"Three years?" she blurted in disbelief, "Why three years? The last time I was here, the time gap was only a couple of months."

"How could you make that big of a mistake, Paul?"

"This timeline was not a mistake, Sandy. I intentionally brought you here on this timeline because I knew exactly what to expect here that would ensure your safety."

"But something is not right here," she protested. "On my last trip to this place, Mr. Hawthorne was alive. How could he be alive three months ago but dead three years earlier? I don't understand."

"Remember how I described how visiting different timelines could trigger different parallel universes in different dimensions?"

"Yeah, I remember, but..." she started to answer.

"We left in a great hurry, and I defaulted to keeping you safe. I knew this timeline intimately because of my previous activities with Mr. Hawthorne three years ago. I did not want to return you to an uncertain situation in a dimension where Mr. Hawthorne and your other self were poking around looking for you. So, here you are, safe and sound, in the company of a very harmless Mr. Hawthorne in a different parallel universe. Does that make sense?"

Sandy did not answer immediately and just shook her head, trying to decide if his choices did or did not make sense.

"I care a great deal about keeping you safe, Sandy. There were never any covert intentions or haphazard decision-making regarding my chosen timeline."

With her flashlight scanning the room, she searched for a switch or a lever to open the bookcase that led into the room. Almost absently, she spoke as she searched slowly, "It seems like we do have a relationship, Paul. You are doing some sweet and thoughtful things for me."

He said nothing for a few minutes, then said, *"I can see how you would feel that way. From my point of view, what we have is not a relationship; instead, it is I who have a responsibility that I take very seriously and will take extraordinary measures to keep you safe."*

"I see," she said, "So there is no emotional attachment that colors your responsibility?"

Paul again said nothing.

Sandy continued, "I think there is, and you just don't want to admit it. Seriously, you've told me you were *proud of me...twice*. You just said you *care a great deal about my safety*. I know nothing about your eleventh dimension, but in my little 3D world, the confessions you've shared point to a relationship or at least the beginnings of one. Are you too macho to admit it?"

"No, not macho, Sandy. I truly care about you, which means taking steps to protect you from all things hurtful. Things like breeding disappointment or hurting your feelings are as important as protecting you from the dangers of time travel. I told you earlier that I did not want to manifest my energy form into a human likeness. I only agreed to accept a name because it was important to you when we first met. Those things cause concern for me, and I do not wish hurtful things on anybody."

Sandy continued to search the smooth surface of the wall, looking for a way out of the secret room. Sandy also continued to pick away at what she perceived as Paul's resolve to stay out of anything that looked or felt like a relationship. She pressed harder to see if his hard shell could be cracked and mused, "That sounds kind of selfish, or am I hearing self-serving?"

Adjacent to one of the vertical seams where she thought the bookcase had opened, her fingers brushed over a slight depression in the surface of the wooden panel. She added some pressure and heard the soft snick that started to open the bookcase inward. It was not lost on her that Paul's demeanor had become more open simultaneously. She smiled inwardly, knowing she needed to apply the right amount of pressure in the right places to open things up further.

"I recall you telling me you did not feel comfortable with my ability to read your thoughts. Do you remember saying that?" asked Paul.

"Yes," she answered, wondering where this was going.

"I am beginning to think you have some of those same abilities," he observed without necessarily accusing her.

"Oh really?" Sandy remarked softly.

"You are very intuitive, Sandy, and I enjoy the company of another energy form possessing that advanced intellect."

"Wow, did you just now promote me to an energy form, or is that a downgrade?" a surprised Sandy asked.

Paul elicited something that sounded a lot like a suppressed laugh, which was hugely significant because Paul never laughed. Sandy honestly did not think there was enough emotional intelligence in this *energy form* to find anything humorous enough to invoke enough emotion to trigger a laugh. She thought, *'Would wonders never cease?'*

"So my laugh was a wonder to you?" he asked.

Sandy had to laugh at his suggestion because she had done little to hide her private thoughts from him if, in fact, she ever could.

She smiled and said, "Better be careful there, bud; the ability to read each other's thoughts is a sure sign of a *relationship*."

He did not say anything. She knew his silence was an admission that a *relationship* of one form or another had blossomed between them, and she was glad.

Sandy left the secret room, put her backpack on the big desk, and pulled out "Mirror Mirror" to finish reading. She felt the old house was as silent as a tomb, not that a corpse in the next room flavored that observation.

35 – Escape Through the Portal...Again

"Ms. Tillman!" shouted Detective Becker again, "Come out here immediately. We do not want to use excessive force. This is a simple arrest; you know why we must arrest you. Please come out here now!"

Mel and Sarah had come up the stairs with Detective Hanson on their heels. "Let me try," said Mel. Sandy, c'mon sweetie, don't make this a crazy scene."

With no reply coming from the other side of the door, Detective Becker pulled Mel aside and took an aggressive stance to kick in the door.

"Wait!" shouted Mel, and reached down, turned the knob, and pushed the door open to an empty room.

"Damn!" uttered Detective Hanson. She turned to Mel and said accusingly, "I thought you told us she had just gone upstairs to get her backpack."

Mel looked bewildered. "Yes, I did. That's what she said she would do and give her book to..." She stopped speaking abruptly, recognizing her blunder. She had just given up too much information.

"Her *book*? That book is retained as evidence of an active crime and is under lock and key in the evidence locker at the jail. Or did she sneak in and steal it from evidence?"

This keeps getting weirder and weirder." Detective Hanson said to no one in particular.

"Alleged crime," Sarah added.

"Alleged, my ass!" snapped Detective Becker.

"Stand down, Becker!" shouted Detective Hanson.

Sarah could not resist tweaking Becker again, "He's just pissed because he didn't get the chance to kick in the door like the big man cowboy he is."

Detective Hanson coughed suddenly in an attempt to cover an involuntary guffaw. Becker shot her a look and turned away to tromp down the stairs by himself.

"Let him pout. Let's at least look for the book," suggested Detective Hanson.

They found nothing in their search except a hastily scribbled note on the bedside table addressed to Mel, '*See you in the morning.*'

Detective Hanson scoured the room and checked the only locked and painted-shut window. No way Sandy escaped from there. "So, where the hell did she go? How did she get out of here without seeing her leave?"

Everyone looked at each other and shrugged their shoulders, open palms raised in the universal signal that indicated not a single one of them had a clue—at least not one that any one of them was willing to share.

Detective Hanson folded the note from the bedside table, stuck it in her pocket, and announced to Mel, "We'll be here tomorrow morning unless she shows up sooner. You must notify us immediately of her arrival, or we will charge you for obstructing justice. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," said Mel, with a quick nod.

36 – Finishing the Book

Sandy had been reading for over three hours and finally came up for air with an exaggerated stretch. She grinned privately and imagined she heard Mel accusing her of being a cat waking from a righteous nap. Maybe she was part cat. Anything could be possible, given she was hanging out with an energy entity from another dimension...in a different dimension. Who knows, maybe she was just a lost soul from the cat dimension. Okay, where did those crazy thoughts come from? Paul did not jump in and display his logical intellect, so she put her head down to rest her eyes for a few minutes.

Two hours later, Sandy awoke with a start, so much for resting her eyes. "Paul, don't let me fall asleep again. I only have one chapter left to read."

"And that last chapter is probably the most important of the entire book," said Paul.

She read, and she reread about matter. About energy and how matter was energy in a visible state, and how you needed energy for matter to exist or something like that. What she read told her that she was made up of matter, and for her to exist, there had to be the presence of energy. So she was energy? Paul was energy. Wasn't he? That revelation caused her to sit back in her chair and consider what made them different if they were both a form of energy.

She did not realize it then, but there would be some high-energy thinking about her future as she and Paul had more in common than differences. But they were different. He was totally made up of energy, and she was totally made up of matter. So they were different, weren't they?

"Those are excellent questions, Sandy!" Paul interrupted her thoughts. *"We need to have a deeper discussion, but there is not enough time to do it justice to it here and now. We need to return to your home timeline and dimension."*

"Okay, but promise me you will answer all my questions," said Sandy, as she stood and stuffed "Mirror Mirror" into her backpack.

"I promise, Sandy!"

She slung the backpack over one shoulder and headed into the secret room and the mirror to fall into wherever one falls when they travel in time.

She stood in front of her mirror in her bedroom a split second later. It was still dark outside, with a sliver of moonlight slipping into the room. The digital clock showed 3:35 am. Good, she thought. I could use a little more sleep. She shook off the pack at the foot of her bed, kicked off her shoes, and fell into bed a couple of moments before deep sleep claimed her.

37 – Back in the Slammer

"Sandy, wake up!" Mel urged her, shaking her awake with a panicked look. "They're here. You need to wake up!"

"Ms. Tillman?" Detective Hanson stood in the doorway to her bedroom. "You need to stand up and put your hands behind your back."

"Can't I at least wake up enough to brush my teeth and maybe pee first?" Sandy protested.

"Yes, you may," said the detective, "but I'm not leaving you alone to pull one of your magical disappearing acts."

"Well, that's just swell of you," said Mel sarcastically. "Do you want to cuff yourself to her in the bathroom too?"

Detective Hanson glared at Mel before turning back to Sandy. "Let's get a move on, Ms. Tillman."

Before she could hide her backpack, Detective Hanson snatched it up. Sandy was in cuffs immediately after brushing her teeth and not so gently escorted downstairs. Detective Becker took her by the arm and pushed her out the front door and into the unmarked police car. He did not get a chance to kick a door in, so he contributed a little extra effort by slamming the rear door in her face. Sandy just glared at him through the window. Such a juvenile prick he was.

In less than an hour, she was decked out in a familiar orange jumpsuit with *prisoner* stenciled on the back and matching plastic clogs. Blanche was her usual toxic self and laughed through a greeting: "Welcome home, sweetie pie! It's nice to have you back where you belong."

"Blanche..." Sandy started to answer and paused, deciding whether to rip into the little munchkin troll or take a different tact and kill her with kindness instead. "It's nice to see you again, Blanche. I hope you didn't miss me too badly."

"You've missed breakfast, so it sucks to be you," Blanche added what she thought was a chance to add insult to injury.

Sandy smiled sweetly and said, "That's probably the best thing to happen to me today."

Sarah Thompson, Sandy's attorney, walked up to the cell and asked Blanche to get them into a conference room. In less than five minutes, they sat across from one another in Conference Room 2. "I'm relieved to see you here with no bullet holes in you," said Sarah. "Trust me; they were angry enough to shoot first and ask questions later when you vanished from your bedroom."

"I didn't have much time for goodbyes, and I could not afford to lose the book again," said Sandy.

"Well, they have it now, so did your disappearing act help or just get you into more trouble?"

"I'm good. Better actually. They did not prevent me from reading the rest of it. Still, I'd like to have it back because Paul and I have more to discuss."

"I should be able to swing that request because there are now two copies of the book. As soon as they find the original in the evidence locker, they have no reason to keep the second book from being released back to you."

On another topic, I looked at the trial docket before coming here to see you. The trial will be in a week. I've never seen a jury impaneled so quickly. Your trial is going to be a hot ticket."

Sandy frowned, "Is one week enough time to prepare?"

"The trial is in six days, and I'm not certain preparation is something we can achieve even if we had a month. This whole other dimension piece has me concerned. I get it, but I'm not sure a jury will be able to follow it, hearing once from the jury box."

"I remember now. You said I was pretty much fucked, so lots of prep time will do nothing to un-fuck me. Have I got that right?"

"Pretty much," said Sarah quietly.

Sarah pushed the call button to summon Blanche to escort Sandy back to her cell.

"Let me go after the extra copy of the book from the detectives and get it back into your hands."

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“Thank you, Sarah!”

Blanche squeezed herself through the conference room door and announced, “Well, you’re batting a thousand, sweetie pie, missed breakfast, and now you’ve missed lunch.”

“Sucks to be me, right Blanche?”

Blanche snorted in agreement, making a sound not unlike a warthog with a cold. The sound made Sandy cringe, and Sarah either stifled a laugh or pushed down a gag reflex. The troll was gross in so many ways.

38 – Too Much Truth?

Sandy reclined on her bunk and considered napping while waiting for Sarah's return. As she lay there, she noticed something she had not seen before: a camera mounted up in the corner of the cell with a blinking red light. That was a new addition. Potentially, it was a new complication, especially if it had an audio capability. She could not converse with Paul if Big Brother were watching and listening. Obviously, they would not see anything, but they would hear her half of the conversation. It might be difficult for them to deduce what's happening, but she'd rather not have to explain anything.

Sarah showed up sporting a triumphant grin and handed the book between the bars to Sandy. "No problems, but you should've seen their faces when they opened the evidence locker and found the original copy of the book. I couldn't resist messing with their heads and explained that the explanation was simple.

I told them, "She just traveled back in time before the fire and grabbed the book. That's where she went when she disappeared. Technically, she never left the county, but apparently, your little tracking device does not tolerate time travel very well. You should consider an upgrade."

"Dang, Sarah!" exclaimed Sandy. "Do you think giving everything to them was a good idea?"

“It was an excellent idea because I got a bird’s eye view of the common man’s reaction to time travel. They told me I was full of shit. So mission accomplished. I mean, really, what were they going to do? Lock you up? Hah!” Sandy could see just how pleased Sarah was with herself...and how devious.

That’s when it hit Sandy. How much of what they just said was heard by Big Brother? She reached through the bars, took Sarah by the sleeve, pulled her close, and whispered in her ear. “We’re being monitored. Look over my left shoulder without being obvious in the upper corner of my cell. It’s a camera. Is there a blinking red light?”

“No!”

“Wonder why not. It was blinking a few minutes ago,” questioned Sandy.

Sarah told her to relax and that it was probably turned off to honor attorney-client privileged communications.

“Well, after you leave and it comes back on, I’ll know for sure. If they do turn it on, I will have a tough time speaking with Paul,” she explained.

Sarah cocked her head and asked, “I thought he could read your thoughts. Do you even have to speak aloud?”

“Well, no,” said Sandy, “but I sometimes forget and say things out loud anyway.”

“You’d better learn to keep your poop in a group, girlie,” admonished Sarah.

“Geez, you’re almost as toxic as Miss Piggy,” Sandy said, laughing at maintaining the swine theme.

Two days later, Sarah arrived at Sandy’s cell under the watchful eye of jailor Blanche. “Good morning, Sandy! Are you ready to make a breakthrough with our defense?”

“Morning to you too! Were you able to get a suitable room?” asked Sandy with a glare reserved only for the jailor wench.

Blanche answered even though the question had not been directed at her. “I have reserved Interrogation Room 1. The camera and audio have been disabled as you requested, and the observation room behind the two-way mirror will remain empty until you leave the room.”

“Thank you, Blanche. That sounds acceptable. I appreciate you making the arrangements for us,” Sarah said pleasantly.

Blanche opened Sandy’s cell door and escorted them down the hall and into the Interrogation Room. As she turned to leave, Sarah asked in her sweetest voice, “Blanche, I realize this is not part of your job description, but would there be any way you could arrange for two cups of black coffee?”

“Blanche balled her fists and put them firmly where her hips may have been sixty pounds ago. She screwed her mouth up for what Sarah and Sandy expected her to

unleash something unholy, but to their surprise, she said, “I’ll see what I can do.”

The delivery of two steaming cups of coffee later, both women were alone with their thoughts and contemplating what seemed like an impossible task – formulating an effective defense strategy. Sarah had invested time researching parallel universes and different dimensions, finding much more than she had ever considered. Sandy had been busy too, standing silently in front of the stainless-steel mirror in her cell under Big Brother's blinking red eye and nosey ear, and had a complete two-way conversation with Paul.

“This was a genius move to get into a room with a decent mirror so I could communicate with Paul. I asked him if there was any way for you to hear at least him speak, but it did not sound like he was willing to go there. No matter. He can hear what you say, but I’ll have to tell you his responses. I thought it would be important for you to ask questions of him directly. Kind of cludgy for me to be the intermediary, but it’s the best we can do.”

Sarah smiled and nodded as she blew across her steaming cup. “Let’s do this,” she said.

Sandy stood up, walked to the two-way mirror, placed her hand on the surface, and felt a familiar warmth and an immediate purple glow. Paul’s image materialized, and he said, “*Hello, Sandy.*”

“Oh, my God!” exclaimed Sarah. “I thought you said I would not be able to see him or hear him. He’s right there. I

can see him, and I heard him greet you...aloud. Oh, my God!"

"You only think you heard him speak, Sarah. That all happened in your head as clearly as if he were sitting here with us. It takes some getting used to, but you will acclimate quickly. Remember that whatever you think is like saying whatever it is out loud. In other words, you no longer have any secrets. He can read your thoughts as quickly as you think them."

Sarah nodded in disbelief and said, "So he already knows I think he is as hot as you described him."

Paul smiled and shared, *"I'm still not sure what being hot means, but I suspect it has something to do with your gender."*

"You have no idea," remarked Sarah.

"Paul, I can't believe you granted my wish."

"Sandy, I will do anything to help you, even things I would ordinarily never do. You are in trouble because of me, and I owe you so much to try and make things right. As I shared with you earlier, I have doubts that the people who will comprise your jury of peers will not likely be receptive to the truth of what happened. I will do anything to protect you from harm. You have my promise."

"I've seen evidence of that level of caring in the corpses of two dead men," said Sarah flatly. "Don't get me wrong, I mean no disrespect for your actions, but it speaks volumes

for how much you care for my friend. She's lucky to have you in her life."

Paul let a smile show at the edges of his mouth, "*I'm pleased to be part of her life as well.*"

There it was, thought Sandy. She no longer cared if he could read her thoughts or not. He cares for me, and that thought filled her with a comforting warmth and a diminishing concern for winning the upcoming trial.

They spent the next two hours with Sarah asking questions and Paul giving answers about how to position parallel universes, timelines, and different dimensions for ordinary everyday people who struggle to survive in their simple lives in a 3D world. Sandy sat quietly without interrupting. She wanted Sarah to be as equipped as possible and did not want to get underfoot. The explanations were going well, she thought.

Still, something nagged at her that pushed her toward a different path – keep it simple – let the jury deal within the limits of what they already knew versus teaching them the whole complex menu of different dimensions and universes.

Sandy interrupted, "Can I make a suggestion?"

Paul did not let on that he already knew where she was going and remained silent to allow Sarah to inject the shift in direction on her terms and at her own speed.

“Would you agree that we are going to face a jury of everyday citizens that likely have no more than a high school education?” asked Sandy.

“Based on what I’ve experienced, that’s probably at least half of them,” answered Sarah.

“Okay, so hear me out. Their perspectives are going to be firmly planted in our 3D world. If we position dimensions and evil spirits with the power to kill and maim, we must do that in a context they already know.”

“Okay, Sandy, I’m listening. What would that context be?”

“The Holy Bible!” she said with no hesitation.

“And how do you propose to do this?”

Sandy explained, “There is a familiar scripture to virtually anyone who attends church and has spent time reading the Bible. It’s in the book of Ephesians, chapter 6 and verse 12, as spoken by Paul. It’s perfect:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

Think about it. What are spiritual forces? Where are they? Where are the heavenly realms? Can any of us answer these questions definitively? It would be a struggle and would leave some doubt. Isn’t planting the seeds of doubt what we are supposed to accomplish as a defense?”

No one said anything at first, then Paul remarked, “*So this Paul in this book of Ephesians is my namesake?*”

Sandy just nodded at Paul and continued. “We’re defending me, who was in imminent danger of being raped by two evil men, right? Here’s another scripture that speaks to that in the book of Jeremiah, chapter 30 and verse 16:

“But all who devour you will be devoured: all your enemies will go into exile. Those who plunder you will be plundered; I will despoil all who make spoil of you.”

Sandy added emphasis, “Who is saying this to Jeremiah? God Himself, that’s who, and how can anyone dispute the word of God?”

Whatever energy came forth and devoured the lives of these evil men and wherever it came from, whatever realm or dimension matters little when you consider *heavenly realms* as the source and forces of evil being despoiled.”

Still, no one spoke, and Sandy continued with renewed confidence, “If you recall, the weapons experts at the police station, all having military training and experience with many weapons, could not identify what caused the fatal injuries in these men. Likewise, the Coroner, a war veteran, had never seen wounds like those suffered by those two men.”

“You are making me rethink our strategy, Sandy,” said Sarah thoughtfully.

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“I must also agree that keeping it simple is an easier path to planting complex doubt,” added Paul.

“Sarah, you referred to it when we started this as reasonably planting unreasonable doubt. Do I remember correctly?” asked Paul.

“Indeed you do!”

Paul said nothing, but a slow nod of his head in agreement was enough for everyone to consider that they were all on the same page.

“This is good stuff,” said Sarah. Let me stop everything here and spend some alone time wordsmithing your thoughts. The scriptures are pure genius and give us some validation that avoids an attempt to explain the unexplainable.”

39 – Relying on the Word

Two days later, Sandy found herself in shackles and shuffling toward the District Courtroom, with Blanche leading her by the arm with more pressure than necessary. When they entered the courtroom, Sandy was shocked to see the place packed to standing room only, shocked at the constant flashes of cameras capturing their first images of a brutal murderer.

TV cameras were poised atop long-legged tripods, and technicians fastened to their eyepieces with heads pinched inside headphones. This was a freaking zoo, and Sandy was on display. Bile crept upward in the back of her throat, and she nearly vomited before arriving at the defense table and the friendly face of her attorney. Sarah's hand closed on Sandy's and said, "We got this! Relax if you can, and let me do my job."

Sandy sat down next to Sarah and reached out to Paul in her thoughts, "*Are you with me, Paul?*"

"*Always!*" came his calm reply. "*You will remain safe with me by your side.*"

"*Paul, please, no fireworks. There are no new holes in the Prosecutor, the Judge, or anyone else threatening to put me away in prison. Okay? Promise me!*"

"*It will not come to that, Sandy,*" he said calmly, "*I promise. We will get through this together.*"

Attention shifted toward the front of the room, and everyone responded to the request, “All rise,” announced the bailiff, “for the Honorable Phyllis Patterson.” As the Judge took her seat, the Bailiff continued, “This court is now in session. Please be seated.”

“Mr. McMichaels, please read the docket details before the court into the record. As the tracking details of her case were read into the record, Sandy began to fight back nausea again. She fought through it and suspected it would not be the last time.

Thurston W. Jenkins, Lead Prosecutor, responded to the Judge’s request, “Are you ready with your opening remarks, Mr. Jenkins?”

“Yes, I am, your Honor. Thank you!”

All of nearly three hundred pounds of Thurston Jenkins struggled to his feet. He shed a suit coat the size of a two-man tent and meticulously rolled up his sleeves, taking his time and mopping his already sweating brow with a handkerchief. He lumbered out from behind the prosecution desk after meticulously draping his suit jacket neatly over the back of his chair.

“I thought you were ready, councilor,” admonished the judge. “Please proceed.”

He nodded toward the Judge, “I’m sorry, your Honor. This will be a long, hard day for us all.”

Sarah leaned over and whispered into Sandy's ear, "This clown was a drama major in school. Everything he does is done to impress the jury with his competence and his importance. Don't let him ruffle you, and for God's sake, tell Paul to stand down with his laser cannon."

Sarah flinched when Paul spoke into her head, "*Standing down, Sarah!*"

"Oh shit," she said a little louder, "He's still in my head."

"We are a team," he responded, *"and your Bible says something about "A cord of three strands is not quickly broken." That's in Ecclesiastes, chapter 4, verse 12."*

"I'm impressed," whispered Sandy.

"You and me both," added Sarah under her breath.

"How did you come to know that scripture, Paul?" puzzled Sandy in silent thoughts.

"I read your Bible after you shared those verses earlier and found it rich with relevant information," he replied.

"Any time now, councilor," directed the Judge.

"What we have before us today is a clear-cut case of murder in the second degree, which keeps it from being first-degree simply because there was no premeditation. I remind you, however, that the intent to kill was solidly in place in the head and heart of the defendant. Premeditation was there, but we could not prove it since the defendant is the only survivor of this tragic event."

Thurston Jenkins continued to bluster his way through how heinous a crime had occurred after Sandy intentionally lured these two innocent men to their deaths. “She lured these unsuspecting men to a secluded room in the mansion to exact her revenge for an earlier...”

He stopped and looked momentarily at Sarah to see if she caught his gaff.

She had and winked at him in confirmation. He had just made his first mistake. Sarah wrote *Revenge for What?* on her notepad. She knew the evidence of previous arrests would never be allowed into the current trial unless the prosecution mentioned it first or a witness he questioned brought it up. The knucklehead mentioned it himself, enough to justify clarifying the record—self-inflicted stupidity. Score one for the defense.

“These murders were so brutal both men had their hearts torn from their bodies and had no way to defend themselves.” And blah, blah, he droned on and on before indicating that the only verdict the jury could find unanimously is Guilty on the charge of Second-Degree Murder. He collapsed heavily into his seat, the impact sending ripples through the water pitchers sitting on each of their tables.

The Judge asked Sarah if she was ready with her opening statement, and Sarah stood up quickly, thanked the Judge, and addressed the jury.

“Ladies and gentlemen, contrary to what the prosecution stated in their opening remarks, what we truly have before

us is a woman who was nearly raped. She paused and scanned the eyes of all seven women on the jury. Have any of you ever been put into a situation where you were threatened with imminent rape?”

Thurston Jenkins slammed his hands down on the prosecution table and fought to stand up, “I object!” he shouted, finally managing to get to his feet.

“Stand down, Mr. Jenkins. These are opening remarks, and you just had your opportunity to position your case. You will have your chances to object repeatedly, as I suspect you will shortly. So, sit down and keep your objections to yourself and your little notepad.”

“Thank you, your Honor,” Sarah turned back to the jury. She continued, “I also cannot believe there is a man among you gentlemen who could even begin to imagine the horrors of not only the threat of rape but an imminent threat of hands-on bodily assault. Fortunately, I have never been confronted with this situation or anything close. Still, as a woman, the thoughts associated with such a threat strikes deeply to my core...and the core of every woman on this jury and in this room.”

Sandy smiled inwardly and felt her confidence in her attorney grow steadily, especially when she saw subtle heads nod in agreement from both men and women in the jury box.

“In conclusion,” Sarah wrapped up, “I agree with the prosecution that there is only one verdict you should find

here today, but...my version is radically different, and it is Not Guilty.

My client was helpless to defend herself, and we will show that the deaths of these two evil men could not have happened by her hand. Not even law enforcement could make a connection between what happened. We will show that she couldn't inflict the injuries that killed these men.

Trust me; this case will sound even more bizarre as we proceed, but remember that my client's proximity to bizarre circumstances does not imply she is responsible for unexplainable happenings. You will see shortly that *Not Guilty* is the only correct verdict you can find because I will show you plenty of reasonableness for seeing equally plentiful unreasonable doubt. Thank you for your attention and your service as a jury member."

Sarah returned to her seat and flashed an *eat-shit* smile at the Prosecutor. It was game on, and she felt the momentum building. Sadly, the building momentum happened on both sides of the argument.

The Prosecution called several witnesses, including party guests, and their contributions were not helpful to Sandy's plight. They witnessed the exchange of angry words audible to all within earshot. Sandy had been visibly angry, which only validated her supposedly murderous plans, and intentionally luring both men into a trap was more than believable.

On cross-examination, Sarah extracted additional truth from the witnesses the prosecution intentionally passed

over that confirmed Wil's collaboration and planning when he communicated to Phillip that *it was time. Meet me in the living room.*

The Prosecutor then called both detectives to testify, and it surfaced that Sandy had aggressively avoided arrest on two occasions by fleeing to parts unknown despite wearing a tracking monitor on her ankle. He shared his belief that the defendant was not only a murderer, but she was also a liar and could not be trusted even if she were under oath.

Under cross-examination, Sarah did not refute the accusation of *fleeing* and instead dug into the nature of the crime and the descriptions of the fatal injuries. She cited that both detectives had extensive military experience in field hospitals and combat, where they had been exposed to various fatal wounds. Neither detective had seen anything like those found on the corpses and knew of no weapons that could cause injuries like what they saw on the deceased.

Jenkins wrapped up his questioning and gave up the floor to the defense. Sarah chose not to call Sandy to the stand initially. Instead, she called her roommate, Mel. There were few new details about the conversations Mel could address because she was not in the room when angry words were exchanged. Mel's testimony shifted on Sandy's behalf when Sarah asked her about previous assaults by Phillip.

"Objection!" bellowed Jenkins, once more making extraordinary efforts to rise in time with his voice. "These men are not the ones on trial here. I strenuously object!"

“Sustained,” said the judge. “Ms. Thompson, I will not allow you to enter a previous criminal activity into evidence in a subsequent unrelated trial.”

“Yes, your Honor, I know that, but the prosecutor himself mentioned the existence of a previous event. To be more precise...” She paused and consulted her notes. “Your Honor, he made this statement in his opening remarks about my client allegedly luring the two men to a secluded room *“to exact her revenge for an earlier...and then he stopped speaking and did not finish his statement. The look on his face told me he realized he had just given me the opportunity to clarify further what happened earlier and why she would possibly need to exact revenge.”*

The Judge looked down at her notes and shuffled through several pages. “I see what you referenced, councilor.” She looked at the Prosecutor and said, I stand corrected; your objection is overruled.”

“Proceed, Ms. Thompson!”

“Ms. Merriweather, do you recall the specifics of Ms. Tillman’s relationship with Mr. Phillip McCorkle?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Mel nodded.

Sarah turned and looked at the jury, “Please tell the court what you recall about their relationship and the difficulties they experienced.”

“Honestly, I would not consider what they had as a relationship. They only went out twice, and after the first

date, she decided they would not continue as a couple. If you can call it that, the second date was to tell him she did not want to see him again. During that time together, he became aggressive and attempted to assault her after forcefully dragging her into the men's bathroom at the pub. Another patron thwarted his attempts, fortunately. She fled from the pub and immediately filed assault charges. He never forgot."

"Objection!" barked Jenkins. "Whether Mr. McCorkle forgot or not is pure speculation."

Before the Judge could sustain or overrule, Mel fired back at him, "Oh, he remembered, sir! He mentioned it during a phone call a few days before the party. He said they had *unfinished business and looked forward to seeing her at the party*. And at the party, he referred to that when they exchanged words. He threatened her and said they had some *unsettled business* to handle, as was stated by an earlier witness. I say it was undoubtedly Mr. McCorkle who had revenge on his mind, not Ms. Tillman, and his revenge was evil. He intended to finish what he had started at the pub."

Murmurs pulsed through the courtroom gallery, and several jurors exchanged glances.

Sarah called Dr. Martin Talbot, the County Coroner, to the stand and had him sworn in. Her questions focused primarily on the nature of the injuries. She offered photographs of the injuries entered earlier as evidence and had Dr. Talbot, a veteran of several Afghanistan mobile

medical assignments, describe what he saw during his autopsies.

The courtroom viewed the images on the overhead projector as he scanned the original photos, “I’d never seen injuries like these in all my experiences of damage made by all kinds of powerful weapons. Nothing I’ve ever encountered in all of my military services caused these injuries.”

“Why do you say that, Dr. Talbot?”

“He said, “Two reasons: the injuries themselves and the positions of the bodies at the crime scene. The injuries had to have been inflicted by an extremely high heat because of the wounds themselves; as you can see from the photos taken on the scene, there was no residual blood. The injuries were cauterized the instant they were inflicted. That means no bleeding. The bones in the chest appeared to be melted where the entry and exit occurred. The direction of the single blast was not linear, meaning it did not follow a straight line. Mr. McCorkle was kneeling, and his partner, Wil Jameson, stood behind him and to the side.”

“And you know this how? Dr. Talbot?”

“The interviews of the attempted assault described by Ms. Tillman. Also, it is important to note that the bodies dropped right where they stood when struck. The bodies should have been thrown across the room for an injury as catastrophic as these. There was no evidence of any movement resulting from impact, which further confirms that this weapon had incredibly significant energy. I can

confidently say I know of no weapon today that could have caused such an injury.”

Cross-examination by the prosecution made no progress in refuting anything described regarding the injuries or the weapon. Thurston Jenkins was not above manufacturing facts in their absence and attempted to dilute the expert testimony of the coroner in a different context. “So, Dr. Talbot, can you also say with confidence that Ms. Tillman had nothing to do with the discharge of this mystery weapon?”

Dr. Talbot looked at Sarah and Sandy, saying, “Well, no, I cannot. I know for a fact she had no...”

“Thank you, Dr. Talbot. I have no further questions of this *expert witness*.” Jenkins said dismissively.

Damn, thought Sarah, point for the opposition. It was true; Sandy did not fire any weapon, but she was in the room when it went off. Her decision not to call Sandy to testify on her own behalf just went down in flames.

The Judge looked at Sarah expectantly and asked, “Do you have another witness, councilor?”

“Yes, your Honor. I call Ms. Sandra Tillman.”

Sandy flinched and fought another surge of bile in the back of her throat. Cameras flashed as she rose unsteadily and headed for the witness stand. After she was sworn in, she sat down slowly and clutched the arms of the wooden chair

in a death grip. *“Paul, please don’t leave me out here alone,”* she pleaded in her mind.

“I’m still with you, Sandy. Do not fear. You have done nothing wrong,” said Paul’s voice in her head.

“I know that. But what I need is your advice. My gut is telling me to tell the truth about all the science.” she countered, *“but I am not sure I know enough about it to be convincing.”*

“In your Bible, I read something that I believe is relevant in the book of Romans, chapter 8, verse 31; what then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?”

“Thank you for that, Paul, but what will I say?”

*“The Holy Spirit of your God promised in the book of Luke, chapter 21, verse 15,
For I will give you the words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict. I am confident you have faith strong enough to run with what you think your gut is saying. Pray. Trust. Be strong in your faith. I will always have your back, my sweet Sandy.”*

All of Paul’s encouraging words came into her head in an instant. She heard every word as distinctly as if he stood before her. She also heard him say *my sweet Sandy*, and tears formed in her eyes that she blinked away as an instantaneous prayer for protection blossomed in her heart. Confidence swelled in her as she fielded Sarah’s first question. “Ms. Tillman, please tell us in your own words

the series of events that led up to the confrontation at the party and what role you played in the deaths of those two men.”

Sandy began to explain in a clear, confident voice. She readdressed the assault that had been interrupted at the pub and Phil’s promise to finish collecting what she owed him sometime in the future, and the future just happened to be the Halloween party. Her explanation included Phillip laying his hands on her, aggressively pinning her into her chair, and saying *he had been waiting a long time for this*.

As she described, the energy blast happened so fast that she could not tell where it came from or what caused it. An instant later, both men were dead, and she was alone. She said she thought she might have gone into shock, and what happened after that was unclear. She left out the part about throwing the book that started the fire. She paused and looked at Sarah.

“Thank you, Ms. Tillman.

“Your witness, Mr. Jenkins!” said the Judge.

As the prosecutor rose, so did the bile once again. She knew he was going to attack her without mercy. Remembering Paul’s words gave her a little boost of confidence.

“Ms. Tillman, I understand you and Mr. McCorkle had some history. Interviews of guests at the party described your cat costume as very, let’s say, alluring. That makes me wonder how much of that alleged assault was brought on

by your lured enticements. How effective would you say your sexy costume was in luring Mr. McCorkle and Mr. Jameson into your deadly trap in a dark room in the rear of the house?”

The gallery reacted with more side conversation and a few gasps.

“Objection,” screamed Sarah, jumping to her feet. “That’s disgusting and uncalled for. He is leading the witness, your Honor.”

“Sustained,” said the Judge quickly. “Mr. Jenkins, if you pull that disgusting approach again, I will gavel you all the way into contempt of this court. Do you understand me?”

He said, “Sorry, your Honor, I will not do that again.”

A couple of hoots came from the gallery, and the Judge slammed her gavel down with a resounding crack. “I will make this clear one time and one time only. I will clear this courtroom if there are more outbursts from the gallery.

“Mr. Jenkins, you may proceed...and be discreet.”

“I understand that Mr. McCorkle allegedly touched you during the alleged attempted assault. Do I have that right, Ms. Tillman?”

“Mr. Jenkins, nothing was alleged about what Mr. McCorkle did to me or his intentions.”

“I see,” he responded and turned toward the jury. “What did you do, Ms. Tillman?”

“I was terrified of what he said he would do to me and started pushing away.”

“Did you attack him? Push him?”

“No, I was just pushing the arms of the chair and digging my heels in to get away from him. He had me pinned in a large wingback chair.”

“What did you say, Ms. Tillman?”

“I think I said something like, please help me!”

“Ahh, and who were you asking to help you, Ms. Tillman?”

Sandy hesitated and looked to Sarah for a lifeline, and all she received was a clenched fist in solidarity and an affirming nod. Paul eased into her head and said, “You got this, Sandy! Tell him it was a spirit from another dimension. Let this play out and follow the script you confidently shared earlier.”

“I asked a spirit from another dimension to help me,” she said in a voice barely audible.

It was audible enough because there was a collective gasp from the gallery in unison with the jury. The Judge was caught off guard because the gasp was so short. She never had the chance to put her gavel into action to call the court to order.

“A spirit. From another dimension, you say. I do believe I have never, and I mean never ever, heard of such nonsense in my entire life, Ms. Tillman.” He turned to the jury with

his palms out and faced up as he attempted to shrug in disbelief.

“And when you called out “Help me!” this spirit responded to your request and blasted these two boys home to Jesus? Is that what happened, Ms. Tillman?”

Sandy leaned forward and unloaded, “Mr. Jenkins, those *boys*, as you call them, were evil men with evil intentions, and if they were blasted anywhere, it would be on the express train straight to Hell, where they belong.”

The gallery erupted with applause and laughter. The judge’s gavel cracked three times before the court returned to a semblance of order.

Sandy stiffened her spine and said, “Well, Mr. Jenkins, are you telling me there are no such things as spirits? Have you ever cracked open the Holy Bible, sir?”

Jenkins sputtered, “I’ll have you know, young lady, I am a serving deacon at the First Baptist Church of Buckhead, so I am intimately familiar with the Bible.”

Sandy smiled her most complimentary nice-nasty smile and said, “Then you should know about what the Apostle Paul said in the book of Ephesians, chapter 6, verse 12:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world, and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

What are those spiritual forces, Mr. Jenkins? Do you know with certainty, or do you take it on faith? Where are those forces, Mr. Jenkins? For that matter, where are the heavenly realms, Mr. Jenkins? Are they in a spiritual realm, a different dimension invisible to us? Could any of us answer these questions definitively, Mr. Jenkins?"

She paused and watched his face struggle to find a response suitable to save the stature of his serving deaconship. "I think it would be a challenge for anyone, me included, to answer these questions with confidence, and, Mr. Jenkins, even those answers would leave reasonable doubts. How about in your mind, Mr. Jenkins? How about all y'all?" she questioned and swept her hand broadly across the expanse of the gallery, coming to rest on the jury box.

She repeated her question directly to the jury, "How about y'all?" as her gaze lingered on the individual faces glued to hers, searching their eyes for a glimmer of response.

Someone in the gallery spoke up, "Preach, girl!" Several gallery members clapped, and the gavel cracked yet another warning shot.

"Nicely done," shared Paul warmly in her head. *"Very nicely done indeed!"*

Sandy did not realize it, but her eyes brimmed with tears, and several slipped down her cheeks when she blinked. She looked away and at Sarah, who appeared to have something bothering her eyes as well.

“Ms. Tillman,” Jenkins began slowly, not addressing her but staring at the faces of the jury. “The bottom line here is without contradiction – dead is dead. My point is a simple and straightforward fact that your spirit overwatch did not fire his weapon until you requested *Help Me*. Is that not a fact, Ms. Tillman? Did you not invoke the fatal shot from an accomplice that acted on your beck and call and murdered those two men where they stood?”

“I object!” shouted Sarah, smacking both hands onto the defense table. “Council is badgering the witness with unproven conjecture and unsupported facts.”

“Overruled,” said the Judge. “Your motion will be upon the jury to sort out.”

The prosecutor jumped in immediately with a howl, “Unsupported facts? Hah! My goodness, councilor, how is the existence of two dead men an unsupported fact?”

Jenkins turned to face the jury and pointed at Sandy without saying a word for several seconds. To Sandy, those seconds seemed like hours. “This woman is a murderer in the second degree. Make no doubt about it.”

Jenkins threw up both hands as though in surrender, staring at the jury, and announced with finality coated with acid, “I have no other questions for this...this witness.”

The closing arguments signaling the final act of testimony began next with nothing new revealed. Highlights of testimony resurfaced and were emphasized for the benefit of sowing reasonable doubts by the defense and as damning

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evidence of murderous guilt by the prosecution. Both sides gave impassioned pleas for the jury to decide in their favor. The faces of the jurors showed no predilection either way as the Judge issued final instructions and dismissed them into their assigned room for deliberations.

40 – Second Degree Murder

Despite having her shackles removed at the beginning of the trial, Sandy felt no less like a condemned prisoner with no hope of escape. That feeling escalated significantly when the bailiff called them back into the courtroom to hear the jury's finding.

The Judge asked the forewoman, "Has the jury reached a verdict?"

"Yes," your Honor said the forewoman.

"Bailiff, please hand me the verdict."

The Judge reviewed the verdict and passed the folded piece of paper back. She waited for the Bailiff to return the verdict to the forewoman and then asked, "How did the jury find for this defendant?"

Sandy's heart stopped, but the bile rose in her throat. Sarah held her by the forearm with easily the same degree of tension.

"We find the defendant Guilty of Second-Degree Murder."

The gallery erupted with outrage, shouts of disbelief, and impassioned curses. Sandy vomited into the trash can she had been holding. The Judge slammed her gavel down repeatedly, cracking as rapidly as an automatic weapon discharging. Order never completely returned, colored with a humming undercurrent of disgruntled murmurs. The

Judge knew that clearing the courtroom would likely cause a riot, so she resigned herself to living with the background grumblings for the moment.

The judge dismissed the jury, “The Northern District Court of Georgia thanks each of you for your sacrifice and service as a member of our community to serve on this jury.”

The Judge turned back to the defense table and looked at her watch. “It’s late, and I am not prepared to impose a sentence on this defendant at this time. We will recess until 9:00 AM tomorrow for sentencing. Jailer, please return the defendant to her cell. Thank you all!”

“All rise,” said the Bailiff. Everyone stood, and the Judge rose to leave through her private door to her chambers.

Blanche arrived and seemed more than pleased to reattach the shackles. She did not say anything abusive, but her self-satisfied smile said quite enough instead. On the way back to her cell, Blanche told her she had been lucky that her ghost accomplice had stopped her rape. She also said not to get any satisfaction because, at Reidsville, she could count on dancing on a mop handle at the hands of terribly angry women inmates. Sandy reacted on the spot and vomited again on Blanche’s left pant leg and both shoes.

“Bitch!” exclaimed Blanche.

When her shackles were removed, the cell door slammed with further evidence of Blanche’s anger. “Sweetie pie, those bull dykes in Reidsville will eat you alive.”

Sandy lurched toward Blanche, feigned another round of vomit, and Blanche danced away to get out of the line of fire. Sandy said nothing but lifted her head and grinned. “You can’t hurt me, sugar butt! Nobody can take away my freedom.”

“Don’t be so sure about that,” said Blanche as she turned to walk away. I’ll stop by if there’s any supper left, but I’m sure the kitchen is closed at this hour. Sleep tight. Tomorrow will be your biggest day for the next twenty years or so...sweetie pie!”

Sandy dropped onto her bunk beyond exhaustion, dropped her head into her hands, and wept in deep, wracking sobs. She continued crying until her tears ran dry, and her chest and diaphragm hurt from retching and sobbing. Sleep reached up, pulled her into a fetal ball, and treated her to unfriendly dreams and dread over her future.

Not all of her dreams were so foreboding, however. At some point, Paul entered her dreams. She remained asleep and could not tell if she was dreaming or if this was another facet of Paul’s presence. He reached for her but could not touch her. She longed for him to find a way to hold her, and she made that desire known, “*Hold me, Paul.*”

“I want that too,” said Paul. *“I said I would never leave you as long as you lived. I meant that. I will tell you this...you are not going to prison. I have other plans for us.”*

Sandy awoke with a sudden sense that she was not alone in her cell. In the dim light from the hallway, she looked for

whatever or whoever prompted that feeling. Nothing. No one was there with her or in the hallway outside her cell.

Sandy leaped from her bunk and quickly stepped over to the sink. With one hand gripping the lip of the sink, her other hand came up and touched the stainless-steel surface of what served as her mirror. Warmth, a familiar purple glow, and the soft voice of Paul floated into her head, *“Hello, Sandy!”*

She dove directly into her questions. *“Paul, did you...can you...I mean...were you just now in...become part of my dreams?”*

“I honestly do not know,” he replied. *“You see, I do not sleep; therefore, I do not dream. Did I communicate with you while you were sleeping? Yes, I spoke to you through your consciousness as we have been all along. I have no way of knowing whether I became part of a dream. I only know what I said to you.”*

Sandy stared at his likeness in the mirror. “In my dream, you said I was not going to prison and that you had other plans for us. Us, Paul, you said us. What about us? I don’t understand. I don’t understand, and you shouldn’t play with my feelings. Don’t tease me with a future that cannot be.” Sandy started to cry and looked away from him.

“I am not playing with your feelings, Sandy. I’m being profoundly serious. I cannot stand by and watch you go to prison,” he said.

“So your guilt is bothering you, is that it?” she asked with a noticeable tone of irritation.

“You do not really know me, Sandy.”

“Then maybe you should tell me. I know I’m a 3D human made of matter, and you are an eleventh-dimension being, an entity made up of energy. I’m not seeing much compatibility here. What am I missing?”

“Do you remember me talking about String Theory when we first met and discussing dimensions and how energy worked?” he asked.

“Don’t even go there, Paul. I do not need a science lesson at his moment in my jail cell waiting for a multi-year prison sentence. Don’t even!”

“My only point here, and this is not a science lesson. Yes, you are matter, but the matter that forms you is made up of 100% energy. All matter is energy, Sandy, but in a different form at different vibration frequencies. That is the simple truth behind String Theory. The speed of vibration determines what is seen as visible matter or unseen as energy. I’m vibrating at a rate much faster than you as pure energy and am invisible to you, but you can still hear me and interact with me, can you not?”

She leaned heavily on both hands that gripped the sink and shook her head. “I knew you were going to go science on me. I just knew you could not resist flexing your eleventh-dimension brain. Okay, so here’s a question you can vibrate on...So freaking what, Paul?”

“What if your rate of vibration increased? I cannot slow my vibrations, but what if I could speed yours up? Did you not read about that in the last chapter of the book?”

Sandy’s silence deepened and stretched into a full minute before she found the words to speak. “You mean I could be like you? I could become pure energy?” Sandy began to cry once again. “Oh, Paul, I only wish that could happen.”

“Who the hell is Paul? And what’s going to happen?” screeched Blanche, standing outside Sandy’s cell. “What’s going on here? Who are you talking to? Do I hear plans for a jailbreak?”

Sandy jumped out of her skin at the sound of Blanche’s voice. She panicked, realizing she had been speaking aloud. “Nobody. I’m not speaking to anybody. Do you see anyone else, Blanche?”

“Not at the moment, I don’t, but the guys monitoring video and audio feeds from the cells seemed to think you were in a conversation with somebody, and it sounded very suspicious, like plans to escape. That won’t happen, sweetie pie, not on my watch.”

Sandy glared at her and did not say a word. She was angry at herself for talking out loud.

“Well, knock it off. I’ll be bringing breakfast by in a couple of hours, and then we go to court to hear how many years you will be locked away,” said Blanche with too much satisfaction.

41 – Final Jail Break

Back in handcuffs locked to a chain around her waist and shackles binding her ankles, Sandy shuffled toward the courtroom at speed dictated by Blanche. The jailer's objective was to make her as uncomfortable as possible. Blanche walked her right up to the edge of falling over her feet. Sandy decided that the only reason her handcuffs were chained to her waist was to prevent her from reaching over Blanche's head and choking her out. That image afforded her a small measure of satisfaction even though it could not happen. They jingled and shuffled into the courtroom and to the defense table.

The gallery was empty. The jury box was empty. The Judge was already seated. Blanche looked cautiously at the Judge and asked, "Your Honor, do you want me to remove the shackles?"

"Don't bother; this will only take a few minutes."

All Sandy could think about was what Paul said before Blanche interrupted them. Could he change her vibrations to transition her into energy? Could he take her...

The judge announced, "This is a sentencing hearing. The guilty verdict of Second-Degree Murder was confirmed yesterday. I've reviewed the trial transcript and the nature of the events and have decided on a commensurate sentence to be served at the State Prison at Reidsville. Do you have anything to say, Ms. Tillman?"

“No. It sounds like your narrow mind is made up, so what’s the point?” snapped Sandy.

“The point is, Ms. Tillman, that my narrow mind is set on you serving 15 years with a slim chance of parole after serving at least eight years with good behavior that I doubt you will be able to maintain. That is the point, Ms. Tillman!”

“Jailer, take Ms. Tillman back to her cell. The prisoner transport vehicle to Reidsville will leave in two hours. Make sure that she has a reserved seat.”

“Yes, your Honor, I will make sure this one is on the bus,” said Blanche triumphantly.

Another high-speed shuffle took her back to her cell. Sandy said nothing until they arrived. “Can you take these off of me?” lifting her hands to the limits of the chain to her waist.”

“Sorry, sweetie pie, you will remain trussed up as you are right now all the way to Reidsville, where you will be somebody else’s problem.” The troll shoved Sandy into her cell before slamming the door to emphasize her point.

Sandy was so angry at her that she thought she could chew through steel and remove the offending jewelry. Her thoughts quickly shifted to Paul, and she shuffled over to the mirrored steel above the sink. Immediately, she realized her predicament. With her hands chained to her waist, she could not reach high enough to touch the mirror. She tried to lean over the sink and reach the mirror with her face, but

the mirror was mounted too high when she bent over the sink to reach it.

Stepping away from the sink, she considered how to get her skin against the mirror. She approached the sink and tried to hop up and make contact. No joy. It dawned on her that she could reach the mirror if she could get onto the sink. She hopped and twisted to get her bottom onto the sink. No joy again, but she was nearly successful. After three more attempts, she succeeded, and her bottom slipped over the edge and into the sink bowl. She turned her head and swiped a cheek against the mirror's surface. *"Hello, Sandy!"* Paul said.

"I'm headed to prison in two hours for fifteen years unless you can take me away from all of this. The more relevant question is, do you want to take me away from all of this?"

"Sandy, what is even more relevant than if I want to take you away, is do you want to be with me?"

"I honestly do not know what any of what you are proposing means," she confessed.

"Honestly, neither do I," he said, *"but I know that getting you out of there is an urgent requirement. We can deal with what makes sense after I transition you out of there."*

"Okay, I trust you. What do we do next? What do you want me to do?"

"I need your hands to touch the mirror like we did to travel back in time to the Hawthorne House."

“That could be a challenge,” she replied. I’m handcuffed and cannot lift my hands very far. You would not believe what I went through to summon you just now.”

“I need both of your hands on the surface, or this will not work,” he repeated.

Sandy struggled to get her bottom out of the sink bowl and scooted toward the edge. She kicked off her crocks and tried to lift her feet into the bowl so she could stand up. She had to stand and turn her palms toward the steel surface. There was no other option. She also figured that scooting another couple of inches would likely deposit her onto the floor of her cell. She fought with all her strength to twist and roll her cuffed hands toward the faucet to grip for leverage and draw her knees up and into the sink. Now, to squirm and shift her knees forward enough to hook her toes on the lip of the sink and pull her feet into the bowl.

Easier said than done. Her feet seemed like they were six feet away, and her exertion rapidly sapped her strength. Progress was measured in fractions of inches and what seemed like hours. She had to stop, catch her breath, and allow cramping muscles to unknot.

She needed more leverage to help her stand. The chain connected to her ankle shackles prevented her from raising one knee at a time to help her stand. Her head was the only part not shackled, so she turned toward the mirror and planted a cheek onto the warm surface. Arching her neck and back, she contorted her torso and wormed slowly upward. Scooting bruised knees in short hops toward the

opposite edge of the bowl, she only needed a couple more inches, and she could slip her toes over the edge and walk them into the bowl.

Suddenly, she felt the sensation of being overextended, and her balance started to fail. The friction from her cheek on the steel surface was the only thing she could rely on to prevent a fall. Throwing her head back, she planted her cheek again, only higher on the mirror, and arched her back beyond where she thought it should bend until she was rebalanced.

That acrobatic move enabled her to regain her center of gravity and slip her toes into the sink. With another stretching move with her cheek and screaming neck muscles, she rocked back onto her heels and began to rise to a standing position in the sink. Fatigued thigh muscles threatened to fail, and they barely functioned as she strained to push herself upward, finally standing upright and facing the mirror.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, you little bitch?” Blanche bellowed as she arrived at her cell door and began to fumble frantically with her keys.

“Paul?” Sandy screamed and turned her palms toward the steel surface. Nothing happened. “Paul!” she shouted again in desperation.

“Palms, Sandy, I need both palms! Palms flat!” he said more urgently than she had ever heard from him.

The cuffs restricted how far she could twist them, so she wrenched both hands, ignoring the pain of aligning her palms to lay flat. She reared back and thrust her hips forward to drive her palms firmly against the surface. She could not see her hands but felt them make contact for a split second, and then she fell into that place where you fall when you travel in time and was gone.

Blanche had wrestled the cell door open just as Sandy jammed her hips forward, planting her palms against the steel surface. Lunging for her, Blanche reached to grab her by the jumpsuit, but she only grabbed the handcuffs that fell away from Sandy's wrists. The waist chain clattered into the sink and tangled with the ankle shackles. Both handcuffs and ankle shackles were still locked. Blanche stood there holding the handcuffs, looking at her reflection in the mirror, mouth hanging open and a shocked look of disbelief.

Running footsteps pounded down the hallway as the skinny video-monitoring technician skidded to a stop at the cell doorway. He had to see things in real time because he could not believe what he had witnessed on his screen. "Holy shit, man!" he exclaimed. "She's...she's just...gone!"

"No shit, Skeeter! Did you get all this? Recorder running, right?" implored Blanche and turned toward him, clutching the handcuffs and dragging the attached chain and shackles from the sink, causing them to clatter to the floor.

"Yeah, you bet! All of it!" he confirmed.

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“Good, ‘cause ain’t nobody going to believe this shit-show without seeing it for themselves. Make an extra copy of that video, just in case. If you lose the original, we’re done here.

42 – Decisions About Paul

When Sandy opened her eyes, she stood in her bedroom staring back at herself in her mirror, dressed in orange and bare feet. Home, sweet home! But wait, was home the right destination? She'd never told Paul where she wanted to wind up, only to exit immediately. Likewise, he never told her where she was going.

“Paul?” Her hand fell onto her mirror, and Paul’s smiling face appeared, *“Hello, Sandy!”*

“Ummm, I’m at home in my bedroom. Was this your plan?” she asked.

“Yes, once more, we had to decide where to go with virtually no time to discuss, much less decide logically in the absence of full-blown panic. Speaking of panic, how did you get out of the handcuffs and reach the mirror?”

Sandy shook her head, “You have no idea what I had to do to reach that mirror, and I might add, while still wearing handcuffs and ankle shackles. I have bruises on my wrists, knees, shins, and ankles, and my neck and back feel like they have been strained beyond legal limits. I almost didn’t make it out. To make matters worse, I did not have my backpack, and the book is still in my cell.”

“No matter,” he said, *“You will not need it. If you want it, I can provide another one for you.”*

“How...where can you get another book?” she asked.

“I wrote the book, Sandy,” he explained.

“But,” she started to protest, “Mel said her grandfather wrote it.”

“No. He did not write it. I did, and I gave it to him. I misjudged him, misjudged his character. He lied to Mel and told her he wrote it himself. That’s just one more example of his dishonesty and covert greed. He had been making plans using the book to exploit the power it described to accumulate wealth most dishonestly, and then...well...all that is neither here nor there now. We need to talk about where we find ourselves now and whether or not you will ever need the book.”

Yes, they needed to talk. About what? Where to start? Sandy was at a loss as to what she should say. What was next? What should she ask for? Why did he send her here? Where could she go to get out from under the cloud of her prison sentence? Did she want Paul to ride into her life and save the day? Did she even know Paul well enough to accept that as a reality? But then, was he not part of her current reality? So where would that other reality be? What would being saved to another reality in another dimension look like? What was the downside? Were there risks? Was it a one-way ticket? Too many questions pressed in on her exhausted mental state.

Her emotions were scraped raw, and she had been stressed to the breaking point over the possibility of going to prison

and being dropped into a hostile general population of real criminals. They would tear her to pieces.

Her emotional limits had truly been exceeded, and when that happened to her, tears fell with no way of shutting them off, and they fell, and she could not turn them off. She started to cry. "I'm sorry, Paul, this is just...just too much right now," she said between tears, sitting on the edge of her bed, sobbing into her hands.

"Oh...my...God!" squealed Mel. "What are you doing here? How did you get out of...never mind! I do *not* want to know."

But Mel did want to know and, at the same time, was almost sure there had been some of Paul's hocus pocus at play. She did not wait for an answer and went over to Sandy and sat down beside her, taking her into her arms and holding her while she cried. Sandy leaned into her roommate's embrace, happy to be home and in a comfortable place.

Mel let her cry in peace until the tide of tears and sobs began to go out. "Paul, right?" Her question sounded more like a statement, and Sandy felt it was more of an accusation. "He got you out, didn't he?" And that follow-up question *did* have the distinct ring of a scolding accusation.

Sandy sniffed and nodded her head in silence. After a few more seconds of silence, still in Mel's embrace, she lifted her head and asked, "Is that a problem? You sound disapproving of his helping me."

“Helping? Helping you? Helping you what... get put in prison for second-degree murder when you didn’t kill anyone? Helping you unravel the mysteries of that damn book? Helping you escape the authorities to lead the life of a fugitive? Helping you put people who really do love you in harm’s way and under unwarranted suspicion? Huh? Tell me how his highness has helped you because I’m not seeing it at all.”

Sandy pulled away from Mel and turned to look at her, “Unwarranted suspicion?”

“Oh yes!” Mel replied. “It seems I’m on those damn detectives’ speed dial. Every time you disappear, they show up convinced you’re under the bed, hiding out. Since you’ve pulled another Houdini, they’ll be on our doorstep to take an unguided tour of the house. No, pause that thought; that dick Becker will finally get a chance to satisfy his itch to kick a door in to make a grand entrance. But hey, you don’t need to worry. Paul will sweep you away from capture and plunk you down into a different time zone.”

“Timeline,” corrected Sandy.

They both stared at each other, Sandy wondering if she could piss Mel off any more than she already had, and Mel looking at Sandy with *that did-you-really-just-correct-me-again* look. Their stares lingered for a few seconds with nothing else said before they both burst into simultaneous laughter and fell back into an embrace.

“How can I love you and hate you at the same time?” asked Mel, not expecting an answer.

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“Sandy said softly, “Maybe it’s because we’re in the same time zone.”

And they laughed even harder.

43 – Escape to Energy

Pounding on the front door of their townhouse stopped their laughter with the abruptness of an airbag deploying. Mel looked at Sandy and said, “Oh shit, they’re here! You had better get Paul to yank you out of here for a few hours.”

After pulling Sandy's door closed, Mel headed for the stairs. Sandy rose and stepped in front of her mirror. One touch later, she heard his greeting, “*Hello, Sandy!*”

“Paul, I’m in trouble again. The police are here, and I know they will not be happy with me. Can you take me away from this mess for a couple of hours?”

“*Show me your hands!*” He said dryly.

“What? Are you trying to be funny, Paul? Your attempt at humor is poorly timed, my friend.”

“*Sorry, I never do well at humor,*” he confessed.

“Maybe it’s your timing. It couldn’t be that you don’t have a shred of emotional intelligence.”

“*I’ve got you, Sandy. Place your hands on my face, and I’ll take you away for a while.*”

She lifted her hands, covered the cheeks of his image, and fell into that place where you fall when time traveling.

This time, she did not wind up back in her bedroom. Instead, she stood beside a pond with a surface as smooth as glass. Birds chattered in the dense border of trees surrounding her and the little pond. The sensation of a gentle breeze carried an intoxicating fragrance of honeysuckle. Wildflowers were scattered randomly at the foot of the trees, and the pond's edges had clusters of cattails standing proudly at attention. The air felt damp with an earthy smell of all things forest mixed in. Everything, all the sensory elements, were strange to her, and yet there was a familiarity she could not define. Everything mirrored things she had seen, smelled, and experienced before, but it was all different. She liked what she saw, liked it very much, but still wondered where Paul had taken her.

“Do you approve?”

Sandy jumped and whirled to find Paul standing beside and slightly behind her. Nothing came out of her mouth; not a single word was even close to being formed to speak. Her eyes just searched his, and a hundred thoughts swirled between them, with neither able to claim ownership of a single one.

Being this close was a natural comfort—no apprehension or hesitation. Her eyes were glued to his when he finally spoke. *“There was a moment when you asked me to hold you not too long ago. I would be honored to have that privilege. May I?”* He opened his arms in invitation but remained in place.

Sandy did not speak a word. She couldn't because every word her heart wanted to say was wedged sideways in her throat. Her stomach intervened with a confirming tingle when she finally said, "Yes, you may!"

She stepped into his arms like it was the most natural place. His warmth closed around her and wrapped her in the knowledge and validation that being in his arms was the best place...the only place to be. They stood there together in an embrace that Sandy hoped would never end. But she knew better. Good things like this never lasted long for her.

Thoughts of Paul being energy and her being matter fought through the bliss of being in his arms to remind her how incompatible they were. Incompatible enough for her to speak, "How can we be together like this? Aren't I made of matter and you're energy?"

"Right now, we are both energies. I've made us compatible in this dimension, and we are in forms you recognize as human."

"But how..." she started to ask. "What if..." Another pause of a question not asked.

"What if we don't work out?" he finished her thought for her.

"I...I don't know what I was going to ask," she said softly.

Paul held her and said, *"We will be together as long as you want to be with me. I can restore you to matter and send*

you anywhere you want to go. But I hope you never want to leave. We have so much to do.”

“Do? What do energies do? What is your job? What would my job be?”

Paul smiled and said, *“Our job is to help righteous people.”*

“Help? Like how?” she asked.

“In whatever way they need help. Sometimes, help can be as simple as planting a thought in someone’s heart, hurting from grief. Sometimes, it can be more physical.”

“More physical? Like more invasive? Like what you did with Phil and Wil?” she interrupted with a slight edge.

“I helped you. I protected you, not those evil men. Remember?”

She did not answer, but memories reminded her of how he helped her by intervening significantly that night, not to mention how many other times he came to her rescue.

“We will help others if you want to be with me. You don’t have to make any promises; just be. Just be with me. The choice is up to you. I enjoy your company and will continue to help people regardless of your decision. It is what I choose to do. I greatly enjoy your company, so do not feel you will disappoint me. Just be yourself!”

Sandy felt no pressure to decide and an overwhelming sense of well-being. She wasn’t sure how to *just be*, and

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because she felt no urgency to take a direction or make a decision, she took the path of least resistance and melted deeper into his embrace.

44 – Change of Possession

Mel pulled open the front door, seeing it was the detectives, and snarled, “So...why didn’t you just kick it in, Detective Becker? And no, she’s not here. She’s in jail and soon on her way to prison for something she didn’t do.”

“Hmmm,” mused Detective Hanson, “well, we just stopped by to pick up the orange jumpsuit she had on when she escaped...again...this time from her cell in front of witnesses.”

“Foiled again, eh?” Mel laughed. “As I just said, she’s...not...here, and I’m quite certain she is smart enough never to show up here again. Would you like to come in, ransack my place again, and check under all the beds?”

“We believe you, Ms. Merriweather,” said Detective Becker. “We’re actually here for another reason.”

“Do I need to put my hands behind my back?” Mel asked sarcastically, “Or are you supposed to read me my rights first?”.

Detective Hanson shook her head, pulled Sandy’s backpack from her shoulder, and handed it to Mel. “These are Ms. Tillman’s personal effects that she might want when she reappears out of the ether.”

Mel snatched the pack's strap from her hand and angrily challenged, "Is there anything else, detectives?"

Detective Becker started to shake his head from side to side, but there was no time to exchange goodbyes as the front door slammed on whatever might have been their last words.

Mel was hot with anger. She knew the detectives were doing their jobs, but it did not ease her sense of loss. Her best friend was now forced to either leave as a fugitive or give herself up and spend many good years in the state prison at Reidsville. Neither option held any appeal, and the inequity of it made her revisit her rage.

She drew her arm back and nearly hurled the pack in anger before stopping to consider why it felt heavier than a change of clothes. She dropped into a chair, opened the backpack, and found two copies of "*Mirror, Mirror*" with Sandy's clothes and shoes. They had released the copy from evidence and Sandy's extra copy from her cell, stolen during her time travel adventure.

Her first reaction was one of rage and a desire to set fire to both copies and rid herself of what were rapidly becoming sad and painful memories of loss. As she sat staring at one of the books, curiosity got the better of her, and she opened the cover of the top copy. The first thing she saw was an encryption that read:

Whoever possesses this book shall have exclusive control of all reflective powers that flow forth when called upon in good stead by the righteous.

Immediately, Mel had images of things Sandy had endured. Did she want *exclusive control of reflective powers*? Did she have possession of the book because she just read those words? What did it mean? Her curiosity prompted her to continue reading, hoping to find a few answers because she had no answers. So, she read. For several hours, she read as the sun began to creep into the afternoon, and a nap overtook her desire to read.

When Mel emerged from her unintended nap, the sun had nearly set. She sat there with the book splayed open face down next to her. Random thoughts slipped into memories of times shared with Sandy, and her eyes threatened to mist over with tears brought on by missing her best friend. Mel closed the book and took both upstairs to leave them in Sandy's room. Was it still Sandy's room, or was it the room where Sandy used to live?

Mel sat down on Sandy's bed and thoughts of how much she did not get to say before Sandy slipped into wherever she slipped with Paul. Their goodbyes were not planned and certainly were not as complete as they should have been given the amount of time they lived together. Those thoughts pulled more sadness into her heart, and the mist turned to tears that fell onto her cheeks.

She cried quietly for several minutes before looking over at the mirror. She imagined Sandy standing there and touching the mirror to connect with Paul before departing and departing forever.

Without thinking and with no intentions whatsoever, Mel stepped over to the mirror and placed her hand on the surface. It felt warm to her touch, and a faint purple glow emanated from the reflective surface. As she watched, two shapes began to form, and she heard a familiar voice speak in her head, “Hello, Mel!”

THE END...for now

Author Note:

Thanks for reading my first fiction book. If you liked it, I’d appreciate a brief review on Amazon. Thanks so much!

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