



Darker Still: A Novel of Magic Most Foul

By Leanna Renee Hieber

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A lush gothic tale that begs for reading...I couldn't put it down." ?New York Times bestselling author Sarah Maclean

I was obsessed.

It was as if he called to me, demanding I reach out and touch the brushstrokes of color swirled onto the canvas. It was the most exquisite portrait I'd ever seen?everything about Lord Denbury was unbelievable...utterly breathtaking and eerily lifelike.

There was a reason for that. Because despite what everyone said, Denbury never had committed suicide. He was alive. Trapped within his golden frame.

I've crossed over into his world within the painting, and I've seen what dreams haunt him. They haunt me too. He and I are inextricably linked?bound together to watch the darkness seeping through the gas-lit cobblestone streets of Manhattan. And unless I can free him soon, things will only get *Darker Still*.

Magic Most Foul Series:

Darker Still (Book 1)

The Twisted Tragedy of Miss Natalie Stewart (Book 2)

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Editorial Review

Review

"Hieber applies some real imagination to the story. Her depiction of the dark magic involved and of the demon's murderous activities adds some good suspense . . . a good romp." - *Kirkus Reviews*

""*Darker Still* was delightfully strange and charming. The book absorbed me within its first couple of pages. . . . This novel is chock-full of mystery, suspense and a most magical romance! I absolutely loved it and I absolutely recommend it."--Kristin Feliz, Growing Up YA" - *Growing Up YA*

""I highly recommend this book! It was just the right mix of paranormal and romance and I hope you all like it as much as I did!"--Sara Teitelman, Catching Books" - *Catching Books*

""*Darker Still* screamed eerie, spooky suspense from the first page and its claws dug into me and didn't let go. . . a masterpiece-twisted, dark, and chillingly possessive. . . I highly recommend *Darker Still* as a must read."--Debbie Wentlein, I Heart YA Books" - *I Heart YA Books*

""This is one of the most amazing Young Adult books I've read this year. Leanna Renee Hieber takes you to a time and place where anything and everything is possible."--Colette chmiel, A Buckeye Girl Reads" - *A Buckeye Girl Reads*

""*Darker Still* is such a unique novel, in a very good way!"--Novia Chang, Truly Bookish" - *Truly Bookish*

""*Darker Still* is such a unique novel, in a very good way!"--Novia Chang, Truly Bookish" - *Good Reads*

""*Darker Still* is such a unique novel, in a very good way!"--Novia Chang, Truly Bookish" - *Barnes & Noble Review*

""Gothic, dark and oh so good!"--Novia Chang, @TrulyBookish" - *Twitter Mention*

""The whole book was an amazing read. The setting, the story, the characters, the plot, the pacing of the story was perfect for me.

Five stars!!!"--Sandee Quimbao, Random Ramblings" - *Random Ramblings*

""It hit me within the first three pages - *Darker Still* is a beautiful novel. It gives off an air of sophistication, it's written so well with such great language."--Sandra Hancock, Panda Reads" - *Panda Reads*

""I . . . ended up loving and thoroughly enjoying this book!"--Breena Staats, Esther Ever After" - *Esther Ever After*

""I . . . ended up loving and thoroughly enjoying this book!"--Breena Staats, Esther Ever After" - *Good Reads*

""*Darker Still* is a captivating glance into a bygone era."--Heidi" - *Good Reads*

""Most Gothic novels have a certain "feel" for me – dark, haunted, lush, and mysterious – and *Darker Still* embraced that tone from page one."--Amanda Ryan, The Raunch Dilettante" - *The Raunch Dilettante*

""*Darker Still* was an entertaining read."--Anne Dwyer, *Unwasted Words*" - *Unwasted Words*

About the Author

Raised in rural Ohio and obsessed with the Victorian Era, Leanna's life goal is to be a "gateway drug to 19th century literature." An actress, playwright and award winning author, she lives in New York City and is a devotee of ghost stories and Goth clubs. Visit www.leannareneeheber.com

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June 1, 1880

Sister Theresa handed me this farewell gift with such relief that it might as well have been a key to her shackles. I'm a burden to her no more. Someone else will have to glue her desk drawers closed and exchange her communion wine for whiskey.

But now I trade the prison of the asylum for another. The prison of home.

Oh, I suppose I ought to clarify the word asylum, as it has its connotations.

The only illnesses the students of the Connecticut Asylum have are those of the ears and the tongue. The mute, or the deaf, are not the mentally ill. Those poor souls are cloistered someplace else, thank God. We had enough troubles on our own.

But now that I'm home, a prison undercurrent is here too. The desperate question of what is to be done with me lingers like dark damask curtains, dimming the happy light of our dear little East Side town house. For unfortunates like me, firstly, a girl and, secondly, a mute girl, life is made up of different types of prisons, I've learned. If I were a man, the world could be at my command. At least it would be if I were a man and could speak.

Every night I pray the same prayer: that I may go back to that year of Mother's death and startle my young self to shake the sound right out of that scared little girl. Maybe I'd have screamed. A beautiful, loud, and unending scream that could carry me to this day. A shout that could send a call to someone, anyone, who could help me find my purpose in this world. But since that trauma, I've yet to utter a word. Not for lack of trying, though. I simply cannot seem to get my voice through my throat.

I've often thought of joining a traveling freak show. At least there I wouldn't have to deal with the ugliness of people who at first think I'm normal and then realize I can't speak. I hate that moment and the terrible expression that comes over the person's face like a grotesque mask. The apologetic look that thinly veils pity but cannot disguise distaste, or worse, fear. If I were already in a freak show, people would be forewarned, and I could avoid that moment I've grown to despise more than anything in the world. But would I belong beside snake charmers and strong men, albinos and conjoined twins? And if not, where do I belong, if anywhere?

• • •

As a child, I heard a Whisper, a sound at the corner of my ear, and saw a rustle of white at the corner of my eye. I used to think it was Mother. I used to hope she would show me how to speak again or explain that the shadows I see in this world are just tricks of the eyes. But she never revealed herself or any answers. And I stopped believing in her. I stopped hearing the Whisper. But what does remain are the shadows that come to me at night. There are terrible things in this world.

I don't have pleasant dreams. Only nightmares. Blood, terror, impending apocalypse. Great fun, I assure you. (Perhaps it's good I can't speak; I'd share dreams at some normal girl's debutante ball and send her away screaming or fainting.) There are times when I feel I need to scream. But I can't.

I've so much to say but don't dare open my mouth. The sounds aren't there. I tried, years ago. Therapists soon gave up on me, saying I was too stubborn. But it wasn't me being stubborn. I was anxious, nerve-racked, afraid; I hated the foreign, unwieldy sound that crept out from behind my lips so much so that I haven't dared try since. Perhaps someday.

That's why I was given this diary. Other girls were given lockets or trinkets. When I've nothing to occupy my mind or my hands, I resort to mischief. Now if the asylum had just had more books (I'd read them all, twice, within my first two years), I'd never have bothered with the communion wine. I wouldn't have had the time for glue, tacks, or spiders.

I'd have been reading about trade routes to India, the impossible worlds of Gothic novels, or even the tedious wonders of jungle botany—anything other than this boring, dreary world we live in. And so, dear diary, you'll bear my written screams as I yearn for a more industrious, exciting life.

Unless I find an occupation or a husband, which in my condition is laughable, I'm destined to languish in solitary silence. Most men of Father's station would have whisked me off to some country ward upstate never to be seen again. (I've been continually reminded of this by scolding teachers who insist I ought to be more grateful for a doting father.)

And I am grateful for sentimentality on Father's part. I look too much like Mother for him to have sent me off, and goodness, if my sprightly nature doesn't remind him of her. So I've always felt a certain security in my place here a few blocks from Father's employer, the ten-year-old Metropolitan Museum of Art. A building and an institution I've come to adore.

Tonight, Father's having a dinner party with his art scholar friends. They're quite boring, save for his young protégé, Edgar. I could suffer Edgar Fourte's presence under any circumstance. But make no mistake, I positively hate that wench he proposed to. If only I could have fashioned some mad plot and sent Father away, I would have thrown myself at Edgar's mercy and become his lovely, tragic young ward. I'd have made myself so indispensable to him, not to mention irresistible, he'd never have considered another woman.

I've been told I'm pretty. And he's a man who likes quiet. What could be more perfect than a pretty wife who doesn't speak? But alas, I'll have to find some other handsome young scholar with a penchant for unfortunates since Edgar stupidly went and got himself engaged to one. So what if she's blind? She can't see how beautiful he is. What a waste!

Ah, the clock strikes. I must help Father with preparations and then make myself particularly presentable, if nothing else than for Edgar's punishment. I'll return with any notable gossip or interesting thoughts.

Later...

They've clustered into Father's study for a cigar, having stuffed themselves as scholars do at a meal they didn't pay for themselves, leaving me a few moments with these dear pages.

We're in luck; they did discuss something fascinating at dinner.

An odd painting is coming to town. An exquisite life-sized oil of a young English lord named Denbury is about to arrive for a bid. And they say it's haunted.

Now if there's one thing I can't help but adore more than Edgar Fourte's face, it's a ghost story. Perhaps it stems from that long-ago Whisper. Or the shadows I see at night. Wherever the thrill comes from, I can't deny my obsession.

Evidently Lord Denbury simply disappeared one day. Locals assume that it was suicide, that he was overcome with despair at losing his family. But it was odd, for he was so well loved by everyone in town. Such a tragedy! Only eighteen years old with no siblings, he lost his parents when they died in a sudden accident. Having to take on such a mantle of responsibility must have weighed heavily upon him, or so everyone supposed. He inherited money and lands with his title, but with no surviving family to help him, he simply went and drowned. A fine piece of clothing bearing a pin with his crest washed onto the bank of a quieter part of the Thames. A damaged body was later found farther downriver and assumed to be his, but was that conclusive?

In such a troubling case, people tend to seek a reason. Once they find one suitable, they'll close the matter in their minds and hearts for their own comfort. But I wonder...

He was devilishly handsome, they say, and studied medicine. Supposedly he helped open a clinic for the underprivileged in the heart of London. So absorbed in learning medicine, he hadn't taken the time to court anyone, though he was continually sought after. He attended a Greenwich hospital nearly round the clock, absorbing all the knowledge he could. I should like to have known him and commended him for being a credit to his class. They say he was a good-natured fellow, if not a bit mischievous, as most clever boys are, and had a way of talking to all sorts of people. Perhaps he could have found a way to help me.

All that survives him is a grand portrait by an artist who remains unknown despite the vast sum paid for the commission, as recorded in Denbury's personal ledger. Considering the portrait is of such fine quality, it's odd that no one sought attribution. Discovered behind a curtain by surprised housekeepers after Denbury's disappearance, the painting is said to appear nearly alive with the soul of its subject.

How a group of men like Father's friends managed to absorb and retain this fantastic gossip is beyond me, but since it involves art, it comes into their territory. Mr. Weiss suggested that when the item makes its way to New York, where the estate broker plans to sell the piece, my father and the Metropolitan ought to consider buying it.

I desperately want to see it. To see him. I must convince Father he ought to at least put in a bid, so that "the Met" seems fashionable. The supernatural is all the rage these days, and America's foremost art museum must stay ahead of the times.

Dear me, I've forgotten their coffee, and they'll be clamoring for it. I'll return once I've served them and given Edgar an unbearably sweet smile. Did I mention that his cheeks went red when I descended the staircase and waved? Perhaps there's something about a girl back from boarding school that makes a man see her differently. Too late, Edgar, too late. Not that I'd fault you for breaking off your engagement...maybe there's a way I can assure it...Drat. Coffee first. Schemes later.

Later...

I hate them. All of them. Especially Edgar. Don't they know I might be at the door at any moment? I may be mute, but I am not dumb.

I'd hesitated outside the study, the coffee tray carefully balanced in my hands. Their cigar smoke wafted beneath the door, acrid tendrils making that threshold a foreign passage where women are forbidden to go-unless, of course, they are there in service. And then I heard my father say something he'd recently said

directly to my face:

"I don't have the foggiest idea what to do with her. I've no idea what would be best..."

Which was, sadly, the truth. It was the subsequent response from Edgar, of all people-I'd know his voice anywhere-that shocked me:

"Why don't you just send her off to a convent, where you wouldn't have to worry about her, Gareth? She could become a nun and change out her own communion wine for whiskey for a change. A vow of silence certainly wouldn't be difficult!"

Before any of them had a chance to laugh or snigger at the insult, I threw wide the door, sending coffee spilling onto the tray. My nostrils flared as I narrowed my eyes and looked right at Edgar. He blushed again, this time not because he thought me pretty. Let him rot with guilt for everything he's done to cause me misery. He's never known how much I care-no, cared-for him, but surely now he knows I'll never respect him again.

I may be an unfortunate, but Father taught me never to stand for being made fun of.

"Edgar, shame on you," Father muttered.

There was deathly silence in the room as I served each of the men: first, Father, who was looking up at me apologetically, second, Mr. Weiss, who couldn't look at me out of embarrassment, and then finally Mr. Nillis, who never has a single interesting thing to say but always has a grandfatherly way of patting my hand, which I'll take over being teased any day. Mr. Nillis beamed up at me, entirely oblivious of the awkward moment, and patted me on the hand. I managed to offer him a grateful smile for his small, unwitting courtesy.

I turned and walked back out the door with the last cup of coffee, Edgar's, in my hand. He would not be served. Now I sit sipping it myself as I write this account and stare out the window at Eighty-Third Street three stories below, golden and dappled beneath patches of shade in summer's setting sun. Men in top hats and women in light shawls and bonnets stroll slowly along the cobbled street toward the gem that is our beloved Central Park for one last promenade before dusk. They have a slow but sure purpose to their movement, to their existence, which is more than I have. What am I going to do with myself?

Oh, Mother. If you hadn't died, I'm sure this wouldn't have happened. I'd speak. And you'd know what to do with me.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joyce Loza:

Reading a book for being new life style in this season; every people loves to examine a book. When you read a book you can get a wide range of benefit. When you read textbooks, you can improve your knowledge, mainly because book has a lot of information in it. The information that you will get depend on what sorts of book that you have read. If you need to get information about your study, you can read education books, but if you act like you want to entertain yourself look for a fiction books, such us novel, comics, along with soon. The Darker Still: A Novel of Magic Most Foul provide you with a new experience in reading a book.

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