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# Shadows Over Ravenwood Manor

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** The Drive Home
- **Chapter 2:** Inventory and Memory
- **Chapter 3:** Stranger in the Village
- **Chapter 4:** Family Reunion
- **Chapter 5:** The First Night
- **Chapter 6:** A Walk Through Memory
- **Chapter 7:** The Historical Society
- **Chapter 8:** The Secret Code
- **Chapter 9:** Confessions and Lies
- **Chapter 10:** Ghosts in the Walls
- **Chapter 11:** The Hidden Room
- **Chapter 12:** Cross-checks
- **Chapter 13:** Night Watch
- **Chapter 14:** Old Wounds
- **Chapter 15:** Betrayal
- **Chapter 16:** False Leads
- **Chapter 17:** The Village Mask Slips
- **Chapter 18:** The Tangled Past
- **Chapter 19:** Close Call
- **Chapter 20:** The Turning Point
- **Chapter 21:** Exposing the Ledger
- **Chapter 22:** The Hidden Child
- **Chapter 23:** The Reckoning
- **Chapter 24:** Aftermath
- **Chapter 25:** Closure and Opening

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## Introduction

Clara Bennett arrived at Ravenwood Manor in the hour when the sun thinned and the cold gathered in the hedgerows. The iron gates rasped open at her touch, protesting as if they had been left alone too long and learned to sulk. She paused at the threshold, engine ticking, and watched the house present itself: a dark front, windows dim with age, the central gable lifting like a brow. The gravel drive was scattered with wind-fallen twigs; a roan leaf skittered across her bonnet and clung to the wiper as though the place had reached out and touched her first.

She killed the engine and listened. Ravens somewhere in the beeches. A clock—hers? no, the house's—measured out a deep, unhurried chime that did not belong to her wristwatch. Damp crept through the air, mingled with the mineral scent of old stone and the faint, sweet decay of leaves. Clara stood, keys cold in her palm, the weight of London still stiffening her shoulders, and tried not to resent the way memory rose here like mist. She had left this village at eleven, in a silent backseat with her mother's hand trembling on the gearshift. Now she had returned at thirty-two because an old woman had died and, with her last, papery breath, made a confession that cracked the past open.

Inside, the hall was quieter than any church. Dust lay thin as silk on the black-and-white tiles. The runner on the stairs bore a subtle track of earlier feet, long ago pressed into its nap. She set her bag down on the deal table and tasted the air: beeswax, hearth ash, the ghost of a winter fire. The solicitor's envelope in her bag—letters of probate, a keyring heavy with tags—seemed suddenly inadequate. It was one thing to inherit a house on paper; it was another to feel it looking at you.

The trunk waited in the study where the west light died. Clara remembered it only in outline, a presence in the room of closed doors. The brass had gone to a dull green, the leather straps crazed into a map of thin rivers. She rolled up her sleeves in a practical, familiar motion; the archivist in her reached automatically for order, for chains of custody, for ways to name things until they sat still. On the table she laid out her tools: cotton gloves, a pencil, index cards. She told herself that this would be a simple task—catalogue, appraise, decide what might go to the county archive, what must stay. That was what she knew how to do: make sense of other people's lives on paper.

The lock opened reluctantly with a scrape that lifted the hair on her arms. Inside lay bundles of letters, their edges browned like the crusts of old bread, sealed with wafers that had lost their glossy pride. Names had bled through in iron-gall ink: Isobel, dearest; Miss Ravenwood; My heart. Some had been tied with narrow faded ribbons;

some were shingled like shingles against damp. Clara breathed them in and felt the thrill she tried not to admit—the electric nearness of voices that had waited decades for a listener. On top, an envelope lay alone, the paper thicker, sealed hard with a blob of dark wax impressed by an unfamiliar crest. In an unsteady hand across its face, a single instruction had been scrawled: Do not trust the house.

Her first impulse—stronger than she liked—was to look over her shoulder. The study's panelling made a soft ticking as it cooled. Somewhere a draught found a gap and set a whisper in motion, like skirts brushing a corridor. Don't be absurd, she told herself; houses did not take sides. And yet, standing in Ravenwood with the warning on her palm, she felt something lean and listening at the edges of her attention, not entirely outside her but not within her either. She set the envelope down with care. Procedure, she thought. She would log it, then decide. The past could wait one more night; the living work of settling a life—of sealing rooms, calling tradesmen, meeting the vicar—could begin in the morning.

She worked until the light went from steel to blue, hands moving gently through paper and string, soothing herself with rows of dates and names. Between bundles, small artifacts surfaced: a pressed violet, collapsed into a shadow of itself; a dance card with two initials repeated down a column; a child's scrawled picture of a house with windows like watching eyes. Clara paused over that and felt the shallow catch of breath she associated with memories she did not trust. In London, she had learned to set them aside the way one shelved an uncatalogued manuscript: noted, contained, reserved for later. Here, later no longer felt like an option.

When she finally slid aside a packet at the bottom of the trunk, her fingers met the corner of something glossy and cold. Not paper, not card. She eased it free and held it to the window for the last of the day. A photograph, its edges scalloped, its surface silvered with the bloom of age. Three figures stood on the lawn outside this very house, the yew hedge a dark bracket behind them. The tallest woman had her head turned, caught in the act of speaking; the smaller figure at her side clutched the woman's hand and looked up toward the camera with wide, intent eyes. Clara felt the world tip as if the house had shifted on its foundations.

She did not remember ever having been there, and yet the child in the photograph was unmistakably herself.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Drive Home

The road to Ravenwood did not so much lead as it did lure. As Clara's modest hatchback crested the final ridge of the Cotswold escarpment, the landscape underwent a subtle, unsettling transformation. The golden-stone charm of the tourist villages fell away, replaced by a valley that seemed to have forgotten the sun. Here, the trees grew in tighter clusters, their branches interlocking like skeletal fingers over the narrow lane. It was a geography of shadows, one she hadn't traversed since the day her mother packed their lives into four cardboard boxes and drove away without looking in the rearview mirror.

Returning to one's childhood home is often described as a shrinking of the world—the hills seem smaller, the ceilings lower—but for Clara, Ravenwood Manor had only grown more imposing in her absence. It loomed at the end of a long, neglected driveway, a sprawling Elizabethan pile of weathered limestone and soot-stained chimneys. To an archivist's eye, the house was a nightmare of deferred maintenance. Ivy had strangled the drainpipes, and the mortar between the stones was weeping grit. Yet, to the thirty-two-year-old woman who had spent two decades trying to be "methodical" and "urban," the manor felt less like a building and more like a patient, waiting animal.

She parked the car, the silence of the countryside rushing in to fill the gap where the engine's hum had been. It was an absolute, heavy silence, broken only by the rhythmic *clack-clack* of a loose shutter somewhere on the second floor. Clara sat for a moment, her hands still gripped tightly around the steering wheel. She could smell the damp earth and the sharp, medicinal scent of pine needles. This was the inheritance: not just the stone and the acreage, but the weight of the Ravenwood name, a name her mother had discarded the moment they crossed the London city limits.

Stepping out of the car, Clara felt the gravel crunching under her sensible Chelsea boots. The air was several degrees colder here than it had been in the village she'd passed three miles back. She looked up at the windows, those dark, leaded panes that seemed to deflect the light rather than admit it. She remembered playing on the lawn, or rather, being told not to play on the lawn. Her grandfather had been a man of strict perimeters and even stricter silences. His deathbed confession—conveyed through a frantic, late-night phone call from a village solicitor—had been the first time he'd spoken her name in twenty years.

"Everything is in the trunk," he had gasped, according to the solicitor, Mr. Aris. "Tell Clara the letters must be settled. The house remembers what we tried to forget."

Clara shook the memory loose and headed for the heavy oak front door. The key, a

substantial iron thing that felt more like a weapon than a tool, turned with a grinding protest. The interior smelled of her childhood—lemon oil, stale tobacco, and that underlying scent of "old house" that was essentially the smell of dust reclaiming the present. She didn't head for the kitchen or the bedrooms. She went straight to the study, a room she had been forbidden to enter as a child. It was there that she had found the trunk, and there that she had discovered the photograph that now lived in her coat pocket, burning a hole in her logic.

The photograph showed a younger version of herself, perhaps five or six years old, standing on the very lawn she had just crossed. She was holding the hand of a woman whose face was partially turned away, a woman who wasn't her mother. Clara had no memory of the moment. In her mind, her childhood at Ravenwood was a series of interior rooms and solitary games. The presence of this other woman, and the fact that the photograph had been hidden away in a trunk of sealed letters, suggested that her internal archive was missing several crucial volumes.

The house creaked, a deep groan of timber settling into the foundations. Clara straightened her shoulders. She was an archivist; she dealt in facts, in the physical evidence of the past. If there were gaps in her history, she would fill them with the contents of that trunk. She decided she needed air before she began the grueling task of cataloging. The interior of the manor was too thick with the ghosts of her own confusion.

She stepped back outside, intending to walk the perimeter of the gardens. The grounds had once been formal, but now the yew hedges had grown into shaggy, monstrous shapes, and the rose garden was a graveyard of thorny stalks. As she rounded the corner of the carriage house, she saw a figure standing near the old well. It was a man, dressed in a sturdy Barbour jacket, poking at a patch of weeds with a walking stick.

He looked up as she approached, squinting against the low-hanging sun. He had the weathered, comfortable look of a local, his face etched with the kind of lines that came from a lifetime of outdoor weather and perhaps a fair amount of skepticism.

"You'll be the granddaughter then," he said, his voice a gravelly baritone. It wasn't a question. "The one from London. I recognized the car. Not many people around here drive a hybrid. It doesn't handle the mud well come November."

"Clara Bennett," she said, extending a hand. "And you are?"

"Arthur Pringle. I look after the hedges, or I did, when your grandfather still had the mind to care about such things. For the last few years, I've mostly just been stopping the woods from swallowing the driveway whole." He shook her hand briefly, his grip dry and calloused. He looked past her at the house, a strange expression flitting

across his eyes—something that looked remarkably like pity.

"It's a lot of house for one woman, Miss Bennett," Arthur continued. "Most people expected it to go to the Ashford side of the family. Mrs. Ashford—Evelyn—has been measuring the windows for new curtains for the better part of a decade. She won't be pleased you've turned up."

"I'm here to settle the estate, Mr. Pringle. I'm not sure yet what the long-term plan is," Clara replied, keeping her tone professional. "My grandfather left a great deal of paperwork that needs sorting."

Arthur nodded slowly, his gaze shifting to the dense treeline that bordered the eastern edge of the property. "Paperwork. Aye, he was a man for saving things. Though some things are better left buried, if you ask me. This place has a way of holding onto its secrets. It doesn't like them being dragged out into the light."

Clara felt a prickle of unease. "Is that a local superstition, or an observation?"

Arthur gave a short, dry laugh. "Bit of both. You were only a slip of a thing when you left. You probably don't remember the fuss. The way the police were crawling all over these woods, poking into the well, lifting the floorboards in the old stables."

Clara froze. "The police? My mother told me we moved to London because of her work. She never mentioned the police."

Arthur leaned on his stick, his expression turning somber. "It wasn't about your mother, lass. It was about the disappearance. It was all anyone talked about for a year. A woman doesn't just vanish from a house like this without leaving a trail, or so they thought. But Isobel Ravenwood went out for a walk one evening and never came back. Not a hair nor a hide of her seen since."

Clara felt the cold of the photograph in her pocket. Isobel. The name on the letters. The woman whose face was turned away.

"When did this happen?" Clara asked, her voice sounding thin to her own ears.

"Thirty years ago this spring," Arthur said, turning back toward the lane. "Right about the time you were born. People say she ran off, but the old man... he never believed it. He spent the rest of his life turning this house into a fortress, watching the gates. You be careful with those letters, Miss Bennett. Some stories don't want to be finished."

He walked away before she could ask another question, his figure disappearing into the lengthening shadows of the beech trees. Clara stood alone on the gravel, the wind picking up, rattling the dry leaves at her feet. She looked up at the manor, and for the

first time, she noticed a small, pale face watching her from a third-story window. By the time she blinked, the curtain had twitched shut, leaving nothing but the reflection of the grey, indifferent sky.

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