

Eleanor

By: Brooke Kelly

I carefully stepped up the damp, stone stairs to the beige two-story home. Maybe the small porch had just been cleaned, or maybe the sprinklers ran too close to the family's home, but the dampness certainly had not come from the morning's crisp, blue skies. I resituated my backpack, filled with clothes for the weekend stay, and rang the doorbell, also damp and cold to the touch.

The dark wooden door slowly creaked open to reveal a tall, thin woman. She wore a knee-length floral dress with a pink sash tied around the waist. A crisp, white smile adorned the lower half of her face, but her eyelids drooped over her dark irises. She made no move to greet me.

"I'm Herron. I'm here to take care of Eleanor for the weekend." I reached my hand out for her to shake. I figured she would want to spend some time with me, given she was leaving her six-month-old daughter with a woman she'd never met. I thought it was odd that she didn't want to meet me sooner, but when I asked my friend about it, she just told me that her aunt was an "odd woman".

The woman didn't accept my outstretched hand but kept her anomalous grin. "You'll call me Mrs. Glass. Would you like to come in?"

"I would love to!" I didn't let my cheery smile or proud posture falter.

The woman's frown lines and crow's feet implied that she had waited past her prime to have children. She looked particularly tired this morning. Planning a weekend getaway while caring for a child under one must take a toll on someone.

Mrs. Glass took a step back, nearly vanishing into the shadow of the front door. I entered the dim foyer. Above me, a small, black chandelier hung but didn't shine. The room smelled musty, and I half-expected to see mold on the navy-blue walls. The dark wooden floors were reflective, even in the low light, and, after a few steps, I realized they were wet. I turned to Mrs. Glass, who was standing in front of the closed front door, with her fingers laced, hands resting on her stomach, mouth set in a straight line. "I'm so sorry. Have you been mopping, Mrs. Glass?"

She cocked her head to one side and narrowed her eyes slightly. "No," she answered, flatly. I decided not to press the issue. After an uncomfortable moment, Mrs. Glass gestured to her right. "This is the dining room, though we only use it for special occasions." Through a wooden archway, a circular black table rested heavily in the center of the room. Dust accumulated on an empty red vase in the center of the table. From what I could see, the maroon walls were devoid of any paintings, photos, or decoration. "Through the door," she went on, taking long strides across the foyer, "is the kitchen and living room."

Mrs. Glass pushed open the swinging door, and disappeared behind it, not looking back to see if I was following. I made my way to the door and gave it a light push with my palm. It was wet, too. Maybe it was just cold. Despite my thick, wool sweater, it was drafty in here. Surely, the door was cold, not wet. I curled my hand into a fist and pushed away the thought that my hand now felt damp. *Nervous sweat?*

The room was gorgeous, much larger than the unassuming entryway and quaint dining room. This room, still, was illuminated only by any light seeping through the blinds, but the lighter beige color of the walls made the space feel much less oppressive. Directly next to me was a simple set of stairs, and a burgundy L-shaped couch with a cushy, matching ottoman was placed in the far-left corner of the room, under a window, covered with dark curtains, making the pattern of the rug difficult to quite make out.

The right section of the open room served as a kitchen. Fairly large, with a gorgeous island, the kitchen was made of dark cupboards and reflective marble countertops, but I thought I would enjoy the space to prepare meals. Certainly, lots of counter space to work with. The shiny, black fridge was bare of any magnets, photos, or grocery lists, and the same blankness carried over to the counters. It appeared the family kept coffee makers, toasters, and blender stored away, or didn't keep them at all.

"You have a beautiful home." I pushed my smile back to my face, hoping to cheer up Mrs. Glass, who I now thought was beginning to frown.

"Thank you." The woman stood a bit straighter and held her head a bit higher. "I insist the place be just as clean as I left it when I return," she instructed sternly.

"Yes, ma'am," I replied with a polite, closed-mouth smile.

Mrs. Glass pursed her lips, surveyed the room, and let out a long, slow breath. "I'm off!" Her smile returned to her mouth but never reached her eyes. She pivoted in place and walked stiffly towards the foyer.

"I haven't met the baby," I protested, following behind her steps. She stopped just before the swinging door.

She didn't turn around. She slowly and carefully told me, "Eleanor is upstairs having a bath."

My eyes flashed towards the stairs. "A bath? Alone?" I took a shallow breath. "You said on the phone that Eleanor is six months old."

My heart pounded quickly against my ribcage, and I could make out the faint sound of splashing. The woman's shoulders tensed. "Eleanor was six months old."

Mrs. Glass began to turn, her face slowly coming back into my view. Her mouth was curved into a dramatic frown, but her eyes were wide open, looking directly into mine. She faced me. Unspeaking, unmoving, unblinking she stared into my eyes.

I looked towards the stairs. "Eleanor is taking a bath," Mrs. Glass repeated, her voice suddenly deep and gravelly. The sound of rushing water seemed to grow louder as I returned my gaze to the thin-lipped woman. "And I am leaving." She took long strides out of the house, and I listened, frozen, to the clacks of her heels until the noise was replaced by a *slam* and faint running water.

I swallowed hard, my breathing labored. I spun to face the stairs and slouched my shoulders, allowing my bag to fall off my back. I bounded up the steps two-at-a-time, refusing to look behind me. Grabbing onto the thin metal railing, I pulled myself onto the landing. I turned to the carpeted hallway and stepped forward. The carpet squelched under my foot fall, water pooling around my foot.

I continued my soggy walk down the hallway. I stopped outside the first door on the right. Rushing water splashed behind it and smacked the tile of the room. I squeezed my eyes shut and bit my lip as I twisted the doorknob.

I found the room in disarray. The showerhead, faucet, and sink were all pouring murky liquid. The tub was overflowing, pattering onto the tile beneath it, light pink bathmat totally soaked. Every surface in the small room was sloshing with water. The towels hanging on the wall were dark and dripping.

I rushed to the tub, falling to my knees in front of it, coldness soaking through my jeans. I gasped and released the breath in an involuntary sob. I reached towards the tiny body. The baby was facedown, her skin tinted blue in the icy water. My sleeves became soaked as I pulled her out of the water. I flinched at the coldness of her skin but brought her to my chest, cradling her stiff body as best I could. Her mouth was open, but her eyes were shut delicately. I placed my hand on the back of her head, holding her face to my shoulder.

“Eleanor,” I sobbed, hot tears mixing with the frigid water that fell from the edge of the tub to my knees.