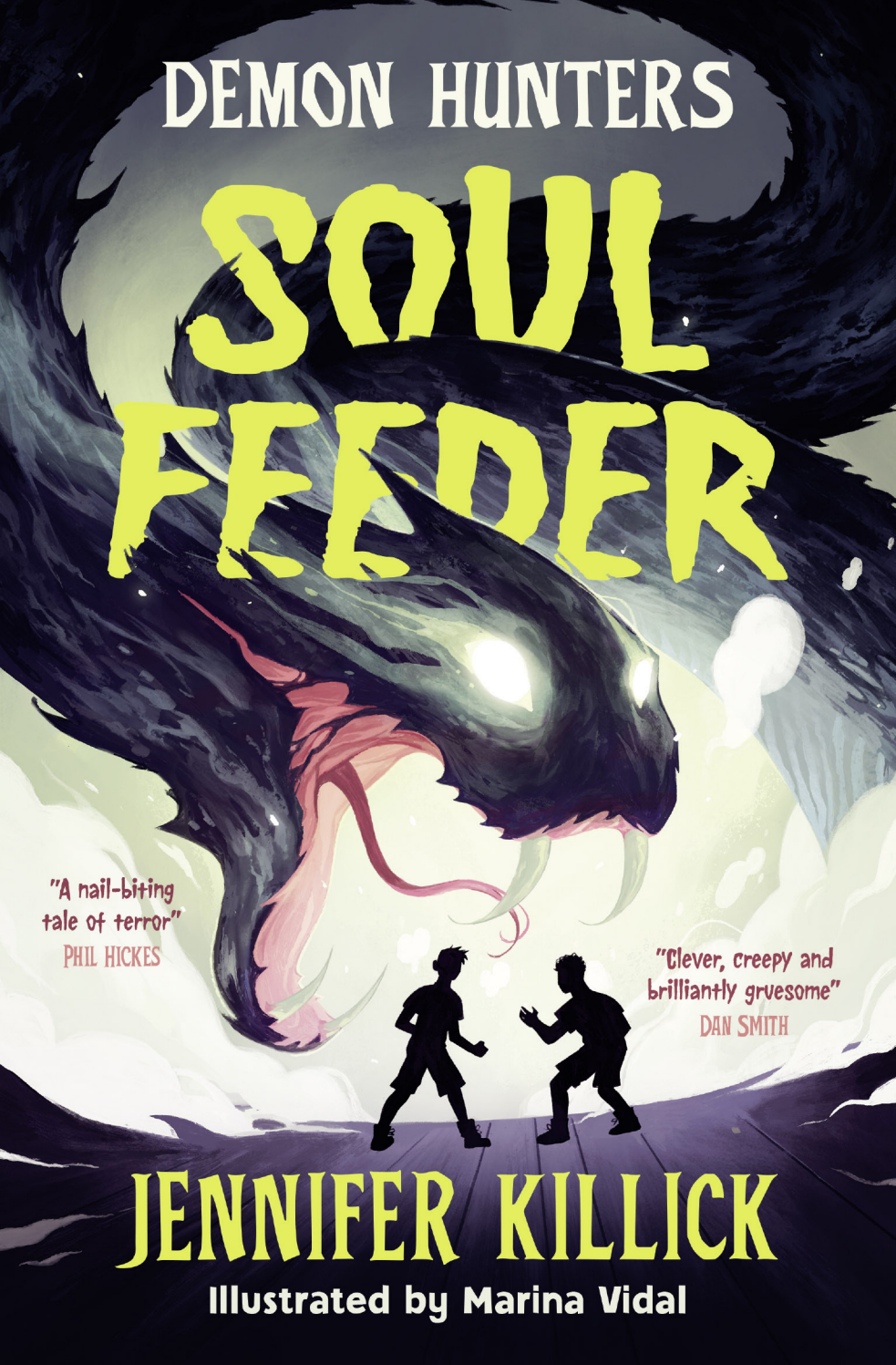

DEMON HUNTERS
SOUL FEEDER
"A nail-biting tale of terror"
PHIL HICKES
"Clever, creepy and brilliantly gruesome"
DAN SMITH
JENNIFER KILLICK
Illustrated by Marina Vidal

Published by Barrington Stoke
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 Robroyston Gate, Glasgow, G33 1JN

www.barringtonstoke.co.uk

HarperCollins*Publishers*
Macken House, 39/40 Mayor Street Upper,
Dublin 1, DO1 C9W8, Ireland

First published in 2026

Text © 2026 Jennifer Killick
Illustrations © 2026 Marina Vidal
Cover design © 2026 HarperCollins*Publishers* Limited

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ISBN 978-0-00-874115-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in India by Replika Press Pvt. Ltd.

FPO (fsc placeholder)

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For the Messing family, with love

CHAPTER 1

Walking into the house of someone who just died is *always* weird. But as soon as I step into this house, I feel a sense of wrongness that goes way past weird.

I notice that the air in here is thin, even before I have a chance to look around. Like I'm not getting enough oxygen into my lungs no matter how deep I breathe. And every breath makes me feel colder.

"How long ago did the lady who lived here die?" my best friend Sam asks, keeping his voice low. The vibe of this house is definitely "whispering only".

For a few seconds, no one answers. Sam, Dad and I just stand in the entrance. The July sun is blazing down behind us, but none of its rays reach into the shadowy hallway ahead.



We take our time before we properly enter Sasha Kinski's house – allowing our eyes to get used to the lack of light. The silence is broken by the sound of footsteps crunching up the pathway behind us. That'll be Bree, who works for Dad in his house-clearing business.

"What's up with you lot?" Bree asks. She pushes past us and strides cheerfully into the house. "You didn't know the old girl who lived here, did ya?"

"No," Dad says, and wipes his feet on the mat like he's scraping away the bad vibes. "Let's get the kettle on. And the radio." He turns to me and adds, "Caiden, you and Sam are on—"

"Tea duty – yeah, I know," I say. I peer past Bree to see if I can spot the kitchen.

It looks like a normal house from what I can see. A narrow hallway with a staircase on the right. Two doors leading to rooms on the left, another one at the end and a fourth door below

the stairs. A normal house on a normal street. But it still feels … off.

"Good lads," Dad says. "And then you can look for anything worth salvaging. You have an eye for the good stuff." He winks at me and Sam, and makes his way down the hall, opening doors and peering into rooms.

"Oh wow," Dad whistles. "Looks like Miss Kinski had some unusual hobbies. This one's gonna be interesting." He disappears into the front room, and I hear the sound of curtains being pulled back. "And to answer your question, Sam, Miss Kinski was found a month ago."

"So they *found* her a month ago," says Bree, appearing from one of the rooms off the hall. I love that Bree talks to us like we're adults and says stuff she shouldn't. "But my mate at the morgue reckons she died way before that cos of the state of the body."

"Get the tea on, will you?" Dad calls. "We're gonna need it."

"What was up with the body?" Sam asks as we head towards the kitchen. "Was it rotting and maggotty?" One of the best things about Sam is that he's never afraid to ask the hard questions.

"Yes, Sam," Bree says, pulling on a pair of thick work gloves. "The body was definitely at the full ick level of decomposing. Apparently, Miss Kinski didn't have any close family, and she travelled a lot, so when the neighbours didn't see her for a while, they figured she was on one of her trips. No one guessed that she was shut up inside this house – dead and rotting."

"That's sad," I say. "Imagine not having anyone notice that you were dead."

"It is," Bree says. "But wait till you hear the really messed-up part ..."

Sam and I turn to her. Obviously, we need to know more.

"So Miss Kinski was found sitting on the floor in the middle of the back room," Bree says. She's speaking quietly so that Dad won't hear her and yell at her for telling us. "On the rug. Knees bent up, arms around them like this …" Bree demonstrates the position for us.

"Miss Kinski died sitting upright in the middle of the floor?" Sam says.

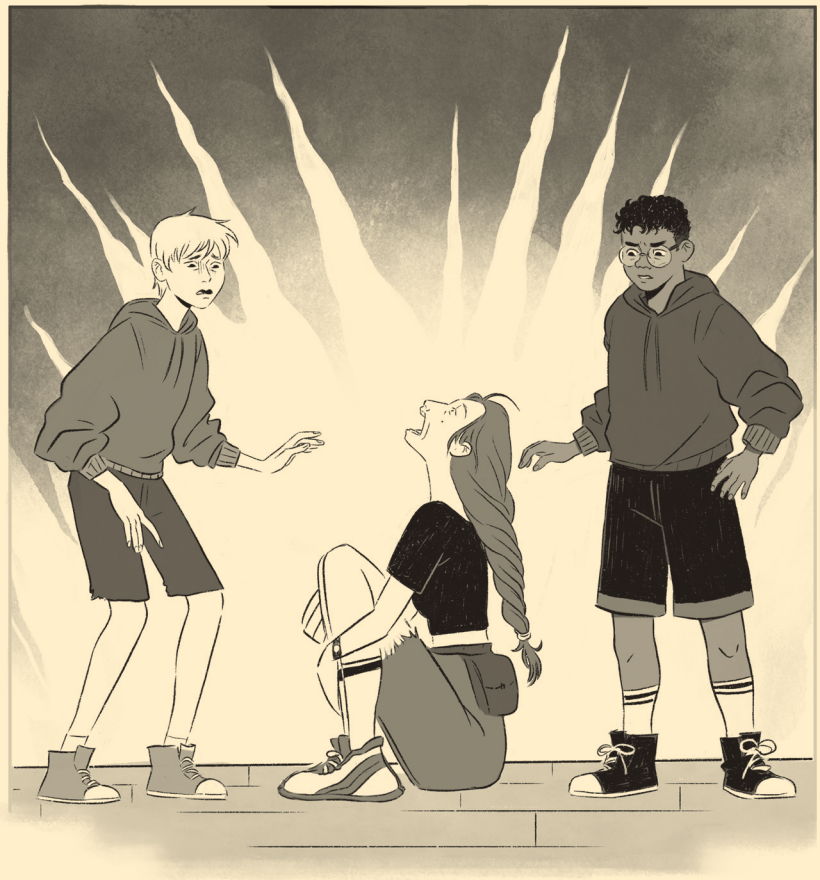
"And that's not even the most messed-up part," Bree whispers. She's loving this – telling gross stories. "Miss Kinski's head was tipped up, like she was staring at the ceiling. Eyes open."

Sam and I both gasp, picturing the scene in our minds.

"Actually?" I say.

Bree nods. “But not just the eyes. The mouth was open too – wide open like it had been stretched as far as it could go and then a bit more. I heard her jaw was broken.”

We stare at Bree as she demonstrates by opening her mouth like a roaring lion.



"You have a really big mouth, Bree," Sam says. "And that gold tooth makes you look like a bad-ass pirate." I snort out a laugh. I feel like my heart must have stopped while Bree was telling the story because I'm suddenly aware of it beating again.

"You're not scaring the kids, are you, Bree?" Dad calls from one of the rooms.

"Course not," she yells back, grinning at us.

"Glad to hear it," Dad says. "Now, we've got a lot to do, so if you don't mind ..."

"On it, boss," Bree shouts. She gives Dad a salute that he can't see and then heads up the stairs as Dad's radio starts blasting music.

I first started helping Dad with his house-clearing business during the last school holidays, and I thought then that Dad and Bree were weird. I couldn't understand how they could be so casual while emptying

out the houses of people who had died. They were always joking and singing and stuff. It seemed … disrespectful to me.

But after a while, I realised that it's just their way of dealing with the sadness of it all. They go into what were once people's homes and sort out the leftovers of their lives. Things they owned and loved and held on to. Things that have just been left to gather dust in an empty house.

Dad and Bree decide what to throw away and what to fix up and sell. It's hard making those decisions about someone else's stuff. If you think about it too much, it makes you feel horrible, and you can't bear to touch anything.

We normally take most of the things back to Dad's warehouse, which is mine and Sam's favourite place to hang out. We spend as much time as possible there – chatting, playing games, eating snacks and watching our favourite shows on a phone or tablet.

My dad offered to pay both of us to do what he calls “the light work”, so Sam started helping with the house clearing too. We make teas, run down the shops for biscuits and fried chicken, look at all the dead people’s little bits and pieces. Meanwhile, my dad and Bree focus on the heavy items – furniture and stuff. Sam loves cash cos he’s saving, although he won’t tell me what for. I spend all mine before it hits my pocket.

We open all the kitchen cupboards and drawers while we wait for the kettle to boil, looking for anything valuable. And still that sense of weirdness hangs over me – even with the muffled singing of the radio and the reassuring sound of heavy items being dragged across wooden floors.

Sam looks at me. Taps the kitchen counter with his fingertips. “This house isn’t right.”

"Yeah," I say, looking around. "The way the lady who lived here died was disturbing. You think it's haunted?"

"Don't believe in ghosts," Sam says. "But maybe a demon."

"How can you believe in demons but not ghosts?" I ask. "They're basically the same thing."

"Nah," Sam says. "Totally different, Caiden. Trust me – I've been reading up on it."

Sam's read up on pretty much everything in the universe, so when he says something is fact, I always believe him. I pour hot water into the travel mugs, breathing in the warmth of the steam.

"That's what it is, you know," Sam says, passing me the bottle of milk I brought from home. "The thing that's wrong with the house."

"What is?" I ask. I'm hoping to have something solid to explain why I feel so freaked out here.

Sam raises his chin and sniffs the air. I do the same, trying to work out what he's getting at.



"You see?" Sam says, and I still don't, so I raise an impatient eyebrow at him.

He looks at me with his brown eyes – always serious, like he's always thinking important thoughts. "If Miss Kinski's body was in here for weeks, it should have stunk up the place."

"True," I say. "Maybe they got professional cleaners in or something."

"But the house doesn't smell of cleaning products either."

He's right. There's nothing chemical in the air. No bleach. No flowery air freshener. "So what are you getting at, Sam?" I ask.

Sam raises an eyebrow at me. "What I'm getting at is that there's no smell, Caiden," he says. "Nothing in this house has any scent at all."