

REVERENCE & DELIVERANCE



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FOREWORD BY SIMON C YOUNG.

I was not supposed to find this diary. That much became clear the moment I cracked open the leather binding, the musty scent of old paper curling into the air like a whisper from the past. The ink, dark and deliberate, had not faded. The words burned with the kind of conviction that only comes from someone who has seen too much. Eleanor B... the name was unfamiliar, yet the weight of her story pressed against me like an unseen hand on my shoulder.

It was tucked away in an attic in a house in Bath, England, wedged between forgotten volumes, its edges frayed and singed, as if someone had once considered destroying it, but failed. Perhaps they tried. Perhaps they burned it, tore the pages, and cast it into the sea, only to wake and find it resting on their bedside table once more. A book that would not be lost.

Only, it was not a single book.

Bound together with ancient twine, I found two identical volumes, one the continuation of the other. A single diary spanning two books, filled from cover to cover in Eleanor's hand. She had run out of space, yet her story had refused to end.

Maybe I should have left them where they lay, buried beneath time and dust. But I didn't. I turned the first page. And now, so have you.

I do not know if I believe everything written here. But what I do know is that Eleanor never meant for this to be published. This was meant to be read in whispers, in candlelit rooms, in the presence of those who already understood. And yet, here it is. In your hands. I, however, still hold the originals.

I have taken a few publishing liberties with the book's format, but only

to preserve it as closely as possible to how she wrote it.

Unlike the previous readers of this testament, I was able to set the books down. I walked away. Whatever they whispered to me in the dark, I chose not to listen. And yet, somehow, I still feel their weight.

What happens next is up to you.

The year is 1887. This is a diary. These words stand as proof of my fear. Fear that gripped me more times than I dare count. And yet, I pulled away eventually. I'm almost free. A sliver of my soul remains bound. That is why you sit before me now. Do not mistake this for chance. You were always meant to find these pages. Just as I was always meant to write them. Long before your hands touched this book, before your eyes traced these words, something in the dark had already been decided. I watched it. It waited. And now, at last, you have arrived.

Throughout my career, I have concealed my true name beneath a dozen pen names, not to hide from Him, but from you. I know you have enjoyed my tales of romance, murder mysteries, high-sea adventures, and quests for lost cities. Perhaps you have also seen many of my novels adapted to the big screen.

Now, I give you something different. A memory. A descent into hell and a fun kind of madness. When you reach the final pages, the choice will be yours. Pull away... or take the greatest step of your life. Read on.

Eleanor B

Silentium est aureum. For ten years, those words echoed in my mind, a whisper in the silence of my thoughts. Silence is golden. But not the kind I once imagined. Not the peaceful hush of solitude. No. It is the silence that fills the void where something should be. The silence that comes after knowledge. The silence of Yh'guath.

This is a warning, though I know it will not be enough. There are those among us, people like you, who crave the knowledge I possess. Who would

sacrifice everything for the *power* hidden in these pages? I was such a person. And I paid the price. Twice.

Perhaps you believe you understand power. You do not. This is not the power of fame or riches, though those things will follow. No. It is the power of knowing. The power of seeing what should remain unseen. The price is steep. And though I have turned away, the path remains open for you.

But you must ask yourself, what are you truly prepared to lose? Do not think of the grand sacrifices, the dramatic gestures. That is not how it begins. It is the quiet things, the pieces of yourself you do not even notice slipping away. The certainty in your thoughts. The voice that once told you right from wrong. The shape of your reflection in the mirror. A name whispered in the dark, and the way your heart flutters before you realize it is your own.

Here, you will find what I found. What was offered to me. The key to the future you seek, if you dare to claim it. But heed this warning: once the door is open, it cannot be closed. I know this now, though I was blind when it was first cracked before me.

Silentium est aureum. The silence you hear now is not the hush of ignorance. No. It is the silence that waits on the other side. It is the hush of a house abandoned not by time but by choice. It is the breath held before the fall. The weight in the air before the storm breaks. It is the silence of something watching. Waiting. Anticipating the moment, you take the first step forward.

You may think you understand the price. But do you truly? There may be a way out early. There may be a way out toward the end. But once you surrender everything, you will have everything. And once the choice is made,

the clock begins to tick. The contract is inked, whether in blood or breath and what is given cannot be taken back.

And you may wonder: when the time comes when you stand on the threshold of eternity with the weight of your soul balanced on the scales, will you still have the strength to step back? Or will you, like so many before you, find that the moment the door opens, you have already stepped through?

So here is the question: once you have tasted what you desire, will you have the will to turn your back on your maker? Your master?

Because if you do not, if you falter for even a moment, He will know.

And He is always listening.

Let us begin.

April 3rd. 1887. A hint of a new future.

I can scarcely describe the weight of the silence that surrounds me now. The quiet in my room feels like a pressing force, the air thick with boredom and writer's block. It has been nearly a month since I received that letter from Annabelle. She is a childhood friend who now lives in southwest London near the Thames. I currently live in northwest London near the smog. We try our best to meet once a month to rekindle our friendship.

The envelope that arrived was so finely crafted, its wax seal embossed with intricate designs I could scarcely make out. Inside, her words, like silk, beckoned me into a world unknown, one I had dismissed as nothing more than whispered gossip among the disillusioned. They were aural delusions. Yet here I am, unable to resist the curiosity of what lay unwritten between the lines. This type of stationery was not her usual brown envelope and smudged ink. She was always different. Always chasing something more than what the world around her could offer. It was not until our last meeting that she confessed her true ambition to me. She had always dreamed of becoming a renowned pianist, one whose name would live beyond the veil of time.

We met at our favourite coffee shop on The Strand, and I remember scoffing at her words. She told me that she was about to become rich, not just well off, but very rich.

'You know,' she said, her voice barely a whisper, 'there are tales of a man... one who can grant you such desires if one is willing to pay the price.'

Her words lingered in my mind long after I had left her, as though they were not spoken by human lips at all but were the murmurings of something far older and darker. But Annabelle was no fool, and neither was I. She was too clever to fall prey to such superstition. Yet, just over a month later, when we

met again, her transformation was undeniable.

The woman who greeted me was unrecognizable. Gone was the frail, somewhat pitiful soul I had once known. In her place stood a woman whose beauty glowed as though she had been touched by something otherworldly. She moved with the grace of a dancer, and her fingers, when they brushed mine, hummed with a quiet power. But it was in her eyes, the sharp gleam that flickered just beneath the surface, that I saw the truth. Then it hit me even harder when she showed me her contract. She was signed up to a major orchestra and had a wealthy patron personally sponsoring her.

‘How did you do it?’ I asked, jealousy creeping into my voice despite myself. ‘How have you achieved all this in such a short time? The last time we met, you... well, you and I were struggling to buy anything.’

She smiled, but the smile was tight as if something within her was strained. ‘I had a... conversation with someone,’ she replied, her tone dismissive. But I could see the hesitation, the lingering doubt in her voice. ‘I will ask him to meet you if you wish. I will ask him to help you.’

‘Who?’ I asked.

‘Mister Alistair Devlin.’

And so, it began.

Only hours after we concluded our luncheon, I could not rid myself of the thought of meeting him, of feeling the power that flows through his veins. What would it be like to be more than what I am? To have wealth, fame, influence, all of it, at my fingertips. But I know this, there must be a price. And Annabelle's eyes, as she spoke of him, told me that the price would be far higher than I could ever imagine. Yet here I am, uncertain but drawn, and now I must make the decision. Will I succumb to the temptation, or will I walk

away? There is still time. What was I thinking? I feel the weight of the unknown pressing down on me, but I do not know for how much longer I will be able to resist.

May 12th. The Lingering Name

The days slip by like the turning of an old clock, each tick growing louder in my mind. I can no longer ignore the quiet pull that gnaws at my soul. It is as though something no, someone, has latched onto my very heart, slowly drawing me towards an abyss I do not fully understand. I had hoped, perhaps foolishly, that the unsettling feelings would pass. But as time stretches on, I find myself closer to the brink than I ever imagined. The thought of Annabelle's invitation to meet him, the man who holds the key to everything she, and I, have ever dreamed of, has stayed with me. Her words echo in my thoughts, replaying over and over in the hushed hours of the night: 'I will ask him to meet you.'

I can no longer say I am uncertain. I have written twice to Annabelle, stressing the urge to meet him, to learn from him, it's too strong to resist. Each day brings me closer to my desires, and yet, I know that something waits on the other side, something I cannot yet comprehend. I concentrate on my job in the printing company, yet I find myself haunted by a name. His name lingers in my thoughts. This job is dull. I desire more.

I had heard nothing of him before Annabelle spoke his name, and yet it feels as though I have always known it. Known him. But that is just a daft notion. As well as working in a publishing house I write short stories for newspapers and magazines in my spare time. Perhaps it is the writer in me yearning for more.

Every moment since I heard his name, and what he had seemingly bestowed upon Annabelle, my dreams are now filled with glimpses of a tall man, his figure commanding. Immaculately dressed, with a vision of wealth and power, he stands before me with an unspoken promise in his eyes. And yet, his presence, though alluring, chills me to my core. Again, she had never described him but who the hell wants to meet an ugly, short, fat and balding stranger?

I find myself drawn to thoughts of him in the quiet hours when the world sleeps. I hear his name even in the rustling of the leaves, in the shadows of the passing clouds. In my waking hours, my hands tremble at the thought of what may come if I meet him. But even more, I wonder what price will be demanded.

May 18th. Rapture.

After receiving her letter on the 15th, we met once more at our favourite coffee shop. She told me, with a look that bordered on both desperation and fear, that he would meet me soon. She had told him everything she knew about me. But then she let slip a faint warning.

‘Be careful what you wish for.’

But how could I be careful when all I’ve ever wanted is within my grasp? If it means giving up something, perhaps my soul, my essence, I wonder if that price would be too high for me to pay. I wonder if there is anything I would not sacrifice.

I cannot escape the gnawing need to meet him. And in my heart, I know it is only a matter of time before I take the step. I could, nay, should, give up hope of wild fantasies. But I yearn to depart this dreary existence.

May 25th. Hope.

The next time I encountered his name it was in the library, on the margin of a book that had no author, only a title that has since slipped from my mind. A scrawled signature, half-erased, the ink sinking into the yellowed paper as though the parchment itself had tried to forget. A. Devlin.

The second was at a company gathering, the kind where conversation is meaningless, but the silences speak volumes. A man, drunk on something stronger than wine, had let slip the syllables with a laugh that did not reach his eyes. The laughter died on his lips the moment he saw my interest. He turned pale, his fingers tightening around his glass until his knuckles blanched.

‘Forget that name,’ he murmured, his voice brittle as glass. ‘It isn’t meant for people like you.’

People like me. As if he already knew what road I was on.

By the third time, I was listening and looking for it. It came in pieces. Hints in old newsprints that my company published, in ledgers with pages missing, in the stories of those who once had wealth and power but no longer did. And then, with a little digging and the help of a colleague in accounts, I found the estate. Eldermoor Hall.

The house that does not appear in many records yet stands as if it has always been there. The address is known to a few but visited by even fewer. And I... I, who had never sought this path, was beginning to feel as though I had already stepped too close. Before I closed my notebook, the lingering scent of burnt paper clung to the air. And I am certain I was alone, and the windows closed.

June 23rd. The Dark Temptation.

It is almost too much to bear. Annabelle, once a mere girl with her fingers fumbling on the piano, now commands the attention of every room she enters. Her name graces the top of every concert program. Her music whispers through the homes of the elite, reaching the ears of those I can only dream of impressing. And yet... what have I accomplished? A handful of rejection letters and empty pages. My heart aches with frustration, but what burns deeper still is the envy that curls around my thoughts. How does one woman achieve so much in such a short time, while I remain stuck in the shadow of obscurity?

The answer, I fear, lies with him. The Man. Alistair Devlin. She speaks of him only in vague terms, of a meeting with someone who holds the power to shape destinies, to lift one from mediocrity to greatness. It is as though she cannot bear to talk about him with any clarity. She avoids specifics, but I know she's hiding something. How could she not? The way she deflects questions, the guarded manner in which she speaks of him. It all speaks of a pact, a deal made in the darkness of unspoken promises.

My thoughts were preoccupied with the pages I could never seem to fill. But now, as the months pass and my own words remain stagnant, I am filled with an insatiable need to understand. To find him. To ask him in person. To make the same bargain Annabelle has made, if only I, too, could taste that success, that recognition, that fame. I cannot be content with the life of a scribbler and a dreamer. I am no longer willing to wait for a world that may never notice me. The world will come to me, just as it came to her. I will take that step. I will meet him. I wrote to Annabelle again today and her reply was swift.

"Do *NOT* go to Eldermoor Hall. They will not let you enter the grounds without

an invitation.

Yours, always,

A.”

June 30th. No hope.

I write this entry with trembling hands, for I know that once I step through this door, I may never return. Yet even as fear coils around my heart, it is eclipsed by a far greater force... desire. Fame. Fortune. To have my name whispered in cafés, and drawing rooms and printed in ink across the world. If, and when, we meet, I pray he will find me a student worthy of his greatness. If he could teach *her* to master the piano in a month, might he grant me the power to lay down a perfect page of prose in a single stroke? And if so... what *other* talents lie within his reach? Could he shape an actress, a singer, a scientist? What else might he bestow upon me?

July 23rd. Renewed Faith.

It had been a month since my last letter from Annabelle. I had written to her weekly at her new address in Maidenhead, Berkshire, desperate to hear the word of Mr Devlin and her new successes. I had read about her new successes in the Times newspaper and a few lesser tabloids, so I cut out the articles to add to my scrapbook. Then the letter arrived.

The envelope was thick, the paper was heavy with an elegant cream hue, the seal and an intricate wax mark I had come to recognize in my recent correspondence with her. I gently sliced it open, my heart racing with anticipation, yet my hands trembled. The letter inside was short but

unmistakably hers.

"Dearest Eleanor,

I trust this finds you well and not growing too weary of waiting. The changes I've undergone are, I think, beyond anything I could have expected. I am to meet Mr Devlin again a week from now, and he has promised to give me a small part in an upcoming performance, one of my compositions, no less. How extraordinary. Yet, I must be honest with you. There is still much that I cannot tell you about his methods. I do not know if I should be grateful or fearful of what he has given me.

I shall arrange for you to come to my home in Maidenhead, Berkshire. I am certain he will entertain a meeting with you. Be ready to travel on the 30th. Take the day off if you have to or call in sick. Pack an overnight bag. It's happening. But I warn you, Eleanor, what you seek may not be what you expect.

Yours, always,

A."

I stared at the letter for a moment, feeling a mixture of exhilaration and dread. I had not only received a glimpse into her success but also a whisper of what I had so longed for, an introduction to the man behind her transformation. I could scarcely believe it. My hand hovered over the paper, considering the choice before me. To follow her advice and meet Mr Devlin... or to retreat to the safety of my own life, a life which, though unremarkable, had at least allowed me some semblance of control. But the seed of envy that had sprouted months ago, when Annabelle first spoke of him, had only grown stronger. What was it about this man, this mysterious Mr Devlin, that had changed her so completely? Was it truly just talent, or something darker?

I gathered my thoughts, clasped the letter to my chest, and made my decision. I would go.

The days that followed were a blur of preparations. I had written to Annabelle, confirming my intent to meet Mr Devlin, and she had replied with a sense of urgency, instructing me to travel at once. The anticipation in her letter, her words tinged with something unspoken, only fuelled my desire to go. I packed my bags with a mix of nervousness and excitement, unsure of what awaited me but certain of one thing: I had to know.

July 30th. Oh my gosh.

The journey via train on the Great Western Railway to Berkshire was long and dusty. I then took a hansom cab through winding and unfamiliar roads to her home. The entire way I clutched my resolve as tightly as the small valise at my side. When the carriage finally pulled up to the gates of her new home, a sprawling estate that seemed to stretch endlessly toward the horizon, I was taken aback. Annabelle had always been somewhat modest in her tastes, but this... this was something else. One minute in an apartment in London, the next... this.

The mansion loomed before me, its stone walls ivy-clad, the windows darkened with curtains that gave the place an air of secrecy. It was magnificent, yet eerily so. The grandeur seemed too deliberate, too perfect, as though it had been built for someone other than the woman I had once known. As I approached the front door, the heavy brass knocker seemed to gleam under the overcast sky, casting a glint of foreboding light. I hesitated for a moment, wondering what Annabelle might have truly become, or perhaps what she had agreed to in exchange for such opulence. But then, a

voice called from within.

‘Miss Eleanor, I presume?’

I turned to see a tall figure standing at the door, a manservant with an impeccable uniform. His expression was unreadable, but his presence seemed to immediately set the tone. He stepped aside and gestured for me to enter.

‘Please, Miss Eleanor, we’ve been expecting you.’

He took my coat and bags with a nod and a smile, ushering me inside. The hallway was long and lined with portraits and paintings of people I didn’t recognize, their eyes following me as I passed. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I was being watched, not by the portraits, but by something else. I glanced around, but no one else appeared.

I was led through the house to a sitting room where Annabelle sat by the fire, a book resting in her hands. The flickering light illuminated her features, but there was something different about her. She no longer had the wild look of someone striving for success. No, she had the calm demeanour of a woman who had already achieved her dreams. When she saw me, her face broke into a smile, but it was faint, not quite as warm as I had remembered. She stood and embraced me, but there was an odd hesitation in her touch, a distance that hadn’t been there before.

‘Eleanor,’ she said softly, ‘I’m so glad you could come.’

‘Annabelle,’ I replied, trying to mask the unease in my voice, ‘I hardly recognize you. What... what is all this?’

Her eyes flickered toward the window, briefly. I thought I saw something darker pass behind them. Then, with a delicate sigh, she spoke again.

‘I knew you would come, eventually. You always were the one to follow the path the furthest. But be warned, Eleanor. The man you are about to meet is

not like anyone you have known.'

My heart skipped a beat, 'Mr Devlin?'

Annabelle nodded, 'Yes. But... it is not simply his teaching that you should be wary of. It is the price. What he offers is not freely given. And once you make the choice, there is no turning back.'

I swallowed hard, a mix of fear and desire clashing within me. 'What is it he offers, Annabelle? What is it you've received from him?'

She hesitated with the words weighing on her. 'Everything,' she whispered, 'and nothing. Success, fame, the ability to do... whatever I wish. But at a cost, I cannot yet fully understand. Eleanor, I've come to see him as both saviour and... something far darker.'

My mind raced. This was exactly what I had been waiting for, hoping for. A glimpse of the life I had always dreamed of. Yet hearing it from Annabelle, seeing the conflict in her eyes, brought a cold chill to my bones. 'Where is he?' I asked, almost breathlessly. 'I want to meet him.'

I remember her eyes softened with concern, but she nodded and stood.

'I will take you to him directly. But remember, once you cross that threshold, there is no return. He will charm you and enthrall you. Encapsulate you. You will never be the same, Eleanor.'

I nodded, unable to speak. My heart was pounding in my chest, each step toward the door feeling like it would either lead to salvation or damnation. As we walked through the brightly lit corridors of the house, I noticed the atmosphere grow colder, the walls closing in, as though the very air in the house was thick with something ancient, something that did not belong.

Finally, we reached a small, nondescript door at the end of the hall. Annabelle paused, turning to look at me one last time. Her expression was unreadable,

but I could see the shadows of doubt in her eyes.

‘Are you sure, Eleanor?’ she asked softly.

I took a deep breath and nodded again. ‘Yes. I have come this far. I will not turn back now.’ She pushed open the door, revealing a small, dimly lit study. A fire crackled in the hearth. And there, standing by the desk, was Mr Devlin. As I stepped inside, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I had crossed some invisible line, a threshold beyond which I would never be the same. The fire’s glow danced along the dark wood of the room, casting fleeting shadows that seemed to move on their own. Mr Devlin was nothing like what I had imagined him to be. There was something more to him, a presence that filled the room with an almost tangible weight. His sharp, calculating gaze swept over me as I entered, his lips curling into the slightest smile.

‘Miss Eleanor,’ he greeted, his voice smooth and measured, ‘It is a pleasure to meet you.’

I found myself unnerved by the atmosphere in the room, and by his very presence. The strongest feeling I had about him was revulsion. His breath was a mixture of damp ash and a hint of coal. Annabelle had stepped aside, retreating to a chair by the fire. She did not speak, but her eyes lingered on me, full of meaning. He turned toward the windows, and with a casual wave of his hand, the air in the room seemed to shift. He gestured toward the windows on either side, his voice soft, almost too casual.

‘Look outside, Miss Eleanor.’

I followed his motion, my gaze falling to the view. I was not prepared for what I saw. Outside one window, I could make out a sprawling manor, its towers reaching toward the sky, sitting atop a hill overlooking a pristine lake. The sun reflected off the water, giving it an ethereal, almost dreamlike quality. Beyond

the second window, another mansion loomed, though this one was far more modern, sleek, symmetrical, and set against a background of lush, manicured gardens. The grandeur of it nearly took my breath away.

‘Do you see them?’ he asked, his voice a soft murmur in the background. ‘Each of these homes belongs to one of my clients. People much like yourself and Annabelle. They have been able to purchase such estates thanks to the wealth and success I’ve afforded them.’

I felt a pang of envy. There were dozens more of these homes, all visible from where I stood. They were perched atop hills, peaking through woodland, overlooking lakes, their windows glistening with wealth and power. Flags with coats of arms flapped in the wind. Mansions gleamed like jewels in the distance, their imposing silhouettes cutting through the mist.

‘And the home you are in now is...’ he asked.

‘Annabelle’s,’ I whispered, though I hadn’t meant to speak aloud. He turned his gaze toward me, and the smile on his lips deepened, though there was no warmth in it.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘and my home is also not far from here. All of these... mine to give, and theirs to take, should they choose to walk the path I’ve set before them.’

I swallowed, the weight of his words sinking in. I came here with so many hopes and desires. I had dreamed of success, fame, and wealth... but this was something entirely different. The idea that he could grant such things with a mere word, a simple contract, left me with both longing and uneasy dread.

‘But before you make your decision, Miss Eleanor,’ he continued, his tone now almost jovial, ‘I would like to have a brief conversation. Ten minutes, if you don’t mind. I will take that time to better understand your desires, your wants,

your needs, and then, I will decide if I can be of service to you and you... to me.’ I stood there, rooted to the spot, unsure of what to say. His presence was so commanding, his words so measured, that I found it hard to speak. I glanced toward Annabelle, but she simply sat in her chair, her face unreadable.

Mr Devlin took a step closer, and I couldn’t help but notice how the room seemed to grow colder and darker, the flickering firelight no longer providing any comfort.

‘Shall we sit, Miss Eleanor?’ he asked, his gaze never leaving mine.

I nodded slowly and moved toward the chair he gestured to, my heart pounding in my chest. As I sat, the seconds seemed to stretch, the weight of the moment pressing down on me. I had been offered a chance, a way to fulfil my deepest desires, but I felt as though I was on the edge of something far more dangerous than I had anticipated.

‘Tell me,’ he began, his voice low and inviting, ‘what is it that you truly want, Miss Eleanor?’

I could feel the weight of his question hanging in the air, thick and suffocating. His voice, though calm, seemed to reach deep into my heart, pulling out all the desires I had kept hidden, all the dreams I had clung to, all the longings I had never dared to speak aloud. What did I want? I opened my mouth, but for a long moment, no words came. I could hear the clock ticking softly in the corner of the room, the rhythmic sound echoing in my ears like a countdown, and the fire crackling, the flames twisting in unnatural shapes, casting shadows that danced around the room. I looked to Annabelle for guidance, but her eyes were lowered now, her lips pressed together in a way that told me she was no longer fully in this moment. She was waiting, as I was, for something to happen, for some unseen force to take hold. Mr Devlin’s eyes never left me,

his sharp gaze never wavering, as though he could see right through me, through every part of me I had buried deep inside. There was something in his look, something ancient and patient as if he had all the time in the world to wait for me to speak, to break. I swallowed, trying to collect myself. 'I want,' I started, but my voice was almost a whisper. I realised that the word *want* was too forceful. I cleared my throat and tried again. 'I would *like* to be a writer, Mr Devlin. A famous one. One whose name is spoken in every home, whose books are read by all.'

His lips curled upward at the edges, as if he had known this was coming. 'Ah, the importance of self-indulgence. And why do you desire such things, Miss Eleanor? Fame. Wealth. Recognition?' He tilted his head, his dark eyes glinting like polished obsidian. 'What will you do with it once you have it?'

The room seemed to grow colder with every word, as though the shadows were moving in closer, tightening around me. I felt myself shiver, but I refused to look away. 'I –' I began again, but the words died in my throat. What would I do with it all? What could I do? I hadn't thought that far ahead. 'I suppose,' I said, my voice shaking ever so slightly, 'I want to prove that I am capable of more than the world has deemed me. I want... to leave a legacy. To be remembered long after I'm gone. I wish to gain wealth and fortune as Annabelle has.'

Mr Devlin's smile grew wider, but there was no warmth in it. Only something colder, darker. 'And is that all, Miss Eleanor? Or is there something more? Something deeper?'

I hesitated, and at that moment, the room seemed to close even tighter still. My chest felt heavy with the weight of his questions, and yet, I knew I had to answer. I had to reveal the truth of my desires, even if it scared me to do so.

I looked up at him, meeting his gaze directly, and the words spilt out before I could stop them. 'I want to be perfect. In every way. I want to write without effort. To create prose as effortlessly as Annabelle plays the piano. I want to be as good as she is. To know that I am worthy of the same recognition. I want to be... admired.'

A low, almost inaudible chuckle escaped Mr Devlin's lips. The sound sent a chill down my spine, and I could feel a tremor run through me.

'Ah,' he murmured, his voice low and smooth. 'Now we are getting somewhere, Miss Eleanor. A little elaboration on your first... instincts.'

For a moment, I thought he might say more, but instead, he simply waved a hand toward the windows again, his eyes lingering on me for a beat longer than necessary. The air in the room grew thick with anticipation, and I felt the oppressive weight of something ancient and unfathomable pressing in on me.

'You see, Miss Eleanor,' he said, his voice drawing me in with a hypnotic cadence, 'desire is a dangerous thing, 'it consumes us and drives us to do things we would not normally consider. And once you surrender to it... once you place yourself in my hands, you cannot turn back. But... if you are willing, if you are truly ready, I can give you everything you seek. You desire. You want.'

The fire flickered, casting strange shadows across his face, making his features appear even sharper, more otherworldly. For the first time, I noticed the faintest glimmer of something else in his eyes. Something dark and endless. I was about to interject but...

'However,' he added, his voice now carrying an edge of finality, 'I will not make a decision yet. I will take my time, Miss Eleanor. I need to be certain you are worthy of what I can offer.'

The words struck me like a cold slap. I wanted to protest, to beg him to make

the offer now, but something held me back. Politeness perhaps? Manners? I remember being contrite and accepting my fate.

‘I will write to you soon, once I have decided,’ he concluded, his tone turning businesslike, as though this were a mere formality. ‘For now, I suggest you enjoy your time here, Miss Eleanor. Think about your desires. What you truly want. Refine your list of wants.’

For a long moment, I could not move. I had walked into this room full of hopes and dreams, but now I wondered if I had made a terrible mistake. ‘I will await your decision, Mr Devlin. Thank you,’ I said, my voice barely whispered.

He nodded once, his smile still there, though it now seemed more like an afterthought than a friendly gesture. ‘You will know when the time comes, Miss Eleanor,’ he said softly.

And with that, he stepped away, leaving me to stare at the hills and scenery once more. The homes of his clients now seemed more like prisons than palaces. But at this point in my life, I didn’t care. I wanted what they had, what Annabelle had.

Alistair’s voice drifted through the room like smoke, smooth and unhurried. ‘Each of those homes,’ he continued, his tone now as easy as though we were discussing the weather, ‘was earned through nothing more than the focused attention of the mind. One by a man who could capture the future in mechanical form, another by a philosopher whose thoughts could bend the very fabric of society, and the last by a painter who, if one were to believe the rumours, could make even the heavens weep with his brush.’ He paused, his eyes locking onto mine. ‘My clients,’ he said, that word carrying weight as if it were a secret, ‘are not mere men or women of the world. They are now its architects. And each of them has made their dreams flesh, simply by walking

the path I offer.'

I tried to breathe evenly, but his words seemed to settle into my bones, leaving me with a strange sense of disquiet. This *is* what I think it is.

He turned toward me, his gaze becoming sharper. 'Now, my dear, what of you? What is it that you desire most? I have listened to the whispers of your soul. You've been a writer of the finest prose, but I sense something darker burns beneath the surface.' A smile curled at the corner of his lips. 'I wish to understand your true wants. You have heard of my reputation, yes? I am not known for giving lightly. But once you step into my circle, your wishes are as good as granted.'

A small shiver ran through me, and I could not suppress the unease rising like bile in my throat. He was not just speaking to me. He was speaking through me as if he had known all the desires I had hidden even from myself. Yes, I had more wants and desires.

He stepped closer now. He knelt before me. His presence was a weight I could not ignore. 'Let us talk,' he said, his voice barely above a whisper, as though the room itself held its breath. 'You will tell me your heart's desire, and I will give you the gift you seek. Or perhaps more than you can even imagine. But first, I must understand you. And then, once I have weighed you, I will, in a month, make my decision.'

I could not move. I could not speak. His eyes never left mine, and I felt as if he were pulling my very thoughts from me, studying each one like an intricate puzzle.

'Ten minutes,' he continued, his voice smooth, confident. 'Just ten minutes, Miss Eleanor and I will decide if I shall write to you soon.'

I opened my mouth, but no words came. He had taken them, I thought. He

had taken my words, and my thoughts, and now, I was nothing more than a piece of his grand design.

He smiled again, but there was nothing warm about it. ‘Take your time, of course,’ he said, almost like a mockery of kindness. ‘After all, what is a moment for someone who has all the time in the world? I shall speak with Annabelle in private for a moment outside and return directly.’

I left Annabelle’s home shortly after. I loved her as a true friend but the thought of discussing what had transpired needed solace for me to truly understand.

I don’t recall the journey to the station or the train back to London. The streets and towns passed in a blur, as if I were no longer in control of my senses, my thoughts clouded by the unsettling presence of Mr Devlin. My mind raced, each moment of our meeting replaying it all in agonizing detail. I couldn’t shake the weight of his gaze, nor the strange, almost hypnotic effect he had upon me. His breath, that sickening stench of ash and burned flesh, lingered in my nostrils, despite the distance between us now. The further I moved from Annabelle’s estate, the more I felt the pull of something invisible, something darker that seemed to reach out for me. I tried to push it from my mind, to focus on the here and now, but the thought of him lingered, like smoke in the air. How could I describe it? I knew not to trust him, yet there was a part of me that desperately wanted to. A part that yearned for success, the fame that I’d longed for all my life. Could he truly give me that?

July 31st. Back home.

I awoke the next morning in my small apartment in London, yet the room felt unfamiliar as if I had awoken in a different world. I could still feel the echo of

his presence, like a shadow cast upon my soul. My mind drifted to Annabelle's transformation, to her sudden rise to fame. Was it possible that Mr Devlin held the secret to greatness? And if so, would I be foolish to reject the offer he might extend to me?

As I sat at my desk, the pen in my trembling hand, I knew that I stood on the precipice of a decision that could change the course of my life forever. There was no turning back once I stepped through that door. I had heard the whispers of a contract, the price that would be demanded. But for the first time in my life, I felt the allure of something greater than my self-doubt. I had to know more. I had to take the risk.