

Chapter 7

The Dream Continues

“I’m back in the desert!?” Cody blurted out.

He skipped over the sand-covered tiles of the market town backstreets and took cover behind a dusty quartz building shaped like a giant chess rook.

This place was clearly the same one as before, but everything looked slightly different. The buildings had gotten taller since the last dream. Not only that, but there were also no chess-shaped structures sticking out of the sandy ground as he could recall. Down the road, Cody heard the hustling and bustling of the crowd roaming the various shop stands. Last time he was in this desert marketplace, the whole venue was empty. However, that was owed to the squirrel beast. Perhaps he was looking into it too deeply. Locations in dreams often change and evolve even within the dream. And plus, even if this place was an exception to that rule, his observation ability would still likely be unreliable. The first time he was here, he had no clue he was dreaming. This time, he knew immediately. That fact alone wrinkled his brain more than any other at this moment.

“I’ve never *continued* an old dream like this.” Cody said out loud to himself.

Here in the dream world, his guard was down. He could speak out his internal thoughts, and nobody would judge him. If they did, he didn’t care.

“Why would I not care? I’ve never felt such awareness of my thoughts before.”

“That’s because you’re the closest to your mind you’ve ever been,” came a mysterious, but cheerful voice that also sounded vaguely Australian.

Cody looked over at the dry, crusty earth from under the shadow of a chess bishop building. Popping out of what looked like a gopher hole, he could see one of those gelatin blob critters with rabbit-like ears. His rotund body was as blue as the sky, and big, bold, beadlike eyes were as black as ink.

“Oh hey, I guess you heard all that?” said Cody, who then paused to look around his surroundings once more. “I just wanna be sure. This whole place is a dream, right? It feels very... real.”

The blue blob shook its wiggly head. “Your hunch ain’t wrong, kiddo. This is a real place, but you’ve found a way to access it in your dreams.” Because it had no mouth, the only thing that moved while talking were its ears.

“Um. Forgive me if I’m skeptical. But can you give me any sign that this place is actually real?” asked Cody.

“Nope! For all I know, this place is a figment of both our imaginations. I also woke up in this place randomly one night.”

“And you come here every night?”

“HA! I never left. My body’s been trapped in slumber for years.”

“There are bunny-eared blobs like you in the real world?”

“Okay. Rude.”

The bunny blob dramatically waddled away from Cody, leaving him stuck with about a dozen questions. *How does someone get into a place like this? Who created it? Was this whole place a hallucination? What were monsters doing here?*

“Cody? Is that really you?”

Cody choked. It was the red-haired Penny. She was lounging on top of a fancy-looking wishing well shaped like a statue of a horse bust. The whole well was made of marble. It had carvings of decorative pyramids and stylistic sun symbols embedded all over the surface of the knight horse’s head. Slim doric pillars surrounding the opening that allowed access to the water down below. From far away it looked like a chess knight.

“Penny? Why’re you still here?”

Cody took a few steps forward and instantly found himself near her. The dream realm was a weird world.

“It’s Penelope, and believe me, I have no clue.”

“Penelope? You must be someone else. It’s just that you look exactly like Penny, minus the red hair.”

“Well, you look exactly like Cody to me.”

“I know, you’re a figment of my imagination.”

“Huh? Brother, this is MY dream. Don’t play those tricks on me.”

“W-wait a second.”

“No, I’m not having this discussion! Seeing you yesterday already messed me up.” Penelope braced herself as she started to back off.

“Penny, I’m not disagreeing with you.”

Penelope shoved Cody way harder than she expected. “Seriously, don’t call me, Penny!”

“Sorry, Penelope. I’m not trying to argue. It’s just that-- I had a realization...” Cody paused, waiting for a response from Penelope. She didn’t give one, so he kept on talking. “The blob I ran into early said that he was dreaming.”

“I first thought it was the dream playing tricks on me, but what if this place is some ethereal dream hub where people can meet-- like a subconscious plane.”

Penelope still kept her face away from sight, but she finally replied. “That’s impossible.”

“How?” Cody stepped closer to Penelope.

“It just is!” Penny stepped back even further. Now her whole back was against the wall of a hut.

“Why? Because you have red hair?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“Because you’re dead!” Penny turned to face Cody, revealing tears running from her face.

Cody took a step back, confused and silent.

“When I saw you yesterday,” she continued, “I thought it was something stupid like your ghost. But now it’s just my dumb mind messing with me.”

Penelope walked away, sobbing. Cody hesitated to go after, but he trusted his gut and followed.

“Okay, first off, I’m very much alive,” said Cody. “Unless my dad’s bison meatloaf killed me overnight. But I doubt it. He’s very careful with his grilling.”

Penelope quickened her pace into the town’s back alleyway, she repeatedly chanting to herself, “Wake up. Wake up. Wake up. It’s just a dream. It’s just a dream.”

Cody sped up to catch up. “What if it’s not JUST a dream?”

“Yeah, it’s a nightmare.” Penny turned the other direction.

“I don’t think you’re the Penelope I knew. You wanna know why? Not only did she go by ‘Penny’ and have brown hair, but she also would not be sad if I died!” Cody called out. Under his breath, he muttered, “If I’m being honest, she wouldn’t lose a second of sleep.

Penny still heard him. She froze, then she spun around and stomped over to Cody.

“Leave me alone!”

Penelope pushed Cody hard. He flew back several steps and landed on the sandstone cobbleroad of the back alleyway.

“Listen, I thought that this was just an elaborate dream too. But hear me out, and I’ll walk away. How often do we realize we’re dreaming? How often do we have recurring dreams?”

Penny paused for a moment, then she violently shook her head. “Nope. I’m tweaking from my sleeping pills. That’s it”

“My friend lucid dreams all the time. Never has he ever stumbled across a recurring scene -- especially from a memory he never had.”

“We probably both saw a movie with a desert town.”

“You said ‘we’ that time.” Cody pointed his finger.

Penelope smacked his hand down. “Okay, fine. You’re making some sense. But why - all of a sudden now - are you here?”

Cody looked down at Penelope's hands. They were trembling. Before he could answer her, he walked over to the well and drew her a cup of water. A mug had appeared conveniently in front of him - a surprising perk of the dream world.

“Here, drink this first. And have a seat, I’ll tell you everything I know.

“Can’t you just answer my question first.”

“I will, but I’m also freaking out too right now. And if we’re gonna try and figure this out, we might as well get comfy.”

“Fair enough.” said Penelope before downing the mug of water.

The two sat down in the shade of the well. Even though it didn’t feel hot in this desert town, they couldn’t help but feel most comfortable in the shade.

“Where are you at right now? Like in the waking world.” said Cody.

“Uhh, my room. Where else would I be?”

“That’s freaky. Because you’re missing right now.”

“Huh? Like on a milk carton?” said a baffled Penny.

“It’s not public or anything, but nobody knows where you are? Not even your dad.”

“I mean, my dad never knows where I’m at.”

“Oh damn, that’s really depressing actually.” Cody waved his hands as he got back on topic. “The POINT is that you’re not home. You disappeared yesterday. And I think you’re in danger.”

“But I’m not.”

“Neither am I? Yet apparently, I’m a ghost in your reality or whatever.”

“So what, we’re in alternate realities or something?”

“I mean, is it too crazy to believe.”

Penelope slowly nodded her head.

“Well, on the slight chance it is real... and this dream realm is a bridge between our two universes, what if it was done for a reason?”

“Like what? Because you died in my world, you’re asking for help so I won’t die in yours?”

“Maybe it’s fate that brought us here?”

Penny giggled for a second then stuffed it under an unconvincing serious expression. “You’re so corny.”

She scooted closer to Cody. He froze.

“So, what am I like in this alternate reality?”

“You’re really cool in it. You drive a delivery truck and are super nice to everyone, even the people who don’t deserve it. And you have this magical power where when you smile, it can just make peoples’ day, even when they’re hurting.”

Penelope’s jaw almost dropped. “Wow. I was expecting something kinda dumb actually.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just sweet of you to think that.”

“Well, it’s great to know you think that.... no wonder the other you doesn’t like me.” said Cody, rolling his eyes.

“Um. Excuse me?” said Penny with a small grin.

“You know why! You said I’m *sweet*.”

“And?”

“Nice guys are invisible to girls,” said Cody. He stood up and began walking in circles, still in denial that he was talking to an alternate version of his crush.

Penny’s smile cracked into a screeching laugh. “Whaaat? Who told you that?”

“Um, it’s just a common truth.”

“Correction: a common misunderstanding.”

He stopped. “Wait. How?”

“Oh, Cody, it breaks my heart that a version of you died before he could figure it out.”

“Figure what out?”

“The **actual** truth.”

Cody braced his aching head. He sighed deeply and sat back down beside Penelope who was still grinning madly. “What is it?” He asked. “What do girls actually think about ‘sweet’ guys?”

“Hm. If I tell you, I’d have to kill you.”

“Nice try, you can’t kill me in a dream.”

“Oh, believe me, you don’t wanna try me. You couldn’t even handle a squirrel.”

“That squirrel was the size of a mini-van. He looked like he fell in a pool of toxic waste.”

“And if I could beat him without trying, I could end you without even blinking.”

“Is that a challenge?” Cody stood up.

“It’s a threat.” Penelope stood back up.

“Alright, try me.”

Then all of a sudden, Penelope tiptoed up, trying kiss Cody. He instantly backed off.

“WHAT THE- NO- Sorry, that came off as really strong.” said Cody, frozen once again.

“Oh. Gosh. AHHH.” Penelope freaked out. “I thought you were giving me a sign?”

“WHAT SIGN? Is this another one of your girlhood truths.”

“No! I don’t know the sign! No guy’s given me that look before.”

“Then how did you think I was giving a sign!?”

“I don’t know! Y-you- AGH.”

Penelope curled up in a ball. It looked like she wanted to collapse into a singularity and disappear from existence. Cody kneeled down and gently patted her on the shoulder.

“Um. There. There.”

“I’m not crying, idiot! Sorry, I don’t actually think you’re stupid. I just really wanna wake up from this fever dream.”

Cody looked at the desert town around him. “I’m starting to think this isn’t a dream...”

The two were silent for what felt like minutes, even if it was probably just 30 seconds. Penelope still had her head buried in her arms, and Cody was trying desperately to conjure up a new topic to change the subject. Maybe she didn’t want the subject changed. Maybe she wanted to wallow in her embarrassment. Whatever the best choice of action was, Cody eventually did realize there was a pressing question that had been on his mind. Amidst all his confusion with Penny and the dream world, he had glossed over the horrifying reality that he was dead in a parallel timeline. It may not have been the best decision to bring it up, but his curiosity was only going to get the better of him before this dream ended. A question of his fatal end kept on circling around in his brain. Now, all he had to do was muster the strength to ask it.

“How did I die?”

“Huh?” Penelope lifted her now pale face.

“You said I died in your world - it feels so weird saying that - well, how?”

“It was an accident.” Penny took a deep breath. “I’m not sure it’s a good idea to talk about it. Do you really wanna know?”

Cody nodded.

Penny looked him in the eyes and nodded back. “Okay. Well, last year, you were-“

Cody suddenly woke up from an obnoxious, purple monster truck speeding past the tree. It had gone off road to dodge the mudslide at the intersection - the same one Penny hydroplaned on earlier. In doing so, it's gaudy, flame-decorated wheels nearly rolled over his shoes. As it sped off, its engine roared again. Not only did it whizz by at an ungodly speed near a construction zone, but it revved louder than the actual booming machines working. If Cody was able to wake up a little sooner, he would've considered yelling at the vehicle. Realistically, there's no way he would've mustered the courage to do something that would've potentially ticked off a truck driver. Now, he wasn't sleepy or groggy in the slightest. The lad was as awake as a Wallstreet phone basher who just chugged seven energy drinks at once.

As he started his trek home, he didn't seem annoyed about being woken by that truck. His conversation with Penelope faded to a distant memory like any other dream..

“That dream isn't real... and there isn't a red-haired version of Penny who goes by *Penelope* and also apparently wants to kiss you.” Cody uttered to himself.

This time, he instantly checked around to see if anyone in his house heard him speak to himself. After all, he was back in the real world. Here, there were consequences. Here, the embarrassment couldn't just vanish in a wake up.