

DUALITY

BOOK ONE

Melancholia

ELLE CASEY

COPYRIGHT NOTICE

© 2013 Elle Casey, all rights reserved, worldwide. No part of this file may be reproduced, uploaded to the Internet, or copied without author permission.

Want to get an email when my next book is released?
Sign up here: <http://eepurl.com/h3aYM>

Other Books by Elle Casey

War of the Fae: Book One, The Changelings

War of the Fae: Book Two, Call to Arms

War of the Fae: Book Three, Darkness & Light

War of the Fae: Book Four, New World Order

Clash of the Otherworlds: Book 1, After the Fall

Clash of the Otherworlds: Book 2, Between the Realms

Clash of the Otherworlds: Book 3, Portal Guardians

Apocalypse: Book 1, Kahayatl

Apocalypse: Book 2, Warpaint

Apocalypse: Book 3, Exodus

Apocalypse: Book 4, Haven

My Vampire Summer

My Vampire Fall

Wrecked

Reckless

Aces High

(co-written with Jason Brant)

CHAPTER ONE: MALCOLM

FOR AS LONG AS I can remember I've brought nothing but misery to those around me. Pain. Sadness. A loneliness so bone-deep it smothers any thoughts of joy or hope that might try to seep in from reality.

I don't do this on purpose. In fact, I'd do anything to change it - this effect I have on people. Some kids might think they want to be an agent of darkness, so they dress up in black clothes and dye their hair and do drastic things to their wardrobes, shocking people with their angry, pugnacious attitudes. But if they were to walk a day in my shoes, they'd change their minds in a second. They'd join the Latin club and study up and do everything they could to make their parents proud. No one truly wants to be me; they just think they do.

I call myself that - the agent of darkness - but I don't really know what I am or what my problem is. What I *do* know is that it's real and it's nothing I can control. Believe me, I've tried. I've done everything from smiling entire weeks on end until my face ached with it, to hiding out in my house and cutting off contact

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

with the outside world. But nothing works.

My own happiness and attitude have nothing to do with how others feel in my presence; I can be smiling like a Girl Scout who just offloaded a thousand boxes of Thin Mints for cold hard cash, and the Miserables would still dive into the depths of despair without a second thought after being around me for a while. That's what I call them: the Miserables - those people who *want* to be sad for some strange and entirely effed up reason. I'm not a Miserable. I'm immune to the sadness that I deliver in spades to the innocents around me. It's kind of a sick joke on me, how I can be working so hard at being happy while I make everyone around me want to jump off a cliff.

Hiding doesn't work. No matter how invisible I try to be and no matter how hard I try to stay away, the Miserables come and find me anyway. They seek me out and haunt me, refusing to leave without a fight. I'm rarely alone. Sometimes there are whole groups of them flitting around me like angry black butterflies, and other times it's just one person.

Case in point: my latest unwelcome acquisition, Caden Kucharski. His friends call him Kootch for short. I don't call him anything because I'm trying to get rid of him, but the kid is miserable with a capital M, and he wants nothing to do with happiness. He's been all over me like a fly on shit since last month.

"Yo, Malcolm. What's up, man?" He stood waiting for me at my locker. Again.

ELLE CASEY

I just stared at him hard for a few seconds, wishing he'd take the hint and get lost. I spun the combination of my lock, focusing all my attention on it, hoping he'd see I was blowing him off. It was a wasted effort, though. It always is.

The problem with Miserables like him is they never get the hint. Sometimes it even seems to make them happy when I'm mean like this, which is really sick and twisted. Lots of times I have to force myself to be nice, when all I really want to do is scream at them to fuck off and leave me the hell alone. I mean that in the nicest way, though. I'm just trying to protect them from me, from the effect I have on them. I wish I could have friends. I just ... can't.

My hard look had zero effect. Kootch smiled. "That good, eh? Yeah, me too. Just got out of Chem class. That asshole Pritchard is a real prickard. Get it? Prickard? Guy's a prick?"

"Yeah, I get it." I shut my locker and spun the dial on the lock. I sighed heavily, knowing I was going to be peppered with Kootchisms all the way to my next class.

"So what's up after school? Going anywhere? Wanna hang out?"

"Busy."

"Or, you're busy again, huh? That's cool. Seems like whenever I ask you to do something you're busy, but hey, you can't blame a dude for trying. I downloaded some new music to my nano, you should check it. Hardcore metal, man." He held out his mp3 player towards me.

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

I didn't even look down. "No, thanks. I don't like metal."

"Really? That's surprising. I figured ... well, who cares. I don't like it that much either. I'll probably delete it off today anyway. What music do you like? What's your favorite band?"

"Are you asking me on a date?" Sometimes if I play the homo card with guys it makes a difference and scares them off. I should probably feel bad about playing on people's phobias to save myself, but I don't. I know it saves them too.

"Ha! That's funny. No, man. I'm straight. I like the ladies and believe me, the ladies like the Kootch. Check this." He lifted up his hand and held it out towards a girl coming our way down the hallway. "Yo! Melissa! Give me some-a that sugar."

She scowled at him and walked by, making sure to stay far away from his outstretched hand.

I tried not to react, but I couldn't help it. I laughed.

"Bitch," he mumbled, letting his hand drop. "Chicks in this school are so friggin stuck up." He cheered up instantly. "But the chicks over at Eastman? They're hot and willing for the Kootch. All up on me and shit when I'm at the games."

"Whatever you say, Caden. Listen, I have to go to the bathroom. See you around." I made a sharp left turn into the guys' room and quickly locked the main door behind me. Luckily, no one else was in there.

The sound of Caden hitting his forehead on the door echoed out into the wall-to-wall tiled room. "Hey, man, did you lock the door? What'd you do that for? I need to take a shit." He laughed.

“Nah serious, I don’t need to do that, but I could take a piss. I got the urge to purge. Open up. And hey, you can call me Kootch, by the way. All my buds call me Kootch.”

I dropped my bag on the floor and sat down, resting my head on my forearms that were crossed over my knees. This was the only thing that worked - waiting them out. Even the Miserables had to heed the call of the school bell. I’ve racked up a record amount of tardies in my high school career, but it’s better than being molested in the bathroom by a million questions and one-sided conversations that made me want to drown myself in the toilet.

The bell rang, interrupting Kootch’s inane chatter. He was quiet for all of two seconds. “Oh, dude, you’re going to be late. Don’t worry, I’ll cover for ya. I’ll tell Adams that you’re constipated or something. Talk to you after class! Or you could text me in class. I’ll risk it for friends like that. Later!”

And then he was gone.

I sighed and stood in front of the mirror, taking a few seconds to look at myself. I try to be unnoticeable. I dress average - not in fashion and not out, I wear my hair in a boring cut not too long or too short and keep it the natural brown I was born with, and I don’t wear black or paint my nails or even use gel. I did that for a while, dressed all in black and tried to look forbidding and dangerous so people would leave me alone, but the Miserables loved it. They ate it up. It attracted them to me in droves, so I had to stop. Now the name of the game for me is to be plain. Unremarkable.

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

Invisible.

Grabbing my backpack off the ground, I sighed at what my life had become. Hiding out in the bathroom again, fending off the friendly advances of another Miserable soul. *So lame.*

I walked over to the bathroom door, counting to ten slowly once I reached it. I had to make sure I couldn't hear Kootch anymore before turning the lock. Miserables can be really persistent and tricky when they want to be. I've been hijacked by a few who held their breath so I wouldn't hear them. They can be freaky intense in their need to be unhappy sometimes.

When I was sure he was gone and the nearby hallway empty, I unlocked the door and walked out. I turned left to go to English Lit class, the wide corridor stretching out in front of me and beckoning me forward. It's a sick joke. It calls me to something I can never have - a normal day in high school, filled with gossip, friends, jokes, and maybe even a crush on a cute girl. There will be none of that for the agent of darkness. None of it. I've given up on being sad about it. It's just my reality, nothing more, nothing less.

The second bell rang right next to my head. To me it's not just the sound of being late. It's the sound that reminds me I'll never fit in here or anywhere people are. I'll never have any friends. I'll never be able to live a peaceful life until I go so far, far away that no one will ever find me. I have three more months left before my eighteenth birthday. Three more months before I can cut out of this place and disappear forever. I'm counting the days.

ELLE CASEY

CHAPTER TWO: RAE

I SMILED AT THE PLUMP lady standing behind the front desk. But not too much. I have to be careful not to smile too much. People get very attached sometimes, and then it's not good for anyone.

“We're thrilled to have Rae here with us at Preston High,” said the principal. He was trembling he was so excited. “Just thrilled. I've received nothing but glowing recommendations from everyone I've talked to about her.” He smiled, revealing capped teeth and funky-colored gums.

The receptionist's constant, unwavering grin was putting me on edge. I had to turn my back to her.

Facing my parents now, I watched their heads bob up and down in response to the principal's glowing accolades.

“She's top of her class her just like she was at her previous school, and on track to be valedictorian,” the principal continued. “We've already done the conversion of her transcripts. We're just pleased as punch to take her on. She'll be a credit to the school.”

“Oh, she will,” said my mother, so absolutely sure of her

words they practically sparkled as they came out of her mouth. “She’s been number one in her class since her very first day of kindergarten. We’ve never had to worry a single moment about her grades.”

I gritted my teeth in frustration. My parents. *Ugh*. They meant well, but *ugh* anyway. They refused to accept the fact that my perfect grades weren’t the result of a brilliant mind but instead were another side effect of something else entirely.

“It’s other things that are a problem,” said my father. He was being stern, like he always is when he talks about this part of my life. “We have to be absolutely sure she’ll be safe here at this school. As I mentioned in my email and over the phone, she’s had some ... issues before. And I don’t want to see those issues repeated here.” My father frowned at the principal as if the poor rotund man was personally responsible for the incidents at my last school.

The principal was shaking his head vehemently and holding out his hands like two stop signs. “You have absolutely nothing to worry about, nothing at all, I can assure you. We have a zero tolerance policy towards stalking of any kind, and that includes social media and other types of cyber stalking.”

“Good. But you have to remain vigilant.” My father had his finger up and was pointing it in the man’s face.

I nearly laughed at how comical he looked, all serious like that. I knew it was a big deal, but sometimes he took it too far. I rolled my eyes. I couldn’t stand it anymore. Reaching out and

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

taking his finger, I gently pushed his hand down to his side. “Okay, Dad, he knows. He heard you the first twenty times you said it.”

My dad turned his concern on me, all his anger gone and replaced with fear - fear for my future. He always worries about my future - my next year, my next week, my next five minutes. It was suffocating at best and more like insanity in my darker hours.

“Rae, you know we have to be careful. People get ... crazy sometimes where you’re concerned.”

Anyone listening in on this conversation from a remote location would think we were all members of a looney bin, having a deluded discussion over a celebrity or something. But I’m no celebrity. I’m just Rae. And for as long as I can remember, I’ve had this problem. It follows me everywhere like a dog at my heels. People who get near me become so happy, so full of joy, they eventually get to the point that they can’t *not* be around me. And in their need to be close, they get *too* close. They smother me. They scare me. They become a danger to me.

Or at least, that’s what my dad thinks. The problem is, he suffers as much as the strangers do from the effects of being in my presence. He thinks he’s just being a protective, loving father, but I know the truth. He’s under my thrall. He can’t be without me, just like my mom. Just like the kids at my last school and the one before it and the one before that one...

The only thing keeping my parents from homeschooling me on an island in the middle of nowhere is my threat that I’ll leave

ELLE CASEY

them. It's a threat I have to reissue every time they pull me from another school. Eight times in the last three years, I've stared my parents in the face and warned, "*If you don't enroll me in a public school somewhere, I'm going to disappear and you'll never see me again. Ever.*"

And so they enroll me, because they have no choice.

Neither of them wants me to leave. In fact, they both believe they'd die if I ever did. It's been a burden of mine that I've been unable to shake, try as I might. I hate to say this even just to myself, but one of these days, I am going to leave. I'm going to disappear forever and never look back. I'll go where no one can find me, where I'll be completely alone. Then I'll never have to worry about people gluing themselves to me and never wanting to let go. I'll finally be able to think and just breathe for a change.

"Here's your list of classes and a map," said the receptionist behind me.

"You don't need to give her a map," said the student helper standing next to her. She snatched the paper out of the older lady's hand. "I'll be happy to show her where to go."

The girl grinned at me with a thousand-watt smile. The orange and yellow of her cheerleader uniform went perfectly with her bouncy ponytail and miniature megaphone earrings.

Uh-oh. A Rainbow. That's what I call the people who can't get enough of me - people who want to overdose on happiness until they drowned in its sweet depths. But no one can handle that much of it at once. It always manages to short circuit something in

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

their brains. *Want* changes to *need*, and then I become the drug they're addicted to and can't live without. It's not a good thing to be someone's personal happy-crack.

I have to stay very far away from Rainbows whenever I can help it. It was a Rainbow at my last school who I now have a restraining order against. Jerry the Rainbow. Captain of the basketball team with hands as big as dinner plates. His joy was a scary thing to behold in the end.

"No, that's okay," I said, taking the map from her hands. "I like to find my own way."

"Nonsense, this is the first thing we always do," said the principal. "We give a tour and hands-on service for every new student or student in need." He grinned big at me. His front teeth looked like they were just balanced there, like they'd fall out at any moment. I tried not to stare.

A small snort came from across the room.

I leaned to the side so I could see around the fat principal. A girl with hacked up and dyed green hair sat there in a chair, waiting for someone. She was examining her fingernails, which I noticed were painted moss green to match her hair. Her torn fishnet stockings went perfectly with her scratched-up combat boots, ratty shorts, and loose shirt that hung off her right shoulder.

I smiled very briefly. It was possible I was looking at a Neutral, which thrilled me to the bone. I'd only met a couple in my life, but they were like golden people to me - the few who weren't affected by me in any way. They either liked me or hated

me on my own merits. Usually, it ended up in hate because being around someone like me can be very annoying, with the Rainbows there all the time. But still, for a few brief moments in my life, I've had interactions with Neutrals, and I could recount them all detail by detail even now. Years later. Being me is a lonely business. I hang on to what I can and try to forget the rest.

“I'll get to you in a moment, Miss Butts. You can just wait your turn.”

I lifted an eyebrow. *Her name is Butts? Holy bad luck.*

“Can't wait,” she said, not looking up.

“How about if *she* shows me to my first class?” I asked. I'm not ashamed to admit I turned on the sweetness just a little. It doesn't take much for me to get my way.

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” asked my mom, frowning at Miss Butts. She leaned in closer and whispered really loudly. “I think maybe you'd be better off with the cheerleader, don't you?”

“Mom, geez, give it a rest. Please.”

My mom looked like she was going to get all firm about it.

I looked at the principal. “Tell her it's okay, would you? She worries too much.”

The principal was nervous. He looked from the rebel in the waiting room to the chipper cheerleader bouncing in her Keds and didn't know what to say.

“I ... um ...” Sweat beaded on his forehead.

“Please?” I smiled at him. “Just this once? I'd appreciate it. I'm sure your receptionist could use her assistant's help, and I'm

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

anxious to get started.” *Lies, lies, lies.* I just wanted to get away from all these people and out into the empty hallways. I took my moments of peace when I could get them. Maybe this Neutral wouldn’t hate me all the time. Maybe we could be friends for two minutes before she got tired of the Rainbows.

“Well, if it’s all right with your parents.” He looked to my father for guidance.

I gave my dad the look. The one that said, “*Don’t suffocate me.*” He’d seen it thousands of times.

“Fine.” He turned his head to the girl in the chair. “But you mind your Ps and Qs young lady. Our daughter is very special.”

She looked up and scowled at him. “Who the hell are you to tell me what to do? You’re not *my* father.” She stood. “I’ll take this *special* chick where she needs to go, but only so I can go have a smoke on the way.” She grabbed the map out of my hands and the schedule from the assistant without hesitating. Looking down at it, she said, “Come on ... Rae. Let’s go find your English Lit class with Mr. Adams.” She walked out the door without waiting for me.

I patted my mom on the shoulder. “Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad. See you after school.” My mom leaned in for a kiss, but I ignored it. It was better not to encourage her. She’s been known to dissolve in tears over a simple goodbye.

“We’ll pick you up!” shouted my mom.

“I’ll get a ride!” I said from out in the hallway. I took several long steps to put some distance between us.

“That was lame,” said the girl, clearly disgusted.

“Yeah. Sorry. My parents are seriously overprotective.”

“Poor you,” she said, just before blowing a big bubble with her gum. She popped it and then sucked it in, cracking the gum as she chewed it down.

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Jasmine. Jasmine Butts. Go ahead and laugh. Like I give a shit what you think.”

“I like it. Jasmine Butts. Jazzy Butts.” The smile came whether I wanted it to or not.

“Call me that again, and I’ll kick you in the taco.”

I burst out laughing. “Wow. In the taco? You don’t mess around, do you?”

“No.” She blew another big bubble and sucked it back in.

“So, do you like going here?” I asked.

She looked at me briefly and frowned. “Please hold all questions until the end of the tour.”

I bit my lip and nodded, not trusting myself not to laugh again.

She gestured to the left. “This is the shitter on your left. If there’s a chick on the door, you can use it. If it’s got a man on the door, well, I don’t recommend it.”

A little farther down the hall, she gestured to the right. “That’s the water fountain. If you don’t mind drinking other people’s loogies, go for it.”

“Oh, sick.” *Note to self: bring water bottle.*

A door opened in the hallway farther up ahead and a boy came

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

out, a backpack thrown casually over his shoulder.

She spoke in a quieter tone. “And that, ladies and gentlemen, is the elusive and mysterious Malcolm McNamara. Late to class as usual.”

Something about the way he walked caught my attention. I couldn’t see his face, but the way he slouched over and slinked a little, it was as if he was sneaking down the hall, trying not to be seen.

“Who’s he?” I asked, trying to speed up. I just wanted to see his face.

She put her hand on my arm to stop me from going too fast. “He’s our resident ghost. Just leave him alone.”

I shook her off. “Why?” We were stopped now, our bodies still facing down the hall, but heads turned to face each other.

She shrugged. “I don’t know.” She seemed mystified by her answer. She blew another bubble and then sucked it in. “Come on. You’re already late.” She stared walking again.

“Why were you in the office just now? Were you in trouble?”

“You could say that. But then again you could say that I was in the process of actively thwarting the tyranny of the close-minded, too. It just depends how you look at it.”

“What’d you do?”

“I let everyone in the cafeteria know that our meatballs are tainted with horse meat.”

I laughed, a little shocked to learn that about my new school. “Are they?”

“How do I know? But if it pushes a few more kids towards being vegetarians or at least thinking about what they shove in their stupid mouths, then it works for me.”

“Okaaaay,” I said, nodding while at the same time wondering what her ultimate goal was. Definitely not popularity. Friendship probably wasn’t the plan either. But maybe she’d change her mind after getting to know me; maybe she’d want to be friends with me. It wouldn’t be terrible to hang out with her, even though she was obviously someone who worked pretty hard at getting people mad at her. Anything was better than being alone. Almost anything.

“So here you are,” she said, turning the corner and gesturing towards the first door on our left. “Your very first class at Butt Suck High. Here’s your map, here’s your list, and here at the bottom is your locker combo and number, written in purple pen because Ashley Dumbass doesn’t write in any other color *but* purple. You’ll find it around the corner, back where we just were. When you get your books, you can load them in there and never look at them again like I do or you can use them to study. I leave that up to you.” She saluted and turned to go.

“Thanks, Jasmine. For your help and the tour.”

She said nothing. She just waved over her head and popped another really loud bubble on her way down the hall.

I went over to the door and peeked through the narrow but tall rectangular window with wire mesh embedded in it that gave a partial view of the classroom’s interior. Most of the students were looking at the teacher. The boy Malcolm was just sitting down in a

DUALITY: BOOK I (MELANCHOLIA)

seat near the back of the class on the far side, and a boy in the chair next to him was leaning over to say something to him.

I took a deep breath and grabbed the doorknob. “Might as well get it over with,” I said. I turned the handle and pushed the door open.

All eyes went to me, and the teacher stopped talking in mid-sentence.