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The Midnight Inheritance of Ashford House

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Introduction

The letter arrived on a gray Tuesday, the kind of sky that flattens the city's edges and erases the glitter from glass. Heavy paper, embossed seal, my father's surname raised like a bruise: Ashford. My name appeared beneath it in a serif that pretended to be merciful. When I slit the envelope with a thumbnail—because I didn't keep a letter opener the way he did, the way people with heirlooms do—the language inside was both clinical and intimate: regret to inform, sudden passing, last will and testament, sole beneficiary. It finished with a directive that felt like a dare. Please arrange to collect the keys to Ashford House.

I've framed countless stories around documents: affidavits, subpoenas, emails that changed the course of a company or a family. You learn to train your eyes on the parts that matter and let the fluff blur. But as I read, the words swam as if the page itself were unsteady, and for a moment I felt that old tilt—like footage missing from a film reel I've seen too many times. I blinked until the room clicked back into place: my apartment, the hum of the refrigerator, coffee cooling by my laptop, an unfinished draft about a zoning scandal open on the screen. I told myself I was fine. I told myself that whatever he'd left, it was a house and a history and a reminder of why I left at seventeen and never looked back.

By dusk, the train had carried me north along a spine of black water and pale, stubborn marsh. The town announced itself the way it always had, by the smell—salt and damp wood, a faint mineral tang that lives in the lungs—and by the way the streetlights shone too yellow on clapboard and brick. Ashford House stood a little apart from it all, a long, stern face turned toward the Atlantic, shingles darkened by a hundred storms. In the last light, the windows looked like watchful eyes. I told myself I was here for logistics: keys, papers, an inventory, maybe one final argument with a man who chose silence over every apology I ever deserved.

The lock protested when I turned the key. The door gave with a sigh, the familiar one, as if the house had been holding its breath. Cool air slid over my skin, tasting of beeswax and old books. I stood in the foyer long enough to recognize the exact pattern of the runner under my feet, the peel of paint on the banister I used to slide down before someone shouted, and the way the echoes collected in the corners. The grandfather clock against the far wall was the first thing to raise its head from memory. Its brass face caught the barest sliver of light—and its hands, dignified and unmoved, were pinned to twelve. Midnight. I checked my watch without meaning to. Eight-forty-three. Some part of me waited for the clock to correct itself, to shudder and admit it had been playing dead. It didn't.

On the landing, above the angle of the stairs, the family portrait remained. The oil had darkened with time, but our younger faces were still mapped there in precise strokes, my father's hand on the chairback, my mother's smile unpracticed, my own gaze stubbornly off to the side. What I hadn't remembered was the fracture, a hairline crack that ran diagonally through the varnish from upper left to lower right, splitting us without tearing us free. It looked like something the house had been trying to say for years without finding the words.

I told myself not to go upstairs yet, not to chase ghosts through rooms still wearing their dust. But the house arranged the logic of my steps the way it always had, nudging me toward the hall, past the study door I knew by its nicked brass handle, past the wavy glass of the library, to the end where the hallway narrowed and went dim. The attic door waited there, paint bubbled into small blisters along the molding, keyhole dark as an eye. I reached for the knob and felt the resistance through my palm, a refusal that lived in the wood. It had always been locked after dusk. I didn't push. Not because I was afraid of hinges complaining or a shower of stale moths, but because a sentence I couldn't quite find rose to the back of my throat and pressed there. Later, I told myself. Not yet.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Keene's hand was everywhere and nowhere: a dish towel folded with soldier's precision, an iron skillet oiled and set on the stove, a note on the counter in the round, tidy script I remembered from school bake sales and reminders taped to the refrigerator. Miss Nora, it began. Keys are on the hook, lawyer's folder is in the study. I'll come by in the morning. My father's name did not appear. His absence was more articulate than either of us had ever been.

I walked the perimeters out of habit—reporter's instinct, or maybe just a child's old ritual—touching wood and plaster, measuring the spaces where laughter used to echo and arguments used to pile up like storm drifts. Every surface had a story it wanted to tell me. The faucet that used to squeak refused to, as if it, too, had decided to become more dignified with time. The piano in the parlor wore its dust like a veil, its keys peeking through in a bright row that made my fingertips itch. Somewhere in that piano was a lullaby I couldn't quite name, a tune I'd known once the way you know your own breath. I hummed a bar and lost it halfway through.

My father's study was smaller than I remembered, or I was larger now, carrying more with me. The desk was clear except for a manila folder with the lawyer's letterhead and a heavy brass paperweight in the shape of a ship. The folder confirmed what the first letter had announced and complicated it with terms. There were inventories to be completed, signatures to be gathered, a schedule for the safe deposit box. My name threaded through the pages like a cord. Under Beneficiary there was only me. I waited for the old ache to come—the one that belonged to arguments cut short and phone calls that never happened—and when it arrived it was duller than I expected, more a

memory of pain than pain itself.

Night pressed against the windows, turning them into mirrors, and my reflection looked like a stranger trespassing in a life she'd left behind on purpose. In the glass, the hall behind me was a tunnel, and at the end of it the attic door was a square of darker dark. I thought about my beat—the discipline of facts, the way you run down a rumor and either hammer it into something that can stand or let it collapse under its own weight. I thought about the places in my mind where the footage still skipped, frames missing, a face blurred. In the city, there were workarounds for that. Deadlines, sources, colleagues who could backstop you when your skull hummed like a power line. Here, the hum was different, older. It vibrated in the bones of the house.

I should have turned on a lamp and made a list. I should have called someone who would remind me to eat, to sleep, to do the small human things that pretend to keep the past in its place. Instead I stood very still and listened. The house settled in its old ways—small ticks and sighs, wood remembering how to be wood—and beneath those sounds was another, not quite a sound at all. It was the feeling of a story breathing behind a door, gathering itself to be told. The clocks were stopped at midnight as if to mark the hour when everything paused, when truth and lie shook hands and switched coats. I let my palm rest against the cool wall, and the cool wall said nothing back. I could feel my heartbeat in the heel of my hand, counted to twelve without meaning to, and waited for something to move.

CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming

The road narrowed as the pines closed in, their needles brushing the windshield like curious fingers. Nora's rental car crunched over gravel, the sound swallowed by the low murmur of the Atlantic somewhere beyond the tree line. She rolled down the window a crack, letting the salt-kissed air sting her eyes, and thought how the town's name—Ashford—had always sounded more like a promise than a place.

She had not driven this stretch in fifteen years, yet the lane seemed to remember her, the same rutted curve where a child's bicycle once lay abandoned beside a rusted mailbox. The GPS blinked its blue dot, confirming she was within a quarter mile of the address on the lawyer's letter. Her phone buzzed with an unread text from an editor, but she silenced it, letting the screen go dark. Here, the only signal worth chasing was the one the house itself might send.

The first glimpse of Ashford House rose through the canopy like a half-remembered dream: a long, weathered clapboard façade, its shutters a faded navy, the roofline sagging just enough to suggest decades of storms weathered without complaint. Ivy crept up the east wall, tendrils curling around the second-story windows as if trying to pull the building back into the earth. The yard, once manicured, now sprawled with wild grass and a single leaning oak whose branches scratched the roof like skeletal hands.

Nora parked beside a rusted iron gate that groaned when she pushed it open. The driveway, cracked and uneven, led to a gravel turnaround where a single tire track hinted at recent visitors—perhaps the lawyer, perhaps the housekeeper she'd been told to expect. She stepped out, the damp grass soaking the soles of her boots, and inhaled the briny scent that always clung to the coastal air, a smell that seemed to seep into memory itself.

The front door was a heavy oak slab, its paint peeling in long, sun-bleached strips. When she turned the iron knob, the hinges protested with a low, resonant creak, as though the house were clearing its throat before speaking. Inside, the foyer was dim, lit only by the gray light that filtered through a cracked transom. Dust motes drifted lazily, caught in the beam of a single chandelier that hung like a frozen chandelier of ice.

Her footsteps echoed against the hardwood, each sound a reminder of the house's emptiness. The walls were lined with faded wallpaper, a pattern of interlocking vines that seemed to shift when she wasn't looking directly at them. A grandfather clock dominated the far wall, its brass face gleaming dully, hands frozen at twelve. She

glanced at it, then at her watch—eight-forty-seven—and felt a faint vertigo, as if time itself had stuttered.

On the landing above, the family portrait loomed, its gilt frame catching a sliver of light. She remembered the day it was taken: summer, the garden in full bloom, her mother's smile bright enough to rival the sun. Now the oil paint had darkened, the varnish crazed with a hairline crack that ran diagonally, splitting the image as neatly as a fracture in glass. She averted her eyes, feeling the weight of that crack settle on her chest.

The kitchen was a museum of half-finished chores. A dish towel lay folded with military precision beside a sink that gleamed with recent scrubbing. An iron skillet sat on the stove, still warm, as if someone had just stepped away. On the counter, a note in neat round script read: *Miss Nora, keys are on the hook, lawyer's folder in the study. I'll come by in the morning. - Mrs. Keene.* The absence of her father's name was a silence louder than any shout.

She set her bag on the counter, feeling the weight of the leather strap bite into her shoulder. The house seemed to breathe around her, its creaks and sighs a language she once understood but had long since forgotten. She ran a finger along the countertop, tracing a faint groove where a knife had slipped years ago, drawing blood and a scream that now lived only in the back of her mind.

The study door stood ajar, its brass handle nicked from countless childhood raids. Inside, the desk was bare except for a manila folder bearing the lawyer's letterhead and a brass paperweight shaped like a ship. The folder crackled as she opened it, revealing pages dense with legal jargon, signatures, and inventories. Her name appeared repeatedly, a thread stitching together documents that felt more like a will than a welcome.

She read quickly, skimming the clauses that designated her sole beneficiary, the clauses that spoke of "personal property" and "sentimental items." A line about "the safe deposit box" caught her eye, but she forced herself to close the folder, not yet ready to confront whatever metal box might hold the bones of the past.

The piano in the parlor drew her like a moth to flame. Its keys were a pale ivory, some yellowed with age, others still bright enough to reflect the dim light. She lifted the fallboard, feeling the cool ivory under her fingertips, and a faint scent of rosin and dust rose. A melody—half remembered, half imagined—floated in her mind, a lullaby that seemed to hum just beneath the threshold of hearing.

She tried to play a few notes, but her fingers stumbled, as if the muscle memory had been erased. The sound that emerged was thin, discordant, like a voice calling from a room she couldn't locate. She stopped, letting the silence rush back, and noticed a

small, hand-carved wooden bird perched on the music stand, its wings half-spread as if about to take flight.

A sudden draft slithered through a cracked window, and the curtains billowed, brushing her cheek. She turned to see the attic door at the end of the hall, its paint blistered and peeling, the keyhole a black void. The door had always been locked after dusk, a rule whispered by her mother and enforced by the house itself. Tonight, the rule felt less like a precaution and more like a warning.

She resisted the urge to climb the narrow stairs, telling herself she would wait until morning, until the house had settled and the shadows had softened. But the hallway seemed to narrow, the walls leaning inward as if to funnel her toward that dark threshold. The grandfather clock ticked once, then again, each sound a metronome counting down to something she couldn't name.

As she stood there, a faint scuffle erupted from the upper floor—a soft thud, the creak of a floorboard, then silence. The noise was too deliberate to be the house settling; it sounded like someone moving cautiously, perhaps a cat, perhaps something else. Her heart hammered against her ribs, and she felt the familiar prickle of adrenaline that had served her well on countless reporting assignments.

She reached for the antique key she'd found earlier, its bow heavy and tarnished, and slipped it into the coat pocket of her jacket. The key felt warm, almost alive, as if it had been waiting for her. With a deep breath, she turned toward the stairs, each step a deliberate choice between safety and the unknown.

The attic stairs were steep, the banister worn smooth by generations of hands. As she climbed, the air grew colder, carrying the scent of aged wood and something faintly metallic. The last step creaked under her weight, and the attic door swung open with a reluctant groan.

Inside, the space was a jumble of forgotten relics: trunks bound with rusted clasps, stacks of yellowed newspapers, and a collection of dusty picture frames that seemed to watch her from the shadows. In the far corner, a single photograph hung askew on a nail, its glass cracked and the image partially obscured by a curtain of cobwebs. She approached, brushing away the dust, and felt a chill as she recognized the scene—a family picnic, her father's arm around a woman she couldn't quite place, their faces blurred by time and neglect.

As she reached for the frame, a sudden gust of wind rattled the shutters, and the photograph slipped from its perch, clattering to the floor. She knelt to retrieve it, but the image had slipped free of its backing, revealing a blank rectangle of paper where a face should have been. The missing portrait was a void, a question mark etched in white.

A floorboard above groaned, and she froze, her breath caught in her throat. The sound was unmistakable—footsteps, slow and deliberate, moving toward the attic entrance. She glanced back at the stairwell, the dim light casting long, wavering shadows that seemed to reach for her. The house, it seemed, had more to say, and it wasn't willing to wait until morning.

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