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Shadows Beneath the Ivy

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Introduction

Kingsleigh University was a world unto itself, sealed away from the ordinary chaos of the city by curling iron gates and centuries-old stone. If you arrived in the blue-grey mist of a September morning, as Eva Mercer did, the gothic towers would loom like guardians—or perhaps conspirators—against the sullen sky. The quads whispered with secrets, the grass flattened by generations of hurried steps between classes and clandestine meetings. The air inside the halls shivered with a chill that never quite retreated, no matter how many roaring fires burned in the ornate hearths.

For Eva, Kingsleigh was more than a school. It was a second chance, the golden key that could turn her years of striving and sacrifice into something meaningful. She approached its gates as an outsider: a scholarship student from a faded coastal town, lost in the hum of privilege and tradition. She'd studied every legend surrounding the university—its gifted alumni, ghost stories, and unspoken social hierarchies—yet nothing prepared her for the razor-edged reality behind its carved doors.

Ambition burned in the marrow of Kingsleigh. Every corridor was a theater of competition, every classroom ringing with the urgency of young, brilliant minds scrambling to outshine one another. Eva quickly learned that brilliance wasn't always rewarded, and that some students carried their surnames as armor, others as chains. Faculty moved like shadows themselves, eyes sharp and calculating; alliances were forged in secret alcoves, and rivalries thrived beneath the polite surface of lectures and formals.

But elegance could only cover so much. Eva soon sensed the weight of something unresolved within Kingsleigh's walls—a presence, a memory, a wound in the university's history that no tradition could heal. It lingered in the way certain topics were hushed at dinners, the way some doors remained locked, no matter how many keys you possessed. It haunted the forgotten corners of the library and the overgrown cloisters, where the ivy tangled with forgotten stone.

Driven by a hunger to belong and to understand, Eva found herself drawn into the university's unsolved mysteries. She would hear whispers of a student who vanished three decades before, and of an underground society whose invitation was both coveted and feared. With every step toward the truth, she sensed the peril of being an outsider—of what it meant to chase secrets that powerful people preferred to keep buried.

Soon, the boundaries between past and present would blur. Alliances would shift, friends would become suspects, and every answer uncovered would spawn another,

darker question. As Eva was about to discover, survival at Kingsleigh meant more than academic achievement: it meant learning who you could trust, what you were willing to sacrifice for the truth—and just how deep the shadows beneath the ivy truly ran.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows on Stone

The first real chill of autumn had begun to creep through Kingsleigh, a damp cold that clung to the ancient stone of Northwood Hall, where Eva's history seminar met. It was the kind of building that swallowed light whole, even on a bright afternoon, its leaded windows diffusing the sun into a pale, watery glow. Professor Alistair Thorne, a man whose tweed jackets seemed to be woven from the very fabric of academia, droned on about the fall of the Roman Republic, his voice a low, rhythmic current against the scratching of pens.

Eva, perched on a hard wooden chair that probably predated her great-grandparents, tried to focus, but her gaze kept drifting. Not to the ornate ceiling, nor to the dusty portraits of long-dead scholars lining the walls, but to the intricate carvings around the fireplace. They depicted scenes of classical mythology, heroes and gods entangled in dramatic struggles. One carving, however, was subtly different. Tucked away in a lower corner, almost obscured by a grand, overstuffed armchair, was a small, crudely etched symbol: a stylized ivy leaf with a single, sharp thorn.

She'd noticed it on her second day, during a desperate search for a quiet corner to read. It was so out of place amidst the polished grandeur, almost like a vandal's mark, yet clearly old. It had snagged her attention then, and now, weeks later, it still held a strange fascination. It felt... deliberate.

Beside her, Chloe Sterling scribbled furious notes, her blonde hair falling in a perfect cascade. Chloe was the epitome of Kingsleigh's effortless elite – bright, beautiful, and utterly at ease in a world Eva was still desperately trying to navigate. "Are you getting this, Eva?" Chloe whispered, without looking up. "Thorne's really laying into the political infighting. Could be a question on the midterm."

Eva mumbled a vague assent, pulling her attention back to the lecture, but her mind kept returning to the ivy. She'd seen something similar, though she couldn't quite place where. A faint, almost imperceptible symbol, tucked away in a place that didn't quite fit. Kingsleigh was full of such curiosities, ancient inscriptions, and forgotten nooks that hinted at stories beyond the curriculum.

Later that afternoon, in the sprawling, hushed labyrinth of the Kingsleigh Library, Eva was knee-deep in research for an essay on the socio-economic impacts of the Industrial Revolution. The library, with its towering shelves and spiraling staircases, was a sanctuary and a torment. Every book seemed to hold a secret, every whispered conversation a fragment of a larger truth. She found herself procrastinating, her fingers idly tracing the spines of older volumes.

She stumbled upon a section dedicated to Kingsleigh's own history: alumni biographies, yearbooks stretching back centuries, and quaint pictorials of campus life. Her eyes landed on a slim, leather-bound volume titled *Kingsleigh's Unsung*. It was a collection of profiles of students who had made unique, if not widely celebrated, contributions during their time.

Flipping through its brittle pages, she found a faded photograph of a young man with intense, intelligent eyes and a shock of dark, unruly hair. His name was Peter Davies, and the caption below stated he had been a promising scholar of classical languages, a chess prodigy, and a passionate advocate for student rights. The entry ended abruptly, almost jarringly: "Peter Davies vanished without a trace from Kingsleigh University on the evening of October 27th, 1993, his disappearance remaining an unsolved mystery to this day."

October 27th. That was three decades ago, almost to the day. Eva felt a prickle of unease. Unsolved mystery. It wasn't the sort of thing Kingsleigh, so fastidious about its image, usually advertised. She read on, fascinated. The brief biography mentioned his brilliance, his "unorthodox methods of inquiry," and his strong opinions, which had apparently alienated some faculty members. He'd been working on a controversial translation of an obscure Roman text, rumored to contain political satires that could be interpreted as subversive even in modern times.

As she absorbed the details, a sharp-featured young man with piercing blue eyes approached her table. "Lost in the archives, Mercer?" Julian Vance's voice was smooth, edged with a casual superiority that grated on Eva. He was another scholarship student, but one who seemed to have effortlessly assimilated into the inner circles, his quick wit and sardonic charm making him popular with both the academics and the socialites. He excelled at everything, always a step ahead.

"Just doing some background reading," Eva replied, closing the book subtly, though not quickly enough. Julian's gaze had already flickered to the title.

"Peter Davies? Interesting choice," he said, a faint, unreadable smile playing on his lips. "The university's favorite ghost story. Bit of an urban legend, if you ask me. Though some still insist it's more than that."

"What do you mean?" Eva asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Oh, you know," Julian waved a dismissive hand, though his eyes were sharp. "Whispers of a secret society, academic rivalries gone too far, a disgruntled professor. Pick your poison. The official line is, of course, that he just ran away. But he was set to win the Kingsley Prize that year. Not many people walk away from that."

Eva felt a jolt. The Kingsley Prize was the highest academic honor at the university, almost a guaranteed ticket to a Rhodes Scholarship or a top-tier post-graduate program. No one just abandoned that. "You seem to know a lot about it," she observed.

Julian shrugged. "Kingsleigh has a long memory. Some stories just refuse to die, no matter how much ivy you grow over them. Besides, my great-uncle was a contemporary of Davies. He had some rather colorful tales." He paused, leaning slightly closer. "He also mentioned Davies was obsessed with a certain symbol. An ivy leaf, with a thorn."

Eva's breath hitched. The carving in Northwood Hall. The realization hit her with the force of a physical blow. The symbol wasn't just random vandalism; it was connected to Peter Davies. And Julian knew about it. She looked at him, truly looked at him, and saw a flicker of something in his eyes – curiosity, yes, but also a calculated assessment.

"Why would he be obsessed with that?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even.

Julian simply smiled, a knowing, almost mischievous glint in his eyes. "That, Mercer, is the real mystery, isn't it? Perhaps some secrets are meant to stay buried. Or perhaps, some secrets are just waiting for the right person to dig them up." He gave her a brief, unsettling nod, then turned and walked away, leaving Eva with a sudden, overwhelming sense that she had just stumbled onto something far more significant than an old campus legend. The shadows in the library seemed to deepen, and for the first time, Kingsleigh University felt less like a sanctuary and more like a carefully constructed trap.

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