



DEATH CAB

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RELUCTANT READER BOOKS

THE NEVERMORE SERIES

#1: WE BURY THE LIVING

#2: DEATH CAB

#3: THE THIRTEENTH FLOOR

CHAPTER 1

The first time I saw a ghost was two weeks before my fourteenth birthday. It was my friend Sam's fault.

"Do you want to see a ghost?"

Sam was always saying things like that.

Do you want to see a ghost?

See these footprints? I bet they're werewolf tracks.

Look at that bat, I'll bet it's a vampire searching for its next victim.

We hadn't been friends long. At first Sam's interest in monsters weirded me out. But I'd gotten used to it. That's just Sam. *Weird.*

"No, seriously," Sam said. "Like a real live ghost."

"You mean a real *dead* ghost."

"You know what I mean."

School had let out half an hour ago. I'd waited twenty minutes for Sam to finish reviewing his latest short story with Mr. Pepper, the high school English teacher. Sam was a writer, and a published one at that. He'd recently written a book with Nevermore's most famous novelist, Mark Stevens. He took all his stories to Mr. Pepper, who read them and told him how to make them better.

Want to guess what kind of stories Sam wrote?

"There's no such thing as ghosts," I told him.

"*No such thing? Are you kidding me? Of course there's a such thing.*" Sam stopped and stared at me the way you might stare at a poodle that just peed on the rug.

We were walking home. Well, I was walking home. Sam was heading to Taco Joes, where he intended to decimate his most recent high score on *Contra*. Big Joe, the owner, had installed three new arcade games at the back of his tiny restaurant, and Sam dreamed of seeing his name atop the High Score list for all three.

"Ghosts are very real, Danny. I can prove it to you."

We stepped onto the New Bridge. There were two bridges across Dark Score Lake. They were called the Old

Bridge, which had been built sometime during the Great Depression, and the New Bridge, which had been built when my mom was in high school. They had real names of course, but no one ever used them.

“There’s a ghost right under this bridge,” Sam said.

I groaned. “Really? Everyone knows that story is made up. It’s just some homeless dude sleeping under the bridge trying to stay warm. That’s your *proof*?”

“I ask you, my dear Danny, what kind of homeless dude sleeps under a bridge for an entire year?”

“One who doesn’t have a home. Obviously.”

“So then you’re afraid, is that it?”

“I’m not afraid. I’m just not an idiot.”

Sam nodded as if he had expected me to say this. “Sad, really. I’d expected more from you. But if you’re too chicken to see a real ghost, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

This was Sam’s usual tactic. He knew I hated to be called chicken. What was sad was it worked. Even when I knew he was manipulating me, it worked. And Sam knew it. He stared at me with a sly grin on his face and waited.

“I am *not* chicken.”

“Well, so you say...”

“I’m *not*.”

“Are you sure? Cause you kinda seem like you are.”

“I. Am. Not. Chicken.”

“Prove it.”

Worked every time.

I know. I need help. Or I need to grow up. Or something.

Maybe I just need new friends.

Everybody’s got issues.

We crossed the bridge. On the far end the sidewalk curves hard to the left down an embankment and splits into two paths. You can follow the right path away from the bridge towards downtown. Or you can swing left and cut under the bridge and follow it to the baseball fields.

We swung left.

It was a fine spring day. Not a cloud in the sky. But the shoreline was banked with tall thick trees. Little of that fine spring sunlight filtered through. The underside of the bridge was dim and filled with shadows.

We stopped short of where the sunlight ended and the shadows began.

“Thought you weren’t chicken,” Sam said.

Sam stood behind me, as if he wanted a head start in case he decided to turn and bolt. For all his teasing, I knew Sam wasn’t exactly Mr. Bravery himself.

“There’s no such thing as ghosts.”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

I shook my head and walked forward. I passed under the lip of the bridge and into the shadows. The air was noticeably cooler, and I felt the skin on my arms chill. I squinted, waiting for my eyes to adjust.

I didn’t see anything much at first. It was just the underside of a bridge. The sidewalk cut all the way through. I saw where it led back into the sunlight and curved up the opposite side of the embankment and disappeared. On the underside of the bridge graffiti had been sprayed by high school kids in years past. Most of it was inappropriate and referred to male anatomy.

I turned back and gazed out at Sam. “See? Nothing at all. Just a bridge.”

Sam pointed above me to the space where the bridge met the embankment. There lay a dark nook where some-

one (a homeless dude, let's say) could crawl up and sleep out of the rain or snow. Not exactly comfortable, but better than sleeping on the ground.

"There's no ghost," I said.

"Then what's the big deal?"

I sighed.

I really needed better friends.

I climbed the slope from the sidewalk up to the hidden nook. The air grew even colder. No sunlight reached back here at all. At the top of the slope was a concrete wall. The nook was on top of the wall. It was too high for me to see over, so I reached up and grabbed the edge. I counted to three and hoisted myself up.

For a moment I saw nothing at all. It was even darker than I expected.

But then I saw something. Something back there in all that darkness.

Two glowing red eyes.

They blinked.

And then the ghost swept out of the darkness and wrapped his icy fingers around my neck.

CHAPTER 2

I screamed and flailed my arms and pinwheeled backwards. Right over the edge.

The ghost's hands came free.

I fell and landed with an *ooofff* on the concrete slope, rolling end over end before coming to a hard stop on the sidewalk. Grit and small rocks bit into the palms of my hands.

I didn't waste any time. Scrambling, I glanced at the dark nook above. The ghost's glowing red eyes peered out of the gloom.

Call me chicken if you want to.

I ran.



Sam caught up with me two blocks away. He was laugh-

ing the whole way.

“What’s so funny?” I bent over and put my hands on my knees, breathing hard.

“Man, you should have seen the look on your face. Priceless.”

I wanted to punch him in the throat. My problem was Sam wasn’t just my best friend, he was basically my *only* friend. You probably shouldn’t go around punching your only friend in the throat. That’s how you end up with *no* friends.

“So you a believer now?” Sam asked.

I thought about those glowing red eyes and those icy cold fingers and shivered. I could still feel that chilly grip around my throat.

But I wasn’t going to give Sam any satisfaction.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what that was, but it wasn’t a ghost. Ghosts aren’t real.”

“Whatever you say, dude. But you might want to check your pants when you get home. I think you might have peed yourself.”

We parted ways at Rainier Avenue. Sam headed into town, and I headed for the library. I wasn’t actually going for

a book. The Nevermore Public Library was located within the old Nevermore High School campus. There were no students at the old campus now (they'd built the *new* high school years ago), but there was a pop machine at the far end of the senior hall. A pop machine which happened to sell the cheapest pop in town. Fifty cents.

After what I'd just been through, I needed something cold to drink.

I traded four quarters for two cans of Squirt, one of which I opened immediately and guzzled so fast my throat burned. Dropping the can in the nearest trash bin, I let out a long, loud burp that echoed down the hall. I saved the other can for later.

Mom works the night shift at Ernest Valdemar Hospital, so she's still asleep when I get home from school. Usually she gets up sometime during the day and lays out an after school snack and leaves me a note with some ideas for dinner. Looked like today's ideas included a can of Nalley's Chili and a box of Kraft macaroni and cheese. Her note lay on the counter, written in her neat penmanship.

This is all we have in the cupboards. Got to go to the store! Don't stay up too late tonight watching movies. Love you!

The one good thing about your mom working the night shift is you can go to bed whenever you want. Technically, my bedtime was nine. In reality, I rarely crashed before eleven. Sometimes later.

Like last week, when I'd stayed up until four watching all three *Back to the Future* movies. I pretended I'd gotten a full night's sleep, but turns out that's hard to do on three hours rest. Mom saw right through that one.

I decided to worry about dinner later.

Ditching my backpack by the kitchen table, I headed out the back door. A short stretch of empty grass separated the house from the garage. When Dad had been alive, the garage had been his sanctuary. He worked from home repairing cars and trucks and vans and even the occasional boat or jet ski. He liked to say there wasn't a single vehicle in the world he wasn't on speaking terms with.

Dad passed away last year. Aneurysm, which is a fan-

cy way of saying a blood vessel burst in his head. I missed him, obviously, but when I came out to the garage I almost felt like he was still around. Like he'd just stepped out for a minute to run down to Napa Auto Parts, or maybe over to Safeway to grab a couple Cokes for us to share.

Which is why I spent a lot of my free time in the garage. I could still feel him there.

With Dad gone, there wasn't anybody left to run the shop, but as it happened there was still one car left in the main bay: a midnight black taxi. Dad's last customer had dropped off the cab the day before Dad passed away, and the guy never came back. Generally, Dad kept pretty good records, taking down names and phone numbers, especially if the car belonged to a stranger, but in this case there was nothing.

Nothing inside the taxi either. The glove box was empty. No title. No registration. No insurance. Just a lone black baseball cap with the words *The Dead Ride Fast* scrawled in yellow across the top. Sounded like the title of a death metal band.

Mom placed an ad in the paper and called KOZI, the local

radio station, a few times. She figured a cab driver would never leave their ride behind. But nobody ever called, and nobody ever came back.

For a whole year, the cab sat in the garage collecting dust.

But that wasn't the weirdest thing. Not by a long shot.

I'm not a car expert, but even I know cabs are usually yellow with black stripes. This baby, however, was the opposite: black with a single yellow stripe running down the doors. And the words *Styx Transportation Service*.

Which was weird, but whatever. Maybe the driver preferred black. What was *really* strange was the car didn't have any manufacturing decals. Nor did it have a serial number, the number the manufacturer uses to identify the car when it is first built.

But even *that* wasn't the weirdest part.

What was *really, really* weird was when you popped the hood.

The car had an engine.

Sort of.

By which I mean it had what *looked* like an engine. But there was no oil tank. And no battery. The engine was just a

mess of tubes and hoses and wires that didn't really seem to be connected to anything in particular. And with no oil and no battery, there was no way you could drive that sucker anywhere. You wouldn't even be able to turn it on.

So how had it gotten here?

I'd never seen it running. Not because of the whacko engine, though. Because I'd never found the key. Like the owner's name and the car's serial number, it was missing.

I stepped into the garage and flipped on the lights. They flickered once, twice, and then dimly brightened the expanse of the garage. The taxi with the impossible engine sat in the main bay, quiet and black and mysterious as always. I popped open my second Squirt.

I'll say one thing: whacko engine or not, the cab had one comfy front seat. It was white leather and stretched from door to door. I opened the driver's side door and turned to swing inside, but I caught my hand on the window and knocked the Squirt loose.

"Crap!"

The can hit the floor and half the pop chugged out onto the cement.

“Ah, man.”

I snatched up the can.

Spilled Squirt snaked across the cement, heading for the drainage grate beneath the taxi. It dripped through the grate, and for a moment, I thought I saw something there.

I bent down and stuck my head beneath the edge of the car.

Inside the grate, two burning red eyes stared up at me.

CHAPTER 3

Startled, I jerked back. Thoughts of the ghost beneath the bridge filled my mind.

My head slammed against the underside of the taxi. Crying out, I grabbed the back of my skull. Which was when I realized they weren't eyes after all.

Something had caught the light in the grate, something small and shiny. That's all. I needed to stop being such a jumpy little baby.

Sam was really getting into my head. All his monsters and ghosts and whatnot had me seeing things left and right. Like under the bridge. That was nothing more than some homeless dude who was unhappy I was sneaking up on him.

Then what about the red eyes, genius?

Contacts, maybe? Who knows.

What I knew for sure was there was no such thing as ghosts.

I snagged a flashlight off the hook above Dad's workbench and knelt back down underneath the car. Shining the light into the grate revealed the truth.

Not eyes.

Keys.

Two keys on a shimmering red key fob.

The grate was heavy, but it wasn't attached to anything. All I had to do was get a good grip and give it a yank. It came up easy. I snaked my hand into the drainage hole and plucked the keys up. Then I replaced the grate and slid back out from under the car.

Three words were scrawled across the fob:

Styx Transportation Service.

I'd found the missing keys.

Hallelujah.

I took a seat behind the wheel. The interior of the car still smelled new, like leather and cleaning wax. The rim of the wheel was thin and shiny black. A pair of dice dangled from the rearview mirror. On the dashboard lay the hat

that read *The Dead Ride Fast*. I snagged it off the dash and pulled it down over my head.

Slipping the half-full can of Squirt between my legs, I inserted the key into the ignition.

It fit.

A slight shiver ran down my neck. Now I'd get to see how this baby actually worked.

I'll be honest. I didn't think it would. I knew it *couldn't*. No oil. No battery. No way it could run.

I was so certain it couldn't turn over, I decided to first just flip on the power. In a normal car, turning the key half-way turned on the battery. That way you could flip on the radio or check the headlights. But this car had no battery.

I gave the key a half turn.

Nothing happened.

I knew it. Something was seriously wrong with this car.

A tiny spark of anger ignited inside me. Deep down, I'd hoped it would roar to life. After all this time just sitting here collecting dust, I'd wanted more from the taxi. Frustrated, I slammed my hand on the dashboard.

A tiny compartment popped down from below the ra-

dio. It looked like an old metal ashtray, from the days when people smoked all the time. But instead of ashes it held half a dozen small coins. On one side was a silver coin slot.

I plucked up a coin. It was the size of a nickel but unlike any nickel I'd ever seen. Embossed on one side was a raven's head, on the other a winding river.

My gaze drifted to the coin slot.

I leaned forward and slipped the coin into the slot.

Well, why not?

The cab's headlights flicked on, illuminating the garage door and a pile of old tires stacked to the ceiling. The radio lit up. Static poured from the speakers.

I nearly screamed.

It wasn't possible.

Where was it getting power from?

For a long moment I just sat there waiting for it to die. But it didn't. The lights stayed on, never flickering, and the static rolled out from the speakers like ocean churn.

I reached for the radio dial. It was an old car, so there were no buttons. Just knobs you spun left and right, and an old school radio meter with a thin orange line running back

and forth across the frequencies. The line stood at the far left on 75. I twirled the knob and the line raced up the frequencies past the 80s and on into the 90s. KOZI was 97.1, but the dial swung right on by and never picked up a thing. Nothing but dead static.

“Can’t even pick up a decent station,” I said sadly.

The static didn’t end at 100.3 either, which I knew was the ZZU station down in Wenatchee. The white noise hissed even at 106.4, which was CTHL out of Seattle.

In fact, it didn’t change at all until the line reached 109.1, which wasn’t any radio station I’d ever heard of.

It didn’t disappear altogether. Instead, it only dimmed, as if I were hearing it now through a heavy door. But there was a new noise there within the buzz.

Not music.

Not a commercial.

Just a voice.

A young man’s voice.

“Hello?” it said. “Can you hear me? Can anybody hear me?”

What the heck?

This wasn't a radio station. It sounded like I was picking up a CB radio, or maybe I'd somehow looped into a cell phone call. Was that even possible?

"Can you hear me?" the voice said again. "I need help. Please. Help me."

The young man sounded scared, like he was on the verge of crying.

For a moment, the static grew stronger, hissing and churning, and the voice disappeared. Then it sank back, like a wave rolling in and out from the shore.

What I heard next nearly stopped my heart.

"Is that you, Danny? You've got to help me. Help me, Danny."

CHAPTER 4

My throat went dry.

The voice had said my name.

Impossible. My ears were imagining things.

The static rolled back stronger than before, and again the voice disappeared. I didn't wait for it to return. I flipped the key back, killing the power.

Then I got out.

Out of the cab.

Out of the garage.

Out of the back yard.

I didn't stop until I was safely in my room with the door shut and locked. I didn't know what I'd heard drifting through that ocean of static. But it hadn't been my name.

That wasn't possible.

Huh uh. No sir. No way.

Not possible.

Right?



Arriving at school the next day, my feet dragged. My eyes blurred. My mind felt like sludge. Nightmares of glowing red eyes hovering in my closet and ghostly static pulsing like a tide under my bed had kept me awake half the night. I felt the way I imagined cement feels as it dries.

Sam hovered by my locker. He looked like he'd gotten a good night's sleep.

"How's it hanging, cowboy?" Sam slapped me on the shoulder.

For about two seconds I considered telling Sam what I'd heard on the radio, but I knew he'd only think I was trying to get back at him. Besides, the mystery car wasn't really something I wanted to share with anyone. It wasn't mine, and as far as I knew Dad had never worked on it, but somehow it still felt like something that belonged to the two of us.

"Great. Wonderful. Never better."

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you, have you got the party figured out yet?”

I groaned. I knew I’d been forgetting something.

My birthday was two weeks away. Mom had already given the thumbs-up for a party. With the weather turning warmer, Sam had suggested a pool party. I was supposed to ask Mom if she was cool with everyone bringing their swim trunks and eating pizza outside on the deck, but I’d forgotten once again.

“You didn’t ask her?”

“I’m sure she’ll say yes. It’s my birthday. Besides, if everyone’s outside, there’ll be less of a mess in the house.”

“So we’re on? Pool party. Your place.”

“Yeah. I mean, somebody’s gotta clean the pool first. It’s full of leaves right now. Usually my Dad cleans it.”

It hit me that with Dad gone it was most likely my job to clean the pool. Sam caught the look on my face.

“We can do something else if you want, dude. It doesn’t have to be a pool party. Might not even be warm enough.”

Sam may be a total weirdo, and he was a writer, which made him even weirder than most weirdos. But he was a

good friend.

“No, it’s not a big deal. I can clean it. It doesn’t take very long. And it’s warm enough to go swimming already.”

The smile returned to Sam’s face. “Awesome. I’ll tell all the guys.”

I really only had one friend: Sam. But he had dozens. It hadn’t always been that way. Before he’d written his book with Mark Stevens, he’d been just another normal kid. He’d hung around with a few guys from the baseball team, but he was far from popular. But writing a novel with the most popular horror novelist in America did wonders for your social standing. Now it seemed like everybody was Sam’s friend. Or wanted to be.

I still didn’t know exactly why he hung out with me. I wasn’t a writer. I wasn’t popular. I hadn’t even read his book.

To be fair, I’d *tried*. I just didn’t like scary stories.

I took my books from my locker and shoved them into my backpack. The hallway was already clearing out. Everyone was heading to class. Sam and I wandered down the hall toward Mr. Barnes’s math class.

“Whoa, high alert, dude.”

I looked up.

Coming down the hall was Lisa Barker. Better known as Batty Barker. Or Lisa the Lane, depending on who you asked. Lisa wasn't all that bad. I had two classes with her and she seemed smart enough and nice enough to me. But she was a little odd.

Okay.

Really odd.

Like, she wore nothing but black dresses with knee-high red socks. Every day. You couldn't tell if it was the same dress or if she had a whole closet full of them. And she tied a black ribbon in her hair, which she refused to take off, even during PE. A strange green amulet hung around her neck, and she smelled faintly of cheese.

But you could probably forgive all of that.

Lisa's obsession with fortune telling was harder to forgive.

Sam edged me over to the far side of the hall, putting as much distance between us and Lisa Barker as possible.

It didn't work.

Lisa looked up just as we went by. Her eyes widened. She

stopped and stared directly at me.

Sam tried to shoo me forward, but Lisa took two large steps sideways and closed the distance. She reached out and gripped both of my hands in hers. Her hands were cool and yet faintly sweaty.

She gazed right into my eyes.

“I’ve seen your future, Danny Ferry,” she said. “Two weeks from now, you’re going to die.”

CHAPTER 5

Let's get something straight.

Batty Barker predicted the death of different students every semester. It was nothing new. Had any of them died?

Of course not.

Still, that didn't make me feel much better. There's nothing quite like someone predicting your death to ruin your day.

"Thanks, Lisa," I said quietly.

She kept staring deeply into my eyes, which quite frankly was creepier than the omen of death she'd just laid on me. No girl had ever stared at me so directly for so long. It was unnerving. I wanted to pull back and slink away, but there was something else in her eyes that held me there.

She looked sad.

Like she was unhappy that two weeks from now I wouldn't be around anymore.

Which was odd, since she'd never said a word to me until now.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this news," Lisa said.

People were stopping alongside us now, snickering and shaking their heads. I saw a few kids down the hall pointing and grinning: *check out Batty Barker's latest victim!*

Sam saved me. He grabbed hold of my backpack and gave it a sharp yank. I tumbled sideways, breaking away from Lisa's gaze.

"Yeah, we gotta get to class," Sam said. "Pop quiz and everything."

If Lisa was offended, she didn't show it. She simply nodded and watched us hurry down the hall.

Her sad eyes never left me.



Two guesses what I spent the rest of the day thinking about.

It wasn't like I actually believed Lisa could see the future.

Everyone knew she spent much of her time at Keir Cross City Park reading people's palms and flipping Tarot cards. Last summer, she'd told Ronnie Cullen he would die in a fiery car wreck. All of August he refused rides from anyone before finally realizing Lisa's Tarot cards were more than a little wonky. Just before Christmas, she'd warned Devlin Mackey some evil doll was going to turn him into a Christmas ornament, which is just about the most insane thing you'd ever heard. Where was Devlin now? Sitting in fifth period science, alive and well.

The list went on and on.

I *knew* Lisa's prediction was bogus.

No doubt whatsoever.

But somehow that didn't keep me from worrying about it. And wondering: just how was I going to die? Would it happen quickly or slowly? Would it hurt? Would I die all alone?

Thinking about your own death sucks.

Arriving at home after school, my brain ached from pondering all the ways I could bite the dust. I needed a rest. I needed something else to think about.

Like who the heck had been calling my name on the ra-

dio.

Other than my own demise, the other puzzle I'd been trying to figure out was how anyone could have known I'd been listening to the radio inside the taxi. No good answers had presented themselves. Probably I'd just heard it wrong. There was a lot of static after all.

The guy could have been saying *Denny*. Or *Annie*. Or *Sammy*. Lots of things sounded like *Danny*.

What was the other option? Somehow the guy knew I was listening and had spoken directly to me?

Crazy.

Bonkers.

Whacko.

Mom's note said tonight's dinner options included grilled cheese sandwiches and Hamburger Helper. Hamburger Helper made me want to barf. Grilled cheese baby!

I snaked three Oreos out of a jar on the counter and headed for the garage. I needed to remove any lingering doubts about the voice on the radio. Only one way to do that.

I'd left the keys in the same place Dad always left them:

tucked into the visor. Pulling it down, the keys fell into my hand. As I slipped the key into the ignition, I snatched the hat off the dashboard and yanked it onto my head. It really did fit me well. I munched an Oreo and turned the key halfway, same as yesterday.

Nothing happened. Then I remembered.

From the metal tray I picked up another of those odd coins and pushed it into the slot. It disappeared with a tiny clink.

The power surged.

The headlights glowed.

The radio filled the cab with static.

I didn't really expect to hear the voice from yesterday. I'd started to believe it had been some kind of radio show. Did they still do radio shows? Who knew.

But the static cleared and the young man's voice floated through the speakers.

"Is anybody there? I need a ride. Can you give me a ride?"

I stopped chewing.

Just like yesterday, the voice sounded sad and alone. Maybe even a little scared.

Who was this guy? And how was I picking him up?

Then he said it.

My name.

“Danny, can you hear me? I need a ride, Danny.”

No mistake. The static hissed in the background, but it was low enough and quiet enough that I could hear the voice perfectly fine.

He hadn't said Annie. Or Denny. Or Sammy.

He'd said *Danny*.

Yeah, no. Sorry. Enough of that. Game over.

I snatched at the key, but in my hurry my hand got confused. Instead of twisting the key back and turning off the car, I twisted it *forward*.

The mystery cab roared to life.

The engine rumbled. A low *put-put-put* echoed from the rear exhaust. The headlights brightened, then returned to their normal shimmer.

Before I could correct my mistake, the driver's side door swung shut. I jerked my leg inside just before it closed on my ankle.

The engine roared again.

And then it did something totally and wholly impossible.

The gear shift on the steering wheel clicked up all on its own.

The taxi rolled forward.

The garage door slid up.

The car banked a left onto Cedar Street and drove away with me inside.

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