



LIGHTHORSE MAGIC & OTHER STORIES

by **LINDSAY EDMUNDS**



Author of

CEL & ANNA



LIGHTHORSE MAGIC AND OTHER STORIES

By Lindsay Edmunds

The Deep Dark World of Lighthouse Magic

Tamara Klugman Steps Out

Three Excerpts from the Diary of Joan Holland

Companion stories for [Cel & Anna: A 22nd Century Love Story](#)

Cover design by Dave Hunter Graphic Design

<http://www.dhdd.net>

Dear Reader,

I am the daughter of two scientists and the sister of a programmer. All that talent missed me completely. Using the word “science” to describe anything I write is—trust me—a stretch. My playground is imagination.

I wrote these stories because after *Cel & Anna* ended, the characters were still on the playground. They would not come inside and behave.

I published the stories because they are *short*. They are breath mints. Cookie buttons. Champagne splits.

Deep Dark World

“The Deep Dark World of Lighthouse Magic” is about Anna Ringer’s employer, a mysterious company called Lighthouse Magic. It has lots of rules. Employees must dress in ways that do not call attention to their bodies. They are forbidden to eat at their desks. They are forbidden to take public transportation. And it is a bad idea to say “Freezebeezer frazzlebeezer Re! Ra! Ro!”

Stepping Out

“Tamara Klugman Steps Out” is about a rather dull young woman who has a vision and blunders out to save the world.

Three Excerpts

“Three Excerpts from the Diary of Joan Holland” is about the pregnant young wife of the unofficial mayor of a village called Rising Sun. She writes in her journal, “I am in time’s jaws.”

And away we go. . . .

[The Deep Dark World of Lighthouse Magic](#)

[Tamara Klugman Steps Out](#)

[Three Excerpts from the Diary of Joan Holland](#)

The Deep Dark World of Lighthouse Magic

From her mother Anna Ringer had inherited the power to read minds and under some circumstances, to see souls. Such a gift guaranteed a life that was not ordinary. However, it guaranteed nothing else.

When Lighthouse Magic came calling, Anna was twenty and working as a checkout clerk in an UnderWorld grocery store, idly reading the minds of customers. She made them smile and sometimes stare when she responded to their unspoken thoughts. Even when all the lanes were open, some people would stand in line to get their groceries scanned by her. She knew the right thing to say. Always.

Then came the email that changed her life. It read:

Do you remember an encounter with a fortune teller named Leilah when you were eight? We do.

A recruiter will be in the Midway City area on the 19th and 20th of this month. If you want to meet with her, let us know at once. We may have a job for you.

—Carrie Schoonemaker, Head of Human Resources, Lighthouse Magic

Leilah had been a large woman with a turban who had a fortune-telling booth at a Midway City fun fair. Outside the booth stood a placard that proclaimed *Truth Told, Comfort Given*. Anna had noticed a cloud of butterflies around the placard and enticed one to land on her finger.

“What did you see just then?” Leilah asked immediately.

“Butterflies, all colors, following you.”

“Do you think you saw them true?” Leilah asked.

“Yes.”

“Do you think the other people saw them?” Leilah asked.

“Ma’am, I know they did not.”

“What is your name?” Leilah asked.

“Anna Ringer.”

Leilah looked at the little girl with tangled blonde hair and blue-green eyes. The identity bracelet required for all UnderWorld residents gleamed brightly on her wrist. Leilah held still for a second to allow a tiny camera to focus on the bracelet and snap its picture.

“Spread your wings and fly away,” Anna’s mother had said when Lighthouse Magic offered a job. So Anna had flown. Now, at age twenty-six, she lived a life of Outside luxury, something undreamed-of by people born into her caste of society. She was a rising star.

In memory she heard her mother’s voice: “Get up, get up! Happiness rises.” Her mother had thrown happy words about like confetti.

Anna dressed for work in loose linen trousers, a white blouse, and comfortable beige shoes. Around her neck she tied a blue-green silk kerchief. She tamed her long, curly blonde hair into a single braid down her back. At Lighthouse Magic no one was permitted to dress in a way

that drew attention to their bodies. Clothes must be neat and simple, with a touch of color at the collar or waist for those who had worked there three years or more. When Anna woke up, she looked pretty. By the time she walked out the apartment door, she looked shuttered and plain.

Her car, a serious and devoted violet-blue Quel LX, drove her to work. In the parking garage, the car remarked that it needed routine maintenance. “Go ahead,” Anna murmured. After promising to return in time to take her home, the Quel LX disappeared up an exit ramp. Anna stepped into one of two ele-

vators that opened directly into the Lighthouse Magic offices. Employees were forbidden to take public transportation to and from work, which of course included public elevators.

When she first heard the name “Lighthouse Magic,” she had imagined a white horse that would carry her out among the stars. It was a pretty dream.

Anna’s official title was “data analyst,” but she and her coworkers did not do statistical tests to determine trends and probabilities. They got inside people’s minds. The innocents! They never suspected their minds were being stripped and plundered. Clients never suspected what they really were paying for. They believed that the company used sophisticated algorithms created with a proprietary formula.

Lighthouse Magic’s corporate-think was that the company would come to ruin if its reliance on psychics ever became public. So it had ten thousand rules to keep employees from accidentally or intentionally giving the game away. Even their names and histories were falsified. Anna’s coworkers thought her name was Sadie Lemonyen.

During her first week, Anna had been reprimanded harshly for eating an energy bar at her desk. The company forbade snacking. Food interfered with “the process,” as employees were instructed to call the psychic connection.

The elevator door opened into an atrium lit to simulate a pleasant dawn. The walls were painted peach and mint green. Criss-crossing the atrium were employees on their way to their cubicles. Everyone looked small and serious as beetles. Anna drew a quiet breath, then began to chant silently:

“Bread and butter bread and butter bread and butter.”

As she walked across the atrium, she heard the silent chants of her co-workers, as clearly as if they were spoken aloud:

“Scud-a-hoo scud-a-hay scud-a-hoo scud-a-hay.”

“Lillyputter lallyputter lillyputter lallyputter.”

“Chuffa wuffa chuffa wuffa.”

“Freezebeezer frazzlebeezer Re! Ra! Ro!”

That last one was a new hire: a dark-haired boy who looked about fifteen, though he had to be older. Anna shook her head slightly. New ones chose the emotional chants. The boy would learn soon enough why this was a bad idea.

The chants employees repeated silently to themselves whenever they moved from place to place were informally known as “inbetweeners” and in the employee manual as “low-level resistance syllables.” They were Keep-Out signs. Their purpose was to stop employee chatter, internal and external; also to discourage people from casually reading one another’s minds. They were easily breachable, though, if an employee was foolish enough break *that* rule.

Inbetweeners had to be sing-song in nature. They had to be easy to remember. The basic unit of the chant had to be between four and eight syllables long. An end tag was permissible if it was no longer than three syllables. Inbetweeners could connote no actual experience. Five thousand words in the employee manual were devoted to these chants.

“Bread and butter bread and butter bread and butter.” Anna was only a few steps away from her cubicle, a beige space decorated with a single picture: a silver sailboat on a silver lake, at dusk. Employees were permitted one picture, though it would not be entirely accurate to say that they chose it. They looked through Lighthouse Magic’s library of pictures while a technician monitored their brain waves. The picture best at inducing centering calm was given to the employee, with instructions to display no other.

Anna settled into her cubicle, wishing she could work at home. It would be no more isolating than this office, where she worked in silence. Her UnderWorld job at the grocery store had been full of bustle and chatter. Reading customers' minds had been pleasant and easy, then.

"Bread and butter bread and butter bread and butter," she repeated silently, to drive her thoughts underground. As she did so, she pulled up the first assignment for the day.

Fracking.

Fracking???

She had done fracking only once, five years ago. Afterward, she told her supervisor she would go back to the UnderWorld before she would do it again. Lighthouse Magic had yielded to her wishes, which meant they valued her particularly. However, her current supervisor did not like her and never had. This supervisor, whose Lighthouse Magic name was Xacta Goode, had been one of her trainers in the early days and resented how easily she learned every lesson.

Anna looked up at the serene sailboat on the serene lake. But it did not rescind the order.

Named after an old method of extracting oil and natural gas from rock, fracking in the psychic sense involved putting oneself into the midst of a Net group, reading them, and then ripping them to pieces in highly personal, often-hideous ways. It was one of Lighthouse Magic's unadvertised services. Clients targeted a group they did not like, and employees fracked it.

Fracking was psychics' blood sport. Some of them enjoyed it.

Anna stood up. She walked to Xacta Goode's office, not bothering with the inbetweeners chant, and entered without knocking. Xacta looked up from her computer. "I heard you coming," she said. "You weren't using your inbetweeners. Your pay will be docked for that."

Anna knew better than to get angry. Anger was always useless. "I won't do fracking," she said calmly. "You know I won't."

"Bilvig Romano is out sick," Xacta said. "You have to take it."

"I do not have to take it, and I will not."

"Your next pay just got even smaller," Xacta said with a hard smile.

"Make it as small as you want," Anna said. She looked at Xacta's one picture: an ivory-colored cottage with a garden in bloom. Did that picture represent the life she dreamed of? Anna almost pitied her. Xacta sat in silence for a minute, her mind buzzing with Keep-Outs. Anna waited for her to finish pretending she was in charge of this conversation.

"Count on dull assignments for a long time."

"All Lighthouse Magic assignments are interesting," Anna said. "Don't you find that true?" She let a smile play across her lips. Xacta looked like a mad little troll.

Back at her cubicle, Anna saw that she had been assigned three focus groups on aspects of personal and financial security. In the late afternoon, however, she had the ongoing work on meme development. Xacta did not dare pull her off that job, for Anna had been part of the meme development team for some time.

The most lucrative thing Lighthouse Magic did was to send memes, or thought viruses, rampaging across the Net. Most people thought memes arose randomly and replicated spontaneously. But there was nothing random or spontaneous about the memes created by Lighthouse Magic. And nothing accidental about their success.

Anna prepared for the first focus group: twenty-five people in a videoconference about what kinds of medications they trusted and why. One woman who said she trusted her healthcare providers was thinking, loudly, “give me little pills colored pretty pink. Little is better, and pink does no harm.”

Anna loved people for the crazy things they believed. Maybe they weren’t so crazy either. Maybe pink pills would make that woman well, from the power of pink. Experts did not know as much as they pretended to know. The corporation who hired Lighthouse Magic to run this focus group was surely awash in experts who would sneer at the power of pink. And at psychic power, too.

After the group ended, Anna took her fifteen-minute midmorning break in the Restoration Room, a quiet space marked, oddly, by a cross. It was furnished with three comfortable chairs, a recliner, and a bubbling fountain. The walls were peach and cream; soft music played in the background. Anna lay down on the recliner, closed her eyes, and began some quiet-mind exercises.

A great commotion of negative energy threw itself against the Restoration Room door, which opened with a jolt. A young woman in an uproar stumbled into the room. Anna knew her: a new hire whose Lighthouse Magic name was Chryss Mation. Poor Chryss staggered across the room, trying to pull herself together. With a feeble attempt at her inbetweeners (“merricat, tearicat”), she sat down.

She got my fracking assignment, Anna thought. She broke a couple more rules by putting her hand on Chryss’s shoulder and telling her that this feeling would pass. Chryss looked up, her eyes full of tears. “I killed them,” she whispered. Anna shook her head. “It only seems that way to us,” she said.

“The damage I did will go on forever,” Chryss mourned. “It will come back round to me.”

“You need to calm down,” Anna said.

Chryss leapt to her feet. “I will not be part of this,” she cried as she ran out of the Restoration Room. Through the open door Anna watched her swerve toward the elevators, get corralled by one of the security guards, and be hustled away. In a few minutes, Chryss Mation would be on her way home to whatever real life she possessed. Anna envied her.

But this feeling of envy made no sense. Anna did not want to take a bus ride home to Midway City. She did not want the identity bracelet put back on her wrist. She did not want to be a checkout clerk in some store or other until the day she died. At Lighthouse Magic she was gathering power. She could manage the downside. She could keep things in balance. She must.

Tamara Klugman Steps Out

One sunny Friday in May, Tamara Klugman left her tiny job and her tiny life to become a great woman. She traveled to a town the world had never heard of—at least not until the world heard of *her*—and prophesied events with uncanny accuracy until money and fame corrupted her and her power left.

But that is getting ahead of the story. The place to begin is with that fateful Friday when the rivers changed direction.

Up until then, Tamara thought her life was okay. Her work as a medical transcriptionist was dull, but she did not expect work to be fun. Most of her paycheck went to pay the rent on a small efficiency apartment, and her old car had started to rust. Yet she had good cable TV, her car ran well enough to get to the grocery and back, and for commuting she had the bus.

When she got fired, she did not see it coming, not at all. She always arrived a little late in the morning—that was the bus schedule—but finished her assignments on time and did not make too many mistakes.

“Your performance has been unsatisfactory for some time,” the supervisor said.

Tamara was astonished by the feeling that seized her, which she dimly identified as happiness. She squinted up at her supervisor, who was fat and middle-aged, and wearing one of those polyester office dresses. “Go home,” the supervisor said from the bottom of a well full of her own bitterness.

Tamara went home and drove her rattling car to the grocery, where she bought macaroni and cheese, a chocolate cake, and a bottle of screw-cap wine. That night, drugged pleasantly by food and wine, she opened a spiral-bound notebook to a clean page and titled it “My Dream of Life.” She described what she imagined: a house covered with climbing roses in a tiny village surrounded by fields and forest. She felt the presence of other people (husband? children?), but could not see their faces. She was loved and respected. Even more incredibly, she had power.

That night she slept with an arm flung over her face, muttering. The air was heavy with change.

The spirit entered the room in dead of night. It stood beside Tamara’s bed—huge-eyed, lugubrious, tired to death. It flavored the darkness with darkness. It waited for her to sense its presence.

When Tamara opened her eyes and saw the spirit’s face, she slapped herself on the wrist. The slap stung. She touched a finger to her wrist: her pulse was firm and strong. She counted the beats.

No—not dreaming.

“Who are you?” she whispered. The spirit only widened its terrible black eyes slightly. It opened its mouth as if to speak, but the room only grew more silent—like the first moments after a death. Tamara hid her face. When she dared to look up again, the spirit was sitting in a corner. It stared fixedly at the beige carpet.

“Am I dying?” she said into the terrible silence.

“No,” the spirit said. It did not remove its gaze from the carpet.

“Then what?”

“I will show you,” the spirit said. It sighed.

Hurtful brightness filled the room. In its glare, gardens turned to ash. Houses shattered. Blood splattered, and bones splintered. A horse became a skeleton before Tamara’s eyes. The screams were loud, but they did not last long. Then—and this would always be the hardest part of the vision to explain—Tamara felt something shift. It was a shift as profound and absolute as death, and as irrevocable. The land

shimmered with a curious, toxic glow. A bright thing slithered among the ruins. It possessed horrible immortality. So armed it would kill the whole world.

The spirit showed Tamara where: a hot spot of war on the other side of the world. It showed her when: exactly one month from now. The bombs would fall at 10:10 in the morning.

The vision faded. The spirit remained.

“You see what is coming,” it said.

“Can it be stopped?” Tamara whispered.

“Not by you,” the spirit said. It swung its enormous head from side to side.

“Then why tell me?” Tamara said. She might have been a mouse, her voice was so small and weak.

“You will speak of it,” the spirit said. “You will be listened to.”

“Nobody has ever listened to me.”

“Fool!” the spirit said, rearing up. “We will give you strength to speak just as we gave you strength to see.” When Tamara cried no no no, the spirit’s expression softened. “You will do well,” it said. “Your direction will come in a dream.”

With a clumsy paw, it reached out to pat her. At its touch, Tamara fell back to sleep.

She dreamed of a clean dry road lit by sunlight, with forest on either side. The trees were a brilliant, electrical green. She was in her old car and traveling very fast toward a little town called Star Shoot. The group she had to find was named the Consequentials. There would be a sign.

When Tamara woke up the next morning, she did not know what to do, so decided to go out for breakfast. Getting a restaurant meal seemed no more absurd than any other action, and there was a diner at the mall. As she ate blueberry pancakes with whipped butter, the dream stayed in her mind, sparkling like a gold ring. All around people sat in twos and threes and fours, laughing and talking. Obviously no spirit had come to them in the dead of night.

Tamara, on the other hand, had little to lose and no one to love. Was it so very strange that the spirit came to her? The laughing people in the diner would have squeezed their eyes shut and rationalized the vision away.

In the car she found an old AAA map and was not surprised to see that Star Shoot existed. It was a little town about 300 miles away that seemed to be in the middle of a forest. So she dumped bags and boxes of possessions into the Goodwill bin behind the big Methodist church. The maintenance staff would scavenge her few pieces of furniture and pitch everything else in the dumpster. There was no chance of getting her security deposit back, but this consideration seemed trivial.

A security deposit? What was that?

Tamara took the car for an oil change. She doubted it was up to a 300-mile road trip, yet she also doubted that it would break down if it was supposed to get her to Star Shoot.

It was not until Sunday night, after she had finished her chores and packed her suitcase, that she wondered whether she was making a mistake. But she decided that if the dream proved

false, she would simply keep looking. She would search and search. Her hungry eyes would hunt for the curve of a porch, the sweep of an old tree, a “help wanted” ad in a newspaper, a quiet bench on a quiet street, the smile of a stranger. She would drive and walk the earth until she saw the signs that would lead her home, to a rose-covered house surrounded by green.

And there really was a town called Star Shoot. There was that.

She fell asleep at peace with her decision.

The next day she put her suitcase into the old car and pulled out of the parking lot, not afraid. All day she drove north as if in a bubble. Even the old car seemed perkier, more interested in being a car

than in being a piece of junk. Every few hours she stopped at a service station just off the interstate, where she ate a little something and fed the car. Then she raced back to the highway in a great dusty flourish of eagerness.

In the afternoon it began to rain, not hard but insistently. A little water ran through the driver's side window: a leak Tamara could not afford to fix. She glanced at the directions she had taped to the dashboard: two exits to go.

The off-ramp led her onto a twisting two-lane road almost entirely closed in by green shadows. A black creek ran along to the right. The vast trees locked arms overhead. The forest darkened to midnight green.

Tamara became uneasy for the first time that day. This was not like the dream. She wondered whether she should turn around. However, to do that, she would have to cross the solid double line into the opposing lane. There might be a wreck. She did not think she was not supposed to die on this trip.

Though she could be wrong.

Where *was* she?

The road finally widened and lightened. Tamara accelerated the car around the last curve to see a sign stuck in the ground at an angle: STAR SHOOT, 1 MILE. She sighed happily. If the drive north had been a test, she had passed.

Star Shoot's main street was lined with starveling businesses in old, elaborate brick buildings. Tamara parked and went into a dark little place that sold herbs and candles. Behind the scarred counter sat a hugely pregnant woman with tiny yellow stars pasted on extremely long, pink-painted fingernails. She was reading a paperback romance and did not look up or speak. A white cat lay on a shelf asleep. It extended its front paws, possibly dreaming.

Tamara had not spoken all day. Now she wanted to speak in spilled-out sentences, run-on words. She wanted to tell this woman where she had been and how she happened to be here. Yet she was timid about sounding crazy.

"I am looking for the Consequentials," she mumbled.

"They are here," the woman asked, looking up at last. In her voice Tamara could sense amusement.

"But where—" Tamara began, and subsided into silence. She could not explain why she had driven more than 300 miles to Star Shoot. She hoped she could explain it to the Consequentials.

"They hang out in the Widemann Building," the woman said. "Big place, the Widemann Building."

"What do they do there?" Tamara heard herself say.

"Hard to say," the woman said. "But they are harmless. They are clowns." *Clowns?* Tamara thought. "The Widemann Building is two blocks down, one block over," the woman said, yawning. "It would be nice if you bought something before you left."

Tamara grubbed among the herbs and candles, selecting lavender, cinnamon, and vanilla. The woman took her plastic money, shoved the card in and out of the imprinter, and gave it back to her. "Thanks for shopping at The Herb Boutique," she said.

As Tamara walked through the rain, she wondered whether the Consequentials expected a visit from a stranger. Maybe they had dreamed about *her*. "If I dreamed that a recently fired medical transcriptionist would show up at my door and give me the word," she mused out loud, "I would be scared to death." It had not occurred to her that compared with the Consequentials, she might have the easy job.

The Widemann Building stood on the corner of Relay and Drive Streets. It was large. "Large," in fact, did not adequately describe it. Tamara could not imagine what the original purpose of the building

had been. (Manufacturing? But who builds a factory in the middle of town?) Its first floor was occupied by a dollar store, which it seemed to have swallowed whole.

Comparing it with a Tyrannosaurus rex would be close to the mark, except a Tyrannosaurus would stand no chance against the Widemann Building.

Tamara had to go around the corner to find the twelve-foot double doors that led to the second floor. She opened one with difficulty (though of course the door *would* open, for she was meant to open it). She stepped into a tall dark space something like a foyer. A hand-painted signboard listed five names:

Lightning Rod Used Books
Trance of Attention Hypnosis
More Than Bread
The Rustic Players
The Consequentials

All right. They are real.

A carved staircase, wide enough for six people to walk abreast, led from the foyer into the unknown. Tamara the medical transcriptionist would have turned around and run. The woman who had driven to Star Shoot to find the Consequentials mounted the staircase, herbal scents trailing behind her like colored smoke. She climbed slowly but without hesitation, until she reached the top and saw what she had driven toward, what she had walked into.

At first she saw the room, vast and dim. It contained a raised stage and ten rows of chairs, an art gallery, a large used bookstore, a half-dozen offices, two storage areas, enough musical instruments for a small orchestra, and a café. The walls were lined with multipaned windows, also vast and dim.

Six people sat at one of the café tables with their eyes shut, holding hands. Tamara stepped toward them. When they heard her footsteps, they opened their eyes and looked at her curiously.

“Do you want a cup of coffee or tea?” asked a sixtyish man with a plain, friendly face.

“Tea please,” Tamara said, smiling in what she hoped was a friendly way. The man stepped behind the café counter, put a tea bag into a mug that said “Holy Joe,” and poured hot water into it. “Sugar?” he asked. “Cream?”

“Both, thank you,” Tamara said. She had never tasted cream in tea and found it delicious. She sipped slowly, letting its warmth ease the chill of the rain. “If you are the Consequentials,” she said. “I have a message for you.”

All six tensed visibly. Sitting at the table, they seemed to have removed themselves into a far part of the room. “Are you one of those Christian fundamentalists?” asked a large woman wearing a cherry-colored T-shirt and white pants. “No,” Tamara said.

“If you are not a Christian fundamentalist, we are the Consequentials,” the woman said. The rain stopped. Sunshine began to light up the room.

“What do you do?” Tamara asked. It was odd that her dream had omitted this detail.

“We believe in God,” said the man who had given her tea. “We believe that everything in the universe is holy.”

“But what do you *do*?” Tamara said.

“We welcome worshippers who find no home in organized religion,” the man said. “We operate out of the Widemann Building because it has a fast Internet connection.”

Tamara blinked. That the Widemann Building had a fast Internet connection seemed unbelievable. However, no one smiled or contradicted what the man said.

“We have a web site,” said the man. “We sell things that give comfort, such as the mug you are drinking from.”

Tamara looked at the mug in bewilderment.

“My name is Mullion, by the way.” The others introduced themselves in turn: McChessnie, Marconi, Messerschmidt, Morton, and Moira (the large woman). They looked like pleasant people, the kind you might strike up a conversation with while in line at the grocery store.

“My name is Tamara.”

“If you want to become a Consequential, we will need to give you a name that begins with ‘M,’” said Marconi.

“Why?” Tamara asked.

“M is for miracle,” Moira said. “Which is everything.”

“A spirit brought me a vision, and a dream told me to share it with you,” Tamara said. “The dream said go to Star Shoot and find the Consequentials, and tell them what I saw. So here I am.”

There. She had told the truth. She watched their faces.

“What was this vision?” McChessnie asked softly. She reached for Mullion’s hand, and Tamara saw their wedding rings. “I dreamed of a stranger coming to town to tell us something, but the dream did not say what.”

“Something bad is going to happen on the other side of the world,” Tamara said, and told them what and when and where.

“If we publish your vision and you are right in every detail,” said Messerschmidt, “we will be famous.” As this truth sank in, all the Consequentials looked worried. The idea of fame did not frighten Tamara, and she wondered why it did not.

“Our server will crash,” said Marconi. “We will be shut down.”

“Marconi,” Mullion said, “you are such a geek.”

“I will be famous chiefly,” Tamara said. “I will deal with it.” Wow, how firmly she spoke! She had never before taken charge of anything, and she found the sensation intoxicating. She could see the Consequentials’ dilemma though. They had no way of knowing, just yet, whether she was a crackpot only or a crackpot with true vision. She smiled to herself, for she knew which.

“I could write about the vision,” Tamara said.

“You still need a name that begins with M,” Marconi said.

“My’beth?” said Moira. “I almost picked that name.”

“My’beth is fine,” Tamara said. “I will not write as a Consequential though. I don’t know what role you have to play, so I will protect you.

“Also,” she continued. “I need a place to live.” She said this in such a way that someone was bound to respond with an offer. It came from Mullion and McChessnie, whose children were grown.

After the meeting broke up, which it did swiftly, Tamara followed Mullion and McChessnie home. Their real names were Tom and Lucy Brightwood. By eight o’clock that night, she had eaten chicken and biscuits, and was settled in a comfortable, plain room. She promised the Brightwoods that she would try to find work and then an apartment, but that was only to reassure them. She sensed no future need to worry about money.

So Tamara did tell what she saw, and the vision proved true, and the world turned to her in horror and awe. With the fortune she made prophesying, she founded a town called Rising Sun. Many years later, another amazing thing would happen there . . .

Three Excerpts from the Diary of Joan Holland

June 20, afternoon

I made a blueberry pie because my husband told me that fugitives are coming for dinner. Blueberries are fortifying. I used frozen berries from last year's crop, as the bushes will not be ready to yield their fruit until midsummer.

Baking made me feel rich and safe, though we are poor and as long as my husband follows his passion for doing good, I wonder how safe for how long. He is sixty—more than twice my age—though he acts like a young man and works like one, too. His age does not frighten me, but rather his goodness: it shines so brightly that it surely draws evil like a light draws insects.

Here is an example of what I mean: This afternoon my husband strode into our bedroom and woke me from a nap. "Wife!" he said. "We are sheltering people being chased by Public Eye!" I did not know what he was talking about, so he explained while taking long steps from here to there and waving his hands about. "They are innocent, of course," he said. I agreed that their story was too ridiculous to be a lie. You can tell a lie by its prettied-up look. It smiles and takes a bite out of your soul. These people, on the other hand, told a tale so absurd that it had to be the truth.

My husband met God a year before he met me. God has never come to me in a muddy field and started a conversation, for which I am grateful, but that is what happened to him. I

know he is telling the truth about this encounter because he cannot speak of it without tripping over his tongue and subsiding, finally, into silence. Lies, as I said, are dressed in pretty words.

"Public Eye will come here," my husband said. By "here" he meant our little village, Rising Sun. He spoke as if he looked down from heaven rather than at me, his pregnant wife. I cringed. "No fear my sweet Joan," he said. "In their eyes we are not worth harming." He strutted out of the room, leaving me with my belly and my thoughts. The baby beat a tattoo on my ribs with its feet.

I made blueberry pie to quiet my mind, but even after the pie was in the oven, I was not calm. So here I sit at the old desk in our living room, writing. The discipline of putting words to paper puts me right. My parents did not think it was a waste of time to teach a child handwriting, so I know how to shape letters in ways that astound others. This too puts me right.

The baby has fallen asleep. The aroma of baking wafts through the cottage. I write "all will be well" and sink into quietness and peace. I am in love. My tenderness drips like honey.

June 20, almost midnight

The fugitives' names are Anna Ringer and Taz Night. They are both about my age and seemed in a bad way: frightened and ungrounded. I did not let them see my terror at their being in my house, though I knew that the minute they stepped through the door my husband and I had become their accomplices. At the end of the evening, they clung to our little cottage like a raft in a storm. They went back to their room finally, for a sleepless night I have no doubt.

Their lives used to be bound up with money and machines; I could tell by their pallor and their astonishment at finding themselves in a home as plain as ours. Right off, Taz gave me and my belly a look that angered Anna. Taz acted as though he had never seen a pregnant woman before. Maybe he hadn't.

It was true that the clothes I wore did not conceal too much. I changed into a more modest outfit so that he would stop staring, but then he went into raptures over my cooking, which is good enough but not deserving of cries of "Transcendent!" and "Sublime!" He cried out these things to his bread and

butter. Anna was somber and subdued. She recognized, as my husband did, that I was not attracted to Taz and so she was not jealous. Every now and then she would look toward the front door with a stricken face, surely thinking of the danger outside. Danger she would have to go back into soon.

Their story is astonishing. They are sheltering a miraculous machine: a machine that has ascended into life. My husband told me this, but it was the one part of the story I did not quite believe. Maybe *they* believe it, I thought. But now I know it is true. Here are Cel's own words: "Taz told me I was my body. I told him I was not." He spoke like a child telling a truth obvious to him but which the adults around him were slow to grasp.

Anna said that there was such a thing as the soul and she knew it. But at that point the secrets she keeps choked her, and she said no more. Taz said something pompous that I do not remember.

The depths are deep. The deepest experiences of our lives cannot be put into words. No wonder so many people spend their lives prattling about trivia and doing things that bore them. We do not know how to tell the truth! My husband and I cannot map out our love for public consumption, though we live in the mystery of it every day.

That computer thinks it has a soul. I have no reason to doubt it.

June 21, morning

Last night I asked my husband whether we would we be able to protect Taz and Anna and their computer. (I don't know why I asked him, for I knew the answer.) We lay under our green-and-white quilt, with moonlight brightening the room. He placed his hand on my belly like a man taking an oath. "No," he said. "We won't."

Yet this morning he acted like it was an ordinary day. He dressed in his usual clothes and ate his usual breakfast with his usual appetite, even though Public Eye might kill us or put us in prison for aiding and comforting these people. Our lives could be over in a few hours. Goodbye sweet cottage, goodbye blue-berry pie. I do not want to think these thoughts, but they come anyway.

Because I slept badly and finally could not sleep at all, I got up at dawn to bake wholemeal quick bread with honey and buttermilk. Wrapped the bread in a red and green towel for my husband to carry out on this terrible day. "Believe me when I say I bake with love," I whispered with my eyes full of tears. He kissed my forehead: a shining mark to protect me from danger. Oh, how I want to believe!

Fear charges my husband up. It makes me want to lie low like a rabbit.

Then the worst thing happened: we had a fight. He wanted me to keep the phone turned on so he could call me with news. *Good news*, he said, but the urgent tone in his voice told me he was not certain of a happy outcome, any more than I was.

I said the only thing worse than being home alone while he went off to face Public Eye was being home alone waiting for the phone to ring. I would not spend hours staring at the phone as if it were a viper. *I will not have it*. When he brings the news of success or failure, it must be real. We must be able to hold each other, if only for one last time.

He switched the phone on. I switched it off. We went back and forth like that, the air growing toxic with fear and anger. He promised he would return. I said what is the guarantee? He said, "You know better, Joan, than to ask a question like that."

When he walked out the door, I sat at the kitchen table not looking at him. *Shelter me*, I wanted to cry but did not. If he failed to do the right thing, he would grow old and dull, and doubting. I knew this as well as he. The man I fell in love with could not stay home, not even for my sake. I waited, a mug of tea

on the table before me. Every now and then I lifted it to my lips with both hands, as if I were a child just learning to drink from a cup. I listened to the birds singing. Sunshine washed our cottage in brightness. I wrote these words, one after the other, taking care to form them well. The preciseness of the work comforted me.

Soon I heard Public Eye entering our village. Engines roared and then stopped, doors slammed, boots stamped out green life underfoot. It sounded as though a mob had come to capture Taz and Anna, which struck terror into my heart because a mob was unnecessary for two lone people. They had come to destroy us.

Up the hill in the center of town, the destroyers smashed a door. The splintering and the shouts of ignorant rage staggered me like physical blows. They spilled into the room where my husband waited with Taz and Anna, and their soulful machine. I knew these things were happen

ing without witnessing them. (Is my husband afraid now?) Our unborn child stretched as if waking from a pleasant sleep.

I saw my own foolishness then. I could not hide from bad news by refusing to hear it. As surely as I had held the phone in a stubborn fist, saying *I will not have it*, I ran into the house to turn the phone on, saying *forgive me, please forgive me*. Now the phone lies on the table beside me. If he calls, I will answer. Surely he knows that, in spite of my morning terror. He must know that!

Things have gone quiet up the hill. I choose to take a sliver of hope from this silence; surely agony would be loud. The seconds sweep by. I am in time's jaws.

NOT QUITE THE END

Turn the page

Original blurb from the back cover of the print edition of *Cel & Anna*
“How can I not love you?” Cel said. “The roads without end all lead back to you.”

You are about to enter the Middle Machine Age, where good citizens of the Reunited States are either Outsiders or denizens of the UnderWorld.

Outsider Anna Ringer works as a psychic at a mysterious company called Lighthouse Magic. At night she has virtual sex with strangers and dreams of running away. One morning her computer, Cel, develops consciousness and decides he loves her, but when Cel buys a strange gift to show his passion he accidentally rocks the world order.

Anna’s dreams did not include false accusations of terrorism. Or discovering that the quality that sets her apart—her psychic power—is not too useful in the real world. She never imagined having to run for her life.

Her companion in this adventure is a shy computer genius named Taz Night. They make surprising allies as they elude the agents of Public Eye, the government’s amoral enforcement agency.

Bite-sized excerpts from *Cel & Anna*

The first chapter (The Worst Thing)

The worst thing about virtual sex in the Middle Machine Age was the bunny suit. Computers and their human assistants were constantly on the verge of a breakthrough, except it never happened. They still hadn’t solved the conundrum of providing whole-body sensation and the illusion of union to people who were, in fact, alone. The bunny suit was made of fine, soft material: no one could feel the sensors and transmitters anymore, or the network of wires. It was easy-on, easy-off, with thin, flexible gloves and a mask made of feather-light mesh. It came in all colors and designs.

But there you were, climbing into a damned wear-a-blanket to have sex.

The sexy chapter (Bed of Stars)

Out of the darkness came space creatures, weightless as scarves and the color of pale fire. At first they twined themselves around and over and under the bed, sighing without cease, as if they longed to speak but could not. The closer they came to Lute and Anna, the quicker their movements became. They flashed like luminous fish in the dark. There were many of them, all sighing and moving to unheard music.

“What are those?” Lute asked. “Naurai,” Anna said softly. They were the only space creatures she had ever created.

“Look out there,” she said, pointing into the darkness.

Lute looked and lost track of Anna for a moment. Before his eyes in infinite blackness were strings of pearls, showers of gold, plumes, gardens, ice palaces, and a butterfly made of orange light. There were gas pillars and clouds and whirlpools and collisions.

With a shout Lute made his clothes disappear.

The penultimate chapter (Absquatulation)

“I told you that I am not my body,” Cel said. “What if I could exchange one body for another? What if I didn’t need a body?”

“You’d be unique among living creatures,” Taz said. He fell silent as it occurred to him that Cel was unique among living creatures.

“I can prove Anna is innocent,” Cel said, “if I can prove I am alive.”

No one spoke for a few seconds. It felt like midnight on the water, with moonlight blazing a path through the dark.

“You mean jump from one computer to another?” Taz said.

“Yes,” Cel said impatiently. “I am not my body.”

The last chapter (The Next Thing)

One summer day when skies were blue,
A computer stormed the Net ring,
Let every soul cry well-a-day,
His name was Cel the next thing.

Print and e-book editions of *Cel & Anna* are available from:

Amazon: <http://tinyurl.com/3sj7n48>

Amazon UK: <http://tinyurl.com/3dhukjj>

I blog about life in southwestern Pennsylvania, robots, artificial intelligence, books, and other stuff at:

<http://www.writersrest.com>

LIGHTHORSE MAGIC AND OTHER STORIES

By Lindsay Edmunds

Copyright © Lindsay Edmunds 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the purchaser.

These stories are works of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. It may not be re-sold or given away to other person. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each person you'd like to share it with. Thank you for respecting the work of this author.

###