

Shadows of the Mourning Bell

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The midnight bell echoed through the village of Blackthorn Vale like a mournful dirge, a sound heavy with warning. It reverberated through the frost-covered streets, its toll carried on the biting December air. Frost clung to the cobbles like a second skin, turning the world brittle, sharp, and silent.

Inside her modest stone cottage, Rebecca Hartley sat with a half-empty glass of red wine cradled in her hands. The fire in the hearth was little more than embers now, but she made no move to stoke it. Her gaze was fixed on the window, where a thin layer of frost curled in delicate spirals, obscuring the view of the sleeping village. Outside, the bell tolled again, louder this time, as though it were closer.

She set the glass down with trembling fingers and pulled her cardigan tighter around her shoulders. “It’s just a bell,” she muttered to herself, the words falling flat in the quiet room. “A tradition.”

But the unease in her chest wasn’t so easy to dismiss. The firelight flickered weakly, casting jittery shadows that crept along the wooden beams overhead. The shadows always seemed... wrong in this place, as though they moved independently of the light source. It was a quirk of the old house, she told herself, nothing more.

Her eyes strayed to the mantel, where the silver key rested on a folded cloth. Its surface gleamed even in the dim light, its intricate design as perfect as the day she had unearthed it. She hadn’t been able to resist touching it when she’d first found it—tucked inside the hollow brick of the chimney during renovations—but the sensation had startled her. It wasn’t just cold to the touch; it seemed alive, humming faintly in her palm, as if a low-frequency vibration thrummed through it.

Now, every time she looked at it, her fingers itched to hold it again, to feel its impossible weight and hear its strange resonance. But the memory of that hum kept her wary. It lingered long after she set the key down, an uncomfortable presence that felt like it had seeped into her very bones.

Outside, the wind picked up, howling against the stone walls of the cottage. The bell rang out again, impossibly loud this time, as if it were right outside her door. The sound pulled her to her feet, her skin prickling with dread. She stepped toward the window, her breath clouding the glass as she peered out into the night.

The village was still, as it always was when the bell tolled. No lights flickered in the cottages. The streets were empty, blanketed in fog that clung to the ground like smoke. The air seemed heavier than usual, dense with a pressure that pressed against her chest.

And then she saw it.

A figure stood in the fog, barely visible through the mist. At first, she thought it might be one of the villagers—a late-night wanderer caught out after curfew—but something about the figure felt wrong. It stood unnaturally still, its silhouette shrouded in a dark cloak that seemed to absorb the faint moonlight.

Rebecca's pulse quickened as the figure raised an arm. It wasn't pointing at her. It was pointing beyond the village, toward the distant spire of the church that loomed at the top of the hill.

She backed away from the window, her breath catching in her throat. The church. Every villager she'd spoken to had warned her against it. After midnight, they'd said, the church was no place for the living.

She shook her head, trying to dismiss the unease that gripped her. "It's just someone playing a prank," she muttered, though the words felt hollow.

The figure didn't move.

The fire sputtered behind her, casting the room into momentary darkness. When the light returned, the figure was gone.

Rebecca stood frozen, staring at the empty fog. The silence that followed was oppressive, broken only by the faint hiss of the embers. A part of her wanted to bolt the door, draw the curtains, and hide until morning. But something stronger—a pull she couldn't explain—dragged her toward the coat rack. Her fingers closed around the heavy wool coat, and before she could think better of it, she was stepping outside.

The cold hit her like a slap, stealing the breath from her lungs. The cobblestones were slick with frost, each step treacherous as she made her way toward the church. The fog swirled around her ankles, dense and clinging, muffling the sound of her footsteps. The bell had stopped ringing, but its echo seemed to linger, vibrating in the air like an aftershock.

Rebecca glanced over her shoulder, half-expecting to see the figure following her. The streets behind her were empty, the village receding into the fog. Ahead, the church loomed larger with every step, its gothic spire cutting into the dark sky like a blade.

She hesitated at the threshold, her breath clouding the air in front of her. The wooden doors hung ajar, creaking softly in the wind. A faint, flickering light glowed from within, casting long, uneven shadows across the stone floor.

Rebecca stepped inside.

The air was colder here, sharp and metallic. The nave stretched before her, cavernous and dark, lit only by the feeble glow of candles on the altar. The walls were lined with statues of saints, their faces worn and indistinct, their eyes cast downward as though in mourning.

Her footsteps echoed as she moved toward the centre of the nave. The shadows here felt alive, shifting and writhing at the edges of her vision. She turned her head quickly, but there was nothing there.

And then she saw the figure.

It stood near the altar, its back to her, shrouded in the same dark cloak she had seen outside. The candles bent toward it, their flames flickering unnaturally, as though drawn by some invisible force.

Rebecca stopped, her breath catching in her throat. “Why did you bring me here?” she asked, her voice trembling.

The figure turned.

Where its face should have been, there was only darkness—a void that seemed to swallow the faint light around it. Rebecca’s stomach lurched as she stared into the emptiness, her knees threatening to give way beneath her.

“You carry the key,” the figure said, its voice low and hollow, echoing as though it came from some vast, empty cavern.

Rebecca’s hand instinctively went to her pocket, her fingers brushing the cold metal of the key. “I don’t understand,” she stammered.

“It does not belong to you,” the figure rasped. The shadows around it seemed to swell, pressing closer. “It must be returned.”

Rebecca took a step back, her heart pounding. “Returned where?”

“To the Tower.”

The words resonated in her skull, a soundless vibration that left her dizzy. She tried to respond, but the air around her seemed to shift, growing heavier, suffocating.

The shadows surged forward, engulfing her. The world collapsed into darkness.

When Rebecca opened her eyes, she was lying on cracked, barren earth. The air was thick with the stench of decay, and the sky above was a flat, grey expanse, neither day nor night. In the distance, a jagged tower rose from the horizon, its silhouette stark against the lifeless landscape.

She sat up slowly, her body aching. The key was still in her hand, its hum stronger now, vibrating through her entire arm. The sound wasn’t just in her ears—it was in her bones, her skull, her teeth.

The tower loomed ahead, impossibly far, yet she knew with a dreadful certainty that she had to reach it. The key pulled her forward, an invisible tether that tightened with every step.

The journey felt endless. The ground beneath her feet cracked and crumbled, fissures spreading like veins. The whispers began softly at first, faint and indistinct, but they grew louder as she walked. Voices overlapped, pleading, screaming, laughing, their tones twisting into something grotesque.

Shapes flitted at the edges of her vision—twisted figures that flickered in and out of existence, their faces gaunt and eyeless. Rebecca quickened her pace, her breath coming in ragged gasps. The tower seemed no closer, its jagged surface pulsing faintly as though alive.

When she finally reached it, she collapsed against the base, her knees buckling. The iron gate before her was ancient, its bars etched with symbols that seemed to shift and writhe when she looked at them. In its centre was a keyhole.

Rebecca hesitated, every instinct screaming at her to turn back. But the weight of the key in her hand was unbearable now, a constant reminder of its unnatural purpose. Her hand trembled as she fit the key into the lock and turned.

The gate creaked open, revealing a spiral staircase that descended into darkness. The whispers followed her as she descended, their tone shifting to something more sinister. They weren't pleading anymore—they were laughing.

At the bottom of the stairs, she found a chamber lit by a single, flickering torch. In the centre stood a pedestal, and upon it rested a book bound in black leather. The keyhole on its cover waited, expectant.

Rebecca stepped forward, her hands trembling. The whispers rose to a deafening crescendo, pressing against her skull. Her fingers moved on their own, placing the key into the book and turning it.

The room erupted into chaos. Shadows poured from the book, writhing and twisting, their touch icy and suffocating. They filled the chamber, their whispers tearing through her mind.

Rebecca's scream was swallowed by the darkness as it claimed her.