

The Cat's Apprentice

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Chapter One

Man on the Floor

Irene was one of five women who founded the City Center for Women over ten years ago. They were a tight-knit group who knew each other well and respected one another despite some rather obvious flaws. They'd purchased a five-bedroom house in an area that was actually zoned residential until Tiza's connections to crooked local businessmen came to their aid. In truth, there had been many obstacles faced by these women, whose goal was simply to provide mental health services and support for poor women in the city. It seemed that any city no matter how small or unimportant had, along with its slew of impoverished peoples, its own little fat-cat back-scratching underground. Purveyors of contracts for trash, heating and cooling, and even the recycling all required some kind of back room negotiations in order for their work to continue. It was a pathetic kind of urban-Anglo cosa nostra designed to help small men feel just a little bit bigger. And thankfully, Tiza knew how to deal with all of them.

Monday mornings at the Center ranged from moderately awful to downright ghastly. Irene would come in to a bevy of frantic voice mail messages outlining the various intolerable tragedies her patients had endured over the weekend. And like a jump into a frigid lake, Irene was suddenly immersed in the cold world of the poor and unbalanced.

"My cat got hit by a car and my son hasn't stopped crying all weekend"; "I called my mother and she said I needed to go on a diet again"; "A tape got stuck in my VCR and I was nearly screaming from boredom until I pried it open, but then it was broken--why do I DO things like that?"; "My husband hit me again and my neighbor called the cops." These women had problems, to be sure, but only a few of them really required an emergency call to The Shrink. Still, Irene's concern for her patients was nearly boundless. Right away she began the process of calling them all back in the hour she had before clients started arriving for their 50-minute sessions.

She was returning one of her many messages when Alex, easily the most high-strung member of their team, stuck her head into Irene's office with a look she knew meant Alex was going to hit her up for a favor. Irene held up one finger as she continued her fruitless attempt to console the sobbing woman on the phone.

"Your mother doesn't hate you, I think she just doesn't know how to tell you that she's worried about your health...No, I don't think it's your fault she

worries...no, I don't think you should give up eating entirely. Sweetie, listen, my ten o'clock appointment will be here any minute, so I'm going to call you back...no, I'm not trying to get rid of you, I just have a very long day ahead...why don't you think of something nice to do for yourself today, and I'll talk to you later, okay? Okay, bye-bye."

Irene hung up the phone and looked at her co-worker expectantly. She thought Alex might be stopping by to remind her to smile again. Irene, like the rest of the office, hated being reminded to smile. If she felt like displaying the "upside-down frown," she would. There was no point to plastering on a pretend smile in a disingenuous attempt to appear happier than one actually is. In fact, when you're surrounded by some of the poorest and most troubled women in the city these big, phony smiles seemed condescending and rude. Luckily though, Alex was not on Smile Patrol this particular morning.

"Your ten o'clock cancelled. It seems she's trying to gather up money to get her husband out of jail." Alex did not bother trying to disguise the contempt in her voice. Irene's ten o'clock was a woman named Suzanne, whose husband "Buddy" was an alcoholic and abuser who knocked Suzanne around several times a month. When Sue first came in for therapy, she was disappointed with herself for "getting her husband arrested." It seemed that Sue had screamed too loudly during a previous beating and attracted the attention of the people in the trailer next to theirs. "It's not my fault," she had said, still crying and dabbing her discolored, swollen eye. "Those trailer walls are so thin, I can't help it if they can hear me." Of course Suzanne had not yet considered that perhaps Buddy was wrong for hitting her in the first place. She'd come quite a long way since then, but not far enough to actually leave her abuser. Like most women in that predicament Suzanne was drowning in a codependent slurry that had sloshed its way into most of her stereotypical trailer park. In truth, she needed his income to support her and their child: a lovely but unfortunately named girl called Twyla. Slowly but surely, Sue was coming ever closer to envisioning a life without Buddy.

"Anyway, we have a new client in the waiting room. If you can talk to her, I'd appreciate it," Alex said, talking slightly louder as she walked away to pour her second cup of coffee. Irene looked at her list of remaining calls to make. If she had this hour to herself, she could probably take as long as 20 minutes for lunch...a luxury she almost never afforded herself. There was always so much work to do. Lately Irene was feeling like she was continually being pulled in too many directions. Too much was being demanded of her. She needed to set some kind of boundary, make some kind of choice to support her own well-being.

"Can Cassy take her?" Irene asked quietly. The waiting room was just down the hall and one could never be sure when clients could hear. The little white-

noise machines on the office doors were only used during sessions, so currently anyone could hear her in the office, including Cassy. Irene would hate for a new client to feel like an inconvenience however much she might need the free time.

"Cassy doesn't come in until noon on Mondays, remember?" Alex said, pouring three sugar packets in her coffee mug coffee at once. A picture of a kitten hanging from a long bar by its front paws looked out helplessly from the mug above a "Hang in there, Baby" caption. If there was something insipidly cute in the office, you could bet it belonged to Alex.

"Obviously not," Irene answered, wondering why in hell she hadn't thought of scheduling herself in at noon every Monday. "Sure, send her in in five minutes."

"You're a doll!" Alex told her with a big, fake grin. "Oh, and Irene..." Alex pointed to her own silly smile and twisted her finger where a dimple would be if she had one. Irene smiled sarcastically for a millisecond and closed the door.

Exactly six minutes later a rather dreary young woman entered Irene's office. She was heavysset and sort of lumbered in like she might have been drunk. She took off her worn jacket and threw it unceremoniously on the floor; it smelled strongly of smoke. She thumped herself into the fluffy chair and opened a large bottle of Evian, chugging it like she hadn't had anything to drink in days. Most of their clients couldn't afford bottled water from the French Alps, nor would they spend on such an extravagance if they could. Alex came in behind the dreary woman, handed Irene a folder and exited quickly.

"Hello...Sadie," Irene said after giving the information in the folder a quick glance. "Why don't you tell me why you've come here today?"

"Um okay," Sadie began. She brushed her long hair out of her eyes and Irene could see that rather than being drunk, this woman bore the glassy, red eyes of a "stoner" which really meant she was a marijuana addict. It was ten o'clock in the morning for heaven's sake!

"See, I live with this guy, Mickey, and he drinks a lot. Things have gotten really bad lately and I've been thinking...I mean I tried to...you know...take too many sleeping pills."

"I see."

"And he didn't even CARE! He said I should go back and live with my mother. But see, my mother...she's...I don't even know where to begin. But Mickey's always mad because I don't want to have sex with him. See there's this old man, our neighbor I mean...well, there USED to be this old man. Then my sister...I guess I shouldn't really talk about it." The dreary woman went on to describe her plan of action in the event that the dead rose to eat the flesh of the living. Irene was dumbfounded, and distantly hoped that Sadie wasn't really stockpiling ammunition.

This poor woman talked in rambling, excited bursts punctuated by crying jags. She appeared to struggle with her desire to tell someone what she was going through, and her intense shame at what Irene might think of her. Irene listened compassionately while scribbling down notes and wondering what might be the most tactful way to tell this woman she needed to be hospitalized before she seriously hurt herself or someone else. Whatever her problems, this Sadie was obviously in a great deal of pain and needed some support and empathy. She was also clearly unbalanced, even as she asserted her own sanity. It was sadly typical that a woman in such a state would be smoking marijuana at 10 a.m., typical and counterproductive.

But before Irene could begin to address the dreary woman's deeper issues, a loud noise like an explosion shattered her concentration and made both women jump in their seats.

"What on Earth—" Irene began as she went to the door and pushed it open just in time to see Lynda, the office manager, gasp and fall to the floor.

"Bitches," she heard a man's voice say, "Goddamn castrating bitches..." A thin wisp of smoke hung in the room. The man had, apparently, fired into the air.

The large perpetrator in jeans and flannel had pushed his way past the receptionist before striking Lynda with the butt of the handgun he was now quickly pointing at one person, then another. "Where's my wife?" he screamed at a patient who shook her head helplessly as tears sprung to her eyes. The man pointed his gun at Rachel, the receptionist, who had for some reason come into the waiting room rather than calling the police from the relative safety of her desk. Angry husbands were an ongoing inconvenience to the women at The City Center, but never before had one chosen to express his outrage quite this stupidly, or dangerously, before. Usually, they just phoned or sent angry but grammatically laughable letters.

Irene motioned her patient back into the office, but the dreary woman seemed frozen in the doorway. Alex must have heard the commotion from her office a mere 30 feet away. Surely the white noise machine couldn't cover up a gunshot.

"You!" The gunman rounded on Irene. "You did this to us!" Only then did Irene recognize the man as Buddy, the husband of her no-show ten o'clock appointment. She had met him only once for therapy with Suzanne. He had assured Irene that he never drank to excess and didn't appreciate her "causing trouble." Abusers tended to classify anyone on the side of victim as a "troublemaker" and Buddy was a textbook case of that. He had left the session early, having thrown a childish temper tantrum, and literally dragged his humiliated wife out by the arm. Irene was sure he would shoot someone if provoked and her mind raced to come up with an idea of how on earth to deal

with this man. She hadn't been trained in this, she thought stupidly.

"Where is my wife?" Buddy screamed again, as if perhaps he didn't have everyone's undivided attention.

"She's not here," Irene told him calmly. "Suzanne did have an appointment with us today, but she didn't come in. She said she needed to bail you out of jail."

"How do you know I was in jail?" He looked like he might cry from the stress of standing there with a gun in his hand. "What did she tell you? She's lying, goddammit. I love my Suzie...I'd never hurt her. Just tell her that for me, just tell her I love her and would never ever hurt her again if she'll just come home...I know she's here! Just make her come home..." He was losing it. He held the gun squarely on Irene until Alex came walking nonchalantly out of her office with a patient like nothing was happening.

"Jeez, what's everybody standing around out—" Buddy whirled around and fired without hesitation, hitting Alex in the right shoulder and sending her and her insipid coffee cup flying backward. As it shattered on the floor, Irene's patient tried to make a dash for the door. Buddy turned back around and grabbed her neck with something like a chokehold.

"Dammit! Why do you bitches gotta make me do it?!?" he asked the room in vain. "Tell me where my wife is or I'm gonna shoot this fat bitch in the face." The dreary woman closed her eyes almost serenely, as if she welcomed the abrupt and violent end to her sad life.

"Buddy, just calm down," Irene took a step toward him, "Suzanne isn't here. We've already told you. And we need to call an ambulance for the woman you just shot. If she dies, you're going to jail for murder. I know you don't want that, and neither does Sue...right?" She waited a few second to see if this would sink in. "Do you want Twyla to have to visit you in prison? You don't, do you?"

Buddy began to sob openly and released his grip on the dreary patient, who ran out the door without her jacket or even a pause, never to be seen there again. Irene eased up to him slowly and took the gun from his shaking hands. Symbolically castrated, Buddy collapsed on the floor of the waiting room in sobs to the stunned silence of the patients and office staff.

Rachel's voice talking to the 911-operator seemed very far away.

By the time Irene had finished talking to patients, police, and Alex's treating physician, she felt ready to collapse into sobs herself. Buddy was, of course, arrested and taken back to jail. Unlike his wife, Alex pressed charges without hesitation. When she came back to work, two weeks later, she appeared to be on a rather long break from reminding people to smile.

Irene wanted nothing more than to soak in a hot tub with a glass of wine. But she couldn't. For the last three months, she had actually been dating

someone, and he had something important to discuss with her tonight, or so he said when she called to cancel. She explained what had happened today, and he implored her to keep the date, promising the evening would be totally stress-free. So she settled for a quick shower and a shot of Amaretto and began dressing for her purportedly unmissable dinner date.