DAN AND THE DEAD

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QUICKSILVER

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1

MY INVISIBLE WATSON



I'm like that kid. You know, the one in the film who says, 'I see dead people.'

Only I'm not an actor. And the people I see, well, they're not part of some script. They're real.

And yup – they're dead.

For a long time it was scary. And I mean pooing-my-pants scary. When I first realised I was the only one who could see the shapes in my room at night, the only one who could hear them, yeah, I was

pretty uncool about it. My parents thought it was nightmares. The doctors thought it was something else and gave me pills. No one believed me, so I'm guessing it's pretty rare what I can do.

Anyway, dead scary – the endless chatter, the reaching hands, the staring 'help me!' eyes. I suppose I was headed for the loony bin. But then something happened a couple of years back, around my twelfth birthday.

I met Simon.

Simon's one of them too – a dead person, I mean – but he's the one who made me realise that I was looking at things the wrong way round. Because yeah, okay, the people who haunt me are *dead*, but they're something else too. They're still people. People who need my help. And when people need something, people will always pay.

Simon's a bit of a mystery though. When the dead linger it's because they've left something undone or unsaid, or because they want revenge, and boy, do they go on about it! But Simon's the first one I've met who's keeping his problems to himself. He's been dead so long, perhaps he can't even remember.

Or perhaps it's because someone put a musket ball through his brain.

Anyway, Simon sticks to me and keeps the other spooks in line, making sure I can get a bit of normal life during the day. Then at midnight (when else?), the interviews start. It's like I'm a psychic private eye or something, only I don't have candles or anything cheesy like that. Simon brings me the desperate dead, one at a time, and I see what I can do for them. Then, if I can help, they give me something very special in return.

You'll find out what later.

And what does Simon get out of all this? I honestly don't know. He just likes to help, I suppose. It's like he's my main ghost.

Hey, everyone wants to feel important.

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YEAH, SIMON REALLY DOES TALK LIKE THAT



'Si, are you there?'

'Yes, Master Dyer,' comes the silky voice, and I spot Simon in the corner of my room. It's odd how they just appear like that, but I'm used to it.

'Got anything for me tonight?'

'Naturally. You have a sizeable waiting list, though the dead are nothing if not patient. Excepting the old magician, of course. Mr Lugubrian's been

demanding to see you again. He has found out about your school show.'

'Si, I've explained,' I say, and not for the first time. 'Lugubrian's a psycho. I'm not doing what he wants, and that's flat. And I wouldn't be seen dead at the school show. Bring me someone else.'

'Someone more your own time, Daniel?'

I sit on my beanbag and turn up the music. I don't want my parents thinking I'm talking to myself again.

'Yeah, hit me.'

There's a moment when nothing happens, then Simon's there again, and now there's someone else there too. I hear a gasp and a high spectral cry, and I dig my fingernails into my hands because it's still a bit scary, all this. A figure runs into the room and stops dead still in front of me, staring down with a ghastly look.

She's about my age, or she was, and even with the terror and fury of the wronged dead twisting her face, I can tell she was quite a looker. Don't take that the wrong way – I just wish I'd met her before, that's all. I often feel like that.

'You can see me?' she shrieks. 'Well, *can* you?'

'Woah, calm down,' I reply, trying to sound like

it's all under control. 'Just take a deep breath and tell me your name. I'm here to help.'

'A deep breath? I'm dead, you moron! *Dead*!' And then she's off again, wailing and rolling her eyes. I'm guessing it hasn't been very long.

'What music do you like?' I have to ask a few times to get her attention. 'I'm online right now. You can have anything you want. Be my guest.'

As I thought, that hits home. The dead can't do much for themselves, so my DJ act usually gets 'em misty-eyed and nostalgic. And quiet.

'Got any Justin Bieber?'

I try not to pull a face – this is business, after all – and tap in the name. Bieber's pretty-boy mug appears on the screen and I click play. The girl stops swooping around and tips her head to one side. The music (if you can call it that) picks up and I can see the girl's remembering. Boy, am I glad ghosts can't cry.

'Daniel, this is Emeline Parker,' says Simon. 'She's only been with us a little while, but I think she's a priority case. It appears to be murder, but I have been unable to obtain details. I've never seen her this calm before.'

'Hi, Ems,' I say, keeping up the professional tone.

‘Would you like to tell me? My colleague and I can sort stuff out for people in your, er, situation.’

‘I’m dead.’ Ems doesn’t need to keep saying this, but they usually do. ‘And I *so* don’t want to be.’

‘I know, Ems, I can tell.’ I’m genuinely sympathetic – I wouldn’t want to be dead either. ‘How did it happen? *Was* it murder?’

‘Yes. *No*! Well... if you must know, I suppose it’s all my own fault.’ She looks terrible as she says this. ‘But he killed me! No matter what it says in the papers.’

‘I see,’ I say, even though I don’t. Dead or alive, girls are complicated. ‘Murder weapon?’

‘Bus,’ she says, and when she catches me looking all ‘say what?’ she turns her side to me, and I see it.

She’s definitely a bit flatter round the middle than she should be.

But I’m not in the mood for Cluedo so I give her another ‘I see,’ just for appearances, and glance at the screen. There’s plenty of Bieber still to go (professional, Dan, be professional) so I put on my best bedside manner and say, ‘Why don’t you start at the beginning?’

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MURDER BY PUBLIC TRANSPORT



Ems is – *was* – like a million other girls in London. Well, okay, a bit better-looking than most, but what I mean is, she's like your sister or your mate's girlfriend or the popular one at school: full of life and drama and shopping. At midnight she should be with her friends having a good time, not standing in my room telling me how she died.

But there's this man in the middle of it all. His name's Carl Bagport, and Carl has a nightclub and

a criminal network to run, starting with organised shoplifting and going down from there.

'But why did you do it in the first place?' I think I know the answer, but I need to hear it from her.

'Money.' Ems looks wretched. 'He pays a lot for... well, it's stealing. That's against the law, you know.'

I know.

Simon makes a noise like he's clearing his throat – even though he no longer has one – and I let him speak.

'Forgive me, but I'm not sure I quite understand. You say Mr Bagport was using a photographic apparatus to make pictures of you, Emeline? Doing "shoplifting". But to what end?'

Simon's not quite on the ball when it comes to the twenty-first century. I think he goes back to the eighteenth or something.

'It was just a bit of fun at first. You can pinch things pretty easily if you don't mind the risk. But he started taking orders from his friends, for antiques and stuff. It just got bigger and bigger. Turns out I was good at it.'

'I see,' I say, making a mental note of this for later on. 'So why didn't you quit?'

Ems slumps to the floor and I can see I've got to the nub of it all.

‘The pictures he took of me, you know, stealing? Well, he said he’d send them to the police. And my mum and dad. Called it his “insurance”. So I had to keep stealing for him, even though he stopped paying me, but then he got pictures of that too. I couldn’t get away from him. He said I had to do whatever he told me... then, that last time, I was spotted in Selfridges by a security guard. I ran out into the street, but…’

This must be where the bus comes in.

‘It’s okay, Ems,’ I say, sensing another wailing fit coming on. I wish I could put my arm round her, but you can only comfort a ghost with words.

‘Those photos.’ Ems is whispering now. ‘If my mum had seen them… and my dad – I was his princess – it would have broken his heart.’

Sounds like it already has, I think to myself, and there’s actually a lump in my throat because of the stupid tragedy of it all, but there’s no time for all that now.

‘Listen, here’s what happens next, Ems. We need to know everything you know about this Bagport, so we can eliminate him.’ I like saying that, ‘eliminate him’, but I’m just thinking of turning him over to the police – there are enough ghosts about already. ‘But first, there’s just the little matter of payment.’

Em's head snaps up and her eyes lock mine. Whoops! Bad timing, Dan.

'What do you think I can give you?' Ems is not happy. In fact, she's flaming mad and her ghost's all fierce and flickery. 'God, you're just like him! All you men are the same!'

'Wait, Ems.' I'm holding my hands up like she has a gun or something. I need to make her feel strong again, so she'll listen. 'It's not what you think.'

She's upright now, and her eyes are like the business end of a double-barrelled tank, but at least she's stopped shouting.

'It's not what you think.' I say again. 'Simon and me, we don't expect money or anything, we just need a little favour from you. We'll help you get even, and do our best to put Carl Bagport out of business for good. In return, before you move on to the Hereafter, I just need...'

And I tell her. It's the same deal I offer them all, and like the others she just stares at me in amazement. Then she laughs.

'Is that even possible?'

I nod and smile back.

It looks like a done deal to me.