

The Talking Cure, Book Two:

TRANSFERENCE

(or The Man
in the Light
Gray Suit).



A Novel by
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Cooper

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ISBN

(print) 978-1-987884-73-9

(ebook) 978-1-987884-72-2

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

* * *

“ . . . I enjoyed this book from the first word to the last. I love that there are facts in the book from different cultures. I love the supernatural elements. But mostly I love the way that I cared about both of the main characters and the other characters. This book is not predictable. It’s not one of those books that you know what’s going to happen as soon as you start reading it. And somehow it’s relaxing. I can’t quite explain it because there is a lot of action in the book, but it leaves you with the feeling that everything happens as intended.”

–Carol Seufert, Educator

* * *

“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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Prologue

FROM THE CASE FILES OF DR. CYNTHIA MANN:

I took the business card out of my purse and read it.

It read:

Psychological Professionals Helping Psychological Professionals

Anonymity Guaranteed

I was quite familiar with PPHPP. I'd volunteered with them several times. I'd manned their phones, giving out free psychological advice to therapists, psychologists, and psychiatrists. I'd talked to them about job burnout, potential ethical violations, career concerns, and so on.

I never thought I'd need their help in return. Then again, I never thought I'd meet a man like Zach Cutter either. Zach was, and is, my client. He is a handsome, charismatic, fascinating fellow with suppressed grief issues.

He is also a supernatural investigator.

Oh, shit, Cynthia, call him what he is: Zach is a magician—the kind who does real magic, not just stage magic.

You'd think that *that* would be the cause of the trouble I was having with the man. You'd think that he was delusional. You'd think that he was a man living in a fantasy world of monsters, magic, and mayhem.

You'd be wrong.

Zach has proven to me more times than I can count that magic and monsters exist. He and I are not suffering from some weird case of mass hysteria. Neither of us are delusional. Neither of us are psychotic. We are not seeing and hearing things that are not there. I have seen him do magic more than once. I've heard his stories, and they are all without a flaw, without inconsistency. Zach is no pathological liar. He is not trying to inflate his importance in this world by making up stories about the supernatural.

I know this for a fact because a few months ago, a monster tried to kill me. I survived, but I almost lost Zach as a client. He was so horrified that his profession put me in

harm's way... that he left Ohio for a while. He was afraid that I would end up dead, like his girlfriend Celeste Palmer did when they investigated the Carter Plantation together.

When he left, I was sick with worry... and, frankly, with *grief*. On a professional level, I knew that he needed more therapy. I knew that he was making real progress concerning his issues. I knew that I could continue helping him. Maybe on some level, he knew that too. He did return to Cleveland, after all... He did continue seeing me as his therapist...

When I asked him why he returned, he said, "Because I missed you, Dr. Blue Eyes."

Sigh.

It took everything in me not to tell him that I missed him just as much in return.

Sigh.

See, this is what we psychological professionals call "walking on thin freaking ice." I've told myself in the past that Zach is having an almost textbook case of transference concerning me.

Oh, I've had tons of experience with transference. It is a normal, even healthy thing for a client to trust a psychiatrist like me so much that they see me as a friend... or even more. I have always been able to maintain my objectivity, and I've always been able to make my clients see that I am not a friend or girlfriend material. I am a doctor, and my sworn duty is to help my clients get well.

I have never been able to make Zach see things that way, though. "You're cute when you try and be all professional, Dr. Darling," Zach has often said to me.

I turned the business card over in my hands several times. *To dial or not to dial, that is the question*, I thought.

Now, I knew that I couldn't tell the volunteer on the other end of the line about Zach's profession. I couldn't say, "My client was an apprentice to a powerful magician named Aubrey Lowman, and I think that Lowman's behavior toward Zach was so traumatic that it caused Zach to have repressed memories." Hell, a lot of psychiatrists don't even believe in *repressed memory cases* any more, let alone what I could tell them about Zach! Too many suggestable clients, and too many implanted, most likely false, memories had happened too often...

But *I* believe in repressed memory cases. I think that they're as rare as a mild winter in Cleveland, but I believe that, atygmj least in Zach's case, repressed memories are real, and they're a problem.

So, no to the idea of any mention of the actual specifics in Zach's case... However, if I kept the stuff about him doing magic and me kind of believing it to myself, surely I could talk about...

What could I talk about?

His feelings... or mine? "No," I said out loud, "I don't have any feelings concerning Zach. I like him, and I'm honored to help him, but that's it." *Yeah, **that's** why you were practically jumping up and down when he returned to therapy,* I thought.

Sigh. Well, if I didn't call, I'd have to go back to doing my job, which for the next hour meant doing paperwork. So...

"Come on, Doctor Mann, you can do this," I said to myself. I got out my cell phone and dialed the number.

I nearly hung up when I heard the volunteer say, "Welcome to the PPHPP helpline." It was a woman's voice, sounded like she was about my age or so. "All calls are confidential. How may I help you today?"

I took a deep breath. "I have a client."

"Yes?"

"He's got a crush on me."

"Transference is a normal, even healthy part of therapy, ma'am."

I sighed. "Yes, I know it is. But this isn't normal transference."

"How is it different?"

"He brings lunch and dinner to my office, for starters."

"Tell him that's inappropriate behavior."

I sighed. *It's not when I'm hungry!* I thought. "It's complicated. They're more like business meals. See, my client often misses appointments..."

"Tell him that is inappropriate behavior."

"My client has a job that has unusual hours. Sometimes he's called out of town or he has an emergency."

"What profession is he in?"

I sighed. *Make something up, Cynthia,* I thought.

"What profession is he in, ma'am?" the volunteer repeated.

"He's in a helping profession, much like our own," I lied. Well, it wasn't exactly a lie. Zach does help a lot of people in his line of work, really...

"Tell him that he must call at least twenty-four hours in advance of cancelling, or he'll be charged for the session," said the volunteer. "He must learn not to take advantage of you and your time."

But the money wasn't the point. "—If I do that, he may stop seeing me. He's at a very difficult point in his therapy. If started being rude to him..."

"—It's not rude to set up a professional boundary, ma'am."

"I'll take your word for it," I sighed.

"Anything else I can help you with, ma'am?"

If you don't stop calling me ma'am, I will find you and stuff my cell phone down your throat, I thought. "Uh, yes, actually," I said instead. "As I mentioned, my client is having a case of transference toward me, and it's getting out of hand..."

"What do you mean?"

"He calls me by... well, pet names. He says that I'm beautiful and wonderful and—"

"—You must tell him that such things are inappropriate."

"I have. He just laughs. He's... a very affectionate person."

"Has he *done* anything inappropriate?"

"What do you mean... inappropriate?"

"Is he sexually harassing you?"

I sighed. "No, he's acting like someone who would like to date me."

"The APA rules say that a therapist cannot date a client until at least—"

"—At least two years after the last therapy session. Yes, I know."

"And even after those two years are over, such things are still considered to be highly inappropriate, if not *per se* unethical."

"I know," I sighed.

“You simply must tell your client that if he keeps acting in an inappropriate manner toward you that you’ll have no choice but to terminate the professional relationship. You may wish to consider giving him a professional referral.”

“He *will not see* another professional. He only trusts *me*. And we are making considerable professional progress concerning his therapy. I *know* that if I violated that trust relationship, he would not continue therapy with another therapist.”

“Well, that’s the risk you’re going to have to take. What your client does after he leaves therapy is no longer your concern.”

You are the most by-the-book, hardhearted little witch I’ve encountered in a long time, I thought. But, I didn’t say it, because I knew that on some level, she was... well, not right exactly—on one level, she was just spewing back a bunch of rules and regulations. I knew and understood those regulations like the back of my hand. I also understood that Zach Cutter was more important to me than what PPHPP said or the APA rulebook said or what I knew was right—or at least professional—in my heart.

“Is there anything else I can help you with, ma’am?” the volunteer asked me.

“No, you’ve been very helpful,” I lied.

“Have a wonderful day, ma’am. Please call back if you need any more help. All calls are confidential.”

“Thanks. Have a nice day,” I said.

She ended the call. It took all my self-control not to throw my own cell phone across the room in frustration. “I’m not a ‘*ma’am*,’ I’m a *doctor*, dammit!” I yelled.

My phone beeped. I nearly dropped it in surprise, but managed not to. The beep, I realized, meant that I had a text.

I checked—it was from Zach. I’m missing you like crazy, the text read. Can’t wait to see you again!

In spite of myself, I smiled a little smile.

Then I put my phone back into my purse, and went back to doing my job.

Chapter 1: THE RASHOMON EFFECT

Part 3: The Girl Who Was Replaced

I may have just had an encounter with the supernatural.

Zach says I did, and as a supernatural investigator, he should know.

I'm... still not sure, though.

The logical, reasonable psychiatrist in me says that I just encountered a young woman with dissociative disorder (which used to be called multiple personality disorder).

Zach claims that what I encountered was something worse. He claims that I was indirectly involved with a kidnapping; a kidnapping of a human soul.

Whatever it was that just happened... it didn't start out as anything too weird or puzzling. When Alicia Marlene Williams came into my life, I was sitting in my office... and my receptionist, Kyla, knocked on my door. I told her to come in... she came in and made a point of shutting the door behind her, which was unusual. "Doctor, your next client is here," said Kyla, "and man, is she a doozy."

Thank God the door was closed when she said it. I gave Kyla a look. "Well, uh, send her in, Kyla."

Kyla opened the door again. "Okay, Alicia," said Kyla into the other room, "you can come right on in."

A slightly overweight young woman with dyed black hair and goth clothing slumped into my office. Kyla shut the door behind her as she left, and I got up from behind my desk. "Hello, Alicia, I'm Dr. Cynthia Mann."

"Don't call me Alicia," she said, "I hate my first name. That's what my parents call me. Call me by my middle name instead—Marlene."

"You want to know something? I hate my first name, too. I never go by it," I said.

"What's your first name?"

“Greta.”

“Ugh.”

“Exactly. Please sit down.”

She sat down. “...What the hell are you staring at me for?” she asked.

“I was just thinking how much I envied young women like you when I was in high school.”

“Envied girls like me? I’m a total freak. That’s what my parents think, anyway.”

“I don’t see a freak. I see an individual.” I sat down in the chair next to her, turning it to face her. She turned her chair to face me, too. “It’s brave to be an individual in our oftentimes conformist society. That’s why I envied girls like you for being brave, for being themselves.”

“So, now you think you’ve bonded with me, huh? You share some fake intimacy and suddenly I’m supposed to trust you.”

“No. I haven’t earned your trust yet. But I’d like to.”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Just like the three other doctors my parents sent me to.”

“I didn’t realize that you’d been to other therapists.”

“The first one just looked at my boobs for ten minutes and then prescribed Ritalin. The next one said that I had anti-social disorder and threw some *other* pills at me. The third said I was depressed and threw more pills at me.”

“How long did you see each of these doctors?”

“One session each.”

“...I can understand why. You’re not a set of symptoms, you’re an individual person.”

“Damn’ right I am.”

“...Tell me about yourself, Marlene.”

“...I’m a gore hound. You probably don’t even know what that is.”

“You like bloody horror films.”

“Yeah, probably the type of shit that would send you running for the hills.”

“Do you like Lucio Fulci?”

“...You know about him?”

“I saw *Zombi* when I was fourteen. I had to hack the parental controls on the family television, but I saw it.”

“...I don’t suppose you ever read the *Hot Blood* books?”

“Yes. And when my adopted parents found out, they hit the roof.”

“Really?” Marlene gave me a look. “Why?”

“Because they were fundamentalist Christians and they thought everything fun and scary was Satanic.”

“You’re shitting me!”

“No... I certainly couldn’t have made that up.”

“Do you read comics? I mean, like, any graphic novels?”

“Well, I did when I was in high school. Those were also supposed to be satanic, by the way.”

“What did you read?”

“Oh, *Swamp Thing*, by Alan Moore...”

“You? Little Miss Hair-All-Up-In-A-Bun?”

“You don’t judge me by my cover, I won’t judge you by yours, all right?”

“All right.”

As the session went on, we didn’t talk about Marlene’s problems or her parents; we talked about all the things she liked. I admit, I didn’t know half the things she knew about pop culture, but I wrote them all down and promised to do more research about them.

“...Why didn’t you ask me about my problems?” Marlene asked at the end of our session.

“Because you, like all of us, are more than just your problems. Now, how about coming to see me next week, and we’ll talk some more? We don’t have to talk about anything major if you don’t want to, we could just talk about whatever you want to talk about, okay?”

“Can I come in sooner than next week?”

“If you like.”

“Okay. ...Promise me you’ll listen to those Megadeth songs I told you about.”

I promised her I would.

I saw that Marlene was a girl who needed someone to talk to. I saw that she felt out of place and ignored—so ignored that she overcompensated by being harsh and distrustful. I knew it would take time to build such trust between us, even if I had to listen to a few thrash metal and death metal songs to do so.

Marlene started coming to see me three times a week, just to talk. I didn’t mind; she needed to feel valued, to feel as if her interests and concerns mattered to someone other than just herself. I was willing to be the person who listened and took an interest in her...

But around our fifth or sixth session, Marlene said to me: “Hey, about that Mr. Cutter.”

“...Zach Cutter? What about him?” I asked. She must have run into him in my waiting room. Heaven knows Zach sometimes showed up ridiculously early for appointments, as if to make up for sometimes being ridiculously late for them...

“Is he crazy or on the level?”

“...What exactly what are you asking, specifically?” Marlene sometimes could be very vague.

“Is he a supernatural investigator like he says he is?”

“Oh, that. Yes, he is...”

“Is he really a magician, too? Can he do magic?”

I sighed. “Marlene, that’s a complicated subject. I will say this, though: *if* there is such a thing as the supernatural, then Zach Cutter knows about it.”

“...So, if he told me something about myself, I could probably take his word for it?”

“...Most likely, but what did he say...?”

“He says that I have a magical personality.”

“Well, you do. You are a very unique young woman.”

“No, no, Doctor, don’t bullshit me. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

“Zach says that the reason I’m kind of messed-up and rebellious is that I’m a magical sensitive in some way.”

“...Oh. Did he say in exactly what way you’re... sensitive?”

“He says I can see ghosts.”

“...Oh. Uh... exactly how did all of this come up?”

“Well, you know he shows up really early for his sessions sometimes.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“Well, when he does that, he talks to the other people waiting. And he started talking to me. He knew who Crowley was, and Anton LeVay, and...”

“—And Zach told you that you have... gifts?”

“Yeah. He said that he was like me when he was my age. He said that he was really anti-social sometimes and kind of rebellious, but that was because people didn’t understand that he was magical and it made him really mad and hurt inside.”

Interesting. Zach had been my client for a while but had never said anything like that to *me*... “It’s a really challenging thing to have beliefs outside of the mainstream,” I said.

“But did he say how he knew about you having these... abilities?”

“Yeah. I told him there’s a dead kid who likes to play in your office. Nice little boy, too. His name is *Hans*. Hans says he likes how tough I look.”

“...Hans was my brother’s name,” I said softly.

“Yeah, he looks like you,” Marlene said, not really picking up on how this information might make me feel.

“...How long have you been able to see ghosts?” I asked.

“Oh, since I was smaller than Hans. But everyone told me I was crazy, and they’d always freak out when I told them about the ghosts I’ve seen, so I try not to talk about it too much. Only sometimes you can’t ignore it, you know?”

“Sometimes you have to tell your truths,” I said.

“Yeah, exactly. Like, take recently...” She frowned, looked out the window, and seemed lost in thought.

“What happened recently?”

More frowning, but she started talking again. “...My rich asshole parents moved into a mansion on Parkland Drive. It’s kind of old. And a girl about my age died of pneumonia there a long time ago. I see her all the time. She looks at me... I think she’s jealous of me because I’m alive and she’s dead.”

“Have you... uh... tried to talk to the girl?”

“Zach says that I need to tell her very firmly to leave. And if that doesn’t work, he’s going to come over and do an exorcism. He says that I need to learn to put up psychic boundaries, or else I’m going to be under psychic attack from every angry ghost I see.”

“...Learning to make boundaries is a good idea no matter what the situation.” Oh, God, Zach, did you just *have* to get involved in this case? Isn’t it hard enough to gain this child’s trust without dragging magic into things?

“He gave me some books to read about it,” said Marlene. “They look kind of cool.”

“Uh, Marlene... let’s say the supernatural exists...”

“It does.”

I gave her a look that I'm sure showed how I felt. "I get enough of that response from Mr. Cutter, Marlene." Marlene laughed. "What I'm trying to say is," I continued, "most of the world is natural, not supernatural. The *natural* world is the one that we *all* have to deal with, *whatever* our abilities. So I'd like to focus more on the everyday world in our next session, okay?"

"Oh, our time's up, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I'm afraid it is."

"Okay. Well... thanks for listening, Doctor. And for not telling me that magic doesn't exist."

"I have to keep an open mind concerning all my clients' beliefs."

Marlene got up and went to the door. She stopped and turned around. "...That Mr. Cutter's a smoking hottie, though, huh?"

No, no, no, do not crush on Zach! You're freaking sixteen and he's twice your age. You're a minor! I thought. "He's a very kind person," I said aloud.

"Too bad he's crushing on *you* like crazy..."

I sighed again. "It's called transference. Many clients form a bond with their therapists that they mistake for love..."

"How about transference between clients?"

"That's not recommended either."

"I'm just yanking your chain, Doc. He only has eyes for you."

"Actually, it's kind of improper for me to talk very much about another client."

"You're blushing, Dr. Mann."

"I'm only blushing because this all is kind of thin ice in terms of ethics... and I don't like being on thin ice."

"Riiiiight. That's *all* it is..."

"Goodbye for now, Marlene."

“Yeah, see you next time.”

Unfortunately, there was no next time.

After Marlene left, Zach came in for his appointment. “Hello, Doctor Darling.”

“—Do *not* Doctor Darling *me!*”

He sat down. “What did I do this time?”

“You’re confusing my client, that’s what!”

“Marlene, you mean?”

“Of course Marlene. You filled her head all about magic and psychics and ghosts...”

“She’s interested in those subjects. And she’s got mediumship abilities. If she chooses the magical path, I think I should recommend her to Bondye University, don’t you?”

“No, I don’t! Some uncredited school that teaches magic? Her parents would hit the roof!”

“Who do you care about more? Her parents or her?”

“I care about Marlene, of course, but she’s only sixteen right now, and she has two more years of living with her family of origin before she can go *any* college. In the meantime, I have to help her navigate her present life, and you’re making that more difficult for me.”

“I’m trying to do the same thing for her that you are. It’s difficult to have psychic abilities under any circumstances, especially mediumship abilities, so she needs a friend and a mentor. You handle her psychological issues, I’ll help her with her magic.”

“That would be highly inappropriate.”

“Why?”

“Because she’s sixteen and you’re twice her age!”

“I talk to her while I wait for you—I’m sitting in a damned waiting room with your receptionist as chaperone! All I do is talk! Do you really think that I would harm a child? My only interest in her is an intellectual one—I know what it’s like to have magic

in me and have no one understand about it, it sucks! It's lonely! Hell, I pay you so I have someone to understand that problem!"

"She's sixteen."

"I know that!"

"She's crushing on you!"

That stopped Zach short. "...Oh," he said quietly.

"You didn't know?"

"No, I didn't. I mean, look at me. I'm not exactly Sid Vicious in leather pants, am I? I'm not exactly the lead singer in a death-metal band."

"No, not exactly—"

"—I didn't mean to—I never led her on, Cynthia. I just took an interest in her. I just loaned her a few books!"

"Sometimes in a lonely teen's life, a man taking an interest in her, no matter how innocent that interest is, is enough to cause problems."

"Yeah, I can see that... *now*... so what should I do about it?"

"Stay away from her. Schedule your appointments so you don't see her. Stop showing up so early."

"You make it sound like I did something wrong. I never—"

"—I didn't say you did. I'm worried about the effect on my client, that's all."

Zach gave me a shrewd look. "...Say, you're not jealous, are you?"

"Me? Have you *completely* lost your mind?"

"That's not exactly a politically correct thing to say to one of your patients, Cynthia." I could see that he was trying to gain control of the situation again, and I knew I shouldn't rise to his bait... although that seemed to be exactly what I'd been doing since he'd walked in... but it's so difficult not to with Zach...

"I'm sorry," I said. "That wasn't proper, and it was inappropriate, and—"

“—You know that you’re the only snugglebunny in my rabbit hutch.”

“Oh, God, no. Not right now—this is a serious matter!”

“You’re the only angel in my heaven, the only princess in my enchanted kingdom, the only oasis in my desert, the only—”

“—Do you stay up nights thinking up that kind of nonsense?”

“No, I stay up nights dreaming of you, tootsie-pie.”

“Stop. Just stop. Please.”

“All right, I’ll stop. And I’ll stop trying to help Marlene. She needs a therapist, not a magician.”

“Exactly.”

Somehow, I managed to get control of myself, and of Zach’s session. Zach seemed to understand that banter-y playtime was over and we should get down to work. I felt wrung out and exhausted by the end of the hour, though.

At the end of the session, Zach said (in regard to Marlene): “Don’t worry, it will all work out.”

It didn’t.

A few days later, I got a call from Marlene’s father. “You let a crazy man talk to my Alicia!” he yelled into the phone.

“She likes to be called Marlene,” I said quietly.

“And that’s another thing. You coddle and indulge my daughter way too much.”

“The child needs understanding. She needs to feel free to be herself.”

“She *needs pills!*”

...*Oh*. Well. *That* explained a lot about Marlene’s situation in just three words... “Just because she doesn’t fit in with her age peers or your expectations of what a normal girl should be,” I said, “doesn’t mean that she needs meds.”

“She’s an anti-social little creep! I’d say she needs her head examined, but *that’s* what I pay *you* for—and that’s another thing! Why the hell should I pay for you to see her three times a week? The other doctors only saw her once!”

“She couldn’t relate to the other doctors. She can relate to me.”

“*Relate?* You’re a *doctor*, not a best friend. Christ, *relate* to you! My Alicia doesn’t need that goddamned 1970s psychotherapy bullshit! She needs someone to screw her head on right!”

“Look, the second I found out that my client talked to your daughter, I had a firm talk with him, and I set boundaries. I—”

“He gave her books about magic!”

“I told him that wasn’t appropriate, and that he shouldn’t discuss his beliefs with her. I told him—”

“—I knew I shouldn’t have let Alicia go to a woman therapist. You’re all too soft to deal with a discipline problem like my daughter!”

“She’s never once been a discipline problem with me. I’ve found her to be a bright, even a gifted child. She should have her IQ tested.”

“What, so she can go to one of those ivory-tower universities that indoctrinates students with their liberal, anti-God, anti-capitalism agendas? Oh, you’d like that, wouldn’t you? You’d like her to lose her values and become a man-hating bitch like you are!”

Oh, dear, I thought. *Not all the lunatics are in the asylum.* “Mr. Williams, what you think of me is outside the scope of this conversation. All I care about is your daughter’s mental health.”

“*You* will never see my daughter again, you *bitch*! And tell that pervert client of yours to stay the hell away from her before I get his pedophile ass thrown in jail for statutory rape!”

“Mr. Williams, I assure you that Mr. Cutter only spoke to your daughter in public, in front of one or more witnesses who can attest that nothing like that whatsoever went

on in my office's waiting room. Your daughter's safety and health are of the highest priority with me, and—"

"—Well you'll never see that little bitch again!" Mr. Williams said, and he slammed the phone down on me.

"...Oh, God, poor Marlene. That poor, dear girl," I said out loud.

I just sat at my desk for a few minutes, trying my damndest not to cry... not for myself—I could handle anger issues, I could handle people bad-mouthing me. But knowing that Marlene lived under those horrible circumstances and there was nothing I could do to help her was almost too much to bear.

Finally, I said to hell with it—I put my head down on my desk and wept for a few minutes. *I'm so sorry, Marlene*, I thought.

Then my computer went ding—an instant message. It read:

ZachC: So did the crazy guy yell at you, too?

I decided to answer him.

DrMann: Yes.

ZachC: I'm sorry, Doctor Darling, I truly am. I guess I over-identified with Marlene. Except for the fact that my family wasn't rich, her life is a lot like mine was back then.

DrMann: Interesting. Please tell me more.

ZachC: This isn't a therapy session, Cynthia. I'm just trying to tell you that I messed up, badly, and I know it. If I hadn't interfered, Marlene would still have a caring, empathetic therapist.

DrMann: I doubt that. The father got impatient that I was actually talking to his daughter instead of putting her on pills.

ZachC: God, you're kidding me.

DrMann: And apparently I'm a man-hater with a medical degree for daring to be in a male-oriented profession...

ZachC: He said that?

DrMann: More or less. He used a lot of curse words and buzzword putdowns, but you get the point.

ZachC: Jesus. Some world we live in, huh?

DrMann: I just feel so sorry for his daughter.

ZachC: Yeah. No matter how much she dyes her hair and no matter how much she rebels, she's got to live with that shit every damned day. And unlike me, who at least had Shug and Jean Marasa for a support system, Marlene's got no one. Without you, I see her crumbling.

DrMann: OMG, you're not saying that she's suicidal, are you?

ZachC: There's more than one way to crumble, sweetie. Sometimes, it's not the mind or the body that gives up. Sometimes, it's the soul itself.

DrMann: I can't mend a human soul.

ZachC: You could've if Marlene's father had given you the chance. Uh... what do we do now about her?

DrMann: There's nothing that we can do.

ZachC: Child authorities surely...

DrMann: She's not being abused.

ZachC: She is. Emotional abuse is worse than physical abuse sometimes. Or so I've read.

DrMann: Unfortunately, unlike physical or sexual abuse, emotional abuse is difficult to prove... or to be taken seriously by child authorities.

ZachC: So we can do nothing?

DrMann: We can do nothing.

ZachC: ...God, I'm depressed.

DrMann: Me too.

ZachC: No good deed goes unpunished.

DrMann: At least we tried.

ZachC: ...I'm in the lobby of your office building now. Come down to the coffee shop and get something to eat with me.

DrMann: OMG, were you texting and driving?! That's so dangerous!

ZachC: No, I was texting, but my car was driving. That's one of the perks of owning a magical car that can drive itself. Now, it's after five and I know that you haven't eaten.

DrMann: I had a snack around three.

ZachC: An energy bar isn't a meal. Come down and we'll drown our miseries in some green tea and salads, okay?

DrMann: ...I'll be right down.

I knew that I should have set a boundary instead—we ate together way too much the way it was. But I was psychologically shaken... and I knew Zach was too, and he needed my support.

I locked up my office. *Oh, God, Cynthia, you talked to a client about another client! You're losing your shit, you really are*, I thought.

Then as I walked down the hall to the elevator, I thought again. *Well, maybe not. The father had obviously called Zach and yelled at him, just like the father yelled at me. I was only commenting on the case to comfort my emotionally upset client.*

I got on the elevator. *Sure, Cynthia, keep telling yourself **that** until you believe it...*

But that phone call wasn't the end of things, though I suppose it should've been.

About two weeks later, Kyla knocked on my door. "Doctor Mann, Alicia is here."

"Uh... Marlene? Has she come to see me as a client?"

"No, not exactly. But I think you should see her anyway," said Kyla. Kyla had a weird look in her eyes—amazement, maybe even alarm, but not in a way that suggested that there was danger waiting in the waiting room, exactly...

I left my desk, and went into the waiting room.

There I saw a girl who looked like Marlene, talking to Zach.

But she *didn't* look *very much* like Marlene. The hair dye was washed out of her hair, and she was wearing a very conservative-looking, modest pink dress—she might have lost just a little weight, too, or was that my imagination? “I’m sorry, Mr. Cutter, but these books are against my father’s beliefs,” she said as she handed a stack of books to Zach. Even the voice was the same and yet not the same. It sounded kind of like the same voice as Marlene, but using a slightly higher register, and all the mannerisms were wrong.

“...Marlene?” I asked.

“I call myself Alicia now, Doctor,” she said.

“Where *is* Marlene?” asked Zach. Zach was also freaking out, but in a different way from Kyla—more in control of how much the situation was weirding him out, but also more concerned.

“I’m Marlene. Or rather, that’s what I used to call myself.” Or rather? The old Marlene wouldn’t have said *or rather* like that...

“Alicia was *also* the name of the girl who died over a century ago in your house, Marlene,” Zach said.

“That’s an interesting coincidence,” said the girl.

“Uh... you look different,” I said.

“Yes, I do. I *am* different. My father sent me to Dr. Whitman, who prescribed chlorpromazine for my maladies. It fixed me right up,” said Alicia.

“But that’s a powerful anti-psychotic medicine,” I said. “I think that it’s contraindicated...”

“Dr. Whitman says I have Dissociative Identity Disorder with psychotic episodes,” said Alicia.

“I think he’s wrong,” I said, “and I certainly think it’s too soon in your treatment to prescribe anything that severe.”

Alicia frowned—a different frown from the frown the old Marlene preferred. Less angry, more haughty. “Face it, Doctor, you failed,” she said, “and Dr. Whitman succeeded. I’m better now.”

“You’re not Marlene,” said Zach.

“Now that I’ve given your books back, there’s no need for me to remain here.” Marlene would’ve said ‘hang around’ instead of ‘remain,’ I noted to myself. “Goodbye, Dr. Mann. Goodbye, Mr. Cutter.” And she walked out my front office door.

We all just stood there, staring at the door for a minute. Then Zach and I stared at each other, and Kyla stared at the two of us staring at each other. Finally, the tension building, Kyla looked away—to the clock on the wall. “...It’s time for Mr. Cutter’s session now,” Kyla said weakly.

“Oh, yes. Of course,” I said in a *might as well, I guess* sort of tone.

Zach followed me into my office—he slammed the stack of books down on my desk and then sat down. Now he looked really angry.

I looked at the books. “*The Sixth and Seventh Book of Moses, Petit Albert, The Book of St Cyprian...*” I read.

“Never mind those stupid books,” said Zach, “we have to do something!”

“I can’t do anything about another doctor’s diagnosis,” I said.

“Screw the diagnosis. That’s not important.”

“Then what is?”

“You have a possession case!”

“I do?”

“Marlene’s a gifted medium, but she doesn’t have good psychic boundaries. It’s obvious that the girl ghost in her house jumped into her and is leading Marlene’s life! This is a case of psychic kidnapping! We have to do something about it!”

“...What do you suggest we do?”

“She needs to be exorcised.”

“Wait, you’re... you’re suggesting that we do what exactly?”

“You make up an excuse to bring her to your office after Kyla’s gone. I’ll handle things from there.”

“Zach, that’s a possible case of kidnapping, or false imprisonment... or fraud, or—”

“—If you won’t help me, I’ll do it myself.”

“No, you won’t. Mr. Williams’ll throw you in jail the second you do anything, so you’ve got to do nothing at all.”

“That would be morally unthinkable.”

“It’s no longer our business. We have to leave it all alone.”

“But Cynthia...”

“No, Zach, not this time. I have a hard time making boundaries with you, Zach. And maybe that’s okay when it’s just you and me. But I will not have you interfering with a former client’s case. This is a big *NO*. You do anything, and I mean anything, and I can’t have you as a client anymore. That’s written in stone, understand me? Whatever’s going on in that girl’s head, she doesn’t seem to want anything to do with you anymore, and her father certainly feels the same way, and to say the very least, I’m afraid for you if you get involved again. I agree that Alicia, or Marlene, or whatever that girl who was just here wants to call herself, I agree that she could probably use some help from some psychiatrist who isn’t the latest person to prescribe her medication, but I’m not the doctor in charge of that right now, someone else is, and so *there’s nothing either you or I can do*.”

Zach looked at me. I looked at him. “...Fine,” he said. “For you, I’ll stay away from it. But I’m telling you, Cynthia, it won’t be all happily ever after for Marlene.”

“We don’t know that.”

“Alicia is a ghost from another century. Times have changed. Life is much tougher now, especially for teenagers.”

“Alicia might just be Marlene’s dominant personality.”

“You don’t believe that, do you?”

“I... no. No, I don’t believe it. She wasn’t a dissociative identity disorder case. I don’t know about your theory, but this Doctor Whitman is just plain wrong.”

“Mark my words, sweetie, this case isn’t over by a long shot.”

And it wasn’t.

A week later, after I got home from work, I got a phone call from Zach. “Get to your office, and hurry,” Zach said.

“Tch—I just got home...!”

“Well, get un-home, and get here instead!”

“Why?” But I reached for my car keys.

“Because in Marlene’s case, the stuff has hit the fan,” Zach said, and that was more than enough for me. I locked up my apartment and ran for my apartment building’s elevator.

“Tell me about it while I wait for the elevator to come,” I said.

“Alicia, talk to the doctor. I’ll put you on speakerphone so you can talk.”

“What’s a speakerphone, Mr. Cutter?” said Alicia.

“Just talk,” said Zach. “The doctor will hear you.”

“Oh, Doctor,” said Alicia, “it’s a terrible, terrible world.”

The elevator came, and I got in. “What happened?”

“School happened,” she sobbed, “Marlene’s family happened. The world happened!”

I tried testing something. “Start at the beginning, Marlene.”

“Don’t call me Marlene! I’m Alicia!”

“All right, Alicia... just tell me what happened.” Finally, I got off the elevator, and walked quickly to the door to the parking lot.

“I don’t understand computers,” said Alicia.

I almost laughed. “Many people don’t,” I said.

“And I don’t understand satellite radio, or television, or modern cars, or elevators, or escalators, or...”

Once outside, I started running to my car. “What don’t you get about them?” I asked a little breathlessly.

“I don’t get why they exist at all! In my time, things were *completely different!*”

“It’s as I told you, Cynthia,” said Zach, “Alicia’s a ghost that’s possessing Marlene.”

I got into my car. “Zach, let Alicia talk.”

“Then, the people... out there,” said Alicia. “They yell and scream at each other... and in public, too! They’re so *rude!*”

I started to drive back to my office. “It’s true that we live in a cruder world than we used to... it seems to be a post-internet thing...”

“I don’t understand the internet! How can everyone see everything at once?”

“It’s a miracle of the modern age,” I said.

“It’s not a miracle! There’s nothing but dirty, filthy pictures on it!”

“You need to have someone show you about internet filters...”

“—Do they know how to filter the world itself? Do they know how to make life gentle and kind again?!”

“No, but there are ways to shelter yourself from—”

“I want to go *home*, Doctor!” wailed Alicia.

“I’ll drive you home, Alicia. I’m driving to my office right now—”

“*No!* Don’t take me back to *Marlene’s* family! I want *my* momma and papa! I want my baby brother and my cousins and my friends in their pretty white dresses instead of the girls at school who show practically everything like painted Jezebels! They’re all so vulgar and cruel, both the girls and the boys! I want the boy who wanted to be my boyfriend back before I died!”

All right, that did it—a chill went through me. I got gooseflesh, I admit it—I shivered. “You believe you really are a ghost, don’t you?”

“I just wanted to see a little more of the world before I went into the light! But I’ve seen too much! I’ve seen far too much! And now I can’t leave!”

“Alicia, I know that you’re a very sensitive person, but there are also very good things in the world,” I said.

“People are saying terrible things about each other online! I accidentally got into a— an online chat room that Marlene had saved, and said I thought that a picture that I saw there of a woman was obscene, and the next day I got three threats on Marlene’s computer from men saying that if they ever found me they would—would *subject me to a fate worse than death!* I don’t even understand about “movies” or costumed people with “super powers!” Why would they do something like that, doctor? I’m a stranger to them! I just said that someone’s costume was too revealing!”

“Some fanboys over-identify with their fan culture. That makes them think they can bully those who don’t agree with them. Plus, the anonymity of the internet—”

“What’s a fanboy? How can people say terrible things to other people and not have to sign their real names?”

“Some people really are that cowardly and cruel, yes... but most aren’t. Even those into such subcultures usually aren’t that cruel...”

“How much longer are you going to be, Doctor?” she asked me.

“Technically, I’m within sight of my office building now, but there’s still a little traffic before I get there—”

“—Please hurry!” she said.

“Zach, please keep her calm until I can get there, park, and get upstairs, all right?”

“Sure—she’ll be safe with me, I promise,” said Zach.

I ended the call, and kept driving until I reached the parking lot of my office building. *What a screwed-up mess!* I thought as I arrived and parked my car. *Something’s wrong with her meds. One personality, if that’s really what’s going on, has taken over, and has no idea how to function in this world... unless, of course, Marlene really is possessed by a*

ghost... and Zach's in my office alone with her, that's not appropriate... oh, hell, how would I ever explain this to the child's father?

I rushed to the front of the building. I think the poor child is having a nervous breakdown on top of everything else. She'll need in-house treatment, most likely. She'll have to be weaned off of those anti-psychotic drugs... But I don't have the authority to prescribe in-house treatment. I don't even know if I have the right to talk to Dr. Whitman about her condition...and if I do, it'll be difficult for me not to tell him exactly what I think of him...

As I ran for the elevator, I almost bumped into the janitor. "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. Larsen, but I have a real emergency on my hands..."

"I let Mr. Cutter and that girl into your office. Was that okay?" Mr. Larsen said. "It turned out okay last time, right?"

"It was fine. Great. You did the right thing, but I have to go right now," I said as the elevator dinged.

"I hope everything works out again this time," Mr. Larsen said as I jumped into the elevator.

I pushed the button to my floor. "Me too."

"Good luck! I'll keep you in my prayers!"

"Thank you! I'll need all the help I can get!" I said as the elevator doors closed.

The elevator started to move. *...This can't really be a ghost, I thought. ...But if it is, what can I possibly do about it? C'mon, elevator, move!*

The elevator finally got near my floor. *If Zach exorcises Alicia out of Marlene—in my office, yet—I could lose my psychiatry license... couldn't I? Or could it be even worse than that? I've read stories about people dying during exorcisms... such barbaric practices... I can't let Zach do—* The elevator stopped and the doors opened. I rushed out of the elevator. *So, I have to make a choice between good psychiatry and what's best for my patient. But if this involves the supernatural...? Or even if it doesn't! I am so screwed, I am so screwed, I am so screwed...*

When I got to my office, the front door was open. "I'm here," I yelled, rushing into the waiting room.

“In here, Cyn,” Zach called from my office. He’d propped my office door open with a chair so he could hear when I came in.

As I entered my office, I found Zach *holding* Alicia, who was crying. *Oh, God, no! That’s totally inappropriate!* I thought.

“Oh, Doctor. Help me. Help me, please!” Alicia said as she looked up at me.

“Alicia, go and sit next to Dr. Mann,” Zach said. Silently, she did so.

“I’ll do my best,” I said as I sat down. “But first, Zach, tell me what’s going on.”

“It’s too late, that’s what’s going on,” Zach said.

“Too late? Too late for what?”

“I goofed, Cynthia. I had this case all wrong.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I thought this was a kidnapping case. Instead, it’s a case of body abandonment.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means Marlene’s *gone!*” said Alicia. “She went into the light instead of me! I’m so scared! I don’t *want* to live in this world! Mr. Cutter says that Marlene won’t come back! He says that he can’t *make* her come back, either!” Alicia started to cry again. She threw her arms around me and sobbed like a baby.

I held her, but looked over toward Zach. “Wha?” I said.

“Our Marlene was a smart girl,” Zach said grimly. “She hated her life... so she did something about it...”

“But...” I said.

“—Marlene told me that she’d be back in a couple of weeks,” said Alicia, “but she never came back! *She’s* in the *afterlife* and *I* have to stay down *here* until *her* body *dies*! She *tricked* me!”

“It’s like the old trick that Hercules and Atlas pulled on each other in Greek mythology,” said Zach. “Here, you take on my burdens for a little while, and I’ll come

right back,' and then the last person to fall for it leaves the person who gets conned holding the bag.”

“Surely that’s, I don’t know... against the magical rules?” I said. “Or something?”

“It’s not against any rule that I or anyone else I know can enforce,” said Zach. “It’s just an unfortunate twist on the typical walk-in case.”

“What’s a *typical* walk-in case like?” I asked.

“When a soul’s been too damaged to continue living a life, sometimes another soul, such as an angel or a ghost, chooses to take over the lifespan of that person, so that the damaged soul can go into the light and heal for a few hundred years. Apparently, Marlene’s soul fit that description well enough that these two could... well, so Marlene could pull a bait and switch.”

“You poor girl,” I said to Alicia.

“I don’t *want* to be alive!” cried Alicia.

“Look, sweetie, I know this is scary for you. The world has changed so much and it’s overwhelming. But, if I understand a walk-in case right, a weaker soul is exchanged for a stronger one...” I said.

“Yeah, that’s right,” Zach confirmed.

“You’re the stronger soul, Alicia,” I told her. “Marlene couldn’t handle her life. But whatever’s out there in the universe, God or whatever, he, or it, or they... think that you can handle things better than Marlene could.”

“But how do I live in a world I don’t understand?” asked Alicia.

“That’s a question that we all ask ourselves sometimes,” I said.

“Alicia,” Zach said, “I want you to talk to your parents.”

“They’re *her* parents, not mine...” said Alicia.

“I know, sweetie,” I said softly, “but they’re the only ones you have right now.”

“You tell Marlene’s parents that you think public school is immoral and trying to rob you of your values,” said Zach. “Tell them that you need home tutoring or a private school.”

“Zach, are you sure that’s the best thing to do?” I said.

“She needs some privacy until she can learn to handle things...” said Zach.

“So, you’re thinking private college for her, too?” I asked.

“Definitely,” agreed Zach. “She’ll have to live a very sheltered life, but she’ll survive.”

“I can’t!” insisted Alicia. “Not if I don’t have you as a doctor!”

“...Here, try this,” I said, thinking. “...Tell your father that he had me all wrong—tell him that I come from a fundamentalist Christian background and I went to a spirit-filled church.”

“Did you?”

“Yes, I actually did, but I didn’t enjoy it,” I said, “and I don’t like talking about it. But he doesn’t have to know those parts.”

“Fair enough,” said Zach.

“Even if he relents about *you*,” said Alicia—I couldn’t help but note, mentally, that Marlene never would have said *relents*— “—he’ll still be mad about Mr. Cutter being your client...”

“Tell your father that Dr. Mann prayed over the matter, and decided to drop me as her client,” Zach said.

Alicia may have been from a more innocent era, but she wasn’t stupid, or above lying to a man who wasn’t her real father. “...Yes, that might work,” she agreed. “But... how do we explain about... my sudden change in personality? I mean, I’m not going to take the pills Dr. Whitman prescribed anymore... I tried them, but they made me feel sick.”

“Tell your father that you found Dr. Mann at a church,” said Zach, “and you two prayed the disorder away.”

“He’s not going to buy that,” I said.

“Oh, he will,” said Zach. “His type will believe *anything* as long as the problem goes away.”

...I could make this story longer, but it really doesn't need much more explanation. I got Alicia back as a client, and she now goes to a very sheltered private Christian school. When Alicia's father phones me, as he often does, I try to treat him and his belief system with dignity and respect. At first, we didn't get along, but now I try to see him as a deeply concerned father who feels that he's in just a little over his head. Personally, I feel he could use some help with his anger issues, but I'm his daughter's therapist, not his.

I have yet to talk to the mother. Alicia says that Marlene's mother is a very quiet woman who doesn't talk much, so she doesn't really enter into the story one way or the other.

I see Alicia once a week now, and talk to her often online, as she tries to renegotiate her relationship with the world. Unlike Marlene, Alicia seems to have no psychic abilities or special gifts. She has no interest in gory movies nor metal anything nor comic books. She is a very different girl from Marlene. I treat Alicia as a separate client, because to me, she is.

But I grieve, as does Zach, for the loss of Marlene. We both had hoped that maybe Marlene would return to this life. We both liked her very much. We both, each of us in our own way, thought Marlene was special.

I try to like Alicia just as much as I did Marlene. I try... and I almost succeed. Alicia really is a strong soul, for all her tears. I mean, it takes a strong soul to navigate a world so different than the one she knew so long ago.

So, I as I said at the beginning of this case file, I think I just had an encounter with the supernatural. But maybe not. In the end, I'm not sure it matters, as long as *someone* inside her body learns to live Alicia Marlene Williams' life with purpose and fulfillment.

Because... ghost or dominant personality, whichever she may be, I wish whoever the girl *really* is all the best... for the rest of her life.