

Mourning her dead fiancée' and facing the loss of her 15-year-old cat, Long Island computer programmer Dulcie Mills escapes to a virtual world, where an online friend and a clairvoyant lead her to her lover's soul.

Cloudy Rainbow

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# **Cloudy Rainbow**

**Debbie De Louise**

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## ONE

Dulcie glanced over her left wrist at the gray and white cat sitting next to her keyboard. Floppy, her 15-year-old male shorthair, purred as she paused in her typing to pat his head.

“I don’t mean to ignore you, big boy,” she murmured. “Visiting a virtual world isn’t as compelling as spending real time with you.”

She hit the esc key from the online game she’d been playing to pass the time and shut down her laptop which she kept on her kitchen table because her apartment didn’t have room for an office.

Tonight would be especially hard. Thank goodness for Floppy’s company. October 9, three years ago. She looked up at her kitchen clock, which featured her name encircled by pretty yellow roses that matched her wallpaper, a gift from her friend Valerie as an apartment-warming when she moved here. She was lucky she was able to bring Floppy. She couldn’t stay at Frank’s place. Too many memories, clouded now but like light through a rainbow. They would’ve been married two years this past summer, but a tragic accident got in the way. Tears spilled down her cheeks. She wiped at them with the same hand that had petted the cat. He put out his paw gently as if responding to her sadness. The white-booted foot touched her elbow gently. She looked into his yellow eyes and wondered if he remembered Frank, was just responding to her feelings (cats are

intuitive that way) or was just asking for more attention or possibly his supper. She couldn't sit here anymore, anyway, so she got up and went to the pantry to take out a cat food can for him.

As she opened the chunky chicken feast with a pull of its flip-top lid, Floppy jumped off the table and bounded toward her as fast as his arthritis-ridden body could carry him. She was worried about his slower movements, and the aging that was becoming more apparent recently. Although more and more indoor cats were living to twenty or older, a cat over eight was considered a senior. Dulcie had studied the cat age charts on the Internet and in her cat books and knew that Floppy would now be well into his seventies in human years. It seemed such a short time ago that she had held him in her hands when she adopted him as a stray kitten her roommate found near her dormitory at college. So many changes had happened in her life since then. She had just met Frank when Floppy came into her life. She'd been in college studying journalism and secretly hoping to make a career out of being a reporter, living the glamorous yet poor life of Lois Lane without a superman. Until Frank came along, and she switched from writing articles to writing computer programs just to be near him in the computer science classes he taught as a junior professor.

Floppy's plaintive meow brought her back to the present, and she remembered that she still hadn't scooped the cat food out of the can into his food bowl. "Sorry, fellow," she apologized. "Mom was just daydreaming or night dreaming since it is almost time for bed."

She watched him lap up the food and then poured fresh water into his water bowl. She knew she was just putting off getting into bed tonight. In the last few months, she'd traded watching late-night television for playing a computer game

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called ‘Virtual Universe.’” As fans of this game were eager to point out, this wasn’t a game but a virtual world where people from all over the world via the Internet highway were able to communicate under different names and even create cartoon-like characters that represented themselves. Was this unlike the pen names that some authors used or the characters that they wrote about in their books? But these computer images, or avatars as they are called, have identities and even interact in this other world. She’d once gone virtual dancing with a guy who called himself Nero. She’d immediately thought of the Roman emperor. But to give the guy credit, he didn’t have any tattoos and hadn’t built up his biceps in any virtual gym. He was quite ordinary looking, if computer images could be labeled ordinary. She ran into him from time to time when she logged on, and they’d chat for a bit. But neither knew much about the other, and she wasn’t about to indulge in any online relationship. For all she knew, Nero could be a woman or a married man.

“I think I’ll just stick with you, Flops,” she said bending down to give her cat a pat as he finished his meal.

She took a last glance at her laptop, stifled a yawn, and headed across the room to her daybed which did double duty as a sofa. Valerie often berated her on why she’d chosen such a small apartment. It wasn’t a matter of expenses, though. She didn’t need much. It was just her and Floppy, after all. The converted garage apartment she’d had years ago before Frank came back into her life was taken now, so she had to find something else. It was probably best to start anew in someplace she’d never lived. Fresh starts were always best after life-changing events.

She pulled open the bed and then went into the bathroom to brush her teeth and change into her cat-decorated night shirt.

When she was done, almost forgetting the significance of the date but not quite, she turned off all the lights but the reading lamp, got under her quilt, also cat designed, and opened the Nora Roberts book she was in the middle of reading. Before she could finish another page, Floppy was there treading gently up to her pillow. She lay the book down and cuddled with him. It was relaxing just to stroke his soft fur and listen to his purrs. While it wasn't exactly the best substitute for a lover, it was easier and less stressful in many ways. The ring of the telephone interrupted the moment. She reached over abruptly to the disapproving glance of the cat and flicked on her lamp, then picked up the receiver on her nightstand/end table.

“Hello.”

The high, somewhat screechy voice of her friend replied. “Hi, Dulcie. How are you holding up?”

She had to give Valerie credit. She never forgot dates. “I’m hanging in there, just going to sleep with Floppy right now.”

She didn't bother to ask why her friend was up so late. Valerie was a night person. Everyone knew not to even try to contact her until noon. It was a good thing she'd gotten the nightshift at Chowders, the restaurant/bar where she'd worked for the past year. Valerie was perpetually changing jobs. She was never fired. She always quit when she got bored. Her employment record ranged from one day to her longest stint of eleven months so far at Chowders. Dulcie always felt she was wasting her art talent and had encouraged her to go back to art school, but Valerie never looked back once she tried something and lost interest in it. She'd never actually lost interest in art but had given up on formal classes after six months at Groves Art Academy on the North Shore. She still painted and even sold some of her stuff at garage sales, on ebay, and through a friend

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who owned an interior design shop. But, mostly, she pursued art as a hobby and gave many of her beautiful pieces as gifts to friends such as the apartment-warming clock and the lovely portrait of Floppy she'd made for Dulcie back in 1999, the year they'd met. Dulcie glanced at the realistic painting across the room comparing it to her real-life pet. The blue-gray sheen of his fur shone in the lamplight, the softness detailed by the finest brushstrokes. The likeness was readily apparent.

“Dulcie, are you there?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking.”

Valerie interpreted this as evidence of her friend's depression. “Well, I have some news that will cheer you up. I meant to call earlier, but I was out with Greg.” Gregory Marks was Valerie's current boyfriend in a long line of guys who never quite measured up to her pampering father who had died in a tragic boating accident five years ago. Valerie's mother was still alive but not often around, as she owned a tour agency and was required to travel frequently as part of her position.

“So, what's the good news, Val? Don't keep me in suspense.” Floppy jumped off the bed, realizing this conversation might take longer than his feline patience was willing to wait.

“I have a new job.”

Uh, oh. “You couldn't make one year at Chowders, could you?”

“I haven't quit Chowders. This is a part-time position. Actually, it's a consulting position, an art consulting position.”

“Wow.” Dulcie tried to sound impressed, but she knew that consulting positions were not always as glamorous or as high-paying as they sounded.

“I was recommended for the position by a widow who’d bought one of my paintings last year,” Valerie continued. “It seems this lady’s sister has an art collection that she wants appraised. She is willing to pay me \$100 an hour just to look at her stuff. Do you believe it?”

“Whoa, Valerie . . .” Dulcie nearly fell over Floppy’s tail as she walked across the room to get a glass of water. She’d probably need something stronger if this conversation continued in the direction it was heading. “What do you know about art appraising?”

“I took a semester’s course in it as an elective at art school.” Valerie sounded confident, but Dulcie could hear a slight tremor in her voice. “I can also use the library to help with my research. Aren’t you happy for me, Dulcie?”

“Sure, Val. I just don’t want you getting in over your head in something.”

“Now you sound like my mother. She called from Florence this morning, and I told her all about it. She predicted I’d only last a day, but I have a feeling this will be my big break. Mrs. Hanover even said this might lead to a full-time position at her gallery.”

Dulcie almost choked as she swallowed the water too fast. “Whoa, again, Valerie. What gallery?”

“Mrs. Hanover owns an art gallery in Port Jefferson. I’ll be starting on her own private home collection, but if she likes my work, she may consider me as a replacement for her assistant

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who is moving out of the country in a few months. What do you think? Doesn't it sound exciting?"

"I don't know, Val. Didn't she ask you for any references or check your qualifications?"

"No. She never advertised the position. She just saw my painting when she visited her sister last week and asked who had done it. She said she had had a dream about that same painting. I think it's fate."

Oh, no. Valerie was about to lapse into her philosophical and slightly supernatural beliefs. Dulcie pulled out a chair at the kitchen table and sat down, preparing herself for the worse. "Val, just because some rich old lady decided to hire you after seeing your art and having a dream about one of your paintings and even though you may be offered a position at her art gallery, it doesn't mean that you've won the lucky employment lottery."

There was silence over the wire, then a sound like a hiccup. Was it a stifled sob or a laugh? "Well at least I got your mind off Frank a bit."

Dulcie had to laugh. "That you did, girlfriend."

## TWO

**A**fter Dulcie put down the phone after talking with Valerie and finally wishing her the best of luck in her new position, she tried to get some sleep and found that she actually dozed off quicker than she'd expected. While there were several memories of Frank that flitted through her mind, especially the one scene she'd tried to vanish so many times over the years, she was able to fall into a dreamless sleep which was disturbed only by the slight tug of her hair. She woke to find Floppy on her bed with a few strands of her hair in his mouth, his usual wake-up routine to get her to feed him breakfast. Who needed an alarm clock when one had a cat?

Once Floppy was fed and she was seated at her kitchen table booting up her computer to read her email while she sipped coffee and swallowed a few bites of some stale Dunkin Donut munchkins, the memories tried to force their way back into her now conscious mind. Had it really been three years yesterday?

The last memory of that horrific October night, the one that played out in her mind relentlessly, came back to her in a wave of distorted yet familiar images -- the sudden downpour, the windshield a sheet of water, Frank at the wheel trying to maneuver his Cavalier around a turn on the winding road on the way home from the concert they'd just attended at the Tilles Center at C.W. Post, her alma mater, then the car coming at them from the wrong direction, head on, the screech of the

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brakes as Frank tried to stop, the tremendous impact, hurtling forward and then whipped back by her seatbelt, the car spinning, out of control, a scream of panic, was it hers? She may have blacked out or simply closed her eyes to deny what was happening because she didn't realize she was on her side, that the car had flipped over on the driver's side, until she looked over at Frank. There was blood all over. Some of it was hers, but most of it was his.

"Oh, my God." She repeated the words she'd whispered three years ago as she relived the accident. And then the memory that caused the most pain flashed before her in startling clarity.

Frank opened his eyes and, as blood fell from his mouth, he whispered, "I love you, Dulcie" and then lay still.

Why did people always remember those last moments of losing someone more vividly than the happy lifetime they spent with their loved one? Although Dulcie knew she was blameless for the car crash, she still felt guilt over Frank's death. Why did she have to buy those tickets for that night as a surprise gift for his birthday? Why had she gone back for the lipstick she dropped in her seat? A few minutes one way or the other may have saved his life. And, then, why hadn't she noticed the other car and warned Frank? So many scenarios, so many ways she could've prevented the end of her fiancée's life. Yet Valerie had assured her, over and over again, that it was Frank's time. Babies die of SIDS or from leukemia or a bad flu. People get aboard planes destined to crash, fall in their bathtubs, cross the street too close to an oncoming car. It's fate. It's predestined. It's the way of the world. To Dulcie, it was cruel and unfair. She knew she wasn't alone in her sorrow, but grief counseling and support groups did little to lift her depression. And while she loved Valerie as a friend, a small part of Dulcie hated her

for her pragmatism. When Valerie's dad had died so unexpectedly, Valerie had been swamped by guilt that she hadn't accompanied him that fateful day on the boat, a natural-born sailor, she was convinced she may have been able to save him. Yet her words to Dulcie at the funeral had been, though spoken through tear-streaked cheeks, "he's okay, and he'll be back before I know it."

Not particularly religious, Dulcie didn't hold any strong beliefs about the afterlife or reincarnation. Valerie was sure that both existed. "You can't just be here one minute and then be totally gone the next," she told Dulcie. "There's something we all must do while we're here. When we've done it, we go back, but then we choose if we want to come back again or just wait for our loved ones to join us. It seems like a long wait for us, but twenty, thirty years or more is not a long wait compared to eternity."

Dulcie scoffed. "If we can choose to come back or not, Val, then why don't we get to choose how long we stay or not to go at all?"

Valerie just rolled her eyes. "Now you're the one being unreasonable. No one has the answers to everything."

Dulcie was awoken from her reverie by the sound of Windows opening on her computer. She went to yahoo and logged into her email account.

From: [Nero2007@yahoo.com](mailto:Nero2007@yahoo.com), Subject: Hi! came up as the first new message. Although she and Nero had not exchanged any personal information, they had exchanged emails. She read the message carefully.

*Hi, PCLady (her pseudonym in the game)*

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*Was wondering if you'd be interested in meeting in game tonight 3 GT at the Commons? Haven't heard from you in awhile, hope everything's k.*

*Nero*

The Commons was one of the social areas of the game complete with dance clubs, quiet spots, and beautiful graphical representations of gardens, waterfalls, and mountains. What the heck? She needed a diversion. Since both of them had ascertained that they were five hours + game time and thus on the same EST time zone, 3 GT would be 8 pm for both of them.

She typed:

*Sounds good, Nero. CY there.*

*PCLady*

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