

THE NECESSARY GIRL



The Devil doesn't lean on spectacle. He has no thirst for pearly gates or streets of gold. When he sends his Doorman, it's obligation, not theater. Efficient and punctual. Heaven has choirs; Hell has clerks.

Three taps at the door. Martin was expecting this visit, but payment was not due until tomorrow.

The Doorman was tall and pale, his suit the color of ink. He sat at the table and removed a ledger and parchment from a worn leather satchel.

The Devil had offered a millennium of delight and debauchery, and Martin pursued that, for a time. In the man he had been, Martin was the perfect agent of chaos. The Devil had chosen well.

Martin wasn't that man anymore. Over the centuries, he had found clarity and purpose. He turned the tables on the Devil. First as a wandering healer in the middle ages, to today – a global leader in bioscience and scientific philanthropy.

But he needed more time!

He was so close. Eradicating disease. Ending hunger. A total reset for mankind.

“You’ve come early to gloat?” Martin asked.

The Doorman set a fresh contract on the table. “You wish to renegotiate terms.”

It wasn’t a question. The Devil was always willing to make a deal, but there was a price – the Devil always had a price.

Martin took the parchment and scanned the document. “No.”

A name was written at the bottom of the paper: *Cordelia*.

His beloved daughter.

Martin had many wives and children over the years. He loved each with all his heart, but time was a juggernaut that couldn’t be bargained with, couldn’t be budged. It marched forward. Everyone he loved was stolen from him. He would mourn, but time heals, as they say. He would reinvent himself in a new place with a new name. Eventually open himself again to love.

Cordelia was different. At sixteen, she was brilliant beyond her years. She had inherited all of his passion but none of his burden.

“A soul will bathe in the Lake tomorrow. It is necessary.” With that, the Doorman vanished.

Martin tossed the contract on the table and slumped into a chair.

In the morning, Cordelia moved through the house like a ray of sunshine. Joy followed in her wake. She cooked breakfast for the two of them, and while they ate, she spoke of a paper she read on synthetic biology that described how scientists could engineer genetic circuits within DNA. She beamed, always anxious to earn his respect and his approval.

She didn't need it – she had won that long ago. She was strong and confident, those eyes so bright with curiosity and wonder. She could have accomplished much, if given the chance.

He cursed his rational mind, which could so easily justify the cost of a single life, even if it meant saving billions - and billions more yet to be born. He tried to think of them, to see those faces.

Martin followed her throughout the day. From room to room. He couldn't help but hover. He wanted to savor every moment.

In the afternoon, Cordelia tried to get some homework done. He goaded her to come outside, spend some time together. It was a beautiful day! She called him silly, said he was acting strange, and tossed a stuffed animal at him. He finally relinquished.

In the evening, he followed her to the studio. She sat in front of an easel, where a watercolor daffodil was coming to life. She had a smudge of yellow paint on her chin. Martin gestured, and she wiped at the stain. That just made it worse. It was now spread across her cheek. She grinned.

He smiled back, but it felt wrong on his face. Like an imposter, a mask hiding the ugliness underneath.

He wanted to give her an explanation. Make her understand the importance of his work. But he didn't need to do that. He knew she would understand. She would probably agree and make the same decision he was forced to make. That's what hurt the most.

In the evening, they curled up on the couch to watch a documentary about kangaroos. Cordelia snuggled up close and put her head against his shoulder, just as she'd done as a child. Martin put his arm around her, pulled her close.

He studied her face – catalogued her skin, the curve of her nose, her dimples, every curl in her hair. He let it burn into his memory. He watched until her eyelids grew heavy. His heart sank when she got up, kissed him on the forehead, and went upstairs to bed.

Martin turned off the TV and sat alone in the dark.

It was nearly midnight. Martin stood in the hallway outside Cordelia’s bedroom. He quietly opened the door, just a crack, enough to see her sleeping. She looked peaceful, content. Even now she seemed to have a smile on her face.

“I’m so sorry, my love,” he whispered.

He went downstairs and entered his study. The air here felt thick in his lungs, like he was drowning. The contract was on the desk.

He picked up a pen. It was cold and heavy in his hand.

The next morning, the house was somber and silent. The sunshine and the joy and the color was gone. What had once felt like a home was now a relic, a lonely archive of books and notes and forgotten dreams.

Martin wasn’t in his bedroom. He wasn’t in the kitchen or the sitting room or the gardens.

Cordelia called his name. No response. She checked his study.

She found the contract, and the note her father left for her.

A complete detail of his life, his work, his hubris, and his burden.

A burden she now carried.

This was my submission for Round One of the [NYC Midnight Scary Story Challenge 2025](#).

Of 3,600 entries, my story placed 10th in my group and got me through to the second round.

Contestants were tasked with writing a story under 400 words, and each submission was required to include the following:

1. Situation: Tomorrow
2. Action: Updating
3. Character: A Doorman