

## The Charlatan

Martin woke up with a hangover. After last night's profitable show, he may have celebrated a little too hard at the restaurant with the show promoter, Dylan.

However, they had reason to celebrate.

"Fourteen shows!" Dylan had laughed into a glass of whiskey. "Fourteen sold-out shows of suckers! How do you do it, Martin? Come on, you and me. No bullshit."

"You wanna know the truth of it?" Martin smiled. He checked around to make sure that no one could overhear them in their private room. The waiters were beyond the closed door, but Martin didn't want to risk a nosey busboy ruining the show's credibility. When he was confident that they were truly alone, Martin leaned close and whispered to Dylan. "It's all bullshit..."

"All of it?"

"The people who come to these shows want to believe...they already do. So, when I tell them that Grandpa Joe says they can keep that old car? They're paying for affirmations. I'm not telling them anything they don't want to hear and that's what the show is all about. Reading what someone wants to hear and telling them so they can have the closure or whatever."

"You're a genius," Dylan said. "Proper brilliant! Like that thing about the watch tonight? So good! We're gonna sell out in the next twenty, I can feel it!"

This morning, Martin decided he needed coffee before selling out another twenty shows. As he padded barefoot down to the kitchen, he checked his phone for the most recent reviews. There were a few naysayers--or "party-poopers" as Martin called them--but a lot more people were talking about how excited they were to be seeing his show that night. He was doing a bit of prep-work about a fan who was bemoaning her car troubles on social media after tagging his show, when he saw a figure in his kitchen.

Martin blinked and whirled around, dropping his phone and raising his hands. The man in the kitchen was wearing a fine suit with a top hat and his mustache was immaculate. He had a slightly sallow look about him with bags under his eyes and greying skin.

"Alexander!" Martin sighed. "I've told you not to do that..."

"And I've told you to stop squandering your talent," Alexander said. "You know what you're doing is wrong..."

"Oh come on, Alex!" Martin scoffed, picking up his phone and going for the coffee. "It's not hurting anyone!"

"For forty bucks a seat at the theatre? You think that's not hurting anyone? You're

a mockery to true mediums everywhere."

"Just because you didn't think of it doesn't mean it's a mockery," Martin said, pouring coffee into a mug. "Besides, charging more makes it more legitimate."

"You inherited this from me," Alexander said. "You're supposed to be helping people, not treating it like some twisted carnival show! The dead want to talk with their loved ones and you're just lying to their faces about it!"

"That's not--ok, that's mostly true, but not enough to say I'm lying. Besides, what do the dead care?"

"You're cheating them out of their final business. Do you know how many complaints I get daily because of you?"

"Oh, yeah, how could I forget: your list of people that I need to help--"

"And you're not making my job any easier! Do you think I like cleaning up your messes? Do you think I like coming to you, hat in hand, begging for your help? It gets old, Martin. A lot of other ghosts would be a lot angrier with you being so flippant in your duties!"

"I didn't ask for this! And I don't know if you remember, but people don't always like hearing from ghosts."

"No one likes to be the bearer of bad news."

"Bad news? Remember that first job I did for you?"

"Don't start with this again..."

"Becky Sandeski! Cutest girl in my grade and you told me to say that her grandmother thought she wasn't behaving like a proper lady!"

"It's just--"

"And not only did she slap me so hard I lost a tooth, but I was effectively blacklisted from dating every girl in my school until I went to college!"

"I'm sorry I made your teenage years difficult, but that's a small price for--"

"Oh, and do you remember the hairdresser? That cute blonde one that liked me? You made me speak for her Great Uncle too!"

"My duty is to the dead."

"And my duty is not getting my face slapped by people! When I was following your rules to the letter, I got slapped, kicked, punched...I can't go into half the bars in New York anymore because of you!"

"That's not my fault."

"Of course it's not, nothing is your fault. So, I played dirty, too. I needed money and people were more appreciative when they heard what they wanted!"

"So, you'd rather be a charlatan than help people?"

"A very rich charlatan," Martin said, turning his back on Alexander and facing the window. "And no thanks to you."

"Don't forget, I made the mistakes you did before I died. Our family has had this power for hundreds of years and they always squander it while alive. If you think the people who are angry with you are bad, imagine the ghosts who are angry."

"What do you want me to do, huh? Stop traveling? Stop making money? You were a bigger liar than me back in the day."

"A fault I regret every day now. My business isn't finished until you start finishing more business."

"So...what's the compromise here?"

"Start resolving some of these spirits!" Alexander said. "Or at the very least stop profiting off other people's grief!"

"And charge people for bad news?"

"You talk so much about what people want to hear," Alexander said, appearing over Martin's shoulder in the reflection of the window. "What about what people need to hear? The dead aren't willfully cruel."

"So you say, as you're breaking my heart," Martin scoffed. "Alright, I'll try to be a bit more realistic, but you gotta bring me some good news during shows! No more of these pissed-off ghosts at shows. I'll do the bad news for free..."

Alexander sighed and shook his head. "Fine. I suppose there's room for compromise. But the good won't outlast the bad. People are much more willing to hold anger than happiness when they pass on. It will hit an end."

"Then I'll go back to lying for shows."

"You were given this gift," Alexander growled. "Don't think you are above us taking it away."

That thought made Martin's blood go colder than any ghost whispers in his ear.