

The Talking Cure, Book Three:

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS



A Novel by
Barb Lien-Cooper & Park
Cooper

Copyright



Copyright © 2025 The Shooting Star Press Inc & Barb Lien-Cooper and Park Cooper.
All rights reserved.

The events and characters in this book are factitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

This book may contain content that some may find to be troubling. If you are experiencing distress or need support, please reach out to a trusted professional or local support resource.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without express written permission of the publisher or the creators.

ISBN

(print) 978-1-987884-74-6

(ebook) 978-1-987884-75-3

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

* * *

Praise for *The Talking Cure* Book Two: *Transference*, or *The Man in the Light Gray Suit*:

"This book explores the push and pull of the supernatural and psychology as we know it, as well as the client-therapist relationship. The situations that the characters are in are all believable, yet not like anything that you have read before . . . the reader really cares about Zach and Cynthia . . . I enjoyed every page of this book, and it left me hungry for more."

—Carol Seufert, Educator and Reviewer

Also available from these authors:

[Song to the Siren, Book One: Good Night, Sleep Well](#)

[Song to the Siren, Book Two: A Lovers' Concerto](#)

[Song to the Siren, Book Three: The Halfway House](#)

[The Talking Cure, Book One: Magic Through Psychiatry](#)

[The Talking Cure, Book Two: Transference](#)

[Hungry Ghosts \(the graphic novel\)](#)

[Hungry Ghosts: Three Oni of Blood](#)

Prologue

I woke up at four o'clock this morning after I had a dream about a client of mine named Zach Cutter. It wasn't a nightmare. In fact, it was...

I dreamt that I was intimate with my patient.

Extremely intimate.

Doing the deed intimate.

I've known for a long time that Zach has a big, bright, beautiful (to him, at least) case of transference concerning me. As a psychiatrist, I understand that these things happen. A therapist like myself isn't supposed to encourage such things, as a therapist and a patient are supposed to have certain ethical boundaries between them. But, conversely, we're not supposed to discourage such things, either. A patient believing that they have feelings for their therapist can establish a trust relationship between the therapist and patient that can help the patient open up to their therapist. A therapist can't pour cold water on what a patient feels, even when such feelings are emotional or even erotic in nature toward the therapist. To do so would destroy the trust between them.

So, hey, Zach Cutter has feelings for me. I understand why. He's a very lonely man. He feels like an outsider wherever he goes. Knowing his history and his profession the way I do, I can sympathize.

But I have a harder time understanding my feelings toward him.

He's a mesmerizing, charming, *damaged* man, with great depths and insights into not only his issues, but also the world around him. He's funny and incredibly intelligent, and he's great-looking. He's kind and flirty... and...

...and he fascinates me no end. I can honestly say that I've never met a man remotely like Zach before.

Zach is a supernatural investigator. When I first heard that, I thought: "No you're not." I thought that maybe he was living in some sort of elaborate fantasy world that I was going to have to be a Jungian-level psychotherapist to break through, like the case studies in Dr. Louis Judd's old book *The Anatomy of Atavism*.

Then he performed magic for me. Not stage magic. Real magic. Magic as in “turning one thing into another” magic. Alchemy, I guess you might call it, the real stuff. I’m not kidding.

I decided maybe I should leave my skepticism aside for a while and just listen to my patient. A therapist who does not show faith in their client—and that client’s beliefs—is a very poor therapist indeed.

So every week (sometimes up to three times a week), Zach comes into my office, and tells me a tale from his past... when I can get him to stay focused on even that much...

Since Zach is a repressed-memory case with insomnia issues, I decided early on that the old-fashioned talking cure approach to therapy would be best. As I’ve heard his stories, I’ve decided that it’s most likely that some traumatic event caused his memory loss.

This is what I’ve pieced together about my client so far: Zach Cutter (born Zachariah Lansky) came from a poor Cleveland family that was highly dysfunctional. The mother apparently had depressive episodes, the father was physically abusive to his sons, and Zach’s brother David was violent with increasing signs of psychopathic behavior. Not exactly a fun childhood. Zach was largely raised, in all the ways that really mattered, anyway, by his next-door neighbor, Shug Marasa, an old African American woman who taught him some things about voodoo. (Although not everything she knew about it, because he had just enough talent, when it came to such things, that she felt she’d better not encourage him too much in the direction of anything magical.) Zach was also friends with Shug’s granddaughter, Jean. Zach may have even had deeper feelings for Jean, although it seems that the feelings were never consummated. When Jean was accepted into a university that taught magic (such things exist in the modern world?) and Zach wasn’t, Zach felt rejected and humiliated. He chose to study magic under the watchful eye of one Aubrey Lowman, who took Zach on as his apprentice. Apparently, a magical apprenticeship involves putting oneself in real danger, pursuing cases that the mentor doesn’t wish to pursue themselves, and generally being little more than a lackey.

Lowman and Zach’s relationship seemed to be a troubled one. Lowman was, by turns, understanding and callous toward his apprentice. Over the years, Lowman’s treatment of Zach apparently became increasingly emotionally abusive. Although Zach had second thoughts about working for Lowman, he couldn’t quit his job because Zach had signed a long-term contract with Lowman... and Lowman, being a powerful magician, could’ve easily destroyed Zach if Zach had broken the contract.

Added to all this was Zach's love for one Celeste Palmer, a young woman from Cleveland with psychic abilities. As the relationship flourished, Lowman seemed to become increasingly jealous of Zach and Celeste... Celeste pressured Zach to either quit Lowman's employ, or to try to get the contract shortened. Lowman apparently made an agreement that if Celeste would work with Zach and Lowman, Lowman would shorten the contract.

Then Lowman told Zach and Celeste that if they did one last job for him, he'd agree to let Zach go. They were supposed to go, along with several other paranormal investigators, to a place called the Carter Plantation, an abandoned mansion in Louisiana that was supposed to be haunted.

This is where the narrative gets less than clear. As far as Zach and I can figure out, some malicious ghosts jumped into the other investigators, and they all killed each other. Celeste was killed that day, too. Only Zach survived.

The guilt concerning Celeste's death was such that Zach tried to commit suicide. After being institutionalized, Zach returned to Lowman, and their partnership continued.

The Carter Plantation is ground zero for when Zach's memory starts coming up with blanks, for at least a few weeks beforehand, and for years afterward. Neither he nor I are clear on *why* he returned to Lowman, or how long it was before Lowman was somehow exiled to somewhere off the face of the earth, and Zach set out on his own (in Lowman's car)...

Zach makes it sound like his employment with Lowman after Celeste's death was more like slavery than anything else. What horrible trauma or traumas he experienced during that time, I don't know. But they must have been severe enough for Zach to have repressed those memories. They've been so traumatic that Zach does anything and everything possible to avoid facing them. I've seen him openly flirt with me when I try to approach difficult parts of his therapy. I've seen him say shockingly direct things to me just to distract me. I've also had to discourage physical contact between us whenever possible, but sometimes it isn't possible. When he goes through a traumatic memory and grabs my hand for support, wouldn't it destroy the trust between us if I drew my hand away and told him that his need for support was inappropriate?

I've told him not to send me flowers. He sends me flowers anyway. I've told him that I can't see him outside of the office. He finds ways to see me anyway. I tell him that we can't dine together. He brings food to my office, or he says that he won't say a word if I won't go to a café with him. If I do dine with him, he'll open up to me. He hates the confines of my office. I think he has some kind of claustrophobia... sort of a claustrophobia of the mind, almost. I think that whatever happened between Lowman

and Zach made Zach feel so trapped that Zach has a hard time with anything that feels like a cage or a prison. So, I let him take us to a park or a food trailer or just... outside. There've been times when he's had therapy in my office when I've had to keep the door open for him, just so he can "have some breathing room."

Then there are the missed appointments. Zach walks all over my schedule. He'll call up at the last minute and say he can't make it. Or he'll arrive 45 minutes late... or he'll arrive after my office hours are over and then stay for hours (strangely, I don't resent him staying for hours—I rather like it). He claims that his job as a supernatural investigator keeps him from being able to make and keep appointments, but I think the main reason is that he's frightened to death of the progress he's making in therapy. He remembers more and more every time I see him. The knot is starting to unravel... which makes him want to run away from his progress. Then he'll say that he misses me, and he'll come back to therapy, promising that he'll "be a good boy" and keep his appointments. If I tried to lay down the law too much concerning missed appointments, I'm very afraid that he might just run away from therapy entirely. Right now, Zach's psyche is so raw that leaving therapy prematurely would be terrible for him.

I thought I could handle the compliments, and the longing looks, and the flirting, and seeing Zach in social settings like restaurants. Yes, I let him walk over some professional boundaries. Yes, other professionals wouldn't handle Zach's case the way I have. But those professionals probably wouldn't have been able to have seen Zach for more than three sessions without Zach walking away from them in disgust. I think one of the reasons that Zach avoided therapy with a professional for so long was that he was poorly treated by the therapists in the mental hospital where he was admitted after his suicide attempt. I can just imagine them, repeatedly telling Zach that his belief in magic was irrational and would have to stop... Instead of helping Zach deal with his grief and guilt about Celeste Palmer's death, they would've misdiagnosed him as having delusions... Who wouldn't, considering he was too emotionally torn apart to demonstrate any magic for them? They may have even tried to put him on anti-psychotic meds... Zach needs to be able to trust a therapist. He needs someone who listens and understands and *cares*.

I'm the only one who can help him.

But now, I'm having counter-transference concerning my patient. I've denied it for a long time. But dreaming that I was naked in my bed with Zach and we were...

Oh, were we ever!

...I need to go read about counter-transference.



I'm back. And I'm more confused than ever. There are so many schools of thought concerning a therapist having feelings toward a client that I have a sick headache. Early schools of thought tell me, "No, no, no! Bad doctor! Those feelings are *verboten*! You will damage the precious psyche of your patient! You will ruin your objectivity! You'll cease to help him if you care for him!" Other, later schools of thought say that it can be helpful for a therapist to care, just be really, really careful about the matter, since the patient is so vulnerable and you're in such a position of authority in the relationship.

Authority? Me? Sometimes with Zach, I feel like I'm in a lifeboat on a stormy sea. I'm not a captain of the boat, I'm just trying to hold on for dear life.

And *other* schools of thought say that it's illegal and unethical to have these sorts of feelings toward a patient. Such therapists are painted as terrible, horrible sexual predators.

I'm not, I'm not! I just have feelings! I can't help being human! I'd never hurt Zach! I'd rather hurt myself!

I keep reading that the solution to transference is to cease therapy and send Zach off to another doctor, but Zach would never trust another doctor. I'm all he has. No other doctor would believe that Zach is a magician or that he worked for a sorcerer or that his girlfriend was a psychic or anything like that. And if he proved magic was real, they'd run screaming for the hills.

That only leaves me.

And if I understand my Jung right, I'm in danger of falling "into the same dark hole of unconsciousness" as my client. But isn't my duty as a psychiatrist to bring my patient out of the darkness and into the light, even if I have to journey through darkness myself?

All I can do, as a good, caring therapist, is to press on with therapy. I'll just have to put more emphasis on Zach really working on facing his issues. I have to solve the mystery of his lost memories before I'm totally lost in the dark...

...and before I find myself in the darkness of my bedroom, kissing and holding and making love to someone I have no *right* to care about that way...



Chapter 1: A Light in the Darkness

As far as we can discern, the sole purpose of human existence is to kindle a light in the darkness of mere being...

— *Carl Jung*

“Doctor Mann, there was a package in the afternoon mail for you,” Kyla said as I came out of my office into the waiting area.

“Could it be...? It is!” I said as I picked up the package.

“A gift?” Kyla asked.

I worked on opening the package. “Better than that. My essay’s been published in *The Journal of Popular Culture!*”

“...Oh. What’s it about?”

“It’s a study of Jungian themes in Grimm’s fairy tales!”

“...Oh. Well, I’m glad for you,” Kyla said, but she didn’t sound very interested.

“Ooh, look, they’ve included a book for me to review for the next issue! It’s an academic analysis of a book about Grimm’s fairytales...”

“You’re going to review a book that reviews another book?”

“It’s important. The original book is a version of Grimm’s fairytales without all the edits!”

“The edits to the fairy tales? Who edited fairy tales? It couldn’t have been the fairies...”

“Ha, ha. No, humans edited them, Kyla—Grimms’ fairy tales were really dark, darker than a lot of the readers were ready for, so they were really censored early on. The

original stories were a *lot* more graphic and shocking and sexual than the ones most people think they know.”

“Ew. I’ll stick to the Disney versions, thanks. Hey, can I go ahead and leave now? It’s Friday, and the day’s over...”

I told her that she could—I went back into my office with my bounty.

I sat down and got comfy, thinking that I was happy to miss the Friday rush hour traffic right where I was, since I had a good book... when my phone rang. I got off the couch and headed over to my desk, taking my reading material with me.

I picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“So my darling doctor is now an academic writer,” I heard Zach Cutter’s voice say on the other end of my landline.

“...How did you know? Magic?”

“Yeah, a magic called a search engine. Magicians use them all the time. Saves us hours looking up shit.”

“I see. But that doesn’t exactly answer my question...”

“I was looking through Bondye University’s database concerning a Bigfoot encounter in Russia, and after several links to various things, I stumbled upon your name. I immediately got the journal, and it just arrived yesterday.”

“I just got mine—how did you get yours yesterday?”

“I paid them to send me a copy overnight. Yours was probably sent book rate. You wrote a good article, sweetie, you really did.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty pleased with it. That’ll show my damned professor!”

“What professor?”

“You know I went to medical school, right?”

“Yeah, psychiatrists have to do that, right?”

“Yes. Well, most of the classes were very practical, but I took a theoretical class whenever I could... One was about Psychology and Fiction. Well, I wrote a paper for the class, and it only got a C. A C! I was so mad! I knew that my paper was really good! So when I saw a link to the *Journal of Popular Culture*, I revised the paper slightly and sent it in! And they accepted it! They said it was an important work!”

“Well, I’m proud of my little Cynthia, being so smart and insightful.”

“I’m not your little Cynthia, Zach, I’m your therapist.”

“We gotta do something to celebrate.”

“I can’t celebrate with a client.”

“Do you have anyone else to celebrate with?”

“No, but that’s not the point!”

“What time is my appointment, anyway?”

“At 5:30. You should know that. You should put a reminder in on your phone!”

“Can’t make it until 7.”

“What?”

“I had a Mishipeshu case and it took a while. Actually, more accurately, if one uses the Native American term, I had a Mishibijiw case. But it’s harder for me to remember how to pronounce that...”

“What’s a—”

“—It’s like an underwater panther with a spiky back. They have dark red fur... bristly, like a buffalo’s. Also, they just have one eye. They’re a big deal to the Ojibwe, Sioux, and Chippewa tribes. Or at least, each tribe has stories about the creature. They’re also dangerous creatures, especially in civilized areas like Cleveland.”

“I can imagine.”

“This particular Mishipeshu was only a baby; a scared baby. The poor thing got separated from its mother somehow, and ended up a long way from home—they’re

supposed to live in Lake Superior, and it ended up in Lake Erie. Because it was scared, it started attacking ships.”

“Oh no!”

“Well, it was a simple enough case. A boat with some strong sailors, a tranquilizer gun, a big net, and a truck, and I got it all worked out. I was a bit surprised that my car could change itself into a big enough truck, but it managed.” On his end of the phone call, Zach honked his horn. “Tch. That guy’s driving dangerously... I don’t really need drivers like that around me after the tough drive I’ve already had... The poor mishipeshu kept waking up and wanting to tear me to shreds...”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. I don’t blame a scared kid for lashing out. It wasn’t a pleasant trip, but it was worth it to see it go back to its own lake, presumably to find its mommy. Anyway, I’m driving back to Cleveland now...”

“Now? If you just dropped it off recently, you’ll never make it back here tonight!”

“I don’t see why not. It’s only a thirteen-hour drive by most human road maps. And my car knows plenty of shortcuts.”

“Magical portals, you mean.”

“Yeah. Once we got to St. Paul, we jumped into a dimensional shortcut and bypassed the state of Wisconsin entirely. I’m already past Chicago... Now I just have to get to a portal that’s in Fort Wayne, Indiana, and I’ll be ready to see you around 7... well, 7:30. So, get yourself something to eat, and just stay in your office until then and then we’ll go somewhere and light up the town.”

“I repeat, I can’t celebrate with a client, Zach!”

“Remember to eat!” Zach said... and then he hung up.

I went to the vegan restaurant across the street and ate whatever I could stand to eat on the menu. I wasn’t very fond of vegan food, but it was close by, and I knew it was healthy for me, so heck with it, I ate there. Then I went back to my office. I tried to call Zach. I wanted to tell him that he needed to reschedule with Kyla. It was a Friday, and I didn’t want to sit in my office alone for *that* long... But when I called him, I got his

voicemail, and it said “I’m in a dimensional portal right now, and there’s no phone reception here. Please leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.”

I just hung up.

Around six, I wondered if I should just leave, and put a note on my door that I didn’t appreciate missed appointments, even if they involved poor baby monsters. I actually *wrote* the note, gathered my things, turned off my office lights... Then I realized that I didn’t have the book the nice journal people had sent me, so I turned the lights back on... but they didn’t come on. Well, the fluorescent lights burned faintly, but they didn’t really go ahead and light up like they normally should.

“...I don’t need this!” I yelled at the light. But all my yelling, and switching the light switch on and off, still did no good. Not that I thought that it would.

I called the building supervisor. I only got her voicemail. A minute later, she called me back and said that she’d deal with it on Monday.

“But I have a client tonight!” I said.

“I only work nine to five, Doctor Mann,” said the woman. “Perhaps you should try it sometime.”

I hung up the phone. I didn’t need rudeness, thanks very much... I started calling around for electricians. Most of them (that I could get in contact with) had no interest in coming to my office after hours. The few that did wanted to charge me an arm and a leg for their services. I thanked them all, and turned them all down.

I called Zach. To my surprise, I got him instead of his voicemail. “I have to cancel on you tonight,” I said.

“No! You can’t! We have to celebrate!” said Zach. He sounded like a disappointed child.

“The lights here are on the blink,” I said.

“Oh? Describe the problem.”

“Zach, if you’re thinking about doing magic to solve my light problem, I don’t think—”

“Oh, I’d never do that.”

“Really? I thought you’d say that magic can fix things like this.”

“Uh... it can. But it’s not a *good* solution—I learned that through harsh experience.”

“How?”

“Back when I was Lowman’s apprentice, he had a dinner party... Everything was ready to go, it was a big event, and he was looking forward to playing host... He was running all over St. Paul making arrangements. While he was doing that, the lights went out in the living room of his house. I figured that I’d magic the lights back into working. I carefully thought about how the spell I wanted to cast should work, and I cast it, and on came the lights. I thought myself quite the clever boy for fixing matters so quickly without running and whining to Big Daddy Lowman about everything. I was about twenty and I was really full of myself, so proud of studying with an experienced magician like Lowman... What I didn’t understand is that magic is only a temporary fix in home repairs. And when the magic wears off...”

“The lights went back off?”

“I wish it was that simple—during dinner, every last lightbulb in the house started exploding. Glass flew everywhere, and I mean everywhere.”

“Did people get hurt?”

“Minor injuries, thank God, but we did have to call a couple of ambulances.”

“And that ended the party, I take it.”

“Yeah, well, there were glass shards in the caviar, in the veal, in the paté...”

“I get the picture.”

“The whole house had to be rewired. Lowman took it out of my salary. Not that I blame him. I was lucky he didn’t strangle me where I stood. Instead, he just said, ‘Next time, call a professional. Or better yet, *become* a professional.’ Then he went into his study. Then I heard the strangest noise...”

“What noise?”

“Lowman, laughing his head off at my screw-up.”

I laughed and Zach laughed with me—in fact, each of us kept setting the other off again...

“...Anyway,” Zach said after a few minutes, “I learned my lesson. I started reading home repair books by the dozens. I even watched a lot of home repair shows on public TV. I learned a lot, and I know exactly what’s wrong with your lights. It’ll only take about an hour to fix. Then we can go celebrate.”

“Uh, Zach, after that story about how you goofed concerning the lights at Lowman’s house, I’m not exactly inspired by your expertise in electrical repair.”

“Nah, that was magical electrical repair. In real-world repairs, I’m pretty good. Besides, who else can you lean on at this point?”

“Uh... I could... uh...”

“I’m going to a home repair place on Steelyard Drive, and then I’ll show up at your office to fix the lights.”

“You’re back in Cleveland?”

“Yep. My car knew I wanted to see you, so it drove fast. Now, just you sit tight. Your Zach will fix everything!”

“Zach, it can wait. You don’t have to—”

“—Have a little faith in me, Cynthia darling!” Zach said, and then he hung up.

“—I don’t want the office to be covered in a bunch of exploding glass!” I yelled into the phone. I tried to call him back, but got his voice mail. ...*Oh, well, might as well read my book—in the waiting room*, I thought. *The lights are still on in there... for now...*

I went out to the waiting area and started reading the book they’d sent me. That made the time pass for a while...

Then I read something that struck at me to the core; something that made me very sad indeed. I put the book down without bothering to put a bookmark in it. I just stared at the wall.

...until I heard Zach coming into my office.

“You okay?” Zach asked.

“Long day,” I said.

“You ate?”

“I ate.”

“Help me get this stepladder into your office,” Zach said. “It’s hard for me to manage while I carry this tool box at the same time.” I helped him get the stepladder into my office. He clipped a bright little flashlight to the stepladder, and then got on it. I sat down in the dark and let him do his work. “Oh, this’ll be easy. It’ll just take a little time,” Zach said.

“How much time?” I asked.

“About an hour.”

“Fine.”

“...You sound down.”

“...I’m fine.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound fine.”

“I’m *fine*.”

“Fine. You’re fine,” Zach mumbled to himself.

“Do you really know what you’re doing?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. Magicians have to know about practical matters like electricity. I even know about plumbing.”

“Why do magicians—”

“—Take the cockatrice case I had a few years back.”

“...That’s kind of a giant rooster thing, isn’t it?”

“More like a dragon with the head of a bird, but yeah, close enough. They’re dangerous. They don’t mean to be, but they have certain protections, like many animals do, and if they’re let loose in urban areas, you’ve really got trouble.”

“They turn people to stone with their glance, right?”

“Yeah, or sometimes they have to actually touch people, or at least breathe on ‘em. And believe me, their breath is not pleasant.”

“And one of these beings was loose in an urban area, I take it?”

“Leeds, England.”

“How’d that happen?”

“Some pissed-off magician. He wanted something from this museum... they weren’t clear on what... maybe he wanted to buy some of the rarer books from their library, or maybe he wanted special permission to investigate their ghosts however he saw fit—they have ghost tours and stuff—whatever it was that he wanted, they blew him off... So he somehow sicced a cockatrice on the place.” Zach stopped talking for a second as he struggled with something using a screwdriver. “I try not to kill cryptids and various magical creatures, but it’s hard sometimes. The cockatrice was in the front of the Thackray Medical Museum. Lots of people could have been turned to stone. Fortunately, being turned to stone can be fixed...”

“It can?”

“Takes magic, but yeah, it can. So there were all these statues, and all these people who weren’t petrified yet who were trapped in various areas near the front of the museum, and it was up to me to save the day.”

“What did you do?”

“I knew that cockatrices hate weasels... or so the rumor goes... but try getting a weasel in a hurry in Leeds at 12:30 in the afternoon... So, I punted. I knew that cockatrices supposedly hate the sound of a rooster crowing... so I got out my cell phone and found a site that had the sound of a rooster crowing, and that got me as far as the museum’s gift shop.”

“Trapping you, essentially.”

“No. I had a plan. Museum gift shops have jewelry... and that meant, I figured, that gift shops also usually have mirrors, so women can look at the jewelry on them... And I was right, they did have a good mirror. So since cockatrices turn to stone when they see their own reflections, I took the mirror and went into the entry hall, being careful not to look it in the eye.”

“What if it was the kind that has to get close enough to breathe on you or touch you?”

“I figured I’d run away. But it didn’t come up—I held up the mirror to the thing, and it turned itself to stone.”

“So is there a big statue of a cockatrice in the front of the museum in Leeds now?”

“Nah, I knew a magician in Munich who had a menagerie of monstrous beings, so I called her and told her about the cockatrice. She said that she’d pay for the postage, which was massive, since this thing now weighed a ton...” Zack took some little electrical components out of his toolbox, and unwrapped them from their plastic packaging. “After a lot of explaining to the police about what happened... man, *that* took a while... The first officer who talked to me wasn’t one of those policemen you meet who secretly understand about magic... he kept asking me ‘but how did you get these statues in here in the first place without anyone seeing,’ and I kept asking ‘look, isn’t there anyone else I can talk to about this,’ and he didn’t like *that*... Finally, I just decided to tell him it was all part of a new art exhibit at the museum, and he was so happy to have an explanation he could believe, he left me alone, since the management of the museum didn’t want to press charges against me... so I finally managed to ship the stone cockatrice off to Munich. I was paid handsomely, and the lady’s menagerie now has a cockatrice... Maybe she looks at it through a two-way mirror. Or maybe she has other ways of dealing with it. I mean, cockatrices only turn you to stone when they’re afraid or under attack...”

“...I’m glad it didn’t have to die.”

“Me too.” He started installing the new electrical components, whatever they were.

“Anyway, my point is, if I hadn’t been internet-savvy, there’d be a bunch of stone statues instead of nice people living their lives.”

“How many people did get turned to stone?”

“Oh, like a dozen or so.”

“And you managed to turn them back to people?”

“Not me. But I knew a magician in Harrogate, not far away, who could do that sort of thing. I paid him about three-fourths of my Munich money, to turn everyone back...”

Zach screwed more electrical components into the light fixture. “The magical authorities dealt with the magician who’d started it all. You don’t just sic a monster on a tourist attraction...”

“...I’m glad it all worked out.”

“...You don’t sound glad.”

“I’m fine.”

Zach sighed. “Of course, it could have been worse. It could have been a gulon.”

“Which is?”

“A fart monster from Sweden.”

“...There’s no such thing!”

“There is. And you do *not* want to get downwind of it.” I laughed a little. “It’s a nasty giant fox-like creature,” he went on. “It’s a carnivore, so it eats animals... but human beings, especially. It’s a total glutton too—it eats and eats and then it needs to pass gas. In order to do that, it squeezes itself between two trees so it can push the gas out. That’s when you trap it.”

“And you did this?”

“No, Lowman did. We got into a real argument about it, too. I said that we shouldn’t kill it, but should take it back to the woods, where it would kill animals, but not people. I said that it only left its usual territory because some stupid hunters from the magical community flushed it out, scared it, drove it ahead of them instead of successfully capturing it, sending it running into areas where it normally wouldn’t go. He wouldn’t listen to me. He slit its throat and collected its blood.”

“Why? For some magical spell?”

“Yes and no... its blood is a powerful aphrodisiac. That’s why hunters were after it in the first place.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, I really lost even more respect for Lowman when he did that. I told ‘im it was selfish of ‘im. He said, ‘Gray magic *is* selfish magic,’ like that’s ever any excuse for anything. I vowed to myself that I wouldn’t kill a magical animal unless I had to. Er, I’d vowed that to myself before that incident, but seeing a beautiful, however stinky and dangerous, animal slaughtered for its blood... just to make sex better or to seduce someone... made me sick to my stomach. And the vow has been very helpful to me in my life as a supernatural investigator.”

“Has it?”

“Yeah. Many of my acquaintances are monsters and magical beings. They trust me because of my scruples... That trust means a lot to me.”

“I’m glad.”

“...What is wrong with you, sweetie? You sound so sad.”

“I’m fine.”

Then Zach got down from the stepladder, flipped the light switch by the door, and the lights came on. He switched off the little flashlight and put it in the toolbox, along with the rest of his tools. I just stared at the floor the whole time. Zach came over and sat next to me. “Are you mad at me?” he asked. “I know I miss a lot of appointments and you have a right to be pissed off, but you know I don’t work a nine-to-five job...”

“I’m not angry at you,” I said. “I’m not exactly angry at all.”

“No, you’re depressed. Don’t try and tell me that you’re not. My mother had depressive episodes. My Celeste had depressive episodes...”

“Did she?”

“Yeah. Lots of them... I think. My memories of the latter part of my relationship with her aren’t that clear, but I remember how sad she was that I couldn’t get out of my contract with Lowman...”

“You’ve been treating me like I’m your mother or Celeste...”

“Have I?”

“You’ve told me that you used to try and cheer up your mother by telling her fantastic stories. That’s what you’ve been doing with me, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, but it didn’t work with her, and it’s not working with you. So tell me what’s wrong.”

“I feel silly about... about how I feel this evening. I’m the psychiatrist. I’m not supposed to get depressed around a client...”

“I’m not your average client. Our relationship, whatever you might say about it, is not a standard one. Now, you always tell me not to invalidate my feelings by judging them. So I’m telling you the same thing. What is it that’s wrong?”

“I was given a book to review by the pop culture journal.”

“Well, that’s great! You should write more.”

“That’s what I thought, too. Then I started reading the book.”

“What’s it about?”

“It analyzes a new translation of Grimms’ fairytales.”

“Oh, you mean the version of the stories with all the gore and sex intact.”

“Yeah, you’ve read it?”

“Oh yeah. I always like to know the real versions of stories. Now, what depressed you about this scholarly work?”

“It’s such a small thing...”

“Tell me anyway.”

“In the introduction, it mentioned that the Grimm brothers, in the original versions of the stories, made the *mothers* in the stories out to be bad people. Not the *step*mothers, but the actual mothers.”

“With you so far...”

“It made me start thinking about my own mother. You know how in the fairytale, it’s the stepmother who abandons the brother and sister in the woods? In the original version, it was the mother, not the stepmother.”

“...And you started thinking about your own mother.”

“She never wanted my brother and me. She left us with our grandmother, her own mother. If she hadn’t done that, my brother wouldn’t have died.”

“...And it brought the whole sad tale of your brother’s death back to you.”

“Yes.”

“...I’m so sorry. I don’t know what else to say.”

“...I’m an adult. *I’ve* had therapy. I’m a psychiatrist now. I’m a professional, a person who’s supposed to help *other* people. And yet, I have my own problems.”

“...Chiron.”

“...What?”

“In Greek mythology, Chiron was a centaur and a gifted healer. But he was injured, and he never got over that wound entirely. Yet he went on to try and help other people, in spite of his own pain. In fact, his pain gave him the sympathy to be a better healer.”

“...And you’re saying I’m Chiron.”

“...I’m saying you’re a very good therapist, that’s all.”

I started to cry a little. “No, I’m not. I’m totally screwed up in the head!”

“Screwed-up isn’t the same thing as crazy. Here, take this hanky and dry your tears.” He took a handkerchief from his leather jacket and offered it to me.

I took it and dried my eyes. I was about to give it back when I saw that the handkerchief had the initials “ZL” on it. “ZL for Zach Lansky?” I asked.

He took back the handkerchief. “Yeah, Lowman got me a whole bunch of them back when I was first working for him. I thought it was silly... and kind of pretentious. I even had initials on my boxers. Too bad I don’t still have any of those, or else I’d show you...”

“I get the idea perfectly well, thank you. ...Why did Lowman micromanage your wardrobe so much?”

“‘A magician must look the part.’ He hated it when I first started out as his apprentice and I bought my own clothing. He said I ‘looked like a ruffian.’ A ruffian! I mean, who talks like that in the modern age? I had a hard time not breaking out laughing when he said things like that, especially at first. I’d start talking slang back to him, just to annoy him...”

“And did it annoy him?”

“Oh, yeah, it really irritated him... which only made me want to do it more. Which pissed him off more... which made me want to do it even more... and on and on.” In spite of my bad mood, I laughed. “There. Laughing is good,” Zach said.

We just smiled at each other for a moment.

Then I said, “Now, tell me about what’s bothering *you*.”

“What, me? What makes you think anything’s bothering me?”

“You’ve talked about everything but your issues this session.”

“I was trying to cheer you up.”

“You were using my sadness as an excuse. You used it to cover up your pain with shaggy dog stories.”

Zach was quiet for a minute. Then: “...Yeah, I was,” he said.

“What happened to you?”

“Nothing important.”

“Don’t invalidate your feelings, Zach.”

“Where’ve I heard that before?”

“I repeat, what happened?”

“I went into the home repair place, feeling happy as a lark. I’d finished my case and I was about to see you and have a nice time with you... we were going to celebrate your article... but then my mood changed.”

“Why?”

“Walking around that place made me think about why I learned so much about home repair.”

“You mean, because Lowman told you to?”

“No, I really started learning about such things because I wanted a home of my own someday. I wanted to buy Celeste and me a house. I imagined it as a fixer-upper. I thought I’d spend hours doing carpentry and fixing the plumbing and doing drywall and all of that. But Celeste died before I ever got to buy that house.”

“And now you stay in an extended-stay hotel instead of setting down roots anywhere.”

“Yeah. I mean, what’s the point of having a house without having someone to share it with? What’s the point if I don’t have someone to tell me what a great job I did repairing this or that?”

“...If it means anything, you did a great job with the lights, and I’m very grateful.”

Zach smiled a little smile. Then we fell silent for a minute. Then Zach asked: “What happened to your brother’s clothes after he died?”

“...What?” The question struck me as really odd... and just a little painful.

“Sorry...” he said, “I was just... after Celeste died, I didn’t know what to do with her clothing...”

“They took me away from my grandmother’s custody. I have no idea what happened to anything of my brother’s. All I have are a few photos of Hans and me. They didn’t even ask me what I wanted done with his stuff! I know I was only eight, but they could have at least asked!” I started to cry again.

Zach gave me his handkerchief again. “After Celeste died,” Zach said, “Lowman told me to get rid of her things. He said to give them all away to charity. In fact, he ordered me to do so.”

“He *ordered* you?”

“...Yeah. Like a spell. I don’t know how he had that power, exactly, but he did... I don’t know why he was able to make me stick around after my apprenticeship agreement was up... Because I think I was still at his house for a while after the term of my apprenticeship ended...” He grew silent.

“Zach, keep talking. You’re remembering something from *after* Celeste died. It might be painful, but it’s a repressed memory coming to the surface... stay with it,” I said.

“—I wanted to keep her clothes! I didn’t want someone else wearing them. I didn’t have much of hers... why do something so cruel to me?” Zach grabbed for his handkerchief and dried a tear from his eye.

“I wanted my brother’s clothes, too. They mattered!” I said.

Zach handed me back the handkerchief. I wiped a tear from *my* eye.

“I remember yelling at Lowman— ‘You killed her! That job at the Carter Plantation was too much for— why couldn’t you have just let me die, too?’” Zach said.

I gave him back the handkerchief. Zach wiped his eyes... but he didn’t say anything more. “Zach, I know it’s painful, but stay with the memory just a little longer,” I said. “What did Lowman say when you asked... when you asked him why he couldn’t have just let you die, too?”

Zach thought a little more, trying to remember. “...He said... ‘Because I own you.’”

*What sort of sick bastard **was** that man?* I thought. Zach fell silent again. I knew he was starting to close the doors on the memory, starting to shut his emotions and his train of thoughts down entirely. I’d seen it happen before, and I couldn’t let it happen this time— “—What did you do with the clothes, Zach?”

“...I burned them. I made a big pyre in Lowman’s front driveway, and I burned them. ...A policeman came up to me after a little while, and said that there was a burn notice in St. Paul. I told him that these were my girlfriend’s clothes, and that she was dead. He gave me a look. I just looked back at him. I guess he saw something in my face, because he said: ‘There’s a hose nearby the driveway. You just finish burning those clothes. I’ll stand by with the hose just in case a spark catches on the grass or anything.’ So that’s what we did that afternoon. You know how people sometimes say that their

dreams ‘went up in smoke?’ Well, that afternoon, mine did. No house with Celeste, no wedding, no children, no life with her...”

“...I remember standing at my brother’s coffin,” I said, “and thinking, ‘My life is over. It’s in there with his dead body...’” I started to cry. Not just little tears, but big ones. I took Zach’s handkerchief, and wiped my eyes. And then Zach started to cry, almost as hard as I’d been crying. We just kept passing that handkerchief back and forth, crying and crying over our losses.

Then Zach took a couple of deep breaths. In a determined voice, he said: “So, what are we going to do to celebrate your article?”

“What? I’m in no mood to celebrate anything!”

“Cynthia, you’ve said to me more than once that I can’t let the past eat me alive. Yes, I must remember, yes, I must feel, but I can’t be so dragged back into it that I don’t see the present. You’ve said that I must make a determined effort to stay in the present, no matter what it takes. And I say that the same thing is true for you. You were back in your past as much as I was in mine. And we can’t keep doing that to ourselves, can we?”

“...No, you’re right, we can’t.”

“So, for the sake of our mental health, we are going to celebrate your article. Now, I know a great custard stand that serves the best strawberry custard in town.”

“Custard, like ice cream?”

“Oh, custard’s nothing like ice cream.”

“It is too.”

“It’s not.”

“How’s it different?”

“Well, it’s thicker in texture... or thinner... or... it’s totally not like ice cream. Besides, custard is as much a part of Cleveland as Lake Erie is.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Then I’m going to take you to see *The Red Shoes* at Cinematheque.”

“Oh, the ballet film? It’s been years since I’ve seen that!”

“Yeah. And then we’ll have a late night snack at a great Japanese restaurant I know, and then we’ll play with their karaoke machine...”

“I’m not the karaoke type, really.”

“Cynthia, you’ve gotta *try*. We’ve *both* got to try.”

“What’s so important about karaoke?”

“I mean, we both have to try and *live*!”

“Oh.”

Again, we both fell silent for a minute. “...Does this restaurant have good saké?” I asked.

“The best,” Zach said.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” I said.

We had a silly, fun evening that night. We laughed and sang and stayed out way too late. We each sang a little karaoke. I tried singing ABBA’s “Fernando.” Zach sang The Temptations’ “My Girl.” That made me roll my eyes at first, because I thought he’d get in my face about it and sing it like a love song to me, but in the true karaoke tradition, he focused on his singing, which was actually pretty good. The only attention he paid to me during the song was that at the ends of his verses, he would put the microphone right up to me so that I could hit the high notes for some of the “my girl” parts.

I have to admit, I got a little tipsy... so much so that I couldn’t drive myself home. Zach had to drive me home (I had to take a bus the next day to my office, where I’d left my car).

After driving me home, Zach walked me to my door. We stood there a moment, not knowing what to do. Then he reached for my hand, and took it in his. “Thank you,” he said.

Then he walked away. It had taken all of our effort to forget our sorrows that night, but we’d had a wonderful time. And it made a world of difference to me that we’d spent the time together.

On Monday, I realized that I'd left the book that was to be reviewed in my waiting room. I read some of it during my lunch hour. I liked it, actually, and promised myself that I'd give it a positive review. And weirdly enough, that feeling of sadness that reading the book had caused me was no longer there. *Thank you, Zach*, I thought.

A few days later, at work, Kyla told me that I had another package. I looked at it. It was from an online bookstore. I opened up the package: it was a DVD of *The Red Shoes*.

The card with it said, *A gift from Zach Cutter*.

"What's that, Doctor?" Kyla asked.

"Proof that we can replace sad memories with happy ones," I said.

Kyla looked at me as if I'd lost my mind.