



**Troubled**

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Teenage twins Stiina and Silver move into an old country mansion along with their work-addicted mother and computer-obsessed brother Rasmus. At first, everything seems fine in spite of the numerous local legends about mysterious deaths and ghosts haunting their house. The twins' classmates are nice and they have no difficulties making friends. But then, a girl named Rahel returns to school after vacationing in Peru. Everyone either fears or adores her. Silver and Stiina start having bizarre nightmares and can't shake the feeling of being watched. Are these events all tied together, or are their young minds just playing tricks on them?

Troubled is a redesigned reprint from 2011

Award:

2011 Youth Novel Competition, 3rd place

## Reading sample

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Monday, November 1st — Tuesday, November 2nd

Silver dreamed he was standing on a platform as a train blew its whistle before departure. The screech grew louder and louder with every second until he finally woke up and realized it wasn't a train, but the alarm on his phone. He'd set it to wake him up to go running. Silver had gotten a pitiful amount of sleep the previous night, so he'd left school a couple of hours early and gone straight to bed. It'd been a stupid idea to drag himself there and fight drowsiness lesson after lesson, anyway. Half the class failed to show up. He decided not to let silly dreams interfere with his life anymore, which meant sticking to a strict routine.

Pulling on a sweatsuit, Silver went downstairs. He drank half a glass of yogurt while passing through the kitchen, slipped into his frayed sneakers, put on a jacket, and unlocked the door. The air was pleasantly brisk.

As he started jogging down the manor's driveway, he noticed footprints in the snow. Someone had been there. This wasn't unusual in and of itself, as there were a lot of his classmates' tracks in front of the building, too. Yet these circled the entire complex. And not just once—there was a well-defined trail packed down.

Silver felt his stomach churn. Who had been walking around their property so many times overnight, and what for? Could it be some local nutjob? He hadn't heard of any in the area. True, he didn't know the half of things about their new home yet, but still. . . Silver was pretty confident that the tracks had been made at night. He was so groggy in the morning that he failed to notice them in the dim light, but now, the circle stood out plainly.

Silver had read somewhere that a magic ring can be made around someone or something to prevent evil from entering. Was it possible that such a circle had been drawn around the manor? But why? Was it to keep evil out, or in? Could it somehow be tied to Halloween? And who had made it? He could swear it wasn't anyone from their class. No one had left, to his knowledge. Who would have made an effort to do it, and to what purpose?

He pushed the nagging questions to the back of his mind. Right now, it was time for a run. He couldn't let the little things get to him.

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That night when Stiina finally showed up, Silver told his sister about the circle of footprints.

"Footprints?" She stared at him, frowning. "Yeah, walking in the snow leaves footprints. So what?"

"It's a circle. Huge. Didn't you notice it when you were outside? You would've had to cross it."

"I came down the driveway. Are you trying to tell me this circle goes around the whole manor?" she asked incredulously.

Silver nodded. "Some whacko made it by walking around the manor over and over again. That's not normal. It's like someone was trying to work some kind of magic."

"Pff, figures!" She grinned. "There's only one crazy here in the village."

"Anton?"

"Yes, Anton. Duh!"

"Then who?" Silver gave his sister a questioning look.

"Rahel, naturally!" Stiina exclaimed. "Who the hell else do you think?"

Silver shrugged. "The fact that you two have some bone to pick doesn't mean she's an amateur shaman."

"I saw her here about a month ago. I could've sworn she was doing some kind of weird rituals. Whatever she was up to, it wasn't normal."

Silver sighed. He wasn't taking Stiina seriously, but he listened patiently, anyway. He didn't need her to get even angrier if he were to start defending Rahel. They still needed to solve the case of the laundry.

The following night when Stiina was home alone, she got a call from Rein, one of their builders, who asked the girl to go check if he'd left his electric drill at their house. He thought it might be in one of the upstairs rooms.

Stiina sighed. She didn't like the manor, and much less wandering around through it. She'd never even stepped foot in the upstairs rooms of the second wing, nor was she really inclined to now. But Rein was in a hurry. Just her luck. She had to drag herself up there, no getting around it. She couldn't ask Silver to go instead; he wasn't even home. She couldn't ask anyone else, either—that would be ridiculous.

Clenching the flashlight more tightly in her fist (the other half of the house naturally wasn't well lit), Stiina started off down the hallway. The floorboards creaked and squeaked beneath her feet. That's normal—floors are always creaky in old houses, she tried to reassure herself. After pausing for a moment, she continued walking. Suddenly, she felt a cold draft, as if someone had opened an invisible refrigerator right in front of her. Then there was a dull thud.

"Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by thy name . . ." That was the only part she could remember. Or wait! "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

She'd heard somewhere that reciting the Our Father backwards would ward off evil spirits, but she couldn't even say it the right way. Stiina trailed off, unable to remember the rest of the prayer. Something about daily bread and forgiveness? She would've forgiven everyone she could now if it helped. Even Rahel.

Stiina found the drill right where Rein thought he'd left it—the second-to-last room down the hallway. She breathed a sigh of relief, feeling like an absolute idiot, then picked up the tool and turned back. Although Stiina had the urge to sprint she managed to keep every step in check, trying not to walk too hurriedly but also not to dawdle.

As she was about to exit the hallway, Stiina noticed one of the last doors was ajar. But instead of pulling it shut, she suddenly flung it open. The first thing the girl noticed was a trail of tiny dark stains leading to the door. She crouched down to inspect them more closely. Blood. Well, sure, whatever. She didn't want to know what kind of debauchery Silver had gotten into here on Halloween.

The girl had heard from Joosep that they'd all participated in summoning spirits—what a joke! As if there weren't enough here already. Apparently, that was the room. In the middle of the floor was a big white sheet of paper with the alphabet drawn on it, a plate, and a candle. She recognized the plate—it was from their kitchen. Stiina reached out to pick up the plate in order to return it. As she got to her feet, she noticed something else. There was a little lump in one of the corners. Stiina took a cautious step closer and pointed the flashlight at it.

Then, she screamed.

Lying in the corner was a bloody mouse corpse.

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### Friday, November 12th

When Stiina got up and looked into the bathroom mirror, she nearly screamed. No, impossible! Was there something wrong with her eyes? Her next thought was that it was probably one of Rasmus's dumb jokes.

She turned on the faucet and began scrubbing her forehead frantically, but there was no change—the huge bruise was still there. No one had drawn it on her face with a marker while she slept; it was real. Stiina had no idea where it came from. Had she hit her head on something? Had she really been stumbling around the manor last night? Was she sleepwalking?

The girl remembered Silver asking whether she'd been in his room at night. It no longer seemed like such a foolish question, because maybe she actually had. Jesus, and she'd flipped out over something so trivial? Well, no—to be fair, she'd flipped out because Silver had been going through her panty drawer. There obviously wasn't a single logical explanation, but she'd decided to ask her brother about it anyway. So what if he was able to rationalize such behavior, against all odds?

When Stiina had calmed down a little, she studied her face and determined it wasn't completely hopeless—by doing full makeup with foundation, blush, and powder, she could probably manage to conceal the bruise pretty well. Still, it couldn't dispel her astonishment and anxiety. Jesus, she could have fallen down the stairs and broken her neck! In any case, the girl planned to start locking her bedroom door and hiding the key every night. She hoped that if she should go off sleepwalking again, then maybe she'd be unable to find the key in an unconscious state.

When she finally left her room, Stiina felt pleased with her appearance. It had taken almost twenty minutes in front of the mirror, but her look was impeccable. Although her face now was an even apricot shade, she still combed her bangs down over one eye. Just in case.

No one at home said a thing about her abrupt change in appearance. Mom had left early, Silver barely even looked at her, and Rasmus . . . Well, Rasmus was off in his own world, anyway.

"Oh, what an awesome look!" Lisanna squealed as soon as Stiina got to school and removed her hat in the coatroom.

"Get lost, you emo creep!" the girl growled a second later at some seventh-grade clown who nearly ran into her.

"Beat it!" Stiina hissed.

"I don't get where these assholes come from all the time," Marleen sighed.

“Gets worse with every year,” Lisanna added.

“I know,” Stiina said. “Rasmus is the exact same.”

She avoided Rahel’s stare as she entered the classroom. It wasn’t easy, as the girl was regarding her with unconcealed interest. Stiina suspected that she knew, somehow. It couldn’t be true, though—it must have just been her lack of self-confidence. It was impossible for Rahel to know about the bruise running across Stiina’s forehead. She had to be imagining things. She’d even thought that Madis was making fun of her. “What’s the special occasion?” he asked her as he politely held the classroom door open for her. That was just his style. Come to think of it, the boy had never said anything rude to anyone—he was a total gentleman and Stiina, the idiot she was, falsely thought he was making fun of her. She hadn’t answered. Damn it! Stiina was suddenly ashamed of how she’d acted. She promised herself she’d make it up to him during the next passing period. No matter how. She’d think of something.

Right. Now there was just the issue with Rahel. Stiina looked up and saw her classmate was no longer staring at her. That didn’t mean anything, though. She’d felt Rahel’s eyes on her the entire day.

Stiina had a sneaking feeling that the girl was watching her and knew what was going on. And worst of all—that she was getting a kick out of it. “Silver, would you have a minute to stop by my office after class?” the teacher whispered when he turned in his test.

He nodded. That meant Mrs. Lindve had news. He considered whether or not to tell her about the tracks in the snow and the dead cat. Would that make it seem too hocus-pocusy? He made up his mind to simply wait and see how things turned out. If his teacher now had some information that cleared the whole thing up, then he wouldn’t; if she didn’t, then maybe he’d mention it, because she might be able to guess at the identity of the area’s self-styled Satanist.

“I did a little research through a few credible colleagues,” she said with a smile when Silver sat down across from her later.

It turned out that Mirtel had been right. Two people had been murdered in the manor in the summer of 1952: a brother and sister who lived in one of the downstairs rooms for a short time. The details surrounding their deaths were classified and the police never released the results of their investigation.

Silver felt the air suddenly drain from his lungs. Kristofer had been telling the truth. There really was something off about the manor.

Mrs. Lindve continued. The real estate company tasked with selling the manor had asked some psychics to try and contact the spirits haunting the manor, but to no avail. Allegedly, they said they’d never encountered such a strong presence before. Silver would have simply snickered at such talk any time before, but now, he felt a chill wash over him. His teacher didn’t know the psychics’ names but told him which real estate agency it was, though he didn’t see any point in contacting them. If the clairvoyants had failed the first time, then why should it work now? What’s more, they’d no doubt want to be paid for their work. Silver had no cash and Mom would never agree to it, anyway. She hadn’t mentioned anything strange so far, probably because she barely even lived there in the first place.

Once she’d finished, Mrs. Lindve shook her head apologetically. “I really don’t know what advice I can give.”

Silver nodded. He decided not to bring up the footprints or the cat. What would be the point? Obviously, there wasn’t any bodiless—and therefore armless—ghost that had seized the cat, shaken it, and hung it from a tree. Only a person was capable of that. A living human being.

“Oh, right, and one more thing,” Silver’s teacher said when his hand was on the doorknob. “It’s probably not important, but one of my older colleagues told me that those stones on the Ussiaugu farmstead . . . Or do you even know what I’m talking about?” she interrupted herself.

Silver nodded. He noticed that she hadn’t mentioned her colleague’s name.

“Well, that pile of stones formed pretty much overnight a couple of weeks after the deaths. He still remembers it happening, though he was just a boy at the time. No one talked about why those stones were deposited there. Or where they’d come from. In any case, people steered clear of the place from that point forward.”

Silver nodded again. He reckoned the information wouldn’t be of any use in terms of ghosts, but it did say a thing or two about the locals. They were hiding something. No, that seemed dumb. What could anyone hide with a pile of stones? Some secret ritual? Silver hadn’t noticed anyone visiting it. At the same time, how should he know? He didn’t hang around there, either.

The boy resolved to check it out. It had snowed again, which meant that any tracks around the stones should be visible.

“Who used to live there at Ussiaugu?” Silver already knew he wouldn’t get an answer to the question.

"I looked into that, too," Mrs. Lindve replied. "My colleague said he couldn't remember having ever heard about the occupant. But I was still able to find out."

"Really?"

"The farmstead belonged to Kreet Elling, who was declared dead in the summer of 1953."

"Declared dead?"

The teacher nodded. "She'd gone missing without a trace the previous summer."

"You mean the same summer as the killings in the manor?"

She nodded again.