

THE MAN WITH THE DEVIL'S TONGUE

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(SAMPLE)

CHAPTER ONE

On the night of April Frausini's twentieth birthday, her dead boyfriend came to her room with a knife in his mouth.

This wasn't altogether uncommon. Brett often visited April after his motorcycle accident a year ago.

The knife was new, though.

April pulled the bed sheets closer as Brett passed through her door. Across the room, her roommate Cary slept on, oblivious to the paranormal visitor.

It was about eleven years ago that April woke to a fright—her first period and her first vision of a ghost in her room.

The ghost that particular day had been that of her grandmother. Old granny seemed so happy that her little girl was a woman now. April, meanwhile, had screamed her head off until her parents rushed to her room and granny finally disappeared into dust.

There had been many ghosts since then, most of them silent and not unkind, but April was still prone to frights now and then.

Her parents had treated her as a child with a broken brain. They took April to doctors. The doctors sent her to specialists. The specialists put her on drugs. When the drugs failed to stop the visions, the specialists zapped her brain.

After that, April told them the ghosts had gone.

She lied.

Those years of confusion had left their toll on the Frausini family unit. Their broken child was fixed but the home had developed many cracks.

In the divorce April was given the choice to pick which parent to live with. Her Mom and Dad had spent weeks coaching her, telling lies about one another, trying to paint the best self-portraits of themselves and the cruelest caricatures of the other.

April didn't want to choose either of them after that, but she chose Mom. Dad didn't talk to her much after that. Once she got to college, though, it didn't matter much; she hardly talked to Mom either. The bird was out of the nest, let her fly far. She had enrolled in classes with the intention of becoming a psychologist, believing that if she learned how to help others she may one day learn to help herself.

There were many ghosts on campus. Most of the time, April paid them no mind, but if a ghost detected her eyes upon them, they often sought her out.

She told her boyfriend Brett about it. He believed her, or at least he said he did.

Visiting her after his own death, he had no choice but to believe her now.

As Brett approached her bedside, he took the knife out of his mouth. His spirit was translucent and a dark shade of gray, looking more like an outline, and lacking the finer details of the human face. April had come to learn that a ghost's shade of gray determined their 'mood.'

And Brett was in a foul mood.

April tried to control her breathing. The knife wasn't real, she told herself. But an angry ghost was a very real thing. Had Brett grown restless and agitated while trapped on the mortal plane? Did he mean to vent that frustration on the only one capable of seeing him? April brought her left hand underneath the sheets and searched out her crucifix which she kept at the side of her bed for nights such as this.

Brett said, "I want to kill your roommate."

April almost shushed him, then remembered that only she could hear his words. She couldn't speak loudly, though. Her roommate Cary thought she was weird enough already.

"You can't kill my roommate," April said in a whisper. "You can't kill anybody. Go back to bed, sweetie."

"I can't sleep," Brett said. He ran his hands through his hair, revealing the part of his scalp that had been stripped away during the accident. "I only dream of memories. I don't want them anymore. They hurt worse than dying."

"I'm sorry," April told him.

"I want to get rid of my hurt, give it to somebody else."

"You can't."

"She's sleeping," Brett said, playing with the knife in his hand. "She won't feel a thing."

“They’ll think I did it,” April said.

“Well. . .”

“Didn’t think of that, huh?” She whispered, “Besides, like I said, you *can’t* do it, and I don’t mean in the sense of the moral argument. I mean, you can’t *do* it. You can influence the world if you want to but not with a knife you made up with your head.”

The knife changed into flecks of dust that floated down to the floor. Brett frowned. His color lightened, his details became clearer. April thought she saw tears in his eyes. She put the crucifix away.

After a long silence, April said, “You can always move on.”

“It scares me,” Brett said. “I don’t know where I’d go.”

“You should have nothing to be afraid of.”

“We judge our own lives differently, less honestly, than others judge us. And if there is a God, and He’s been watching everything I did, how can I expect a kind judgment?”

April had no answers for him. Brett wept quietly until his spirit disappeared from the room.

April knew without even trying that she would not get back to sleep.

For a long time now, ghosts had been making things difficult for her. They had split up her family, made her into a mental case in the eyes of her parents, and ruined her chances at a normal college life.

April dressed for the day and left her dorm. She met up with some night owl friends at a local bar. She was underage and felt the need to obey the law, for fear of what potential ghosts waited for her in lockup. More than that, though, if she started screaming about dead men in a jail cell, the police might never let her leave.

She kept her life on the straight and narrow. She never drank, didn't smoke, rarely drove, and only kept friends who were just normal enough for society, but strange enough to accept her, *the girl who sees things*.

Some of them knew what she saw because she told them. April wondered if anybody believed her, though.

Abby believed her. Abby was a calligraphy enthusiast going to school to become a painter or something. Abby also believed that she had been abducted from her bed by aliens at age eleven. This, she explained, was why she went to bed fully clothed nowadays.

Abby and her boyfriend Josh were eating nachos and discussing the merits of the last episode of *The X-Files* when April sat down.

"Jesus," Josh said. He tried to avert his eyes and focused so intently on his nachos that the chips were likely to catch fire.

"I look that bad?" April asked.

"You don't look *good*," Abby said. "Trouble sleeping?"

April nodded. "Brett came to visit me."

Josh scoffed. Abby slapped the back of his hand and said to April, “What’d he have to say?”

“He wants to kill my roommate,” April said.

Josh frowned.

“Is that normal?” Abby asked. “I mean, did he want to kill her before he died?”

“Not that I know of,” April said. She put her forehead on the table and closed her eyes.

“Should you have left your room, then?” Abby asked. “What if he tries to kill her now that you’re gone?”

“Brett can’t kill anybody. It doesn’t work that way. It’s just a cry for help. But I can’t help him. I can’t even help myself.”

April looked up from the table. The smell of nachos made her queasy in the middle of the night. The bar was mostly empty, with the exception of the sad regulars and the nocturnal students.

The chubby bartender with the accent that was impossible to determine set out a line of drinks for a few jocks in football jerseys. Gwen the waitress tried her best to politely turn down some balding old men a few tables over. And seated in his usual dark corner was the lonely, awkward genius Ronald Lime.

April blinked away the sleep from her eyes.

No, Lime wasn't by himself. There was someone with him. That was new. His friend was seated with his back to April, so she couldn't see who he was, but he wore all black and had wide shoulders.

Lime had joined college at age fourteen. He was brilliant and practically everybody hated him. Some of this was jealous human nature, but sometimes Lime didn't make himself easy to like. He rarely spoke except to clarify how superior he was to those around him. April believed there was little difference between Lime and the jocks who meant to put him down all his life, except they did it with brawn and he did it with brains.

"Not usual for Lime to go out with a friend," April said.

Josh and Abby looked back at Lime, then regarded April with confusion.

"I don't know what you see," Josh said, "but the Nerd King is alone."

The dark figure turned, as if sensing April's eyes upon him, revealing a face covered with scars and infected piercings.

His eyes were on fire.

The man in black got up from his seat and crossed the bar slowly, dragging behind him a length of chains. A smell of decay preceded him and the lights in the bar seemed to dim in his wake.

April started to shake as sweat came down her face. She gripped the edges of the table tightly while her friends looked on with concern.

She had never seen a spirit like this before.

The man walked up to her table. . .

Then he simply walked past.

April breathed out. Her face was pale and her heart was beating in a rapid chorus of drum beats.

Abby took her hand in her own. She said, “Sweetie, are you okay?”

April nodded. She pulled hair from her sweaty brow. “I’m fine.”

The lights in the bar grew brighter and brighter until they became blinding—then they shattered all at once, raining bits of glass down on everyone.

April didn’t understand it herself, but she began screaming like a mad woman. Josh and Abby grabbed her and forcefully took her outside while the other patrons hurried after them.

People brushed glass off their shoulders and from their hair, but April was still screaming. She fell to the pavement and curled up in a fetal position as she screamed at the dark sky above.

Someone asked, “What’s wrong with her? Is she hurt?”

Abby got down next to April and embraced her, then started cooing into her ear like a mother might to a frightened child.

“You’re all right,” Abby said. “You’re okay, April. Calm down.”

The world returned to April slowly. Panic subsided, giving way to reason and shame. She got up from the pavement and dusted herself off and tried not to take the weird looks she got from the others personally.

Josh said, “Was that you? I mean, did you, umm, turn out the lights?”

April shook her head. “There was a powerful spirit in the bar. I’ve never seen anything quite like it. He seemed especially interested in Lime.”

“Where is Lime?” Abby asked.

April surveyed the crowd of confused bar patrons but Lime was nowhere in sight. She brushed past them, heading back to the bar.

It was dark but Lime could clearly be seen seated in his corner.

His eyes were on fire.

CHAPTER TWO

It was called the order of the Gatekeepers, though through the years they had many other names and affiliations, including the Illuminati and the Knights Templar. The Order operated in every country, answering only to the Church and the angels above. They kept their operations shrouded in secrecy, working in the shadows to ensure a safer world for all mankind.

Now in his forties, Jameson Talbot had spent the better part of his life as a member of the Gatekeepers. In that time, he had killed demons, captured poltergeists, shaken hands with the Pope, and saved the residents of DeKalb, Illinois from a rabid unicorn.

Talbot was a field agent. Whereas most of the Order was devoted to study and secrets, he had to go out into the world and deal with the monsters that the others only read about.

He returned to the Gatekeepers stronghold with one such monster under his arm. It was a hellhound pup, rendered unconscious with drugs. It was born with a full, black coat of fur, but that was already beginning to fall out, giving way to the patchy, hideous skin underneath. This was the first pup ever discovered in the human world and it seemed to suggest that the hellhounds were breeding beyond the gates of Hell. He would deliver the mutt to the scientists, let them figure it out.

The Order's stronghold was located in the ancient sewers beneath Rome. Agreements with the Vatican kept their special corner of the sewers off the grid and away from prying eyes.

After navigating through corridors of rock and eventually passing through a locked door, Talbot found himself in the ultra-modern Gatekeepers HQ. Fancy chrome, lots of glass, the latest computer technology—they had it all, and it was paid for by the public without them ever knowing it.

Talbot dropped off the pup with the geeks just as its eyelids were beginning to flutter open. The doctors quickly administered another dose of tranquilizers, putting the hound under before he could cause any trouble.

Talbot wanted rest and he needed a shower. A week spent in a hellhound den in Spain wouldn't wash off easily.

From the corner office, his boss Dominic Friend was waving him over.

Rest would have to wait.

Friend was a profane middle-aged man who you would never expect to be a religious sort. Talbot supposed that working with the Gatekeepers didn't automatically mean one was religious. With certainty of angels and demons, did that perhaps cancel out the requirement for faith, for worship?

Talbot entered Friend's office and remembered how much he liked the spacious room. There was a rumor that Dominic Friend would be retiring in a couple years. Some gossipers seemed to suggest that Talbot was first in line for the job. He'd like that. No

more digging around for demons in the shitholes of the world—instead he'd have a nice, warm office to work out of, and then he could play the asshole boss role.

Friend said, "Fucking angels came to me with a message."

Talbot frowned.

"They want you in Indiana," Friend said.

"Why? There's nothing worth anything in Indiana," Talbot said.

"Angels, in their infinite wisdom, apparently disagree." Friend reached into a desk drawer, pulled out a bottle of bourbon. He poured himself a glass, downed it, and put the bottle back.

Talbot tried his best to look dejected.

"There's a girl enrolled in Notre Dame," Friend said. "Her gift of sight is powerful but raw. They want you to give her the choice to join us and refine her gifts, such as they are."

"That's unusual," Talbot said.

"That's what I told them."

"What'd they say?"

Friend waved his hand dismissively. "Gave me the old 'mysterious ways' bullshit."

"Angels said *that*?"

“I couldn’t believe it.” Friend shook his head. “There’s no standards left anymore. Even the angels are fond of goddamn clichés.”

“What’s so special about the girl?” Talbot asked.

“They said she’s clever. They say she has a future.”

Talbot nodded grimly. It always bothered him that the angels had some idea of the cards in every player’s hands and that they preferred to be cryptic about the details. To say that the Indiana girl had a future was just angel-speak for saying she was important to them somehow.

Ghosts, demons, and the creepy crawlies of myth existed beyond the sight of most humans, either invisible or appearing as something totally normal. They hid behind this magic, known as the Veil, knowing that they could only be seen by a gifted few. Even the normal people of the world still usually saw at least one thing beyond the Veil in their lifetime, often upon the brink of death when the fabric between worlds begins to fray.

One day, it was said that the Veil would be lifted for the entire world; this event was better known as the Apocalypse.

“What does she see so far?” Talbot asked.

“For years she only saw ghosts,” Friend said. He broke eye contact and stared at his folded hands on the desk.

Talbot said, “Yes, and?”

“Last night she saw the Devil.”

CHAPTER THREE

Ronald Lime ate his ramen noodles with Saturday morning cartoons at high volume, attempting to drown out the sound of screeching furniture that slid on its own across his apartment floor.

It all started quietly enough. He had stayed up five days straight working on his formula. He'd nearly discovered the key, broken the truth free from bondage, when he started seeing things.

The beasts were the color of blood. They stood only three feet tall, but they had impressive wings and a set of horns that made them appear much larger.

Though he was never religious, Lime took to calling them demons, for they certainly fit the description. He watched them cautiously out the corner of his eye as they lurked in the shadows eating garbage and snorting smoke.

Then they started noticing him.

They fornicated for laughs in the middle of his classes. They butchered each other and painted the walls with their comrade's blood. They whispered into his ears the tales of dead classmates, decapitated professors, and how he should assist them in the coming massacre.

Lime wondered about his sanity. Truly, they could not be real. He'd been awake too long and his mind had taken to cruel fantasies.

He wanted to tell someone. He needed help. But no one wanted to help him. He was alone in a crowd of thousands.

He suspected that his lack of sleep was playing tricks on him, willing him to enact certain urges created by his social ineptitude.

Upon deciding that his theory was sound and that all he needed was rest, Lime swallowed a handful of sleeping pills. It was a half-hearted suicide attempt.

He awoke to find claw marks covering his chest and back. Every night that followed produced even more. Soon they were crisscrossing old scars with new, bloody gashes.

He didn't bother changing his bed sheets anymore.

Though fully rested and more or less sane, the demons continued to visit him during all parts of the day.

To satisfy his scientific curiosity as much as anything else, he decided to sneak up on one of the winged hellions and stab a butcher knife through its skull.

The demon died twitching while all its buddies flew around laughing manically.

Lime dissected the demon, coming to the conclusion that it could not be mistaken for anything from the known animal kingdom.

The next step was to decide if the thing actually existed in the first place or if he was still just seeing things.

He chopped off its head and left it on the university's front steps one night. The next day everyone was wowed by the demon's wretched face, which had contorted comically during death. They determined that it was indeed real flesh and blood but ultimately the work of a most elaborate hoax. Lime knew better, but was thankful to learn that others could reach out and touch the same devilry that taunted him every night.

Then one day the demons simply left—and in their wake, the world began to spin out of control around him.

Furniture moved on its own. He could no longer trust a chair to stay in place beneath him. Now he only sat down in booths and other things fastened to the floor or wall.

Car accidents always seemed to happen around him. As a result, he didn't drive anymore, nor did he use public transportation.

The shower was always scalding hot. He washed now with the use of buckets and a rag.

Dogs behaved strangely towards him, often on the verge of attack. Cats hissed at him when he walked past. Even birds seemed to dive bomb him from overhead.

The demons were gone and in their place was some invisible dark spirit, lording over the world around him, taking away any sense of safety, leaving him in a constant state of panic.

Last night he tried to get out to spend some time around people, hoping the presence would loosen its grip for fear of being noticed.

But when the lights exploded at the bar, Lime realized that it would never leave him alone.

Enough was enough, Lime decided. This could not continue. Let the demons kill me or let them leave, but I will be haunted no longer.

He switched off the TV and the room descended into screeching silence.

“Show yourself or I’ll kill you,” Lime said.

An empty threat—anyone could see that. Violent threats rolled off the tongue like a third language for him.

Lime took a chopstick from the ramen bowl and pressed it against his own throat. He pressed hard. It hurt. He felt warm blood on his neck.

“Show yourself or I’ll kill myself,” he said.

The lights dimmed and the shadows seemed to take on a life of their own, growing outwards, becoming like oil. The soupy darkness grew upwards into the shape of a man. Definition came to its face. The dark man’s handsome features were chiseled from stone. He had long, black hair and eyes a burning red like the magma of an angry volcano.

When he spoke, and he most certainly liked to speak, his voice was cool and soothing like a late night DJ.

“Don’t be rash,” said the dark spirit. “Let’s talk.”

“Who are you?” Lime asked.

“Satan,” it said quite matter-of-factly.

“Fuck, I am crazy,” Lime said. His hand trembled, he dropped the chopstick from his throat.

“Not crazy,” the Devil said. “Special.”

Lime started to stammer, failing to put his rambling thoughts to words.

Satan rested a cool hand on Lime’s cheek, startling him.

“How would you have me?” Satan asked.

“What?”

The Devil’s dark makeup changed. He grew shorter, thinner. The long hair remained the same, but his chest blossomed and his face became more feminine.

“Is this better?” Satan asked with a sultry voice.

Lime wept as he went to the kitchen looking for a knife.

“Did you prefer the other way more?” Satan asked.

Lime pulled a butcher knife from a drawer. Without hesitation he pulled the blade across his own throat, spilling blood down his chest.

Coughing and sputtering, Lime hit the kitchen floor and dropped the knife next to him.

Satan came into the kitchen. His form turned into something else entirely, something not quite human. Horns adorned his head. Wings sprouted from his shoulders. His hands, once soft and cool, were now tipped with talons.

“Stupid,” Satan said as he knelt down next to him.

Lime wanted to close his eyes, let it pass quietly, but he couldn't look away.

Satan reached his talons through the hole in Lime's throat. He pushed deep and upwards while Lime gagged and gushed blood.

The talons went up the back of Lime's throat and caressed his tongue. The fingers worked his mouth forcefully, treating him like a grotesque ventriloquist dummy.

With his claws deep inside Lime's jaw, the Devil lifted him to his feet and brought him face to face.

“I had plans for you,” Satan said. He stroked his claws through Lime's hair. “You're stupid to have given them up. However, we can adjust. You can still serve a purpose.”

Lime tried to speak but he had the Devil's claws stuck in his mouth.

Satan withdrew his hand from Lime's throat and wiped blood on his shirt.

“Let me die,” Lime managed in a broken mumble.

The Devil leaned in close and whispered into his ear. “No.”

Lime whimpered and tried to pull away. Satan held him close. He embraced Lime like a lover and their lips connected. Blood poured out of the kiss, splashing on the floor between them.

Lime's jaw went wider and wider until it unhinged—and Satan pushed deeper, the kiss becoming stronger, until his lips and nose were within Lime's mouth.

Lime cried as the Devil pushed deeper.

Satan's body crunched down in impossible ways as he forced his skull and neck through Lime's open mouth.

The Devil's shoulders contorted sideways and disappeared into Lime's gullet one arm at a time.

Soon Lime was swallowing his chest, his belly, and finally his legs.

Lime bent over onto his knees, only dimly aware that the blood had stopped flowing from his neck.

He remembered thinking about God and then he felt his body go limp.

When he stood up once again, Lime was no longer at the controls. He watched the world pass him by as he left the bloody kitchen and walked out into the world. He watched from a pit of darkness, trapped within his own body, with the Devil in command.

(END SAMPLE)