

The Talking Cure, Book One:

Magic Through Psychiatry



A Novel by
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ISBN

(print) 978-1-987884-60-9

(ebook) 978-1-987884-61-6

Praise for the Talking Cure

Praise for BOOK ONE of *The Talking Cure*:

“[A]n engaging and exhilarating paranormal read. . . a great job of world-building and infusing humor and wit . . . Captivating, heartfelt, and entertaining . . . Rating: 10/10”

—reviewer Anthony Avina

“5/5 stars . . . I really enjoyed this story . . . [Zach and Cynthia] have been through the dark . . . and perhaps they can help each other get to the other side. The cases . . . were very interesting indeed . . . And I absolutely love his car! (It is magical and so fantastic, though its story is so sad, I want to adopt it!) The humour is excellent, I had a few times where I laughed out loud. . .”

Amyah MapleBell, MapleBell Reviews

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Preface

“Heaven and earth! *Must* I remember?”

--*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene 2

FROM THE CASE FILES OF DR. CYNTHIA MANN:

Chapter 1: The Magician And The Green Cat

After the Cormac “Whit” Whitney case, I left New York City, and moved my psychiatric practice to Cleveland. I had to, to get away from the various people—the reporters, the fans, the gossips—who wanted to ask me endless questions about what might have happened to the fallen pop star.

“Dr. Mann, isn’t it true that you were the last person to see Whit alive?”

Yes.

“Doctor, in your professional opinion as a psychiatrist, was Whit crazy?”

No.

“They didn’t find a body—do you feel that Whit was murdered?”

You don’t want to know what I think happened, because it’s too horrible to even think about. Maybe someday I’ll talk about what happened, but I can’t face it right now...

After moving to Cleveland, my professional life assumed a quiet, calming normalcy. Most of my cases were run-of-the-mill neurotics, nothing very interesting or challenging... or so I thought.

One afternoon, just before five-thirty, I’d seen my last patient for the day, and, thinking about the nice cool breeze that was surely waiting outside, I was getting a sort of fallish version of spring fever. I was on the verge of telling my receptionist Kyla to go on home, and then just leaving early myself. “No, Cynthia,” I said to myself, “you have paperwork to do.” I got back to work, finishing typing up my case notes concerning the patient I’d just seen, a young woman with bipolar disorder.

Then I heard a stranger’s voice say, “I didn’t realize that you’d be so young... or so pretty.”

I looked up to see a handsome man standing in my office, by the door. His hair was medium brown, his eyes, light brown. He was wearing a regular white button-up shirt,

and blue jeans, with brown leather shoes. He was about 5 foot 10—not tall, but certainly not short. He was about the same age as me, I figured, so therefore seemed like he was in his early thirties.

There wasn't anything particularly unusual about the man, except perhaps for the fact that he looked rather tired.

I didn't quite feel... threatened or anything, because his attitude just seemed so... normal. It was like I'd just gotten distracted during the moments when he must've opened the door and come into the room. His expression, his body language, suggested that he'd just been there for a moment, that he'd seen that I was engaged in something, and hadn't been able to decide how to get my attention.

This idea was so convincing, I ignored the fact that I normally heard something when someone entered my office—their shoes against the carpet, a sort of acoustic change when the door opened, a little click that the door's hinges made, something...

But I'd heard nothing, felt nothing... and was left feeling only a little curiosity. “—How'd you get past my receptionist?” I asked.

“Eh, I told her to go home. That was what you wanted, right?” he answered with an accent that told me he was definitely from the Midwest, as opposed to somewhere more exotic. Something about the way he slipped a sort of tiny, faint “uh” in at the end of “told her-uh to go home,” with a little bit sharper “eye” in his “right” than some people would put...

“...How did you know that I'd been considering taking the rest of the day off?”

“Simple,” he said, “I'm a magician.”

“You mean like a stage illusionist?”

“No, just your average supernatural detective type.”

“Uh...”

“Maybe you should ask me to sit down and tell you what my trouble is.” I did. He slouched in the leather chair in front of me. “I need some sleeping pills,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because there’s some sort of magical creature that’s invading my dreams. Until I figure out how to get it off my back, I need something that’ll knock me out at night without letting me dream. I’m thinking Ambien, or something stronger, if you’ll just prescribe that for me, please. Then I’ll take my prescription slip and be on my way, and you’ll never have to think about the strange man who came into your office without an appointment ever again.”

Well, I wasn’t about to give a prescription to a complete stranger, especially not with a story like *that*. “Why’d you pick me to come and see, Mister...?”

“Zach Cutter. It used to be Zach Lansky, but I changed it after... what happened.”

“...After *what* happened?” I asked. Mr. Cutter pulled up his sleeve. I saw the scars of a failed suicide attempt. “How...” I stopped. *How* was sort of obvious. “Why...?”

“I did this after Celeste died.”

“Celeste?”

“...Celeste was my girlfriend. And she was a gifted psychic. We were investigating a haunted house case... only it turned out that the house was chock-full of the most vicious, pissed-off ghosts *ever*. Six of the people who went into that house that day ended up dead—and no, it wasn’t me who murdered any of them. Some killed each other... some, no one could even figure out what could have caused what happened to their bodies. Christ, it was awful. They locked me up for months, after I got out of there, for my own good... and I needed that time, considering the things I saw...”

“...Oh. ...I’m sorry to hear that.”

“...That’s not what you’re *really* thinking.”

“...Isn’t it?”

“You’re thinking, ‘this guy is a danger to himself, and maybe others.’ But let me tell you, Cynthia, about a fourth of the magicians I know have been under observation for some serious mental health issues at one time or another. Magic is a very stressful job.”

“Dr. Mann.”

“Pardon me?”

“We’ve just met. Maybe in a few sessions, we can start calling each other by our first names, but... it’s nothing personal, it’s just... I *am* supposed to be the doctor here.”

“Oh, sorry. Now, about my sleeping pills, *Dr. Mann...*”

“No, I can’t give you that prescription.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because so far, I don’t believe a word of your story.” Honestly, so far, he sounded sincere, but based on the things he was telling me, I wondered if he was just testing me, to see what sort of person I might be, what my reaction would be to the kinds of things he was telling me...

“Um...” said Mr. Cutter. “May I ask you why you don’t believe me? I mean, you’d take other patients’ stories at face value. You’d give *them* the benefit of the doubt.”

“That’s because my other patients’ stories tend to make sense.”

“You don’t believe in magic?”

“Let’s say I’m an open-minded skeptic. If you can prove to me that magic exists...”

“You want me to do a magic trick?”

“Yes, that might help.”

“I’ll do you one better.”

“How?”

“I’ll tell you about the case I’ve been working on.”

“I don’t think a case could convince me...”

“You listened to Cormac Whitney talk about Die Dame, you can listen to me.”

“How did you...” I stopped. I didn’t tell people about what “Whit” Whitney had told me. I never talked about him. As far as I knew, *Kyla* still didn’t know anything about the talk Whit had had with me. I had never said a word to her about it. I suppose she might have learned about my connection to Whit Whitney if she’d Googled me... if she had, though, she’d never mentioned it.

But Mr. Cutter *really* shouldn't have known... that phrase he'd said. That phrase that Whit had mentioned— "*How did you know about—*"

"I'm a magician, like I said," he shrugged. "Now, do you want to hear about my newest case, or what?" He didn't act like he was interested in the fact that he knew something that I'd never told anyone. He acted like he wanted to talk about his job.

I tried to think. Maybe Whit's wife had told someone some of the same things Whit'd told me...? I tried to keep in mind that there were all sorts of possibilities I might not be aware of how— "—All right," I said, "tell me about your recent case you handled. As a supernatural investigator. See if you can convince me."

"Fair enough. It started out after I came back to Cleveland for a visit..."

"This is your hometown?"

"Yeah, I grew up here. But I haven't settled down anywhere for more years than I can count... In fact, I was living in N.Y.C. around the time that you encountered Cormac Whitney. That's how I knew to contact you."

"Really?"

"Well, it wasn't like I was *stalking* you... There was just a lot of gossip concerning how a non-magical type psychiatrist could attract a magical-type case like 'Whit' Whitney into her life... When my nightmares started happening, I figured that someone who'd had a little magical experience might be more sympathetic to me than someone who hadn't. I would have gone to a magically-based psychiatrist, but... I dunno, maybe I don't have enough to base this on, but I've just always gotten the impression that they're terrible gossips, really... And magical enemies love to hear that someone's having problems. It makes the person more vulnerable to magical or psychic attack, y'know?"

"'Whit' Whitney was... it was a disappearance case, that's all."

"Can't argue with that, I guess," said Mr. Cutter. "Anyway, I started getting a little bored with New York, as I seem to get with every place I live sooner or later, so I decided to come back to my hometown and track down some old haunts. I mean not literal *old haunts*, just places I remembered from when I was young... It just felt like it

was time to come back and, I dunno. ...But the supernatural follows me, even when I'm not looking for it. It's probably the same with you."

"...Not particularly."

Mr. Cutter laughed at that... then he started telling me about his case...



Cutter's Story About The Green Cat:

There's a little Greek restaurant in Garfield Heights called Zorba's, Dr. Mann. It's a family-based operation, passed down from generation to generation. It's been around since the late '40s, named after the 1946 novel, *Zorba the Greek*. Great food, nice people. I like to throw some business their way whenever I'm in town. It's a very friendly place, looks like an old deli. There're tables with olive oil on 'em, and candles, very sweet, very romantic. Celeste and I used to go there a lot... but... well, that's not the point.

There are a lot of pictures on the walls, so that you have something to look at while you eat. Since I usually eat alone—magic can be a very lonely business, Dr. Mann—I like to look at the pictures. There are a lot of family photos, a few pictures of Cleveland from other eras, a few photos of Greece, a few sketches and paintings, mostly depicting Greek-restaurant type scenes.

Anyway, I was about to go into Zorba's for the first time in a while... and when I was about thirty feet from the front door, a bunch of people came running out of the place. I heard them on their cell phones, saying things like, "it's haunted" and "blood everywhere!" As a matter of fact, some of them had shoes or pants or jackets that were slightly stained red...

Intrigued, I went on in, once they were all out of my way.

By the time I made it inside, I was the only customer. The place was absolutely covered in blood. Blood was splattered on the floor, on the white tablecloths, and, in the dining area, there was even blood here and there on the plates of food itself. Not exactly how you want to eat your supper...

Alcina and her husband Christos were standing in the middle of this seeming-carnage, looking kind of defeated. They were both in their early thirties... I knew they were

about the same age, because they were childhood sweethearts, Alcina the granddaughter of Greek immigrants, Christos the son of another family who moved to the area from Greece... I used to watch them crawl around in a playpen in the restaurant when they were little kids. "If this keeps happening, we'll have to go out of business," said Christos. He was poorly-shaven, looked tired, more worried than I was used to seeing him.

"No! I promised my grandparents that as long as they were alive, I'd keep this restaurant open," said Alcina. She looked at least as stressed-out as Christos, but still pretty, with her long black hair and her eye makeup that gave her a tiny hint of the Cleopatra look, or I guess in her case a sort of vague Helen of Troy look.

"We might not have a choice," Christos said.

"Uh... maybe I can be of help," I said.

They hadn't particularly noticed me until then. "—Zach!" said Alcina.

"Boy, are we glad to see you!" said Christos.

I asked them what'd happened there, exactly. "Oh, God, where to start?" Alcina said.

"At the beginning is always nice," I said. I touched a spot of blood on a table with my fingers. Believe it or not, I wasn't particularly surprised when the blood disappeared a couple of seconds later, like invisible ink.

"It'll all be gone in a minute or two," Christos said.

"Ghost blood, eh?" I said.

"Yeah, that's what we call it," said Alcina.

Sure enough, even as we stood there, the blood all started to fade.

"How long has this been going on?"

"About ten days now," Christos said.

"Um... look, could I get something to eat while I talk to Alcina about this?"

"Vegetarian platter?"

“Yeah, that’d hit the spot.”

Alcina and I watched Christos head off to the kitchen. I sat down. Alcina did too. “Have you pissed off anyone in the magical community?” I said quietly. “Or the monster community? Or—?”

“—Zach, I may come from a Delphic line of descent, but my family hasn’t been into the magical or mystical for generations,” said Alcina.

“Okay, I guess I didn’t really believe it would be that easy to figure out. Look, what exactly happened here tonight?”

“Same thing that’s happened on and off for a while now... I guess it started at least ten or eleven days ago—it almost always starts by 8:30, but sometimes it’s just after it gets really dark... the restaurant grows cold. Then the lights sort of dim. The customers hear a moaning sound. Then blood starts showing up. The voice of some old man starts saying—” —she paused for dramatic effect— “‘...It’s gotta be here somewhere.’” I nodded, shrugged. “Items on the tables are tossed around, tablecloths are torn off the tables, and people start running out the door.” She looked around. “This time wasn’t so bad. At least the tables weren’t disturbed. But the blood gets worse every time, too.”

“Do you have any business rivals that could be doing this?”

“Well, as you know, periodically, we get offers to sell this place, but we always say no. But those real estate people aren’t into magic.”

“Are you sure?”

“Zach, I can smell magic a mile away. They’re not into anything like that. Besides, we haven’t gotten an offer for the place for more than two years now.”

“Have any customers ever died here?”

“No, of course not. People might not want to eat here if someone had.”

“Yeah, that’s true.”

“But we’re not just covering it up, Zach. Seriously, no one’s died here. And before you ask, we haven’t made any changes or renovations or anything like that that would stir up a ghost, either. We’d *like* to, but we can’t remotely afford it.”

“Well, there’s only one solution to the problem.”

“What’s that?”

“You put a closed sign in the window tomorrow night, and then you let me stay here and see what’s going on. Shame I just missed it this time... but if I can do anything, I’ll probably have more chance of success with no one around, either.”

“You’d do that for us?”

“You and your husband are friends of mine, of course I’d do that.”

Christos came out with my plate. Alcina told him what I was planning to do. “Sorry, Zach,” said Christos, “but we’re broke, so we can’t pay you. And we don’t take charity... so I can’t let you help us.”

“Well, how about this: if I don’t solve the problem, don’t pay me. Just tear the place down or sell it or don’t stay open after dark or whatever, and just forget that I tried. But if I do solve the case, I get to eat free here whenever I want,” I said.

“You’ve got yourself a deal,” said Christos.

The next night, the restaurant was closed around 7, and everyone, including all the staff, left—everyone but me, that is.

I just sat there, alone in a restaurant, doing nothing. Oh, I could have called my answering service to see if any of my clients needed anything. I could have played games on my cell phone. I could have gone out before dark and retrieved the book I had in the car, and read it. But I was on the magical version of a police stakeout, and distractions would have been, well, a distraction.

I got pretty bored, just sitting around, staring at the pictures on the wall. Frankly, if I hadn’t known Alcina and Christos since they were kids, I probably wouldn’t have bothered with the case at all. Magical stakeouts are mind-numbingly tedious.

But a little after 8:30, I heard a loud moaning sound. Then everything happened as Alcina said it would. Blood seemed to drip as if from an invisible source. *Someone had a serious wound, I bet...* I thought, watching the invisible source of the blood seem to move around.

And sure enough, this time, items were tossed off of tables. Tablecloths were yanked off the tables, too. A voice kept muttering to itself that: "...it has to be here somewhere..."

I stared carefully at where the voice seemed to be coming from. I never could have even tried to do this with the lights on, with people running around or talking. But in the low light, with no other distractions, I started to see an old man in white, but blood-stained, pajamas. Apparently, he'd killed himself by slitting his wrists, as blood was dripping from his arms.

"Uh, anything I can help you with, friend?" I said.

That stopped him. He kept bleeding profusely, but he stopped in the middle of examining a table and turned to look at me. This was the part that could have gotten bad... I waited for his eyes to turn red or for him to get all rotted-looking or screechy... but fortunately, nothing like that happened. He just looked at me.

Then he did what I was doing: squinting. "You..." he said slowly... "...You've got magic in you, haven't you?"

"...Yeah, that's right," I said.

"...Then maybe you can help me."

"I'd like to try. But I need more information."

The man sat down in a booth. "I'm Dominic Owens. Who're you?"

I sat down at the same booth. "My name's Zach Cutter. Why are you haunting this place, Dominic?"

"Fifty or so years ago, my pal Otis and I robbed the National Bank in Stow, Ohio. But while we were doing it... Otis shot a bank teller."

I tried to ignore the streams of blood gushing out from Dominic's wrists onto the table, since it should all disappear after he was gone... "What's the connection between that and this place?"

"Otis hid the money someplace, but he didn't tell me where."

"You must have trusted him a lot to let him hide the money."

“Yeah. We each had a weakness... Otis was a pretty smart guy, but he was a little trigger-happy, too. Whereas I calmed him down as much as I could, but I couldn’t keep money—I was sort of well-known for letting money burn a hole in my pocket as soon as I got any... so Otis never told me where the money was hid... ‘cause he never got a chance. We were holed up in a little place near Kent... Well, we ran out of cigarettes, and I figgered it’d be best for me to go out and get some, and for Otis to stay put, see? So he gave me a few bucks, and I drove to the nearest gas station. Well, while I was there—at the gas station, see—I saw a bunch’a cop cars rush by, really fast, their sirens on. I didn’t know how they figgered where we were... but with them announcin’ they were comin’ for ‘im, I knew that Otis wouldn’t live to tell me where the money was hid. Well, since Otis was a goner, I thanked the guy behind the counter for the cigs, took ‘em to my car, and I drove off th’ other way, y’know? I figgered God had saved me from a police shootout, so I’d better change my lowdown ways. And I did. I lived the rest of my life on the straight and narrow.”

“Commendable. But what are you doing here, Dominic?”

“Aw, call me Dom, you sound like a nun when you call my whole name like that.”

“Okay, Dom, but—”

“—I always promised the All Mighty that if I ever found that money, I’d give it all to a church. But since I had no idea where it was, I could never make good on that promise.”

“Um, again, commendable, but what does that have to do with this place?”

“I’m comin’ t’ that. A few months ago, they found out I got brain cancer. I tried, y’know? But I couldn’t... they put you on this stuff that... well, I begged God for forgiveness for bein’ a coward, and I slit my wrists, okay?” I thought about showing him my wrists as a gesture of solidarity, but decided not to complicate the moment. “Well, as I was dying, *I saw Otis*. He told me that I had to fulfill my promise before I could go into the afterlife. I told him that I couldn’t do that, ‘cause I had no idea where he hid th’ money. He told me that he’d drawn a treasure map and hidden it at *this restaurant*—Otis always liked Greek chow. He said that *I should look for a white tablecloth with a bottle of olive oil on it, and that the map was under it...*”

I glanced around at the tables that still had their tablecloths. “Every table here has a white tablecloth and a bottle of olive oil on it,” I observed. “...Well, normally, anyway.”

“Yeah. And no matter how much I look, I can’t find the map.”

“You know, it was a long time ago. Some of the furniture’s bound to’ve changed, or at least the tablecloths. The map might not even be here anymore.”

“Naw, Otis wouldn’t steer me wrong, especially since this is about gettin’ into the afterlife ‘r not... Besides, he gave me one more clue, or at least I think it’s a clue. It sounded so crazy that I don’t know what to think.”

“What’s the clue?”

Dom spoke very slowly, weighting his words with an emphasis that showed me that, no joking around, he was telling me exactly what Otis had said to him. “*He said that there was a cute li’l green kitty sitting on the table.*”

I looked at Dom. He looked at me. *No, seriously*, said Dom’s expression.

“A cat? A green cat?”

“Yeah.”

“...Zorba’s doesn’t have a cat at all, let alone a green one,” I said. “I don’t remember ever seeing any animals in here.”

“He said *a cute li’l green kitty*, and he *meant* it!”

“All right, all right! ...Let’s look together, all right?”

Dom nodded.

I turned the lights on. We looked that restaurant up and down. We broke tables and chairs and anything else we could think of, looking for that map. Dom even talked me into prying up a few floor tiles under one table.

Nothing.

“...What a mess,” I said.

Otis plopped down into a booth. “I’m sunk. I’m never gonna get into the afterlife.”

I paced around in the bloody mess on the floor. “Come on, brain, think!” I said to myself. Dom started groaning and moaning his ghostly moans and groans again.

I considered trying a locating spell, but those things only work for me like barely 65 percent of the time, and sometimes the results are so off it makes the problem worse... then, suddenly, I realized I wasn't pacing anymore: I was staring straight ahead at a picture on the wall.

It was a sketch that said Zorba's on the top of it. It showed a scene of a table with a bottle of olive oil on it.

And on the table, staring me right in the eyes, just like I'm looking at you, was a light green cat with a curious expression on its face.

Bingo.

"What are you staring at?" Dom asked me.

"The solution to your problem," I said.

I got the sketch down off the wall. I took the back of the frame out, and I found an extra piece of paper there.

"Thank God, thank God," said Dom. "I never thought I'd live t' see th' day... uh, you know what I mean."

"...According to this map, the treasure is buried in the Calvary Cemetery," I said.

"Aw, yeah, that's so Otis. He wuz a Catholic too, like me," said Dom, in case the nun reference earlier hadn't been enough of a clue for me, which it had been.

I took out my phone and looked the place up on the internet. "Closed at 4:30," I said.

"We can't wait until morning!" exclaimed Dom.

"No, because we don't want other people around seeing us digging." I switched to my cell phone's mapping application. "Look here, see? This fence wouldn't be hard to jump at all, but if that's too much trouble, there's a railroad track that cuts right through the middle of the thing..." I searched for a little more visual information. "Look, I could just walk up the track and then walk down this slope, and I'd be in the cemetery, no problem."

"So we're going now?"

“First we need to go to a hardware store. I’m not gonna dig up something with my bare hands...”

“Ooh yeah, I hadn’t thought of that. You’re a smart guy, y’know that?”

I shrugged and made out a note to leave for Alcina and Christos that the mess was all my fault and I’d pay for any damages, and explaining the rest...

Not much more to tell concerning that part of the story... the map showed that the money was buried under the back right corner of a mausoleum—not a huge one, just the kind big enough for one large coffin. When I got there, I found out why it was the back right corner—the thing had biblical sayings engraved all around its four walls, and the one closest to the money was about “the wages of sin.” Cute sense of humor Otis had, huh?

It took a bit, but we found the money, still preserved by the ravages of time by an old Army-surplus watertight ammunition box, wrapped in a big oilskin. “Does it matter which church we give it to?” I asked Dom once we were safely back at my car with the loot. “I know a church that needs repairs...”

“Is it a Catholic church?”

“It’s currently headed by my friend Father McGrath. That’s about as Catholic as one can get.”

Around two in the morning, I was knocking on the good Father’s door. “Is this an emergency, Zach?” he asked me when he answered.

“Well, not *exactly*...” I said, but—

Father McGrath started bawling me out for disturbing his slumber... until he turned on his rectory’s porch light so he could better yell at me, and then he blinked, looked down at the porch, adjusted his glasses, and blinked again. “Is all that *your* blood?”

“No, Father,” I said honestly.

He turned the porch light off again, then on, then off, squinting behind me... “Ah, a ghost,” he said. Like a few people I know, Father McGrath is no stranger to strangeness. “What’s this all about then, my son? Er, sons?”

I handed him the money and a sentence or two of explanation, and then I went off upon my merry way...

Dom thanked me, all the way back to my car, for the trouble I'd gone to to help him, and then he disappeared. He'd even stopped bleeding, after I handed over the money...

And that was it. Slightly anti-climactic, I admit, but most ghost stories aren't like in horror films. Most ghost stories just involve someone dead with unfinished business.

In the morning, I called Alcina and told her how the rest of the night had gone. She thanked me; I told her that I'd be in around noon to collect the first of many free meals.

Later, as I was eating my chicken kabob, I noticed that, along with cleaning up the broken chairs and the bottles of olive oil (they'd switched to plastic bottles after the ghost had shown up for the second time, but the night before, I'd managed to actually step on one, making an even bigger mess), the sketch was back on the wall.

I stared at it, and thought: *If only the money I'd dug up could have been given to Alcina to help this restaurant. It needs repairs almost as much as Father McGrath's church.* Then I went back to eating.

Eating, but my eyes kept looking at the sketch. The art style looked somewhat familiar. It wasn't exactly the Mona Lisa in terms of greatness, but it was really cute and friendly, in an early 1950s sort of way. "Alcina," I said as she passed my table, "what's the story on that sketch, anyway?"

"It's a little special," she told me. "It's on that particular wall because it was Grandmother's favorite and she always wanted to be able to see it from the kitchen. They saw the work of some commercial artist they liked, and sent away to him for a sketch for the restaurant. Grandmother's favorite color was green..."

"Mm, a cat the color of money. Maybe that's why it drew Otis' eye..."

As I stared at it, I looked down at the lower corner of the frame, where one would expect that a signature might be. I couldn't make out much more than what looked like an "A" and a "W."

"...Oh, you have got to be shitting me," I said. I jumped up and took the sketch back down from the wall.

“What’s up now?” Alcina asked me.

“What did your grandmother tell you about the artist who drew this sketch?” I asked.

“I don’t remember much of anything she said about *that*... She just said that it was some commercial artist who’d lived in Pittsburgh for a while. He drew a lot of cats... and shoes...”

I took the sketch out of its frame so I could see the whole signature, even the part that’d been covered up by the frame. “Well, Alcina, I think that your financial problems are over,” I said.

“What, is there another treasure map back there?”

“Look at the signature.”

She looked. “Are you really telling me...”

“Yeah. Your grandparents didn’t know it at the time, but it seems that they bought themselves a genuine Andy Warhol sketch from his commercial art period.”

“How much is that worth?”

“I’d say you could pretty much name your own price.” She named a price in the five-figure range. “I’d add at least a zero on to that figure,” I said, “maybe two.”

Alcina started crying so hard that her husband came running out of the kitchen to see what was wrong.

When I showed him the signature, he just about cried, too.



“So, you’re telling me that on top of being a magician, you’re an art expert,” I said to Mr. Cutter.

“Art and the supernatural have a lot in common...” he said, “you never know what’s lurking around in the corner of one’s basement.”

“Mr. Cutter, while I found that story to be quite engaging...”

“—Zach.”

“What?”

“Call me Zach.”

“Oh. Um. Well, Zach, what I’m trying to say is, you’ve given me no proof concerning the veracity of your story.”

He took a post-it off my desk, wrote down a number on it, and handed it to me.

“Your number?”

“No. Call it now, Cynthia.”

“I’ll only call it if you call me Dr. Mann.”

“...Fair enough, Doctor. Put it on speakerphone mode, so I can talk to Alcina too.”

I called the number. I got an answering machine. Since I’d put it on speakerphone, both of us heard the message: “You’ve reached Zorba’s restaurant. Due to a sudden windfall—” —the woman who recorded the message giggled a bit— “—Zorba’s will be closed for at least a month for major renovations. If this is a personal message for Alcina or Christos, sorry, we’ll be out of the country for the next two weeks because we’re taking my grandparents on a Greek cruise. Thank you for your patronage,” said the message.

“Well, good for them!” said Zach. “And there’s your proof: it’s as I said—the restaurant came into a sudden windfall, and now they’re rich. Now, c’mon and be as nice as you are lovely, and give me the sleeping pills, because right after all this stuff happened, I started having nightmares that I don’t think are related to that case, and I need time—and at least a few nights of restful sleep—to figure out what’s going on.”

“But I don’t—Mr. Cutter, you could have just heard that story about the restaurant that found out that it had a Warhol sketch somewhere... anywhere... There’s no indication that *you* had anything to do with it.”

“There’s no indication I didn’t, either. You might want to have a little faith in your client, you know.”

“Give me proof and I’ll give you faith.”

“...All right, how about this for proof?” Zach said as he reached into his pocket. He produced his wallet.

“What, are you going to pay me?”

“No, I just want you to look at my driver’s license.”

He took an old rectangle of plastic out of his wallet... Gingerly, I took it from him. The old driver’s license had last been updated in 1979. It belonged to a Mr. Zach Lansky. The driver ID photo looked exactly like Zach Cutter, the man sitting across from me. “I’m a bit older than I look,” Zach said.

“I wondered about the part of your story where you remembered Alcina and Christos rolling around in a playpen together, but now they’re in their early thirties... I found it to be a flaw in your story, but you’re trying to tell me...? All this proves is that a guy who looked like you and had your name existed. You could have had this doctored or faked or... And it certainly doesn’t prove that you’re a magician...”

“You’re really going to make me do magic, aren’t you?”

“Yes. I can’t believe your story otherwise.”

He reached out to some fresh roses that were in a vase on my desk. “Watch,” he said.

No magical energy came from his fingers, and nothing felt or looked any different. He was just... touching them. But he looked at me as if he’d done something. “...You didn’t do anything,” I said.

“Touch the petals.”

As I reluctantly reached out to the petals he’d been touching, his fingers, drawing away, touched my hand. “C’mon, they won’t bite you,” he said. Then he reached out again, and guided my hand across the petals of the flower.

The roses had been real that morning—I’d put them in fresh water.

But now they were fake flowers, made of silk. “You have nice hands,” he said.

I took back my hand. “What did you do to my flowers?”

“Magic,” he said.

“Slight-of-hand magic, you mean. You could have just distracted me...”

Zach sighed and raised his hand, showing me his palm, the fingers splayed out like he was about to start pointing to it and lecturing me about palm-reading. Then he lowered it down until his hand was laid out flat on my desk. I watched his hand lower, then I watched it sit there, waiting for something to happen. His hand didn’t move... nothing seemed to move... though there was some slight change I couldn’t put my finger on.

After a few seconds, I looked more closely around his hand at the desktop. The top of the desk was transparent.

My desk *had* been made of wood. Now, however, the *entire* desk was made of *glass*.

It was still exactly the same shape. It was at least the same weight, since it didn’t budge when I pushed at it.

I pulled out a drawer. A glass drawer slid out, on metal wheels turning on metal rails screwed into the glass by metal screws. I hadn’t really *needed* to pull out the drawer—I could already see, somewhat, what was inside: regular-old, boring white envelopes, some staples, paperclips, pens. All faintly visible through see-through glass, glass with a woody brown tint to it... and a sort of vague wood grain set into it somehow...

“Don’t worry, it’ll only last a few hours, then it’ll change back to wood,” Cutter assured me.

What. In the world.

I stared at him for almost half a minute. He looked at me patiently. It was as if we were trying to “read” each other, trying to figure out... I don’t know. Each other, I guess.

I looked away first. “I’m sorry, Zach, but you’re *not* a client of mine yet... I can’t... until I get to know you... I don’t just *give out* sleeping pills... I’m sure other doctors might, but...”

“I don’t want another doctor. I want *you*, Cynthia.”

Great. The first handsome, smart guy I’d met in a while, and not only did he have to be a potential client, he was some sort of... magician...? “I’m not sure that would be...” I said, “I mean...” On top of everything else, I found that I was blushing.

“What if I told you that...well, uh... I actually... it’s not just sleeping pills... seriously, I do have some real problems...”

“What sort of problems...?”

“...Repressed memories.”

“Oh? When did that start?”

He smiled weakly. “After Celeste died. The time right before that is very fuzzy. And the time right after that is pretty much lost to me. I lost months... probably a lot more time than that.” He glanced at a clock on the wall and grinned a winning smile. “But I imagine my time’s up for today...”

“Yes, I suppose it is...”

“Unless you’d like to go out to dinner with me...?”

“*Mr.* Cutter, if you’re to be my client, I can’t... we can’t meet socially...”

“I’ve always liked women who have a bit of an authoritarian side to them...”

I took out my appointment book. “Let’s get you an appointment for next time. I don’t really appreciate walk-ins, and...”

“—Argh, I hate sticking to appointments. Being a magician isn’t exactly a 9-to-5 job...”

I ignored that remark. “Let’s see. I have an appointment for three o’clock, two weeks from today. How would that suit you...?”

When I looked up, he was gone.

It was as if he’d vanished into thin air.