**“DEATH DEALER” — INTRODUCTION AND FIRST CHAPTER**

QUERY LETTER

  Allow me to introduce myself. I am Troy Zimmermann, a designer with a Bachelor of Architecture degree who specializes in Themed Entertainment Attractions and who helped create award-winning destinations. Throughout my career, I engaged in worldbuilding in some form or another. I've now built another world in novel form.

 In my stumbling about to categorize this new world for the convenience of a genre, I ultimately designated it as an "Urban Fantasy." Certainly, supernatural events are occurring in a modern American city. There is a fantastical device that bridges the world of the Living with that of the Dead. The intrigue of the plot is the study of the ethics involved with this invention, and the culpability the inventor still retains after it is sold to others.  
   
 It just happens to all involve a protagonist who found out how to manufacture drugs for ghosts.  
  
 Perhaps I should classify this manuscript as a "Ghost Story," but that feels inaccurate. Indeed, ghosts are central to the entire narrative, but the drivers of it are those who would profit off of them. The main character learns throughout that the most terrifying unseen presences are the ones that are still alive.  
  
 If you are curious, please contact me for further sample chapters or the entire 80,000 word manuscript entitled "Death Dealer." I fully understand you rolling your eyes at that name given the revealed subject, but I assure you that the working title, "Parapharmacologist," would do nothing for retaining eyes upon the shelf.

TARGET AUDIENCE

• People who are attracted to the genre of Urban Fantasy.

• People who pay rent. People who know they could be paying rent again.

• People who work behind a counter. People who know they might be doing that again.

• People who like Ghost Stories. Future ghosts who want their stories known.

• People who contemplate that One Big Score, the one that would finally make things better.

• People interested in the ethics regarding world-shifting inventions.

What follows is the introductory chapter. May you be intrigued by the premise.

— CHAPTER I —

You know how you can tell someone who deals with ghosts, I mean, real ghosts? Plastic tableware. The dining area in the apartment I was in was filled with nothing but plastic tableware, and that’s when I knew I was fucked.

If you repeatedly encounter ghosts in close quarters, you know communication is going to be less than eloquent. Those stereotypes about moaning and rattling chains are based on a whole lot of precedent. Denied the basic use of a fleshy set of vocal cords, spirits will often hastily resort to any nearby object to try to communicate their thoughts before their intended audience leaves. Usually this means any random bit of bric-a-brac on a shelf or tabletop will suddenly get flung about. Plates, mugs, drinking glasses; they’re all prone to go flying. I mean, it is effective for getting the attention of the living. Unfortunately, it is rather inarticulate as a language. Furthermore, if you’re relying on it, you’d better resign yourself to the shortest of sentences. Dishes can only be smashed once.

This psychic lady that contacted me? She’s clearly been hosting specters for a while now if she’s down to nothing but plastic. So she was lying about something going bump in the night only last night. I was in the middle of a good old-fashioned bushwacking.

No formalities. No anger. Just run.

I made it two steps before the first bottle leapt at my head from the top of the refrigerator.

Up until then, I had a pretty average morning. I had just arrived at my apartment after working the graveyard shift at the clinic and was fussing about with one hand unwrapping the foil on my breakfast burrito that I picked up from a taco truck on the way home and the other scrolling through the messages on my phone with the other. Normally when I see “URGENT” in the subject line, it’s swiped to the “This is Spam” folder before I can process the inevitable colon following that word. The source of my legitimate paychecks wouldn’t even use that word to request a double shift. But when the word “GHOST” is riding backup, it gets my immediate attention. “URGENT THERES A GHOST AT MY PLACE” is a good and desperate way to introduce yourself. Coherent enough to use proper spelling, alarmed enough not to bother with punctuation. Alright, it looks like I’ve got a customer. I peel open the tortilla to add sauce with my left hand, and stab out a text reply with my right thumb.

Do you have a problem? I type. Send.

The ding of a Notification chimes just after I put my phone down on my kitchenette countertop and just as I swivel to pick up a bottle of Sriracha. Yep, they’ve been waiting diligently for my response. That means I can bump my charges a bit.

LAST NIGHT THERES DEFINITELY A GHOST IN MY APARTMENT the text read. STARTED AROUND 10. COLD SPOTS AND I CAN HEAR THE FLOOR SQUEAK EVEN WITH ALL THE LIGHTS ON AND SEE NO ONES THERE. CAN YOU HELP I NEED HELP.

I squirt out some hot sauce and reseal the burrito, then chomp down and swallow three large bites before I respond.

I text Yes, I can help. Is there anything that this ghost needs? Back to my burrito.

Ding. IM NOT SURE. CAN YOU JUST BRING EVERYTHING TO GET HIM OUT OF HERE?

Definitely a customer. Sounds like a referral, even. Some people who call for my services are a bit put off when I dispassionately inquire what the ghost needs, rather than what they what. Those people are not my clients, and often turn out to be not haunted at all, anyway. My customers? Not only do they know it’s all about what a ghost needs, but they can be very explicit about what a ghost needs specifically.

I finish consuming my burrito, wash my hands in the kitchenette sink, and then reply: Today is clear. Where are you?

She is at her apartment, a granny unit above the garage behind a white stucco house built in the 1930s. As I walk the driveway alongside it, I am treated to blue glass bottles, crudely welded zodiac signs and shiny pendants hanging from the ivy-covered chain-link fence. I sense the pong of cut-rate New-Agey hucksterism, and the weathered hand-painted “PSYCHIC ADVISOR” sign mounted next to the stairs confirms this. FORTUNES. LOVE. FUTURE. Good marketing: everyone wants these. It’s almost a sentence of unrequited want.

My overcoat with laden pockets scrapes the sides of the narrow staircase as I climb. I lose my traction on the second to topmost step and I bang my shin on a tread. I’m fully awake from the adrenaline shock now. For me, this is a late-night run. It just happens to coincide with daylight hours. I shake out my discomposure as I prepare to shake a hand. A ring of the doorbell buzzer and I’m ready to do just that. The door opens quickly.

“So you’re the psychic?” I ask. Evaluative. Clinical. Already looking over her head to scope for any specters within.

Even if she didn’t have naturally largish eyes, the contrast of the darker hues unattributed to mascara beneath them gave a sense of more alarm to them. Haunted is the term they use for that look, and I assure you that’s a very proper word.

“Oh. Yeah,” she says, understandably preoccupied. “Could you come in? I haven’t slept at all last night.” It showed, but it seemed inappropriate to point that out when business was on the line.

I cross the threshold and look around. Chain-store tulle fabrics layered over each other until the cheap passes for baroque. Disparate and even contradictory framed pictures of occult iconography. I didn’t have to glance toward the kitchenette to know it had a beaded curtain obscuring the path. Beaded curtains might as well be like diplomas for professional psychics. My attention to the décor drifted as I focused upon more businesslike elements with which I should deal.

“So,” she says, “you can get them out? What happens next?”

“Asking them what they want is the general procedure,” I say.

“And then, what? If they get what they want, they’ll leave?”

“That’s usually the case.”

She flinches a bit. “Usually?” she asks with a constricted windpipe.

“More often than not,” I tell her, which is a statement I realize that as I say it out loud has a neutrality that is unappreciated at the moment. “But, yeah. They tend to leave.”

She unhitches her breath. She definitely is rattled, I observe. I guess she really is new to the physical manifestations of the supernatural, even if she’s been ostensibly making an income on the mental aspects of it. I figure if you make a career out of beating the bushes, you shouldn’t be surprised when something scampers out of them.

“I have to ask: do you know why they revealed themselves to you last night?”

“Oh, uh, I don’t know,” she starts before registering my own expectant and deliberate pause in response. “I mean, yes, it’s what I do, you know. I’m what they call a Sensitive. A Spiritual Sensitive. That’s a real thing. I’ve been one since I was a child.”

“Believe me, I’m familiar with the term if it’ll put you at ease,” I reassure, still engaging in the swivelhead practice of inspecting her apartment for the telltale signs of a recent haunting.

“Oh, good. Okay. So, right, I’m in contact with the Spirit Realm just about constantly. It’s how I do such good readings for people. I’m like, known in the neighborhood. You ask anybody up and down this block, they’ll tell you I’m the one you go to if you want a real experience with the spirit world.” I appreciate her being on the cusp of dropping a positive Yelp review of herself. Game recognize game and all that. “But, y’know,” she continues, “nothing like this. Last night. Bang, bang, bang. All the time. Throughout the night. It’s a presence that’s trying to communicate.”

“But it doesn’t know how.”

“Right. You get it.”

“I do,” I announce, my line of sight drifting away from her eyeline and more heavenward, “sounds like a ghost needs a little something to help it communicate. I think I can help with that.”

Reassurances given, I start feeling around in my overcoat pockets for my gear. I ask, partially for mollifying personal engagement and partially for Legitimate Business Purposes, “so, how did you hear about me?”

“Oh. It was online somewhere.”

That’s… odd. That’s not how I usually get clients reaching out to me. I want to say it’s by literal word of mouth, but that’s also a bit inaccurate. Someone’s been talking, even if somebody hasn’t been talking.

“Where was that?” I ask.

“Look, I don’t know right now. I’m tired. Can you just do what you do?”

That tracks. And, honestly, I’m okay when people I deal with are discombobulated. I’m good.

“Will do,” I declare, “just give me a minute to prepare.”

She heads through a door with no motion for me to follow. Must be her bedroom.

I grasp a tea strainer filled with dried mugwort in one of my pockets, and fish around in the inventory in another pocket to try to snag my lighter. I reflexively want to use the word “normally” to describe how I set up communicating with the dead, even though I know that’s not the case of Society At Large, but, normally, I use a burning wad of the stuff in there as a censer to formally announce to The Spirit World that I am taking requests. A few swings of the stainless steel chain as it smolders and it may as well be a lighthouse beacon to any of the restless dead in the area. Regarding the restless living, however, it’s sometimes it’s best to be thoughtful of their carpets and get something underneath the strainer to catch any stray embers that could drift from the flame. Obvious choice would be anything in the company of an incense burner, but uncharacteristically for someone with the word “Psychic” on their shingle she didn’t seem to have one handily lying about to set the atmosphere. Still, one of those is easier to find than trying to get an ashtray nowadays. As a bit of cultural oddity, small children used to make those in elementary school art classes. Now you’d be hard pressed to find a souvenir ashtray for sale at the chintziest of tourist traps.

Lacking that, an ordinary saucer, cup, or plate will do. Ideally ceramic or glass, of course, as plastic has the tendency to scorch, melt, and stink up the place with decisively toxic smoke. Too bad all the stuff in her kitchen nook was new plastic.

And that’s when it hit me: the realization that she’s been lying to me about how much contact she’s actually had with ghosts.

And that’s when it hit me: the bottle flung by an unseen hand from the top of the refrigerator.

The bottle was contemporary. Metal. Likely Aluminum. I’d like to curse the individual who made it a priority in the last two decades to say how important it was to “stay hydrated” and keep a water bottle at the ready like society was overcompensating for every caricature ever depicted of a bedraggled lost soul crawling in the sand toward a cartoon oasis. The noise it made when it impacted with my head echoed both within the kitchen and within my skull.

A vintage solid wood chair bolted across the linoleum from the dinette table, clipping my shins and slamming me back into the inner corner of the kitchen counter. Of all the budget furniture to have in a modest apartment, she had to have third-hand thrift-store mainstays from a sturdier age and not IKEA purchases that are intended to be able to be disassembled with an Allen wrench. Maybe that should’ve been another clue.

The force upon the chair doesn’t stop with the impact on my legs. It sustains, pinning me to the cabinetry. Raw impulse prompts me to start slapping around on the countertop for anything within reach I can use as a weapon. Appreciable from an evolutionary standpoint, but useless when confronted with ghosts. A breadbox, a blender, a roll of paper towels, and a couple of quilted potholders that look all the more cartoonishly padded due to their inefficacy in a fight. A stocked-enough knife block is the only thing that would qualify as a weapons cache in this room, and even that taunts me twofold in that this isn’t a fight against flesh and that it’s on the extreme other end of the counter, not two yards away and yet a mile’s journey from here. That figurative distance is what I wished was literal when one of the knives in the block started rattling in its socket.

I notice the knife has no handle, just essentially a bare metal tang. Right after I notice it imbed itself into the cabinet door next to my face with such force that it swings open. In my defensive state of mind, I am still scrambling for anything that I can use as a weapon within my sightline. Nonperishable condiments seem to be the only volunteers within until I spot a crucial ally: a tubular cardboard container of everyday iodized salt. I was already grabbing at it before I could even mentally assess in a formal language this’ll do, and mercifully before I could eye-rollingly add in a pinch.

I slap the top off the blender on the counter and jam the cardboard tube into it and hit frappé. With a sound reminiscent of a tantrum of excavator drills at a sawmill rave, a cloud of sodium chloride explodes into the kitchenette. Salt that’s not set out in a boundary line won’t fully function as a warding spell, but it can work, very briefly, as a disruptor.

There is a resonant clomp from all the objects in the room that were primed to levitate as they let the full weight of gravity regain control. Then coughing. Mine. Only. The psychic had long since fled to her bedroom.

In a justifiable near-panic, I inelegantly scrabble around in my coat pocket for my emergency sagebomb. This is a tea strainer preloaded with a magician’s flash paper surrounding a clump of ethanol-saturated sage. Fussier to prepare, yes, but when you need to start generating smoke immediately it’s a necessary precaution, exactly for situations like these. I am not yet relieved but I am satisfied that the payload of sage ignites with a sharp pull on a clump of cardboard matches sheathed within a tube of sandpaper taped to its side. An extra-long chain on the strainer aids combustion when I vertically spin the burning wad like a centrifuge, and honestly gives me a bit of psychosomatic relief in being able to vividly visualize what I do as generating a force field. When, as a result, it’s actually hazy in the room, I stagger to the front door, pry it open and gasp deep breaths at both the outside air and the security of escape.

I’m pretty sure my shins are bleeding. Definitely my scalp is bruised. And soon my voice is going to be hoarse from all my yelling I’m about to do. I start with the classics: “FUCK!” I scream, and, to clarify: “WHAT THE FUCK?!”

She’s already stomping out of her room, justifiably anticipating me kicking through her hollow-core bedroom door.

“What the fuck?!” she replies with her own justifiable shout. “What the fuck is, I want to know, how do they know you? And why the fuck are they bothering me?!

“This has been going on for over a month! First it was knocking, then it was shit getting thrown all over the place. I’ve got bruises! I tried staying at a friend’s apartment, and they followed me there! She’s fucking terrified of me now! Even on the bus they start smacking the windows! I’m fucking exhausted! It took me until goddamn yesterday to recognize there was a pattern to the noises! They were banging out a phone number!”

“You deal with spirits all the time! You of all people should know better! Sage ‘em the fuck out!”

“I have asthma, you asshole!”

My smugness of expertise stopped short. “Oh. Whoa. Holy shit,” I fumbled, trying to access my atrophied social codes of sympathy. “Oh, fuck. That’s… really fucked up. To be a Spiritual Sensitive and not be able to do the most basic method of exorcism? Oh, man, that’s a serious curse right there.”

Her body does a hard pivot away from me before her head does, in order that she could fling some eye-daggers at me, a hard reproach for me clumsily saying out loud what she already lived. I should have read all that in the practiced makeup trying to conceal her eyebags to know that she already knew what a true curse was, and that unless someone had a cure available, any diagnosis would only be met with the teeth-gritted wish that a curse could spread.

“Anyway,” I proclaim, “I’m not coming back here. Ever. You hear that?” That last sentence I directed loudly to the ceiling, not her, to indicate in shorthand that I was addressing any eavesdropping ghosts, a statement carrying the subtext that bothering her would be a futile hobby on their end. I suppose I could have made a point of enunciating that subtext directly to her, but, fuck it, I was still kind of pissed at her for essentially setting me up.

“You can’t rob from me anyway,” I continue, and louder for those presences in the theoretical back row. “I don’t keep my product on me when I make first contact! All I keep in my pockets for that are my talking boards to arrange the where and when that I control. And you’re not getting any of those where and whens. You’re blackballed. You don’t ever get any of my product again.”

That was an empty threat. It’s not like I can recognize faces to avoid in my line of work. I was this close to saying out loud Don’t let me see you around my neighborhood. I’m sure that would’ve gotten a laugh. What would have even gotten a bigger laugh if I had threatened to withhold my product for life. That threat doesn’t work on the deceased.

I don’t give that opportunity for them to figure that out. I’m already stamping down the exterior staircase, in pain, but generating a wordless hum congratulating myself on my caution. Never bring your product to a meet-and-greet. I may be bleeding, but at least I wasn’t ripped off by something wanting a free fix.

You’ve figured it out by now, I’m sure: basically, I’m a drug dealer. Don’t tsk at me like that when I tell you. The problem you have with drug dealers is that they prey on the health of the addict and can clear the path to their early death. My clients are already dead.

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