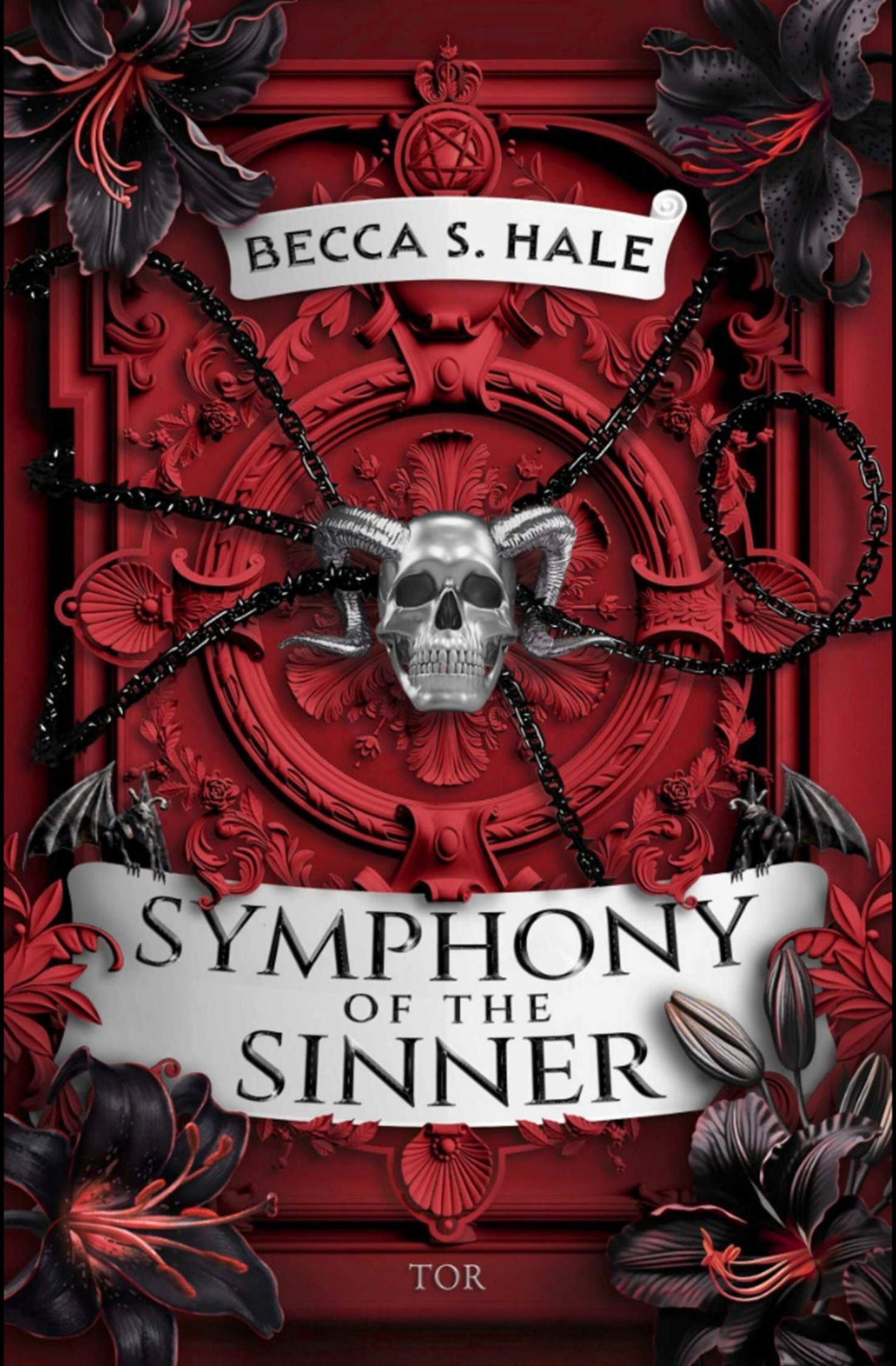

BECCA S. HALE
SYMPHONY OF THE SINNER
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OF THE
SINNER

Sample Translation

September 2026 / 560 pp



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Becca S. Hale is a Spiegel bestselling author of fantasy novels. She comes from a tranquil village in southern Germany. Her heart beats for romantic stories and fantastical worlds. When she's not working on a new story, she can be found at the piano, with a good book or a paintbrush and paper in her hand. On Instagram and TikTok, she shares insights into her everyday life as an author at @beccaschreibt.

1

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

With a dull thud, the stolen goods land on the soot-stained table. At that very moment, Dagger Dave's stiletto knife springs up.

I flinch slightly.

My boss makes the sharp blade dance between his fingers. Completely lost in thought, even though one wrong move and blood will flow. But with Dagger, the gesture looks playful. As if he were holding a ballpoint pen instead of a deadly weapon.

It's not the thought of him pointing that switchblade at me that terrifies me. No. A cut would be harmless compared to what's lurking out there tonight. It's his words that will decide my fate. Whether he'll throw me out. And whether I'll survive the night.

For midnight will not only leave wounds behind.

But dead bodies.

The way it took my mom back then.

And this time … maybe me.

„What's that supposed to be?" The leather of his throne – as he calls the worn-out armchair – creaks as Dagger leans back.

The heyday of Dave's Automotive Repair Shop lies somewhere between the nineties and the noughties. In the middle of the workshop, a half-stripped-down pick-up truck gathers dust, surrounded by numerous crates and cart wheels. Alongside engine parts, the concrete floor is littered with dark stains of origin I'd rather not know, and the walls are covered from floor to ceiling with neon lights and rusty tools.

A click sounds as Dagger snaps the knife shut.

"Is that all you've got, kiddo?" He points, almost casually, at the small brown leather pouch in front of him. The air is thick with the smell of oil and cold smoke, accentuated by the countless cigar stubs scattered around the throne.

He swaps the knife for a cigar and a flip-top lighter, which he pulls from his breast pocket. Slowly, he holds the stub over the small flame, twirling it between his thumb and forefinger as he does so.

Only when the tip is glowing does Dagger let his head sink back into the leather, taking short puffs so that smoke rises from the corners of his mouth.

The dreadful stench alone makes my stomach churn.

I wonder how he manages to get that harmful nicotine into his lungs, given that he literally has his throat stuffed full of money. Without ever lifting a fucking finger himself, mind you. No. My boss enjoys, commands and … decides. On life or death.

As I still owe him an answer, he raises his eyebrows impatiently. A line of wrinkles etches its way up to his receding hairline. “Where’s the fucking rest?”

Trembling, I raise my left arm and let my soaked sweater sleeve speak for itself. With my other hand, I reach for the fabric. I squeeze it only lightly, yet it splashes as if I were wringing out liters of water. A drop lands on Dagger’s forehead, whereupon he twitches his eye disapprovingly.

“Nobody goes out in this weather,” I murmur meekly. Remorse—even if it's only feigned—is the only thing ensuring my survival these days. “It was almost impossible to get hold of anything…”

No sooner have my words faded than the fluorescent tubes begin to flicker. The neon-green light reflects, flickering, in Dagger"s signet ring.

That vain piece of jewelry is the only sign of his wealth. His unkempt, long beard, his grubby lace-up boots and his faded leather jacket suggest quite the opposite.

“Then for goodness' sake, come up with something,” my boss grumbles. “You can shove your lousy excuses somewhere, kiddo. I’ve put up with you long enough. It’s about time you did your job properly.”

I have to stifle a snort. Even if you turned a blind eye, you could hardly call pickpocketing a proper job.

It’s shabby. It’s dishonest. But above all, it’s humiliating.

Still, three years ago, when I ran away from my last foster family, I had hardly any other choice. I didn’t finish high school, had no savings, no prospects. Just a shattered soul, faded memories of my mum and a nagging fear that constantly drove us to flee.

We had lived in a stuffy one-room flat in the center of the old town, then in a ramshackle caravan on the outskirts. Sometimes on Old Briar Mill Road, sometimes on Black Fern Street. Only to leave it all behind us again a short time later.

But we always stayed in Grimmwood Creek.

And perhaps that was the mistake.

Because, despite everything, he found us. A cloaked figure. Tall. With bony fingers and long black nails. Two horns on his head, so sharp they looked as though they could have sliced through the clouds in the night sky. But it was above all the eyes that etched themselves into my memory … deep red like the blood that is spilled every year.

Whenever they come.

The embodiment of pure deterioration.

The harbingers of doom.

And today, of all days, is that day.

A deep clap of thunder makes me flinch again. But it doesn’t rattle Dagger Dave. He blows a cloud of smoke in my direction. For a moment, it obscures my vision. After a few blinks, a wrinkled nose and a pursed upper lip come into view. His gaze rests disparagingly on my haul. “Take that junk back with you. I’ve no use for it.”

When fate has been delivering not just lemons, but every variety of citrus fruit imaginable, for fifteen years, you really shouldn’t feel guilty about a bit of theft. Yet a leaden lump forms in my throat

as I undo the leather buckle and tip the bag out in front of Dagger.

The contents tumble onto the table with a jingle, along with my heart. Because I know it's not much. A lipstick. A packet of chewing gum. Tampons. Headphones. A hand mirror. But at least a small wallet with two letters sewn onto it.

"There's 50 bucks in there." I nod towards the wallet. "And that thing should get you another 300 on top." I try to sell it to my boss. As always. Because he's right about one thing: I'm a terrible thief. Even after three years of stealing for Dagger.

My haul is hardly worth mentioning. On a good day, it might be two, at most three, expensive wristwatches, a smartphone or a valuable designer handbag. But the bad days outnumber the good. Of course they do.

It was pure luck that I spotted the bag in a Target customer's car before nightfall.

One swift grab. Silent and lightning-fast.

I'd vanished again in an instant, whilst the woman was busy lugging her groceries into the boot in the pouring rain. Packets of ready meals, to see her through the night in her prepper bunker. Just like most people who are bracing themselves for the worst time of the year.

"Who do you think you're bullshitting, kiddo?" Dagger's voice suddenly sounds sharper. Instead of inspecting the stolen goods, he's got his sights set solely on me.

In Grimmwood Creek, there's a rumor going round that my boss once gouged out someone's eye. That's where his name comes from. Nowadays, he gets his people to handle the really shady business for him. Still, I reckon he would get his hands dirty himself if the situation called for it.

I swallow hard. My gaze darts to the bulge in his breast pocket. Where he's just stowed away the switchblade.

"I don't think much of this stuff, but even I know that this one here…" Now he does glance at the wallet and grimaces, as if the next words disgust him. "…isn't real."

"No, that's not true. It's…"

But when I recognize the crookedly sewn-on Gucci monogram, where the gold paint is already flaking off, even I can no longer deny that it's a fake. A derisive click of the tongue follows. He takes the wallet and yanks the zip open forcefully. Even though he's more than dissatisfied with today's takings, he leaves me my agreed share. That's the deal. One on which my survival depends.

When he slams a banknote featuring a politician who died long ago down onto the tabletop, I breathe a sigh of relief. At least until I take a closer look at the note.

A delicate lilac background, dark green details and a single cipher on it. One. Singular.

He can't be serious.

"Five dollars?" The two words come out of my mouth shrill. Half panicked, half accusatory. "Is this some sort of joke?"

"Do I look like a fucking jokester to you?" he growls at me.

No, he certainly doesn't. Right now, he looks more as though he's about to live up to his reputation after all and pull out his knife.

"Take the money and get lost."

My vision blurs. Angry tears well up in my eyes. A single tear falls, leaving a hot trail down my cheek.

I hate the fact that, on the anniversary of my mother's death, I can't even afford flowers for her

grave. But what I hate even more is appearing weak in front of Dagger, whilst he sits opposite me with a smug look on his face. Just the sort of look someone gives who's never gone to bed on an empty stomach.

I hastily wipe the tear away with my sleeve. But my flushed cheeks remain. Because inside me, it's seething. It's seething and boiling and steaming ever more fiercely.

"We agreed I'd get twenty per cent." The paper crinkles in my palm as I clench my fingers convulsively around my day's wages. "I want what's rightfully mine."

"Oh, really?" He leans forward, sending another cloud of cigar smoke into my face. "And what about the rest of the cash you've been secretly pocketing?"

His gaze falls on the spot where my rust-red hair is clinging wet to my black hoodie. More precisely, where twenty dollars are hidden behind the tattered fabric.

The note I'd tucked into my bra just before entering the shop suddenly feels like sandpaper. Even though my clothes are soaking wet down to my underwear, my body is burning up. And I'm surprised there isn't a hissing sound yet.

Defeated, I lower my gaze to the floor and press my lips together. Not because I've secretly pocketed some money, but because he's seen right through me. Of all days, today – the most dangerous day of the year anyway.

What on earth was I thinking…

A deep breath can be heard. Just like always when Dagger is thinking about what to do with me. Unlike usual, there's no new reprieve. Instead, he remains silent.

For a moment, all that can be heard is the muffled roar of the storm outside.

But then … it happens.

He strikes.

Not with a knife, but with a verdict that will spell my doom: "You"re fired, kiddo."

2

The Clock Is Ticking

"What?" Stunned, I look up from the rainbow made of water and petrol that's forming around my almost soaked Converse.

"You're fired," he repeats. "And you can pack your things too."

My heart is pounding loudly in my ears. It beats even faster when I see Dagger's stern expression. He really means it this time.

After Mum died, I was passed around various foster homes. But I never stayed anywhere for long. I was passed from place to place like a rickety piece of furniture. Too big to throw away, not valuable enough to be repaired or to deserve a second chance.

Admittedly, I didn't make things easy for the child welfare system. Once I was kicked out because, worried that the Johnsons' hamster might be cold, I set a sofa on fire. Another time, because I cut off an elderly neighbor's hair. I was absolutely convinced that she'd be able to hear better if her grey curls weren't covering her ears.

The system had no place for people like me. It wants circles, squares or triangles that fit perfectly into their designated molds, like building blocks. But I've got rough edges and corners – so many, in fact, that even I can barely keep track of them all.

I was considered too odd, too different, too… broken.

And so I, Parker Bennett, became a born outsider. A rebel against the system.

When I returned to Grimmwood Creek three years ago, it was impossible to find a normal job. Let alone a normal apartment. Back then, nobody had any use for an eighteen-year-old with a sack of clothes, a crumpled shoebox and dirt under her fingernails. Inside the box were Mr. Cuddles – the teddy bear who's been with me my whole life – and a photo of my mum.

It's one of the few things I have left of her. There's one thing, however, that time couldn't take away from me: the memory of the way Mum used to look at me. The love in her eyes was clearer than words could ever be. But time and again, that spark of panic would flash through her eyes. No matter how hard she tried to hide her fear of me … I noticed it.

In the way she went back three times to check that the doors were properly locked. In how often she looked out of the window. And in the tension that clung to her shoulders the moment we left the house. As if she'd known even then that the most terrible of all days was yet to come.

I want to find out more about Mum. About her life. And, above all, about her death.

Who murdered her? And why was I spared?

All questions whose answers I would only find in that small town in Pennsylvania, where it all

began and ended. But here I encountered more obstacles than I'd expected.

Only Dagger gave me a chance. Not out of charity. But because I begged him. To prove myself, I slipped a drunk's wallet out of his trouser pocket in a side alley next to the Devil's Diner. But above all, the fact that I'd been involved with his son saved me from a life on the streets back then.

I was safe. Especially on this day of the year.

"Y-you … you're really going to kick me out of the apartment?" the question comes out of my mouth breathlessly.

Admittedly, the place above the Final Hour – a run-down bar in Lower Grimmwood – barely deserves to be called a flat. There's so much mold on the walls that I can't even tell where it starts and where it ends. And yet it has a mattress, a loo and a shower cubicle right next to the kitchenette with the microwave, which only works if you're not using any other plug socket at the same time.

I only got this ramshackle place because I handed a thousand dollars in cash over to Dagger. It was the money I'd stolen from my last foster family. The Rasputins were a strict Catholic family who forced me to attend Mass every Saturday and Sunday in an itchy dress. In the evenings, I had to pray the rosary whilst other seventeen-year-olds were sneaking off to parties. So it was all too easy for me to help myself to some financial compensation from them and then make a run for it.

That was over three years ago. Since then, the little flat in Lower Grimmwood has been my home. Or at least it was until a few seconds ago …

"Are you hard of hearing?" Dagger growls.

I feel paralyzed. "Just because I slipped in twenty dollars?"

"If only that were all." A harsh laugh bursts from his throat. "Sweetheart, you've cost me more over the last few months than you've brought in in fucking profit."

I squint my eyes shut. If I keep them closed long enough, there might still be a chance that this is all just a nightmare from which I'll wake up any second now. But it's the cruel reality from which there's no escape.

"It was only because of Lily that I let you live there in the first place."

At the mention of that name, I fling my eyelids open.

He tilts his head as he openly sizes me up. "You're just as pretty as your mum used to be."

In addition to my panic my chest tightens. Like a wire mesh fence that has wrapped itself around my heart over the years, constricting it increasingly with every mention of Mum.

Dagger knew her. Only casually, as she was younger than him and lived on the other side of town before I was born. But even so, my boss had heard about how she'd suddenly got pregnant at eighteen. And everyone knew that something about it was damn well not right. I was too young for Mum to be able to talk to me about it. But the expressions on people's faces said more than enough. And even back then, I found it unbearable. That pity. The heavy swallowing and the silence when you meet someone to whom something horrific has been done. And I was the result. Nobody knows who the perpetrator was. My so-called father. Just the thought of that last word makes something inside me clench. Not with longing, but with revulsion. In my heart, he is yet another nameless monster in the gruesome tragedy of my life.

"But even that is useless if you don't bring in any cash," my counterpart adds. "You're out, kiddo."

"And where am I supposed to sleep? Especially tonight!"

I hate how desperate I sound. I hate that, despite blinking repeatedly, another tear escapes from the

corner of my eye and now joins the puddle on the floor. I hate that I'm at the mercy of a man to whom I'm as worthless as the fly buzzing round the fluorescent tubes.

Dagger's gaze wanders to a stripped-down car radio lying on a dusty drill, which, miraculously, is still working.

I've got just under five hours left until midnight. A shiver creeps down my spine, as if my body can already sense their arrival. Fear makes my nerve cells tremble. But also, adrenaline. Just like every year, whilst the other residents of Grimmwood Creek barricade themselves in their shelters and only a door with a broken lock separates me from the night. And the creatures that rise from the darkness.

We know only one name for them, and even that is usually whispered. The fear of summoning them by the mere act of speaking their name is too great: demons.

They have been appearing for about two decades now, to prey upon us humans. To pounce upon us like wild beasts. Brutally. In a flash. They suck the life from our bodies and feed on the souls of those who are powerless against them. In recent years, their hunger seems to have grown. For the number of victims is rising, and with it, the fear. Only one thing eases our cruel fate: they come just once a year, for one hour.

On the night of 31st of October to 1st of November. Halloween.

When the clock strikes twelve, they step out of the darkness. Anyone who isn't safely hidden away by midnight pays with their life.

Just like Mum did fifteen years ago.

But Dagger has always been unfazed by the Night of the Demons. "Not my bloody problem."

There's a screech as the armchair's legs scrape across the floor. Before he finally turns his back on me, I lean hastily across the table.

"No, wait!" I reach under my jumper, pull the hidden twenty-dollar note out of my bra and slam it down on the tabletop along with the five bucks he had given me. "Just this one night." It's a last-ditch, desperate attempt to save my life. "I'll be out of here first thing tomorrow morning." I swallow hard. "You have my word."

Despite his thick beard, I can see him pressing his tongue against his cheek. He keeps me in suspense for twenty endless seconds.

"All right then," he grumbles, before snatching the notes and stuffing them into his trouser pocket. "Just this one night. If you haven't vanished by sunrise, you'll regret it. Is that clear?"

With the cigar between his lips, he pulls up his sleeve. Out comes a sparkling silver wristwatch that I'd stolen for him, only to be nearly caught by an officer in the process. Although even a night at the Grimmwood Creek Police Department sounds tempting today. Dagger taps against the round glass. "The clock's ticking," he warns indistinctly, because the cigar is still clamped between his lips.

Before I can reply, the steel door to the back yard is suddenly flung open. It slams so violently against the wall that plaster crumbles onto the floor. Shortly afterwards, two pairs of clunky boots with thick buckles enter the workshop. Then comes that throaty, dark laugh that only comes out of men who have long since drowned their consciences in booze. They fall silent when they notice the tense atmosphere in the shop.

"Is there a problem?" Larry asks his boss. He supplies Dagger with stolen motorbikes and always wears a wide-brimmed hat, which is now full of rainwater.

Jim does the particularly dirty work for Dagger. As if he'd read my mind, he reaches for his side.

A revolver glints behind his patched jacket.

"No," Dagger waves him off. "We're done here."

"Done?" Jim tucks the pistol back under his jacket and instead leers at the large belt buckle. "Well then, you can carry on with me, sweetheart." He runs his tongue over his thin lower lip. The sight alone is enough to make me feel sick, but the men burst into raucous laughter.

My cheeks are burning, my heart is racing, and I'm acutely aware once more that my clothes are clinging to me from the rain. Their laughter cuts right through me, to every fiber of my being. A final, crowning mockery of this already shitty day.

I draw a sharp breath through my nose, clenching my teeth so tightly that my jaw aches. Rarely have I felt as humiliated as I do at this very moment. And I want it to stop, for God's sake. I want their sneers to get stuck in their throats and for them to choke on their own spit.

Defiantly, I reach for the rest of the stolen goods. I quickly stuff the worthless trinkets back into the bag until the worktop is almost empty. All that remains is Dagger's cigar, which he's set down in a steel bowl whilst clutching his stomach with laughter. My fingers hover in the air for a moment. Perhaps it's a last-ditch attempt to salvage my honor. Or simply to annoy him. As I take the smoldering cigar, it suddenly goes dead quiet. I certainly won't be smoking that disgusting thing, but I clutch it as tightly as if it were made of gold.

Dagger's ice-blue eyes flash. For a moment I fear he might order Jim to draw his revolver after all. But as I push past the men, cigar in hand, bag over my shoulder and a whole lot of anger in my heart, nobody stops me.



MEET ME AT THE CEMETERY

"Hi, Mum," I whisper after kneeling down in the grass.

My jeans are instantly soaked through with rainwater, sending a shiver down my spine once again. With trembling fingers, I brush aside a tendril of ivy hanging over the inscription.

LILY BENNETT.
15 August 1985 – 1 November 2010.
BURIAL #2010 – 315.

That"s all. There's nothing else on the gravestone. No saying, no rhyme, not even a 'Rest in Peace'. Just bare facts on plain granite.

The cremation was paid for by the county back then. Just as in all cases where there's no one who could cover the costs. According to my file, I no longer have any family or relatives who might enquire about me. It's just me now.

"Sorry I'm so late." I give a sad laugh and push back my handbag, which has slipped off my shoulder in the rain. "I've had a lot on my plate."

For several moments I stare at the gravestone, but of course there's no reply. There's just the flickering light of the cast-iron lanterns, the creaking of the old oak trees growing crookedly amongst the stones, and a loud caw.

My head jerks to the left.

A raven has made itself comfortable on the gravestone one down. It tucks its neck in as the raindrops roll off its midnight-colored plumage.

Despite the storm, it remains perched. It watches me with its beady eyes and opens its curved beak. Once more, a caw rings out. A warning to seek safety before the witching hour sets in, and not to waste my time in the cemetery. But I must be here. Staying away from Mum's grave is not an option. These visits are the only thing that still brings me comfort these days.

Grimmwood Cemetery is completely deserted. Well, apart from the many rows of gravestones and the ivy-overgrown mausoleum with its collapsed roof. But there's not a soul here. At least, not a living one.

Every year, several dozen people die in Grimmwood Creek on this night. The demons seem to have taken a particular liking to this unassuming little town in eastern Pennsylvania. It's as if the

boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead, which blurs at this time of year, is even thinner here.

Whilst Halloween is a reason for most people to avoid this place, others see it as a reason to pay a visit to this small town in the Rust Belt. An allure that draws them here even throughout the year. A macabre tourist attraction.

Even the shops have adapted to this. There's Betty's Hair Saloon, which offers blood-red highlights. The little bookshop Ink & Tails, where the shelves are lined exclusively with occult works and legends about demons. And all the diners that draw in the crowds with Fright Fries, Hellfire Shakes, Demons' Delight Cheesecake or Bloody Burgers.

A few locals have also stayed behind in this small town. The sort of people who won't be driven away by either fear or death. As hard-nosed as Dagger Dave. Or as desperate as me. And during the day, the place is packed with onlookers.

But I didn't come here for the thrill; something else drove me – the search for the truth. And I'm here because the memories of my mother are stronger in Grimmwood Creek. How she cradled me in her warm arms whilst we snuggled up together on the sofa because the heating had broken down yet again.

Very few apartments were furnished. And even then, only sparingly. There was hardly ever even a television. But I didn't miss it. Not when my mother read to me by my bedside every evening. From a children's book from the library. From the newspaper from the day before yesterday. From an old magazine. It didn't matter. The main thing was that her soothing voice filled the room.

If she ever did run out of reading material, she'd simply make up stories herself. So many of them – but never any about my father. Not a single one.

They were adventure stories featuring a superheroine who saved the world from evil. And I was the protagonist. Yet she was my true heroine. The only person who ever loved me, protected me, gave me hope.

I must be a masochist to have returned to the town where Mum was murdered. And yet, to me, she feels more alive here than anywhere else in the world.

"As you know, today is … the anniversary of your death." My voice trembles. Just like my hands as I place the makeshift bouquet in front of the gravestone. I took the autumn shrubs for it from the front gardens in Upper Grimmwood.

I don't know if my mother can hear me – wherever her spirit may be now.

Her body was found in the stairwell of the last apartment we shared. The records noted the typical signs of a demon attack: bleeding from the mouth, nose and ears. Sunken eyeballs. Pale, torn skin. Case closed.

But the typed words in the documents can't begin to capture what it felt like to witness my own mother's death at close quarters.

All my memories of that day have been wiped clean, yet I remember the moment the demon burst into our apartment as if it were yesterday.

How it sucked the last breath of life from her body. How it flung her blood-soaked corpse aside and turned towards me. How it raised those overly long, bony fingers before my face, whilst its glowing red eyes flashed through the pointed claws. A figure so large that it brought nothing but darkness into my life. For I remained unharmed.

My research into the accessible files and the post-mortem report confirms that it was a typical demonic attack. But what nobody confirms is this: she wasn't simply one of the many victims of that night of terror. Because a breaking and entering isn't typical for demons. The crime was personal. But who would believe a severely traumatized six-year-old? I must admit that it sounds absurd. Yet I know what I heard and, above all, what I saw.

"You don't have to do this," my mother pleaded with him, just before her body lost its color in a matter of seconds.

Did they know each other?

No. That's out of the question. For as long as I can remember,

Mum was strictly against anything that was unfamiliar to her. She didn't even trust Midnight, the black stray cat in the trailer park. Yet the hellish creature flinched and hesitated briefly when my mum uttered that one sentence and I'm certain it was no coincidence.

You don't have to do this.

But he did it. And when the bells began to ring, he left me behind in the hallway with my dead mother.

Luck, others claimed.

I suppose that's in the eye of the beholder.

With ice-cold fingers, I wipe the water from my cheeks. Rain and tears. The storm just won't let up. By now, I'm frozen to the bone.

Four hours until the witching hour. No more.

"I miss you terribly, Mum," I sniff. "I wish you were …"

A loud crash makes me stop short. My gaze turns to the sky, which is being split by countless flashes of lightning. Like a cracked vase, leaking water.

A gust of wind rips the hood from my head and whips mercilessly across my face. My tears feel like ice as I watch, my limbs trembling, the battle between light and shadow above me. The brightest flash of lightning yet streaks across the sky, followed immediately by the rumble of thunder. The storm is here. A second clap of thunder rings out and I'm sure that this time a tree has fallen victim to the storm.

And at that moment, I find myself thinking that dying can be a tempting prospect. For what a fateful end it would be if I were to meet my death on the very same night as my mother?

A story full of tragedy. A circle that closes.

A macabre family tradition.

My gaze returns to the cemetery. I flinch so violently that my heart skips a beat.

For two rows ahead of me stands a figure that almost blends into the darkness.



4

TRICK OR TREAT

"Who do we have here..?"

Startled, I jump to my feet. But I recognize that sneering voice. And as he steps into the flickering glow of the lantern, my hunch is confirmed.

Dark buzz cut. Broad shoulders. And those piercing blue eyes. It's none other than that pile of rubbish who calls himself Clyde. My ex-boyfriend.

A branch snaps. To my right, two more people appear. Donna and Matt. Just what I needed … The former sits down on a gravestone that's found shelter from the rain beneath an oak tree. Donna lets her legs dangle whilst chewing her gum theatrically. 'There she is at last.' She pulls a piece of that pink stuff out of her mouth, the same color as her chin-length hair. She winds it round her index finger like a cord whilst eyeing me disparagingly. "Our Bonnie."

That was her joke. Because there was a time when my ex and I were supposed to be like Bonnie and Clyde.

Fearless. Invincible. The perfect criminal duo.

Except that our story didn't end with us dying together. Instead, he too soon realized that my haul was meagre. As if our love could be measured by that. By money rather than feelings. Since I hadn't raked in enough, the logical consequence for him was to rent me out to his mate Matt for a night.

I would have done anything for Clyde. Blinded by loyalty, because apart from Mum, I'd never known true love. But that evening, I pulled the plug. In that sense, I can count myself lucky that Dagger let me work for him for another year, despite the rift with his son.

I square my shoulders. "How many more times?" I press out through clenched teeth, annoyed. "My name is Parker."

Unfazed, Donna pops a pale pink bubble and then runs her tongue over the sticky residue around her mouth.

My gaze wanders to her companions. "What are you lot doing here?"

Matt looks at me with his dark eyes as if his leader's offer were still on the table. "The better question is: what are you doing here?"

"Don't you know what day it is today, Sweetie?"

Hearing that pet name come from Clyde's mouth sends a shiver down my spine and makes every single hair on my body stand on end. It's a reminder that he never saw me for who I was. To him, I was a fleeting diversion. Nothing more.

With his arms crossed, he leans against the lamppost, whilst the rain runs down his face straight

into the bandana around his neck. The image he presents looks as though he's stepped straight out of a 2000s gangster rap album cover. If I didn't know how pathetic he really is, you might take him for a daredevil.

"My dad's finally kicked you out, hasn't he? I suppose even he must have realized by now that you just aren't cut out for it anymore."

"Don't you have any arses you can kiss?" I snap back.

Because unlike when his dad's around I'm not afraid of my ex. Especially not now that I've got nothing left to lose anyway. Matt lets out an appreciative whistle.

But I'm playing with fire. I can tell that clearly from Clyde's narrowed gaze. "Well, well, the little kitten's hissing. But we all know where that comes from."

"Fear," Matt concludes, as he himself, crouched slightly like a big cat, slowly walks towards me.

"Just say the word if you need a place to stay, Bon." My head snaps round again. "There might still be room for you in my bed."

"No, thanks." Out of the corner of my eye, I see Matt getting closer. "I'll pass."

"Now, now," Clyde begins in a feigned tone of pity that makes me clench my hands into fists without thinking.

"You don't want to spend tonight on your own, do you? Because if they come…"

He pulls something out of his trouser pocket. And I'm not at all surprised to see a long silver blade glinting in his hand the next moment. Like father, like son.

But Clyde's switchblade seems to be a few centimeters longer. It's so sharp, I imagine it could even slice through raindrops.

"Then I'm prepared," he concludes with that over-the-top self-confidence that must run in the family too.

I give a cold laugh. "Have you already forgotten what happened to Hunter two years ago?" As a reminder, I hold both fists to either side of my head and stretch out my index fingers to mimic two horns.

Armed with nothing but a bread knife, his mate had ventured out on Halloween. His body was found the next day, covered in blood, in a side street.

Clyde snorts, his ego clearly wounded. "They might just as well have put a gun in a child's hand. Don't worry, sweetie. I'll look after you. But only if you're nice to me. You know the drill: trick or treat."

The very fact that he thinks I'm so dependent on them that I'd get involved with him again makes my blood boil.

"I'd rather spend the night with a demon than with you!" I spit a mouthful of saliva in his direction.

His nostrils flare with anger, his gaze fixed on the dark grass where my contempt has just landed.

He pushes off from the post and stands up to his full height. "Still think you're better than everyone else, do you?" he snaps.

"When you're nothing more than a girl from the gutter."

Then he comes towards me. With that furious look in his eyes and the knife in his right hand, it's time for me to get out of here. I turn on my heel and bump into something hard. Suddenly, Matt is standing in front of me.

“Where do you think you’re off to?” He reaches for a damp strand of hair, examining the dark rusty hue in the light of the lantern. Despite the darkness, I can see his pupils dilating greedily.

Disgusted, I knock his hand aside. “Hands off!” I take a step back and stop abruptly. Something silver glints beneath my chin. Then, all of a sudden, an arm wraps round my waist. Clyde.

“Boo,” he breathes into my ear, whilst guiding the knife to my throat with his free hand.

“Fuck, what’s this all about?!” I grab his arm, trying to wrench him away from me, which he uses as an excuse to press the blade even closer to my throat. In the background, I hear Donna laughing coldly.

“Stop it, Clyde!”

“Shhh.” His warm breath brushes against my cheek.

I can tell he’s grinning, even though I can’t see him. “You’re only making it worse, sweetie.”

“Let me go, for God’s sake.” I yank at his arm. As hard as I can. But it’s no use. It’s like I’m struggling against a statue.

A dark laugh rings in my ear. And only one thing comes to mind…

Since my hands are free, I pull the long-extinguished cigar out of my pocket. Even so, it’s the only weapon I’ve got. Without giving it a second thought, I ram the cigar backwards. Towards where I reckon his head is.

“Ahhh!” Clyde cries out.

He releases his left arm, and in the next second I’m able to free myself. But I stumble and land in the mud.

“You little bitch!”

My head snaps back. I just manage to see the ash crumbling from his eye before I get to my feet and turn round.

Matt comes running towards me, so I swing the stolen handbag at him. With all the force I can muster, I smash it into his face.

And as soon as he starts to stagger, I don’t waste any more time.

I set off running.

I slip and slide over puddles, gnarled roots and wet leaves, past the endless rows of gravestones. My lungs ache from the cold. But I don’t stop, because I can still hear their footsteps behind me.

"You’ll regret this!" shouts Clyde in the frenzy of the chase.

Through the sound of the rain, I can’t tell how close he is to me. So I just keep running, as fast as my legs will carry me.

“Can’t you hear me?! You’ll fucking regret this!” At last I reach the cemetery’s wrought-iron gate.

With a clang, I slam it shut behind me, hoping to buy myself some time.

I run down the narrow path that leads back to the town. My frantic movements startle more ravens, which flutter away into the night air.

Then I reach the town’s abandoned houses and old buildings, taking every inconspicuous turn, because I can’t go straight home. Not yet, anyway. That’s exactly where Clyde, Matt and Donna would surely be waiting for me. So, for now, I look for a hiding place. My legs have unconsciously carried me to a familiar spot: the town library. It’s the only other place where I feel close to Mum, surrounded by thick tomes and leather-bound volumes. But of course, the doors have long since been locked.

In the narrow alley behind the building, I find an overflowing rubbish bin. I lift the lid and sit

underneath it to get at least some shelter from the rain. As I catch my breath, the foul stench of the rubbish burns my lungs.

I stay there for an hour, listening to the rapid drumming of the raindrops on the makeshift plastic roof above me. The clock on the spire of St James's Church at the end of the alley now shows nine o'clock.

Over the past hour, fewer and fewer people have been coming and going from the church. They're rushing about, their faces full of worry. These are the people seeking refuge in God. A final, futile prayer before the night of terror, before they retreat to their bunkers.

Then there are those who cling to superstition as a last hope. Jack-o'-lanterns as far as the eye can see. Little carved pumpkin faces meant to ward off ghosts and demons. Even now, they grin at me from the terraces of the brick buildings. Others are stocking up on vast quantities of incense sticks, garlic cloves and salt. All the stuff that's become a bestseller in the supermarkets of Grimmwood Creek.

And then there are the adrenaline-fuelled tourists who, in their blind thirst for adventure, will meet their end tonight. They're the only ones still wandering the streets. Otherwise, the town seems completely deserted. It's time for me, too, to get out of here as quickly as possible.

It takes another hour before I finally arrive at the Final Hour, passing countless steaming manhole covers along the way. Unlike usual, not a soul is lingering on the pavements outside the dive bar. Even the town's drunkards are choosing to do without their cheap booze tonight.

With soaked clothes, aching limbs and a sluggish mind, I drag myself up the external staircase of the old building that leads to my flat.

But as I reach the top landing, I spot a crumpled piece of paper wedged between the door and its frame. With trembling fingers, I reach for it.

You've chosen trouble. Trouble is what you'll get.

"Oh, shit…", I whisper. I want to push the door open. But it's been torn from its hinges. Instead of swinging open, it falls straight to the floor.

As if in a trance, I flick on the ceiling light. But the scene that reveals itself before me is worse than I'd feared.

Absolute chaos.

The little bedside table is smashed to pieces, the chair is shattered, the kitchen unit torn open – the only furniture I ever owned lies scattered in fragments all over the room. I'm breathing in short, gasping bursts as I take in the devastation. The mattress has been slashed open, with springs springing out. My few clothes lie there in tatters. A cold draught brushes past my body. My gaze falls on the window, which has been smashed in.

The only thing that has remained intact stands in the corner: an old grandfather clock. Its stubborn ticking serves as a reminder of the horrors that will soon await me with a broken window and no front door. The place that has offered me shelter on Halloween over the last few years is no more.

Cautiously, I finally step fully into the room. With every step, the pressure behind my eyes builds more and more.

I know I'll be thrown out tomorrow anyway. But knowing Dagger as I do, I'll have to pay for the damage. But with what money?

Clyde's right. I'm going to die. If the demons don't come for me tonight, then Dagger's men will.

I step over splintered wood, torn fabric and sharp shards of glass until I tread on something soft. As I lift the toe of my shoe, a sob escapes me. Lying amongst the rubble is Mr Cuddles.

Or at least, what's left of him…

His head – from which only one of his button eyes was still hanging anyway – has been torn off. The limp body lies further to the right. The teddy's belly has been slashed open and the stuffing torn out. Skin without flesh or bones. And next to it –

No…

The dam I've been holding back inside me all this time finally bursts. And everything comes crashing down with it. A flood of anger, grief, despair.

Because there, next to Mr Cuddles, lies the shoebox containing the few things that really mean anything to me. A small hairbrush, an old lipstick, Mum's file, its pages scattered everywhere, and the Polaroid.

Torn to shreds.

"No, no, no …" I don't shout it, but just let it pour out of me in sobs. The tears are now rolling freely down my cheeks.

"Mum," I sob, as I kneel and press the paper to my chest. Amidst all the chaos, I rummage around for some sticky tape. But it'll never be the same as it once was. It's broken for good.

And that breaks something inside me. Because it's more than just pigments on paper. Nothing is more important to me than this photo. Carefully, I piece the two bits back together until her face is whole again. She looks over her shoulder and smiles straight into the camera.

The photograph has yellowed over the years, but you can still make out the long red hair, the snub nose, the many freckles all around it and the pale skin. They are the same features I recognise in my own reflection. Only my eyes aren't hers. Whilst mine look almost black, hers are hazel with green flecks and radiate nothing but warmth.

Without this photo, the memory of her would fade away completely. Everything about her would be forgotten. All that would remain is that dark figure who brought about her death … With the teddy bear's head and the Polaroid, I remain sitting amidst the rubble.

Seconds. Minutes. Hours.

As time passes, my tears dry up. Yet the pain in my chest remains. With every tick of the grandfather clock, the thorn pierces deeper.

Wind and rain lash relentlessly through the broken window. My stomach growls and my body trembles. But not with fear. There's this furious flame inside me. For fifteen years, its embers have been eating their way through me. But today? Today it's an inferno.

I won't stand still any longer. I won't buckle and pretend to myself that I can handle all this. This scorching heat inside me demands to be unleashed. To devour everything and everyone who has ever caused me pain.

Dagger. Clyde.

And above all: that damned demon from that night. One last time, I look at the photo of my mother. A tear falls directly onto her face.

"I'll find out who did this to you," I sniffed. But there's no doubt in my voice. "And I'll avenge you."

A loud rumble of thunder makes me flinch. My gaze falls back on the old grandfather clock: just before midnight.

Every tick is a reminder of the horror that lies ahead tonight. Every ‘tack’ is a promise that I will be the first victim.

But my mission is clear. I won’t stay here any longer. Not amidst the ruins of my former self. Not amidst the hatred others have left behind for me. I want – no, I need – answers.

What exactly happened back then?

Why did the demon kill my mother but spare me? What was the reason for his hesitation?

And that twitch… Did they know each other?

I know what I saw. That wasn’t merely the murderous lust of a beast. Nobody believes me, but I know there’s more to it than that. Somewhere, the answers are waiting for me. But I won’t find them here. Not in Grimmwood Creek. Nor anywhere else on Earth. But perhaps somewhere else …

I pull myself to my feet. The tears have dried. My knees are wobbly.

But my chin is held high.

Frantically, I stuff the remains of the teddy into the front pocket of my hoodie and clench the photo of Mum tightly in my hand.

The clock strikes twelve.

Then I step out into the cold night. In search of the gates of hell.



THE HOUR OF THE DEMONS

The rain beats down on the cobblestones, the wind whistles past the dark, stone walls of the houses—

and thunder crashes over the sloping roofs, as if intent on bringing them crashing down.

This is the City of Demons. The place where the gates to Hell swing wide open every year. And yet, the second loud toll of the church bells told me that thirty minutes of the Hour of the Demons had already passed. And that was quite a while ago.

I look around the deserted alleyways once again. Is this some sort of bloody joke? Where on earth are they?

I'd run so fast that I'd made it from the dilapidated concrete buildings of Lower Grimmwood to the historic centre in half an hour.

And yet, of all days, the demons and the portals are nowhere to be seen. Are the hellish creatures just lurking in the shadows, taking pleasure in dragging out my demise? Like cats playing with a mouse, letting it escape only to finish it off with a single bite? At the thought, an icy shiver runs down my spine.

There's a voice in my head that whispers to me at every corner I pass that my midnight mission is a mistake. That I should turn back. Whilst I still can.

But where on earth would I go back to? To a ramshackle hovel from which I'll be thrown out tomorrow? To an ex-boyfriend who one second is holding a knife to my throat and the next wants to sell me off to his mate?

No. I meant what I said to Clyde: I'd rather spend the night with the demons. If I have to risk my life just to have the slightest chance of finding out the truth about Mum's death

… then so be it.

I hate living on the edge. That's why the other voice is stronger. It spurs me on to keep running, without looking back.

The alleyways seem eerily empty so far, yet I know I'm getting closer to the creatures.

I can feel it in the goosebumps that spread more intensely across my body with every heartbeat. In the cold that creeps deeper into my bones with every breath. And I can see it in the shadows, which seem to expand further with every blink.

Suddenly, there's a loud thud. Very close by.

I come to an abrupt halt. My heart stumbles, but I force myself to stay calm. I press myself into the shadow of a building corner, digging my fingers into the grooves of the damp wall.

For a few seconds, there's nothing but the roaring sound of the storm, until the screams begin.

A man and a woman.

I squeeze my eyes shut and listen to that moment between life and death.

The man's voice fades first, whilst the woman screams her heart out. There's a pain in that I've never heard before. So raw and full of agony that I instinctively hold my breath.

And then … there is silence.

Were they the demons? Where are they going now?

But the questions become irrelevant when I suddenly hear footsteps approaching. They echo off the walls with a splashing sound.

My heart is pounding loudly in my ears, whilst I'm still hiding in the shadows. But I don't back away. Because I'm here to find them. Not to flee from them.

I take a deep breath in and out, swallowing hard as I make the decision that will determine the rest of my life.

With trembling knees, I step out from behind the corner and

… "Fuck!"

A glaring light blinds me.

Something falls to the ground. Then someone gasps in pain.

I have to blink several times, but in the glaring light I make out two figures who clearly don't look like demons.

One of them is lying on the ground, having apparently slipped on the cobblestones.

"You gave us quite a fright." The bloke who swore turns his torch slightly to the side so that I'm no longer blinded. He presses his free hand theatrically against his chest. My heart is pounding like mad too.

He breathes out in relief before letting his hand drop. Beneath it, he reveals a name badge. Zeddemore. My gaze drifts over his clothes. Alongside his soaked beige uniform, I spot black gloves, a rucksack with plastic tubes sewn onto it, and a device dangling from his belt that looks like a vacuum cleaner.

Meanwhile, the other bloke has got back to his feet. He pushes his glasses, with a cracked lens, back onto his nose. Otherwise, he's wearing the same clothes as his mate. Except that his uniform bears the name Venkman.

And then it hits me. Tourists.

In a bloody Ghostbusters costume.

What a bad joke …

"What on earth are you guys doing here?" Even though I already suspect the answer, I need to hear it.

"Well, what do you reckon?" asks the Zeddemore lookalike. His hair is plastered wet to his forehead and curls at his temples. Beneath it, you can make out cheeks marked with dark spots. Neither of them's likely to be even eighteen yet. He casts a quick glance at the bloke next to him before replying to me far too enthusiastically: "The same as you."

But Venkman seems completely devoid of any enthusiasm. Raindrops roll off his glasses. Nevertheless, I can't help but notice how his horrified gaze wanders down over my long, wet hair. Only then do I realize that, in all the shock, I've pulled Mr. Cuddles out of my bag. Or rather, the head

of the teddy bear, which is now dangling from my pale fingers. I quickly tuck it back into my hoodie.

“We heard a scream over here,” explains Zeddemore, whilst his friend is still looking at me as if I’d just stepped straight out of a horror film. “So we came straight here. Have you seen her yet?”

I shake my head. “You’d better go. Otherwise, tonight’ll be your last.”

He snorts. “What a load of rubbish.”

“Mate, don’t you think we should…?” Venkman sounds a bit worried. “That scream from earlier… it sounded bloody real.”

But his mate remains adamant. “What are you on about, man? We wanted to prove it’s all just a fake. A set-up. Marketing.” He taps the device at his side. Only then do I notice the little camera he’s attached there. “Forgotten already? It’s all just a show.”

This time, I’m the one who snorts. At first it’s a short sound, then a laugh slips out. I do it so rarely that the sound itself sounds strange even to my own ears.

“What’s so funny?”

I can’t stop laughing, whilst the two wannabe ghost hunters look at me as if I were actually possessed by a demon and they had to rethink their ‘staged event’ theory. Because that’s the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. All over the world, you find places like this: towns, villages, areas where demon attacks are on the rise every year. And yet there are still people who attribute some abstruse narrative to the whole thing.

I honestly wish they were right. Then so many people wouldn’t be dying. Then Mum would still be here.

The tower clock announces with a third loud chime that we have only fifteen minutes left to find demons. Each for their own reasons. Zeddemore grabs his friend by the arm. “Come on, let’s go.”

As the two lads walk on, my laughter dies away. Just before they round the corner at the end of the alley, I hear:

"She’s completely mad."

And perhaps they’re right. Perhaps there really is something not quite right with me. I seem to possess the uncanny ability to always maneuver myself into dangerous situations. Yet I wasn’t always like this.

I was a happy child. Carefree, despite our living and financial circumstances. Because I had everything I needed to be happy in life: my mum.

Her death left a hole inside me. An abyss that regularly pulls the rug out from under my feet the moment I think I’ve regained control. An important part of myself was torn away from me, and ever since then I’ve actually been completely off my rocker. But no one has ever spotted it as quickly as those two ghost hunters. A new record – congratulations.

Once again, I check that both Mr Cuddles and the recording are safely stowed away in my bum bag before I carry on keeping an eye out for the creatures from hell.

But I freeze in my tracks when I hear screams again. And this time, I know who’s been caught.

I turn on my heel and run in the direction they were heading just a few minutes ago. But as I run, a thought flashes through my mind. If I get there in time … then what?

Will I really be able to help the lads? Or will I end up trading my life for theirs?

Doubts about my plan flare up, but the adrenaline burns them to ashes as I skid across the wet ground in my Converse. Past countless winding old buildings that jut out crookedly into the narrow

streets.

A passageway opens up ahead of me, but it turns out to be a dead end. Then I hear them again. The words are suddenly crystal clear.

“Help!”

“Please … no!”

I leave the dead end and run towards where I think I heard her screams just now.

My lungs are burning, my heart is pounding, everything inside me is trembling as I head towards the final turn. From which no sounds are now coming. Just as before, it is suddenly deathly quiet. And as I round the corner, my hunch is confirmed.

It’s too late.

In the flickering glow of the streetlamps, I make out a body at the far end of the alley, lying motionless in a puddle. The broken glasses lie next to the head, whilst the face is submerged in the water. Only the ears are still visible. Blood is oozing from them. So much that the puddle is turning dark red.

A scraping sound cuts through the rain as a torch falls to the ground and rolls across the cobblestones.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I realize that the second boy is still alive. But the relief is short-lived.

A bright flash of lightning streaks across the crooked rooftops, bathing the alleyway in an eerie light for a moment. Yet it’s enough to see the two horns.

For right in front of him … stands a demon.

6

ONE, TWO, THREE, ANYONE NOT HIDDEN, I SEE!

I gasp for breath and my heart skips a beat as my gaze falls on the demon at the end of the alley.

For the last twenty-two years, we've been fed a certain image of the demons. Through the media, which have captured blurry footage using CCTV cameras. Through accounts from witnesses or survivors who narrowly managed to escape them. Through horror stories told to children at a young age.

I never whined about a scratch. Never screamed when I fell. Nor did I ever shed a tear when my foster parents told me off. And yet I, too, am plagued by sleepless nights, during which those red eyes stare at me from every dark corner. The eyes of my mother"s murderer. Even though I didn't take much in back then through my tear-blurred vision, the memory of the demon has burrowed deep into my skin like a rusty nail. It simply won"t let the wound heal. It hurts. It's frustrating. It frightens me.

And yet it"s nothing compared to the feeling of standing face to face with a creature from hell for a second time.

A chill emanates from him that not only makes you shiver but leaves you frozen stiff. My chest tightens violently as the shiver creeps under my skin and makes every cell tremble. And yet I cannot move, only stare. At the figure standing at the far end of the alley.

It is huge. Much bigger than I expected. The demon towers three heads above the boy. Its body is shrouded in black. Its robe looks as though it is drawing in the shadows of the night. Even the light from the torch seems to be lost in its darkness. I try to make out a face, but the head is hidden beneath a hood. Only the horns stand out – two long, curved sickles. Probably longer than my forearm. The flashes of lightning are constantly reflected in their smooth, onyx-coloured surface. And then there are the hands, which look as though they've been dipped into a bucket of pitch-black paint. The gnarled, long fingers end in curved nails that seem to be crying out to steal the soul of their next victim.

One of these hands is held close to Zeddemore's face by the demon, who stands there as if hypnotised. He seems to be completely under the spell of the hellish creature. Like a marionette, his arms hang motionless at his sides. His head is tilted back as he stares at the fingers of the demon, who looms menacingly before him.

And then … it begins.

The horrific image that first came to me fifteen years ago now thrusts itself into my consciousness with piercing clarity. Something inside me flares up. I cannot stand by and watch once again as an innocent person's life is stolen from their body right before my eyes. Back then, I was six years old and had little choice in the matter. But today, I will not stand by and watch.

My knees are wobbly. My heart is racing. The cold has constricted my lungs. Everything inside me is screaming for me to turn back. And yet I will not flee.

I'll be brave.

I glance around hurriedly, searching for anything that might serve as a weapon, and I curse myself for not having thought of it sooner.

Behind a rusty drainpipe hanging crookedly from the house wall beside me, I spot a broken glass bottle. It'll have to do…

I grab the shattered neck of the bottle and start running. My quick footsteps are drowned out by the pattering rain. The demon hasn't noticed me yet. That could be to my advantage. The only one I have …

The closer I get to the end of the alley, the more I can make out of the horrific scene unfolding here.

First, the boy's skin turns pale, until only a deathly grey remains. Then his ears start to bleed. At first just a few drops, until the trickles become so thick that they seep into the fabric of his costume along with the rain. The liquid red is also running from his nose and mouth.

I've hardly any time left. I'm running so fast that I'm just skidding across the paving stones. A few meters in front of them, I raise the bottle high, ready to throw.

The demon's head jerks round in my direction.

My survival instinct kicks in and I stop moving abruptly. I just manage to secure my grip on the bottle before it slips from my fingers. My heart, however, has sunk so low with fear that I'm sure I'd see it lying on the cobblestones if I lowered my head. But I don't dare.

I hold my breath. Every muscle in my body tenses as I force myself to stay still whilst I look at the demon.

He stands there motionless. Dark. Tall. Unnerving.

A creature straight out of hell, as he continues to hold his hand stubbornly in front of the boy.

Bloody hell, what do I do now?

In a panic, I search my thoughts for a way out. But there wasn't one back then either.

I dare only take shallow breaths. My fear is too great that I might provoke him into bringing all this to an abrupt end.

Although I can't make out his eyes beneath the low-hanging hood, I feel his gaze on me as clearly as the wind whipping my hair into my face.

He can see me. Perhaps he can even smell me. Or however demons sense their prey.

And yet he does nothing …

Seconds pass. Perhaps even minutes, during which I struggle to suppress the panic within me as we continue to stare at one another.

The demon at one end of the alley, me at the other. Life and death face each other.

In the middle, a moment that stretches into infinity. Then I notice something that had completely escaped my attention before. On closer inspection, I realize that his left horn is shorter than the right one. No, not just shorter. A piece is missing. As if it had snapped off. Whereas on the right horn a jet-black curve tapers into a thin tip,

here an uneven edge remains.

I look at the creature, feeling sheer terror. Yet it's like a

bruise: even when you know it hurts, you can't help but press on it. It's that brief flicker of pain you long for. Almost a necessity.

I can't help the urge. It feels as though an invisible thread is pulling me forwards, so I take another step towards him. Just one.

A mistake.

A bloody huge mistake.

His fingers clench into a fist in front of his victim's face.

Zeddemore's eyes darken. In the next second, they close.

"No!" I scream through the roar of the thunderstorm. But it's too late.

What remains are deep holes from which blood gushes forth unstoppably.

The scene unfolding before me could scarcely be more gruesome. And yet the demon didn't even have to touch him.

I clap my hand over my mouth. The shock hits me as mercilessly as the lightning streaking across the sky.

It has killed him.

And once again, I could do nothing.

There's a splash as the lifeless body falls onto the wet ground.

Right next to his friend's corpse.

For a moment, the demon stares at the dead bodies at his feet. At the puddle, which has now turned a dark red. Then he lifts his head and … walks away.

His long robe whips through the air for a moment longer. He vanishes round the next corner. And leaves me behind.

A wave of adrenaline burns hot through my veins, carrying with it raw fury. Fury that one of these heartless creatures has taken an innocent life. And above all, that I couldn't stop it. Not again.

My body makes the decision to follow him even before my thoughts catch up. As I reach the end of the alley, I just manage to catch a glimpse of his dark silhouette. He turns into another street and I follow him.

Twice left, once right, straight on, left again. With the bottle neck in my hand, I keep my distance, hugging the walls of the houses, avoiding the light of the streetlamps and staying in the shadows. Inconspicuous, yet still close by. As a pickpocket, I've at least had some practice in that. Anyone else wouldn't notice that I'm lying in wait for him. But here I'm not dealing with a human, but with a demon.

No sooner has he disappeared round the next corner than a faint murmur suddenly reaches my ears. My senses are on high alert as I lean against the edge of the wall. Cautiously, I venture a glance to catch a glimpse of what's going on behind it.

Startled, I press my lips together. Just in time, I manage to stop the shock from escaping my mouth.

There are corpses lying on the ground. About ten of them. Each one's eyes are sunken, whilst blood oozes from their orifices. Every last trace of life has left their stiff bodies. All that remains is the expression on their faces, which shows sheer terror of death.

My gaze wanders over the ashen faces.

Many of them are strangers to me, but that one…

I can scarcely believe my eyes when I see the bandana around his neck. Then I notice the knife lying next to his limp hand, as if he'd been about to use it.

Clyde.

Further to the left, I recognize Matt and Donna. All three are dead.

My ex-boyfriend was right. There's trouble in store tonight. For both of us.

I almost have to laugh – our story isn't so far removed from Bonnie and Clyde after all. A shared tragic end.

But even so, the sight of his corpse leaves a suffocating feeling in my chest. He's not just some stranger who's among this year's Halloween victims. He's someone whose name, age, background and character traits I knew. Even if the latter weren't exactly good ones …

A figure pushes its way between the dead. A demon tramples carelessly over the corpses. Two horns protrude from his skull. With a casual kick, he pushes one victim's arm aside as if it were an empty tin. Then that soft murmur sounds again as the demon from earlier steps up beside him. Although half of his left horn is missing, he seems no less ominous.

His words are incomprehensible and are swallowed up by the sound of the rain. Nevertheless, sounds keep breaking through, sending a chill down my spine like the whisper of the wind.

The conversation seems to have ended when the two-horned demon holds out his right hand in front of him and uses it to trace invisible patterns in the air.

I furrow my brow. What on earth is he doing?

At first I can't believe my eyes, for suddenly something appears in the air, in the midst of the torrential rain, barely two meters away from the demons. But the thing slowly takes shape. At first it looks like a small, black cloud, but within seconds it grows until it reaches about my size. Wafts of smoke swirling around it, and at its center a pitch-black hole materializes. A gaping wound of darkness.

The portal. At least one of them.

Of course. I remember the church clock striking when I encountered the ghost hunters. The demon hour must be over any moment now.

The demon lowers his hand, apparently satisfied with his work. He doesn't hesitate for long and strides towards it. I lean forward further; I simply must see exactly what's happening.

My heart is pounding with excitement. My curiosity is enormous. Is this my chance to uncover the truth?

The demon lifts a leg, stretches it into the hole first, and it sinks into … nothing. I don't know exactly what I'd been expecting. Perhaps that I might catch a glimpse of hell? But the fact that his leg is simply swallowed up leaves me standing there, dumbfounded.

He takes a second step into the portal and, in the very same instant, his body vanishes. One second he's still there; the next, he's as if wiped out.

Then the demon with the broken horn steps towards the gaping darkness. But just as he is about to follow in his predecessor's footsteps, I am violently grabbed by the shoulders.

In my shock, the bottle slips from my fingers. A jolt follows, and I crash onto the wet floor beside the shards of glass.

My head hits the ground. So hard that everything goes black. I gasp for air, which has been forced out of my lungs by the impact. Everything aches and throbs. Then I suddenly feel a violent grip on my

collar, which yanks me upwards by my upper body.

A cold gust of wind brushes across my face, and rain lashes down on it. Just like the pain at the back of my head.

I gasp, drawing oxygen back into my lungs in fits and starts. After a brief moment, the dizziness subsides. My vision clears bit by bit.

The hood hangs so low over the demon's face that I can see only a grey chin and, above it, sharp teeth that he bares greedily. He pulls me even closer to him, whilst my body freezes in shock.

A foul odor rises to my nose, because I am now so close to him that I can smell him.

He's getting closer to me.

I clench my eyes, my lips, my fingers – everything about me – whilst I wait for him to take what he wants. My soul.

But suddenly he lets me go.

It happens so unexpectedly that I thud onto the floor a second time.

I push myself up slightly on my elbows, dare to glance down at myself and spot something dark on my jumper. At the same time, I feel a sharp point piercing between my ribs.

A pained groan escapes my throat before I push whatever is lying on top of me off my upper body. It splashes down beside me into a puddle. I have to blink several times to make it out in the darkness.

Dark liquid pools into a midnight-colored puddle.

And in it lies the severed head of my attacker.

7

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

Black blood oozes from the stump where his neck had just been. The liquid stands out, glistening against the pale flesh and the broken cervical vertebrae, before it is washed away by the rain.

A sharp twinge shoots through the back of my head as I look down at myself. My vision blurs and I'm sure the impact has caused a laceration. Even so, I recognize the blood caked onto my hoodie. And it isn't mine.

The urge to wipe it off is so strong that I instinctively reach for the fabric. But it has already congealed into the fibers and clings to me like pitch. Except that it's ice-cold.

As I pull my hands back, long threads stretch between my fingers and the hoodie. And the blood stinks. Horribly.

The stench is so overpowering that every breath I take ends in a quiet gagging sound. With my nose wrinkled, I manage to swallow the bile. It smells of tar and a roadkill in summer that's been lying on the road for too long. The smell of death. My gaze falls on the rest of his body, lying motionless in a small heap beside my legs. Despite the storm, it begins to glow fiercely at that very moment. For a brief moment, I fear I'm hallucinating. But the heat emanating from the corpse is no figment of my imagination. Red, glowing patches are also forming on his head,

and bright flames shoot skywards from his torso and head. In a panic, I slide backwards across the ground, my back bumping against a lamppost whose light has long since gone out. The fire is so hot and bright that I have to raise my arm to shield my eyes. The flames snap at the darkness like hungry mouths. They grow stronger and stronger, until they suddenly fizzle out. What remains is a dark cloud that envelops me from all sides and robs me of my sight for a brief, unpleasant moment. As the smoke clears, the old house walls reappear, along with crooked roofs … and him.

The demon with the broken horn.

My upper body jerks upwards. The pain at the back of my head is suddenly a minor concern. For what I see before me is far more dangerous.

From down here, he seems even larger and more terrifying. His head is bowed, as if he were looking down at me, yet his features remain hidden in the shadow of his hood. A true nightmare looms before me. The intact horn stands out sharply against the sky, which lights up at that very moment. A bolt of lightning cuts through the dark clouds like a scar. Barely a second later, the clattering rumble of thunder follows.

My gaze falls on his left hand – on the claw-like fingers from which something is dripping. My attacker's blood. Because he has killed him.

Just as before, he simply stands there.

Just as before, he stares at me.

Just as before, he has spared me from death. And this time, from his own kind.

A thousand question marks swirl in my head. Yet it is the simplest of all questions that pushes its way to the forefront: Why?

The word sticks to my lips. Yet I lie on the cold tarmac, unable to utter a sound, whilst my heart beats faster. But it skips a beat when the demon suddenly lifts his head. Very slowly.

My breath catches in my throat as I discover what has been hidden beneath the hood.

Two eyes.

The pupils are thin slits. The irises are glowing red. And its gaze is fixed solely on me.

My chest tightens. A painful pressure builds behind my ribs, fuelling the panic even further. Hastily, I push myself up off the ground, wanting to stand and … Any decision is taken out of my hands when, in the very next moment, I am grabbed abruptly and yanked to my feet. There it is that cold, violent grip on my collar again.

I gasp for breath, reaching for his hand. His long fingers feel rough and ice-cold to the touch. Yet they cling tightly to my collar, the fabric of which is choking the life out of me.

I'm hanging there like a condemned man on the gallows.

A gasp escapes me as he suddenly presses my body against something hard. For a moment, everything goes black, because it hits exactly the spot where I'd already landed on the back of my head earlier. Only when my fingers find a few ridges on the wall behind me, which I can use to push myself up, does air finally flow back into my lungs.

I'm gasping for breath whilst the demon is still holding me with one hand and closes the distance between us with one final step.

I'm sure I'm hovering a few centimeters above the floor, and yet I have to tilt my head back to look into his face. Or rather: into his eyes. Thanks to the shadow cast by his hood, I can't make out anything else. And despite the situation I find myself in, I can't help but notice small details about him. I don't want to look. But I can't help myself.

There are the slit-like pupils, which grow larger and then smaller again every second in a glowing red. As if they were pulsating.

Then there's his scent, which doesn't burn my nostrils like the stench of decay. It's a complex fragrance that can't be described in a single word. Like the smell of earth just before it rains. And at the same time like chimney smoke wafting through the air on cool nights. Undoubtedly pungent, but not unpleasant.

Then there's the way he moves. There's an urgency that underpins his movements, yes. But not a greedy, uncontrolled urgency; rather, a more cautious, calculated one. Like now, as he raises his free hand.

I don't resist, I just gasp as he curls his claw-like fingers one by one into a fist. Only one remains outstretched.

My breathing grows shallower and shallower the closer he gets to me with that finger. For a moment, he seems to hesitate. He hovers so close to my cheek that I feel goosebumps at the promise of his touch. As he rests it on the strand of hair that's clinging wetly to my skin, I hold my breath.

By now, all I can see in his eyes is a narrow red ring. I'm not even sure if he's blinking. In any case, I see nothing but desire and hunger in his gaze. Although that's exactly what I've been asking

for, my body responds with fear and something… that feels forbidden.

My breathing quickens, whilst I can also hear the blood rushing in my ears.

His long finger glides agonisingly slowly down my cheek. His fingernail is so sharp that it leaves a slight tugging sensation on my skin, which he's probably scratching. The hot rush of adrenaline in my veins drowns out the pain.

When it reaches my mouth, I gasp sharply. The tip cuts ice-cold through the thin skin of my lower lip as it glides along it. And it burns.

Everything inside me is burning.

He pulls his hand down. With a soft pop, my lip snaps back into place.

Within seconds, a warm dampness spreads where he's just touched me. The distinct coppery taste creeps into my mouth. It's pure instinct as I run my tongue over my lower lip. A second. Perhaps even less. Yet it's enough to draw his full attention to the gesture. Is that still a murderous glint in his

eyes? Or just greed now?

His pupils dilate, banishing the glowing red to a final flicker. And with that, something stirs within him. The bestial instinct that dwells within him.

Yet he waits again, staring at the second drop of blood trickling warmly down my chin. As if he had all the time in the world. But we both know that's not the case.

Every second is too long, every breath too many. And it's driving me mad. This knowledge that something is coming … and yet it fails to materialize. A flash of lightning streaking across the sky, but without the liberating clap of thunder.

"Just do it already," I gasp. There's fear in my voice, but also determination, because I've long since come to terms with the situation.

His eyes dart back up as if he'd forgotten I can speak. I swallow hard before whispering the next words.

"Kill … me."

His fingers tighten around my throat.

I gasp for air. A hot tear wells up in my eye. But he waits. Still.

Anger mingles with impatience. "Come on then," I force out, as his long fingers dig deeper into the fabric of my jumper.

But I go one step further. "What … are you waiting for?" Again, no answer.

I let out a laugh. It's a desperate sound that can only come from someone who knows there's no way out.

"What now? Are you playing games with me?" I snap. Silence.

A tightness builds in my throat as my end stretches into eternity.

"Go on, then." I swallow hard. "Kill. Me." This time it's not a demand, but a plea.

He seems to have some semblance of mercy after all as he positions his free hand in front of my face.

I close my eyes. Two final tears squeeze their way out from beneath my eyelids.

And I wait.

For the blood to gush from my ears.

For life to leave my body, straight into his waiting hand. For the darkness to pull me into the abyss.

And then I actually fall. Just in the nick of time, I manage to break my fall. Water splashes up as I

land with my palms in a puddle.

Dong.

At that very moment, the first of the four bell chimes rings out. The official end of the hour of the demons. A supposedly benevolent service provided by the city. But in truth, it is pure irony, for the horror cannot simply be rung away.

I glance up hastily.

The demon stands before me. He clenches his hands into fists. Only briefly, before he turns on his heel. With quick steps, he strides towards the portal, which is contracting, growing smaller by the second.

Dong.

Then he vanishes into the darkness.

I sit up, blink several times at the spot and still don't quite grasp what has just happened here.

They were here. The demons. And I've survived.

As if I needed to remind myself, my gaze wanders to the corpses lying in the alleys, drenched by the rain. But I … am alive.

Dong.

My heart is pounding with excitement; my body tingles right down to my fingertips, brimming with a desire for action. I stumble hastily over the corpses, ignoring their gruesome warning one last time. My gaze is fixed solely on the portal behind them, which has now shrunk to the size of a small wisp of smoke.

Is this my chance to uncover the truth?

Then the final blow rings out.

Dong.

And before it fades away, I leap.