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# The Wrongful Death

The Great Devil War III

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The Great Devil War Vol. 3

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CHAPTER 1

# *A Spectacular Death*

"I'm going to bed, Mom."

She was on the couch reading. She looked up from her book, glanced at the clock on the wall and then at her son, who was standing in the doorway, yawning. "But it's not bedtime for another half-hour, Philip."

"I'll save it for another day," he said. "I'm dead tired."

"Well, then it's silly to stay up. Did you finish your homework?"

He nodded. "It took about five minutes. All we had to do was practice our parts for the play we're doing, and I only have two lines."

"Two lines? That's hardly anything. Let me hear."

Philip spread his arms wide and, in a serious voice, said, "And they lived happily ever after!" He took a deep bow. "Thanks for coming."

His mom smiled as she shook her head. "Is that really all you get to say?"

"Well, there weren't that many parts. Five of us are sharing the narrator part. I got the last two lines. So yeah, I'm done with my homework—I even know it by heart!"

She laughed, and he went over and gave her a goodnight kiss. She wished him "sweet dreams," which sent a chill down his spine. On his way out of the living room, he stopped in the doorway and watched her. She had gone back to reading, and

despite his shivers…

*(Sweet dreams)*

… he couldn't help but smile. Half a year ago, she hadn't been able to read for more than five minutes at a time. Her migraines would get too intense.

Philip went to his room. The script for the play the eighth grade were putting on lay on the bed. He took the papers and stuffed them in his bag.

"And they lived happily ever after," he mocked, shaking his head. He didn't mind having to end the story, but he thought it was a stupid line. Who ever heard of anyone living happily ever after? You only heard that kind of nonsense in fairy tales, and everyone knew it was a lie. But their English teacher had written the play, so that's how it ended. If Philip had written it, the ending would have sounded a whole lot different.

He stood in front of the window, looking out into the darkness that filled the courtyard. His reflection looked like a giant figure hovering over the playground, the benches, and the bike sheds. The moon hung above him like a strange halo. The bumps on his forehead were visible, just like the smile on his lips. "And they lived happily ever after," he said. "Then they died, and if they hadn't been good, they were punished for an eternity in the deepest depths of Hell." He bowed to the dark. "Thanks for coming."

See, that's what you call a real ending.

He picked up the strings to close the blinds, briefly glancing at the remains of the big tree in the middle of the yard…

*(Sweet dreams)*

… and once again he felt the goose bumps spreading. Lightning had split the tree in two, and half of the trunk lay on the

ground, now a jungle gym used by the children in the yard. It was there, right there—under the wind, rain, and thunder—that Mortimer had stood and called for help. Called for Philip. Mortimer. Death himself.

But that was a long time ago now, and Philip seldom thought about it. At least, that's what he liked to tell himself. Maybe it was true, too. In the daytime, perhaps, but at night… At night, your mind can play tricks on you, and in dreams that turned into nightmares he often returned to Death's basement and what he had seen in his mother's hourglass. Those nights he awoke in a cold sweat, and sometimes in tears, too, and couldn't calm down until he had gone to her bedroom and listened to her breathing, peacefully and deeply.

*I saved her*, was the one thought that lulled him to sleep when he was back in his bed. *I saved her.*

Then his thoughts turned off, and for the rest of the night, there were no more dreams.

Philip shook off the rising goose bumps and rolled down the blinds. He undressed and got under the covers with a big yawn. It was incredible how tired he was. He skipped his bedtime reading and turned off the lights. He lay in the dark, clutching the rabbit's foot that hung from a cord around his neck, and listened for the sound of his mother paging through the book in the living room.

*I saved her*, he thought and hoped the nightmare would leave him alone tonight. Gradually, he felt himself overcome by sleep. *I saved her.*

Philip slept.

And dreamed.

* * *

*He's back in Death's basement. Deep down below the earth's surface, in a hall so gigantic, it's hard to grasp. A radiant, eternally fluctuating light bathes the basement in a thousand shades of color. The light in the hall comes from the hourglasses. They're everywhere, hourglass upon hourglass, as far as the eye can see. Apart from the whispering sound of the sand that keeps running and running, it's completely silent.*

*No, not completely. He can hear the hammering of his own heart, too. He's standing in front of his mother's hourglass.*

I don't want to look, *he says to himself, he* pleads *with himself.* I don't want to see it.

*Only he has no choice. Even though he doesn't want to, he looks into the hourglass and sees the image of her much too early death and—*

*Behind him someone clears their throat, and Philip spins around, frightened. A familiar figure steps toward him. The shadows crawl around in the furrows of the expressionless face. Gray eyes observe him from under bushy eyebrows. The light in the eyes has gone out. They're dead as stone.*

*"You weren't supposed to see that, Philip," says Mortimer, putting a cold hand on his shoulder. Cold as ice. "But there's something else you should see."*

*The frosty hand gently directs him toward another hourglass nearby. Philip recognizes it; he's seen it before. The color of the sand in the hourglass is almost entirely black. Only a fine line of white grains can be seen within the dark mass. The bottom bulb has a tiny crack, and a bit of sand has run out onto the table.*

*"Take a look," says Mortimer, pointing at the hourglass. "His death is… spectacular."*

*"No, thanks," says Philip, stepping back. "I don't feel like it…"*

*"Look." Death nods. "Look."*

*Philip glances back at the hourglass and realizes he was wrong. The sand isn't almost entirely black. It is entirely black. The thin line of white sand is gone.*

*Suddenly the sand in the lower bulb swirls around, and an image appears inside the curved glass.*

*"What you see here happens a week before his time is up," Mortimer's gravelly voice whispers in his ear. "Do you understand what I am saying? His death begins a week before he actually dies."*

*And inside the bulb, an incredible series of coincidences begins to unfold. Small events, that in themselves are insignificant and unimportant, slowly weave together, becoming entangled like threads in a spider web. What Philip witnesses is Death himself, putting together a jigsaw puzzle.*

*The first piece is a taxicab. The passengers are a man and a woman. They are on their way to the airport for a vacation. Philip can hear them talking about the sunny south, when the woman suddenly realizes they forgot their passports. In a split second they go from being on time to short of time. They ask the driver to hurry, and he does. He hurries so much that he drives through a red light, and another car crossing the street has to slam on the brakes. Nobody gets hurt, but the sound of the car screeching to a halt distracts a boy drinking a soda on the sidewalk, and he turns to look. That's why he doesn't see the man who steps out from a side street. They bump into each other, and the boy spills soda all over the man's jacket.*

*"It makes a stain that doesn't wash off, and the jacket has to go to the cleaners," whispers Mortimer. He taps the hourglass with his yellow nail, and the picture changes. It shows the man who got soda on his jacket. He's sitting in his living room watching TV.*

*"He should take the jacket to the cleaners that same afternoon, because his schedule is packed for the next three days. But he gets caught up watching something on TV, and once it's over, the cleaners are closed. Three days go by. Then, on the fourth day…"*

*The hourglass shows the man on his way to the cleaners with the jacket in a bag. He walks through the park and bumps into a cat on his way. It's timid and quickly runs away when he gets close. The picture continues and now follows the cat. A few seconds later, it runs o z ut in front of a girl on a bike. She swerves to miss it, then drives over a piece of glass, puncturing her back tire. In the bottom bulb Philip sees her walking her bike home.*

*"This all happens on a Friday," Mortimer says, and his frosty breath makes the hair on Philip's neck stand on end. "There's no school the next day, and the girl forgets that her bike has a flat. She would have been reminded of it on Sunday, because she was going to go to the movies with a friend, but the friend gets sick and they never go. That's why the tire is still flat when she needs to leave for school on Monday. In order to make it on time, she has to run."*

*Deep inside the glass bulb, the girl takes off running with her backpack. She runs out onto a pedestrian crossing, forcing a long line of cars to hit the brakes. In the fourth car, there's a woman with a ponytail. The woman keeps looking at her watch—it's obvious that she's in a hurry—and because of the sudden stop she doesn't make the green light at the next intersection. The three cars in front of her barely manage to cross, but she has to wait. She impatiently drums her thumbs on the steering wheel and speeds off as soon as the light changes.*

*"Meanwhile…" Mortimer says as the hourglass reveals a new picture, and a new sequence of seemingly meaningless events ensues. Like tiles in a game of dominos. The scene is constantly changing,*

*each in some way affected by the previous scene, and therefore meaningful for the one that follows. Changes and changes and changes.*

*It all ends with an old lady. She's out walking her dog. It's a big puppy, and it's pulling the leash. The woman has a hard time controlling it. Suddenly the dog catches sight of a cat—the same one that caused the girl to puncture her tire, Philip realizes. The dog chases after the cat, and the leash is ripped out of the woman's hand. She tries to call the dog back, but without luck.*

*"Look," whispers Mortimer, and Philip can almost hear the smile on his lips. "Look."*

*Philip looks. He sees the cat dash out into the road. He sees the dog follow. He sees them both run out in front of the car driven by the woman with the ponytail. He sees her turn the wheel sharply to avoid them. He sees the car steer directly toward a boy on the sidewalk, and he sees that it's Sam. But Sam's face is turned the other way, and he never sees the car, which hits him with so much force that it sends him rolling down the sidewalk.*

*That's where the picture ends and goes as black as the sand running through the hourglass…*

* * *

Philip woke gasping for air, his heart thundering against his ribcage. He felt like he couldn't breathe. He was freezing and sweating at the same time.

The room was pitch-black, and for a second, he was afraid he was still in Death's basement, staring into Sam's hourglass. But he was lying in his bed, and it was midnight. He hadn't slept for more than a few hours, but he'd been dreaming. Boy, had he been dreaming.

Philip lay back down and tried to relax, but he couldn't. He was feeling uneasy, and the pictures of what he had seen kept flashing through his mind. Why in the world had he dreamed that? It all seemed so real. He could still feel Mortimer's snow-cold hand on his shoulder.

He couldn't go back to sleep. Not before he was sure. He had to be sure.

He turned on the bedside light and got out of bed, went over to the bookcase and found the school yearbook. Paged through to the tenth grade. Sam had been in school the day the picture was taken, but he wasn't in it. He'd been deleted, after he gave the photographer the middle finger. All that was left of him was a white smudge, which made it look like a ghost went to school with them.

Philip found the phone number and dialed the number on his cell phone. His hands were shaking.

After the third ring, someone picked up.

"Hello?"

Philip's heart felt like it took a plunge into his stomach. Thank God.

"Hello?" Sam replied gruffly, death metal playing loud in the background.

"Who is it?"

"Hi, Sam," he sighed. "It's Philip, from school."

"Philip?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry I'm calling so late. I hope I didn't wake you up."

"Nah, not at all. Tomorrow's Monday, so I'm just sitting here getting ready. For Condemned of the Week, you know. There's lots of work to be done." Sam was the school's biggest bully. Each

week he chose a new victim, whom he then terrorized until the final bell on Friday. When it came to Philip's turn, the abuse had ended with Philip getting hit by a car. Even though it was an accident, it abruptly put an end to Sam's nastiness. At least toward Philip, whom Devil Sam had taken under his protective demon wings. "What's up, Philip? Is someone chasing you? Are you in trouble? Do you need help?"

"No, no. I… I…"

*I just wanted to check that you hadn't died, because I just dreamed you did.*

"I just wanted to… say goodnight."

"Goodnight?" Sam repeated, confused. "You just called to say goodnight?"

"Yes. Sleep tight."

"Umm… Okay… You, too."

"Thanks," said Philip and quickly hung up. He took a deep breath. Sat for a while on the edge of his bed and tried to gather his thoughts. Nothing had happened to Sam. Of course it hadn't. It was just another stupid nightmare.

He crawled back into bed and turned off the light. The room disappeared into total darkness, and a little while after, so did Philip's worries.

This time there weren't any dreams.

CHAPTER 2

# *Clouds in the Sky*

"Philip, it's your turn. Where do you want to go?"

He shrugged. "I don't care. You decide."

"Fine, you're going to Heaven, then."

*If only it was that easy,* he thought, smiling to himself as their teacher, Mrs. Jenkins, wrote Philip's name on the board. It was first period on Monday and the class had to start making props for the play. The students were assigned different tasks and Philip had to paint the sky.

"We need another person for Heaven. Any volunteers?"

"I will," said Sabrina.

"Oooh," someone jeered. "Philip and Sabrina are going to paint the skies together. How romantic."

The class laughed, and Philip blushed. Out of the corner of his eye he glanced at Sabrina and was delighted to see that she was blushing, too.

The rest of the tasks were divided up and Mrs. Jenkins asked them all to calmly and quietly go to the Arts Room. They didn't need to bring their backpacks and—*Hey, hey! I said calmly and quietly!*

On the way to the Arts Room, Philip talked to Vernon. Or rather, Vernon talked, and Philip didn't listen. His thoughts and eyes were on Sabrina, who was walking farther ahead, and he couldn't stop smiling at the thought that she'd signed up to work with him. But that smile was curtailed by the sound of Martin's voice behind him. Martin, who had hated Philip ever

since the fifth grade because of an incident with a football and a broken window, and who hated him even more since last fall, when Philip could have saved him from Sam's claws, if he'd wanted to. Martin whispered something, but it was loud enough for Philip to hear.

"Of course he's painting Heaven. That's exactly where the little angel belongs."

Philip turned around. Martin was walking alone and Philip couldn't resist. Martin was asking for it.

"Hey, Sam!" Philip shouted, looking past Martin's shoulder as if Sam was right behind him.

Martin froze and looked as pale as a ghost. Suddenly he sped up, hurrying past Philip without a second glance.

"You're evil," laughed Vernon.

Philip shrugged as he gently passed a hand over the bumps on his forehead.

"The Devil himself was once an angel," he said.

* * *

Twenty-two eighth graders in the Arts Room meant total and complete chaos, but Philip hardly noticed. He and Sabrina got started painting clouds right away. They worked well together, they talked about this and that, and had a good time. Sometimes, when he was sitting on his knees painting, he would take a peek at her and get a warm, fuzzy feeling. It wasn't be- cause he was in love with her. At least, he didn't think he was, and the very thought of it made him feel sick to his stomach. Like he was a traitor. Like he was being disloyal to someone.

And he knew exactly who.

So, no, he wasn't in love with Sabrina, but he liked her a lot. He was pretty sure she liked him, too. That was the part he felt especially happy about.

He'd never really talked to her that much. The few attempts he'd made had crashed and burned from the start. Like that time at the class party in December, where somebody—should we guess Martin?—"accidentally" bumped into Philip, so he ended up spilling soda all over Sabrina's new dress. Or that time the whole class had gone to the movies, when he was just about to sit next to her but ended up stepping on her bag and tripping, this time spilling coke all over himself. When he got back from the bathroom, the seat next to her was already taken. By Martin, believe it or not.

But Philip and Sabrina were in the same group now and there was still plenty of time before the bell rang.

"What does this look like?" he asked, pointing to one of the clouds he'd painted.

Sabrina studied it for a little while. "A couch."

"A couch?" he burst out. "It's a horse!"

She laughed. "Then you must be pretty bad at drawing horses, Philip. And couches. And clouds."

"But I'm pretty good at drawing beards," he said and jokingly threatened her with his brush. "You better watch out!"

"What about this cloud here?" she asked, making the final brushstroke. "What does it look like?"

"A…" he started and then froze. In his mind's eye he saw bits and pieces of last night's nightmare, and he shuddered. After class he would go find Sam and ask if they should walk home together. Just to make sure. "A butterfly. It looks like a butterfly."

"Exactly," Sabrina said and smiled. "I'm going to get some more blue paint." She got up and made some teasing remark about working on his horses in the meantime. Philip wasn't really listening. He just stared at the cloud Sabrina had painted, which didn't look like a butterfly to him at all. It looked like an hourglass—eerily so—lying on its side.

All of a sudden there was a terrible racket, followed by a shriek. The sound came from the room with all the paint cans.

The students dropped whatever they were doing and ran to see what had happened.

It was Sabrina. She had spilled a can of paint all over herself and she was blue. Blue from head to toe.

"Stop looking at me!" she shouted in a teary voice. Then she ran out of the room, and people had to jump to the side, so as not to get paint on their clothes.

Someone was quietly chuckling and Philip scanned the crowd. His classmates stood there with dumbfounded faces, staring at Sabrina's trail of blue footprints on the floor. None of them were laughing.

Then his eyes fell upon the cabinet with the brushes. On the glass panes of the cabinet door. He saw a reflection of himself and his classmates in the shiny glass. But there was another figure, too, over by the shelf with the paint cans. It was vague and hazy, but definitely there.

"Satina?" he called out and turned his head. The muffled laughter instantly stopped and the room went silent. Too silent. No one was over by the shelves.

Philip got a lot of puzzled looks, and he sheepishly cleared his throat.

"I mean… Sabrina? Was that Sabrina?" He laughed, hating

himself for it. “I thought it was a smurf!”

A couple of the boys laughed. Some of the girls said he was mean.

A little while later the only reflection left on the cabinet door was Philip’s. He wasn’t laughing any longer.