Three Knocks

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**Estimated reading time — 19 minutes**

It was midnight, and Sam Kessler was trying to believe that he was alone. He crouched against a cold tile floor and peeked out from cracked blinds, staring into the impenetrable snowstorm outside. There was nothing, no life or sound, except for the shrieking wind and the creaking of naked trees on that stormy winter night. Sam had stopped listening for the sounds of police sirens hours ago. The flurry of snow, which had greeted him upon his arrival in Massachusetts, had already begun to turn into a blizzard when he pulled off the gravel mountain road in the icy violet dusk of the evening. It would be hours before anyone could get back on those roads. He thought he wouldn’t be going to prison tonight, but this was cold comfort. He knew he had not really escaped. He wasn’t safe, and he certainly wasn’t alone in this shameful refuge.

It was a rundown motel lost in the backroads of western Massachusetts, and Sam Kessler was trapped there. He had spent the happiest days of his life mere miles from this with his family in distant summer days. He had proposed to his wife by the lake in what felt like a different century. He was snowbound and alone, but the memories brought a fleeting comfort. His present reality, however, could not be hidden from in the past, and Sam’s reminiscing was cut short as the sound he had been dreading rang through the cell of a room.

Three knocks came at the motel door. When he peeked from his hiding spot beneath the window, Sam Kessler l saw nothing but a thick blanket of snow at the doorstep. There wasn’t a soul alive out there, but still, he stood unmoving, eyes fixed on the cold dark. A minute went by with nothing but the buzz of fluorescent lights and the pounding of his heart to break the silence, and then the knocking came again and again, the man did not move. Another minute went by, and then the sound came again, three knocks at the door, and again there was silence. Sam allowed himself to breathe. It was gone, at least for now. He knew his pursuer’s patterns by heart, three knocks, then three again and again, and then silence for a little while.

It was gone, and when he realized this, relief flooded his stiff limbs. Sam looked down at the filthy ground and slid down the plain beige wall into a crumpled heap on the cold tile floor. It wasn’t long before his desperate gasps for air turned to sobs of self-pity. Sam was trapped in this room, miles away from friends or family, in a desolate motel, waiting for the thing on the other side of that door to find him. He didn’t deserve this, Sam thought to himself. He knew that he was a good man, a loving husband, and a father to a wonderful son. For God’s sake, he was a pillar of the community, a small business owner, and the pastor of his local church. How could anyone believe he had done such horrible things?

With shaking arms and wobbling knees, Sam pushed himself to his feet and made an attempt at rationality. He kept his back defiantly turned towards the window and folded his arms across his chest in a futile gesture of protection. The room was spartan, the barest furnishings possible crunced between four fading baby blue walls and a cream-colored popcorn ceiling. To his right, there was a broken t.v sitting atop a nightstand, and across from it, one uncomfortable twin bed in the center of the room. It was all lit by a single fluorescent overhead light, and this cast a hopeless pall upon the unfortunate surroundings that left the environment unsuited for hope. With his back still turned resolutely to the wall and with more than a little trepidation, Sam slowly crossed over to the bed.

The bed was entirely undisturbed. Its sheets were still made up, and its pillows untouched. In the hours since he’d entombed himself in the dingy room, he hadn’t as much as sat down. He’d hardly had time to throw his suitcase on the bed before the first knocks came. His luggage spilled out over the starched white sheets. He’d brought only the things he could grab in the moments before he’d fled his home that morning. He saw crumpled khakis, a pink polo, and his wife’s toothbrush among the pile. It was a motley assortment and grabbed from the laundry in his now far-off Virginia home, hardly warm enough for the biting cold of a New England winter. He ignored it all, he had to stay focused, and every thought of home tore at his resolve. He found what he was looking for next to a stale, hours-old cup of instant coffee on the nightstand. It was the room’s landline. Before the will left him, Sam quickly picked up the phone and aggressively punched in 9-1-1.

It took two rings, and a woman’s voice answered the phone “911, what’s your emergency?” It was the first human voice Sam had heard all night, and at the sound of it, he choked on his words. The operator repeated her question, but by then, Sam had mustered up the last of his courage. His rusty larynx gave a sound that was something between a grunt and a dry heave as he began to speak. When at last, the air he forced out his mouth again began to resemble words, he spoke fast, “Hello, my name is Sam Kessler. I’m at the motel on 13 Mountainview Road, and I-.” He trailed off. As he searched for the right words to say to the dispatcher, the reality of his situation began to set in.

Images of the cold grey morning began to flood back into his mind. The clump of yellow hair he had awoken to find clutched in his fist. His wife’s terrified face, frozen cold and pale, her wide green eyes dull and absent of light. Sam remembered searching, he remembered confusion, fear, and despair fighting within him as he tried to figure out what had happened, and then he remembered the blood on the bathroom door. He tried to block out the thought, he shut his eyes and fell silent, but it seemed as if the sight had been burned into his eyelids. The naked body of his son, his only beautiful son, laid out; red wet, and cold on the white tile floor. He had been butchered, mutilated beyond recognition. His little head had been smashed into a haphazard mess of flesh and bone. His ruined face stared unseeing into the ceiling, and his teeth lay shattered all around him. The boy’s blue eyes, the same cornflower color as Sam’s own, had been pushed into his skull by hateful and eager fingers. The only thing that could identify this body as his beloved son were the clumps of blonde hair that still clung to his desiccated scalp, the very same blonde hair that Sam had clutched in his bloody hands.

Somewhere, a world away, the operator said something in words that Sam Kessler would not hear. The only thing in his world were memories and the pounding of blood in his ears. Still, the words continued, and as they came, they became demanding; until, at last, the demands of the here and now woke him from his nightmare. “Sir, are you with me?” He opened his eyes, and the images were gone, banished by the realization of what he had just done. He’d told them where he was, and as this fact set in, Sam was seized by panic. What had he done? They would never understand. They would never know that he had not done it, that he could never have done something like that. The woman repeated her question, but Sam had already dropped the receiver. The phone swung from its cord, and as it did, the now muffled voice repeated its unintelligible questions. In his panic and delirium, Sam did the only thing he could think to do. With a single desperate motion, he pulled hard on the cord and tore the phone from its fastenings to the wall. The voice died abruptly, and Sam threw the landline across the room. As the wire tore out from the wall, it caught the little foam cup, and while it crashed to the ground, its murky contents spilled out over the bed and onto the floor.

Sam fell into a crumpled, shaking heap on the cold, coffee-soaked floor. He began to cry as he hadn’t cried since he was a child. None of it was his fault, he thought, but it didn’t matter. They would never believe him, and it wasn’t fair. He was a good person. Why should he lose so much? Sam was wracked with sobs, and the more he sobbed, the greater his self-pity grew. He clasped his hands across his eyes, shutting out all light. He wept for minutes uncountable until, at last, the voice of ever-watchful self-preservation tore him from the familiar warm hole of self pity.

He had told the police where he was, and Sam knew that as soon as the day broke and the snow could be cleared from the mountain path, they would be coming for him. He sobbed again and felt like crying, but he couldn’t choke out any more tears. It was over. Sam knew he didn’t have any more options; there was only one thing left to do. Sam rose from the pool of stagnant coffee. He now walked with a surer stride than he had managed since well before that horrible morning. He was going to make everything alright. Sam stopped beside his bed and began to search through his now-soaked luggage. He didn’t want to do this. He had never wanted any of this, but it had all happened. Sam didn’t think he should suffer for something that he was certain was not his fault. At last, his hands closed around the edges of the book he had been looking for. Before he pulled it from the depths of his suitcase, a thought crossed Sam’s mind. “Isn’t this all a sin for a reason?” No, he pushed the thought aside, and he reminded himself that he was a good person. After all how could saving his life be a sin? And then, rejecting all doubt, sam kessler pulled the old book into the flickering light.

It was a thin lime green paperback, the price tag still stuck across its binding, and on its front were a few simple words in a basic black font; The Lesser Key of Solomon. The book was a product of the modern world, its lettering printed en masse by unfeeling steel, but its contents were ancient. Sam thought that the book was insultingly ordinary for all the horrors it had brought upon him. When his hands brushed the yellowed pages, a giddy feeling of anticipation raced through him. The excitement felt wrong somehow. It was almost invasive, as if the feeling was not his own. He wondered again how he had come to this place. After all, he had never meant to buy the thing. It had been another capricious twist of fate that had brought this Apocrypha into his hands. And then he remembered why.

The sneering face of an old friend rose up from where it had been buried deep in his subconscious. Caleb, it had all been his fault. If it wasn’t for that lowlife, he would never have even heard of the wretched book. If it hadn’t been for him, he wouldn’t be here at all. Sam was stewing now, lost in condemnation. He had abandoned his despair and, in its place, began to take up righteous anger. He found himself on his feet, turning away from the luggage and his purpose. Sam let the book slide from his hand, and he began to pace. As the pages slid from his grasp, he felt a sharp twinge of frustration. Had he not been so consumed with assigning blame, Sam would have seen the strangeness of this. That was someone else’s feeling. It had come from somewhere apart and foreign to him. The invasive emotion did not break his fury, but instead, in its insidiousness, the feeling only fueled his wrath.

Sam had now, without realizing it, forgotten himself. He had put aside his surroundings and turned his thoughts away from his family and what he had done to them. Instead, he thought only of the past and the bitter disappointments that lay there. Above all, he thought of the grinning face of the man he now held responsible for all of this.

Sam remembered now. It had been so long since he’d thought of it, but now he was certain that none of this was his fault. He had been in college, studying theology in New York City, when he had encountered it for the first time. It had been in an antique bookstore on the upper west side, sandwiched between a deli and a movie theatre. The interior was squat and cramped, the walls obscured entirely by unending rows of faded old tomes. The books spilled out onto tables and even the floor. Everything in sight had been covered in a blanket of dust. The place had an ancient feeling to it, one that wasn’t helped by the musty old man at the register. The geriatric clerk sat in almost perfect stillness, his lips pursed behind a tangled grey beard and his small glassy eyes staring unblinkingly at the wall. It was a miserable place and one that Sam had not wanted to go to. He had a terribly important test he hadn’t studied for, but Caleb had insisted.

Caleb was his roommate and his only erstwhile friend in the city. Sam remembered he had liked the boy at the time. His unkempt brown hair and easy smile had put him at ease, and his half-clever opportunistic jokes had endeared him to the teenager. Caleb was always laughing, and when Sam was younger, it was what he had loved best about his friend. Now the memory of the insipid cackling inspired only revulsion. Caleb had suggested the place, Sam knew he shouldn’t have gone, but it didn’t matter because, as in all things at the time, he had followed his friend. They had spent the better part of an afternoon in that dusty bookshop, Caleb engrossed in the esoterica, Sam listless and bored.

By the end of the visit, as if by chance, Caleb had pulled the damn thing from beneath a teetering stack of old books. “Do you know what this is?” his friend had asked him, and of course, he hadn’t and shook his head. “This is the original demonology. This shit is the real deal, man.” Sam had rolled his eyes at that, and he’d told Caleb to shut the fuck up, but Caleb had insisted. “I’m serious, man. It’s supposed to be the same incantations King Solomon himself used to summon all his demons.” That was too much for Sam, and he said as much, “King Solomons got nothing to do with Demons. That’s some bullshit.” Caleb’s eyes had gleamed at that, and as he remembered that, Sam grew all the angrier. “Well, if you don’t believe me, why don’t you buy it and take a look? Maybe you can even find a demon that can take that final for you.” Sam had laughed. At the time, it seemed funny, and the book had only been five dollars. “Fine, I’ll read it, but I know you’re bullshiting me.” At that, Caleb had only shrugged and led the way to the register, a stack of old books under his arm. That had been the last time Sam ever saw the son of a bitch. Now, alone in a motel room hundreds of miles from home, he wished he’d never listened to him.

Sam hated his old friend and felt perfectly justified in that. It was Caleb’s fault, not his. The death of his family, the police pursuit, everything. Of course, it wasn’t Sam’s fault, he thought to himself, he was a good man, and no good man would do these things on his own. Sam began to think he was the victim of a terrible crime, and he seethed against the long-dead criminal at whose feet he placed the blame. He had been isolated in cold despair, but now he wrapped himself in a blanket of hate. He didn’t need to think anymore. He didn’t need to worry about his actions. He knew who was responsible for this, and it wasn’t himself. He could go to his grave or his jail cell knowing his innocence, content in his righteousness. Safe in this certainty, Sam Kessler would have waited all night and into the dawn for the police to come, but it was not to be. As he sunk into the coffee-soaked carpet, book clutched tight to his chest, three knocks came at the door.

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Sam froze in place immediately, and the hot certainty of hate fled his body in the face of terror. It was back. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew it would be. The knocks had come every hour since he’d woken that morning. First at this bedroom door, then at the rest stop bathroom, and again and again even amidst the howling blizzard. He counted the seconds. Every time it was exactly sixty silent seconds, and it came again. He waited, but as the seconds crawled by, Sam noticed something had changed. In place of the deceptive quiet, he heard something distinct beyond the distant howling wind. He heard the murmuring of voices. It was muffled and far off, but it was unmistakable. There were voices at the door. Sam could make out the voices, the words were muffled and only just outside comprehension, but it did not matter. Sam recognized these voices, and he did not need to understand what they said to know what they wanted. He buried his head in his hands. Sam was determined not to listen. It did not matter. Even in the solitude of his own mind, he could only think of one thing; The book, the handwritten note, and his terrible mistake that night twenty years ago.

He should have never touched the book, and for a while he hadn’t. It had sat, forgotten in his dorm, underneath a stack of hardly opened and thoroughly unused textbooks for weeks. He’d only ever picked it up again on a whim. It was a week before his midterms, and he hadn’t been prepared. He’d spent his time frivolously, and the balance was about to be due, but with a week still left, Sam wasn’t ready to begin seriously studying. Instead of getting to work, he remembered his roommate’s comment in the bookstore “Maybe you can even find a demon that can take that final for you.” He hadn’t thought it would work. Sam knew that if he had known, he’d have never done it. After all, he was a good man, and a man of god, certainly not the type of person to summon demons. Still, his regrets couldn’t change the past. Caleb had been visiting his family that weekend, and so, with the room to himself, Sam had followed his friend’s ill-given advice.

He had rifled through the little book without care or concern for its content, and he laughed to himself as he saw the fantastical names and sigils that accompanied the registry of demon princes. Beleth, lord of desire. Forneus, who giveth knowledge of tongues. Astaroth, who processes the knowledge of science. The list was amusing, but none of these things could help him. Sam had been about to put down the book when he discovered a particularly worn page. It was earmarked and ragged as if the previous owner had returned to it many, many times. On this page were a name and a title, Naberius the twenty-fourth spirit and marquis of hell. Beneath the name was a sigil for summoning and a description. It read; He maketh men cunning in all Arts and Sciences, but especially in the Art of Rhetoric. Then Sam noticed something else. Cramped into the margins of the book were handwritten notes. The words were written in striking and elegant form, and Sam recognized them immediately.

These were instructions. Detailed instructions on how to summon the demon Naberius and the incantation he would need to do so. This was exactly what Sam had been looking for, and so he read on. He saw that, as with all the other demons he had, without any serious intent or regard for his actions, he began to read through the instructions. All he needed to do was draw a sigil, recite some words, and light a few candles. It was just simple enough that he could justify throwing away the time on what he had been certain would amount to just another idle diversion.

The sigil was impossibly complicated. It wasn’t the simple pentagram or upside-down cross that he assumed he would have to draw. The sigil was intricate, made up of many intersecting and deliberate pen strokes. Sam thought it looked a little like the neck of a guitar laid across train tracks. He tried to copy it out correctly, and what he produced was just similar enough to the icon in the old book that he could accept it. Next, Sam read out the incantation. Whatever the words were, they weren’t in English, nor Latin as far as he could tell, not that it mattered to him at the time. Sam rehearsed the strange phrase twice before he felt confident he could remember it, and then he lit the candles, closed the blinds, and turned out the lights. He had felt silly there, sitting alone in the candlelight. He knew that if Caleb had walked come back early to see him like this, he’d never live it down. The thought of this almost drove him to put out the candles and drop the whole damned thing. As he remembered that awful night Sam wished he had done just that. He hadn’t stopped, though. There was something about the alluring blackness and the shimmering candlelight that drew him in. It was all too perfect, so fitting to the moment. The shadows cast swayed like worshipers at a Sunday service, and Sam had felt himself moving with them. When he spoke the incantation, it felt so natural, like breathing, so perfect. As soon as the rehearsed and half-remembered spell left his lips, Sam had felt as if he would burst, that it would work, it had to work, but at that moment, it didn’t seem to. He had waited a minute, then a minute more, and nothing happened. Sam was about to get up when it came for the first time, three knocks from inside his closet door.

When he had heard the knocks for the first time, Sam had choked, his breath caught in his throat, and his heart seemed to stop for a moment as his body adjusted to the impossible. He waited, frozen in place for a whole minute. His only thought was, “How?” How could this be happening? It was impossible. It simply could not be. Sam refused to believe it, and he decided that he must have been losing his mind. Then three knocks came again and shattered the sweet illusion of insanity. He had to accept his new reality. The impossible had happened. All he could do was respond to it, and so Sam gave the only answer he could think of. With trembling lips and a shaking voice, he mustered his reply, a meek “Come in.” with those words, Sam bid the thing in the closet entry.

The hinges creaked as the door slowly opened, and out stepped his visitor. He heard the slapping sound of bare feet on the wood floor of his dorm room. Sam kept his eyes fixed downward. He had a strange feeling that if he looked up, something terrible would happen. Still, as the footsteps grew closer, he could not look away from the glimpse he had. He saw long pale legs bulging with throbbing black-blue veins. The creature advanced towards him, and as it did, Sam’s heart began to pound. He felt something cold and dead touch his head. As the thing ran its i long fingers through his short hair, it spoke with three voices and with one. The first he heard was a woman’s, soft and inviting like the first warm day of spring. “Hello, Samuel.” It continued, the woman’s gentle tone fading, replaced by the sunny voice of a small boy. It spoke in a cheery tone, one that would have inspired delight had its cold dead hand not been resting upon his head. “Why have you called us here? Tell us what you desire, and we shall make it so.” Then came another voice. It was an old man’s stern but, somehow, almost kind. “All we ask is a simple price, a single night to walk within your skin.” Sam remained silent. He knew that he could never agree to this. Everything within him railed against the unnatural cost. The demon did not wait for an answer. It spoke, now with all its tongues at once, it asked, “Tell us, what is your desire?”

Sam paused. He heard something new. Beneath the overlapping words of the three voices, he heard a fourth. It was monotone, and it was cruel. This was the steady voice of a predator. The wrongness of it all was palpable, the air was sick, and his blood ran cold, but somehow he answered. Against all logic and against all faith, he gave his bargain and stammered out, “A test. I need to pass my next test.” It seemed such a trifling matter, so small a thing for such a price. The demon did not react, did not question his request. It only said in its voice of three and one, “So it has been asked, and so it shall be done, sleep tonight, and when you awake in two days’ time, the price will be paid, and you shall have what you desire.” And with that, the creature was gone. Without sound or movement, it simply faded into the night, leaving Sam entirely alone.

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Something within Sam left with the demon, dissipated into the stale air. All he had left to do that night was fulfill his end of the bargain. He had slept, and two days later, when he awoke, everything was different. No clear sign of change was present, nothing to indicate what had happened while his body had left him, but Sam knew that everything was different. He had spent that morning in a daze. When he returned to class, he was greeted by another student, tears in her eyes. She told him that Caleb was dead, that he had killed himself, and although he denied it all the rest of his life, Sam knew that Caleb had done no such thing.

Sam never attended his friend’s funeral, and in the months to pass hardly ever spared a thought for him. When he thought of Caleb at all, it was in his moments of despair. When late at night, he fell deep into his familiar pit of cold self-hatred. In that pit, he discovered hate, and he wrapped himself in it. Sam began to hate Caleb, and he blamed him for ever encountering the demon Naberius. As he came to know this hatred for his dead friend, he forgot his shame and his sins. Sam decided that he himself was not to blame. He was the victim of circumstance, and there was no need to think about it any longer. He had regained his certainty, but in those many weeks of shame and recrimination, Sam had once again fallen behind in his studies. His final exams were not a week away, and he had no chance of passing. When he discovered his needful state, the visitor came again. Three knocks had come at the door, and Sam, this time without hesitation, opened the door.

It went on that way for years. Sam would fall into desperation, the knocks would come, and he would make a deal. Each and every time he would sleep and when he woke, he would have everything he wanted. He stopped needing to work or to worry, he had only to open the door, and he would get his heart’s desire, but there was always a price. Every time he woke, Sam would know that something terrible had happened. People would go missing.

First, it was his classmates, but soon it would be his friends. They would suffer an accident or be found to have killed themselves. Sam never blamed himself. He always reassured himself that the beast was to blame. He was just another victim. In all the years since that night, Sam had rationalized his actions, he had only been 19, just a child, and children do stupid things. Now, alone and hunted, he wondered if any of these qualifiers mattered in the face of what had happened. He had built his life on his dealings with the creature that now waited in the storm. His scholarships, his business, and even his position as deacon of the church were all owed to the three voices and one. His family had been the only thing that Sam had created himself, and now even they were gone.

He had kissed his wife and laid his son to bed the same night that he had traded away their lives. He had been having an affair with one of his flock. The red-haired woman had been a faithful member of his church for years and a friend of his wife. The woman had begun to harbor doubts, and she’d told Sam that she was going to come clean. His life was on the precipice of destruction, and it was all his fault. He had been desperate, and with the dreadful need came a familiar sound. Three sharp knocks at the bedroom door. Sam had made the deal eagerly that night. He had convinced himself that everything was going to be ok, but somewhere forgotten and boarded up inside himself, he knew what he had traded away. The rest of his family was gone, all dead in terrible accidents and senseless tragedies. His wife and son were all that was left.

Sam was alone now. There was nothing left. His whole world was inside four faded blue walls and a popcorn ceiling. All that was left outside was the storm and the beast in the night. He didn’t even have his hatred or guiding self-righteousness. He had remembered his long-dead friend for the first time in many years. In the clarity of the memory, nothing was left but the truth. When Sam looked down at his manicured hands and well-kept nails, all he could see anymore was dried blood and clumps of blonde hair beneath his fingernails. At last, he realized it was all his own fault. The thought struck him with the leaden weight. It was all his fault. Nothing had mattered since that night twenty years ago. Everything since had been a drawn-out fantasy. There was nothing left for him but despair and the full weight of what he had done. Sam had no anger left. He didn’t want to fight. He only wanted out. Sam wanted to leave the dream. He needed to forget it all and give up the ghost.

He knew what would come next, and as soon as he’d thought it out, three sharp knocks came at the door. Three came, and three again, but they did not stop there. The murmuring voices were raised. A chorus of whispers came from beyond the door, a thousand senseless speakers united in hunger. The wind picked up, and the knocking did not stop. Three and three again, it went on beyond counting. The wind howled and beat against the walls and windows. Sam gave a last look around the room, at the cell phone lying in a heap on the floor, at the coffee-stained sheets and broken television; this is what his deal had made him. This desolate motel room in the backcountry of Massachusetts was the measure of his life. Sam couldn’t bear it any longer. He picked himself off the floor, stood up straight, and for the first time, without any illusions; Sam Kessler answered the door.

Credit: B. Boethius