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The Inheritance Game

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Introduction

Jonathan Ashcroft was a man who defied easy definition: a paragon of ruthless ambition, a visionary builder of empires, and—most of all—a master of secrets. His name adorned the world's finest hotels, his reputation casting a long, cold shadow over rivals and relatives alike. For decades, Ashcroft ruled his domain with unyielding precision, each move calculated, every relationship ruthlessly leveraged. So when news broke of his sudden death, the world paused in morbid fascination: What would become of the Ashcroft fortune, an empire woven together by charisma, cunning, and countless whispered deals?

The answer came shrouded in further mystery. Instead of a standard will, five unconnected strangers each received an invitation—sealed, hand-delivered, bearing Jonathan Ashcroft's distinctive monogram. The contents were simple: a summons to the remote Ashcroft estate, with the promise that their attendance would determine the fate of a legacy worth billions. With little else to unite them, these five—each with their own secrets, desires, and wounds—set out for an encounter that would change the course of their lives forever.

Upon arrival, they found themselves not just guests, but participants in a game they'd never agreed to play. Greeting them was not a lawyer or grieving relative, but a posthumous video from Ashcroft himself: stoic, direct, and laden with unspoken menace. The rules, he informed them, were simple: stay in the mansion for one week, complete a series of tasks, and the inheritance would be theirs—if they survived both the challenges and each other. It was a final power play from a man who never relinquished control, even in death.

Rumors flew in the silent corridors: Why were they chosen? What linked a disgraced journalist, a failed entrepreneur, a distant cousin, a reclusive artist, and a devoted caretaker? As the days unfolded, it became clear that the game was more than a contest of wits. Every task resurrected the past—unearthing betrayals, long-buried grievances, and connections none could have guessed. And as alliances formed and crumbled, a chilling question crept in: Was the greatest threat the inheritance itself, or the people vying for it?

But Ashcroft's mansion was more than a stage; it was a labyrinth of memories, every room echoing with unanswered questions. Each twist of the game left nerves more frayed, each revelation made survival less certain. As accidents mounted and suspicions deepened, the heirs were forced to ask themselves not just what they would do for fortune, but what—or whom—they were willing to sacrifice.

In The Inheritance Game, fortunes are made and lost not only in boardrooms and trust funds, but in the cold calculus of human nature under pressure. This is not a simple bequest—it's a crucible. And only those who can see past the lies, even their own, will claim a prize worth killing for.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Summons

The crisp white envelope arrived on a Tuesday, indistinguishable from the mountain of junk mail usually assaulting Amelia Vance's tiny mailbox. Except for the weight. And the texture of the paper. And the singular, embossed monogram of a stylized "A" – a detail that sent a prickle of unease down her spine even before she tore it open. Amelia, a journalist by trade, had long ago developed a sixth sense for things that didn't quite fit. And this, decidedly, did not fit.

Inside, a single sheet of heavy parchment, folded precisely, bore the chillingly familiar letterhead: Ashcroft Enterprises. Her heart did a peculiar lurch, part dread, part morbid curiosity. Jonathan Ashcroft. The man whose empire had crumbled a significant chunk of her career. The very name was synonymous with ruthless ambition and the kind of wealth that could buy silence, or worse. The news of his death, weeks prior, had been a global sensation, but for Amelia, it had been a footnote, a quiet, almost bitter satisfaction that the old monster had finally met his match.

Now this.

The summons was brief, almost offensively so. "You are hereby requested to attend the reading of the Last Will and Testament of Jonathan Ashcroft," it read, the elegant script doing little to soften the bluntness. "On Saturday, October 26th, at 10:00 AM. Ashcroft Manor, Blackwood Lane, Sterling, Vermont." A map, meticulously drawn, was enclosed, along with a discreetly folded, high-value airline ticket and a voucher for a private car service. No RSVP. No explanation. Just a demand.

Amelia reread the sentence several times, looking for a catch, a prank, a typo. Her connection to Ashcroft was tenuous at best, a ghost from a past she'd rather forget. She'd spent years attempting to expose the shadowy dealings of one of his subsidiary corporations, a venture that had ultimately cost her her job, her reputation, and nearly her sanity. The thought of being named in his will was preposterous, a cruel joke.

She paced her small Brooklyn apartment, the polished floorboards groaning underfoot, the envelope clutched in her hand. Her landlord's cat, Mr. Tibbles, a mangy ginger tabby with one eye, watched her with an unnerving intensity from his perch atop a stack of investigative journalism books she still hadn't the heart to part with. "What do you think, Tibbles?" she muttered, addressing the feline oracle. "Is this a trap? Or a twisted apology from the grave?" Mr. Tibbles blinked slowly, offering no immediate insight.

The rational part of her mind screamed: *Don't go. It's a trick. He'll find a way to*

humiliate you even from beyond the grave. The journalist in her, however, whispered something far more insidious: *This is a story. The biggest story. And it just landed in your lap.* Jonathan Ashcroft didn't do anything without a reason. And a summons like this, to a remote estate, involving seemingly random people... it screamed of a hidden agenda.

For all her cynicism, a part of Amelia was also deeply curious. Who else had received such an invitation? And why? Ashcroft was a man who left no loose ends. To be summoned to his will reading meant she was connected, however obscurely, to his final act. And the sum of money that would have to be involved to make such an elaborate charade worthwhile... it was dizzying to contemplate. She looked at the airline ticket, a first-class fare she hadn't seen in years. He was paying for her to come. He wanted her there.

The next call was to her former editor, a gruff but insightful man named Frank Davies. He picked up on the second ring, his voice raspy from too many cigarettes and late nights. "Amelia? To what do I owe the pleasure? You finally cracking that alien conspiracy I told you about?"

"Frank, it's about Ashcroft," she began, her voice low. "Jonathan Ashcroft. I just got a summons to his will reading."

A beat of silence. Then, "You're shitting me. *You?* Why you?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out. It's to his estate in Vermont. A week from Saturday. They've even sent a first-class ticket."

Frank whistled. "Ashcroft Manor. That place is legendary. Built like a fortress, practically a country unto itself. What's the catch? He trying to buy your silence one last time?"

"I don't know. But there's something off about it, Frank. It's not just a will reading. The way it's worded... and the secrecy around it. I have a feeling I won't be the only... unlikely guest."

"Unlikely guests," Frank mused. "That sounds like a reality show waiting to happen, or a really bad Agatha Christie novel. Look, Amelia, be careful. That man was a snake. Even dead, he could probably still bite."

"I know," she said, her gaze drifting to her half-empty coffee cup. "But I also know that if there's a story here, I need to get it."

"That's my girl," Frank chuckled, a genuine sound of pride. "Alright. You go. And you call me the second anything... fishy happens. And I mean anything. This could be big,

Amelia. Bigger than that corporate scandal you tried to expose.”

The conversation with Frank cemented her decision. Curiosity, the driving force of her career, won out over caution. This wasn't just about a potential inheritance; it was about the untold story of Jonathan Ashcroft. What kind of man, even in death, orchestrates such a theatrical final act? Who were the other recipients? And what dark secrets lay buried beneath the polished facade of his empire?

Amelia spent the rest of the week researching Ashcroft, poring over old articles, financial reports, and any obscure mention she could find. The man was a ghost in the digital age, a master of controlling his narrative. Information was scarce, and what existed was heavily sanitized. It only deepened her suspicion. Jonathan Ashcroft had always been a man who preferred shadows to sunlight. This posthumous grand gesture felt profoundly out of character, unless it was just another calculated move in a much larger, unseen game.

She packed light, just a single carry-on. A few changes of clothes, her laptop, and a worn notepad and pen – her indispensable tools. As she zipped the bag, Mr. Tibbles hopped onto the counter, rubbing against her leg, purring loudly. “Wish me luck, old friend,” she whispered, scratching him behind the ears. “I have a feeling I’m going to need it.”

On Saturday morning, the private car arrived exactly on time, a sleek black sedan that looked utterly out of place on her modest street. The driver, a taciturn man in a dark suit, merely nodded, opened the back door, and drove off without a word. The ride to the airport was silent, the cityscape gradually giving way to the sprawling suburban expanse, then the green anonymity of the highway.

As the plane ascended, Amelia looked down at the shrinking landscape, a strange mix of apprehension and exhilaration churning within her. She was flying into the unknown, to a meeting that promised either immense reward or profound danger. Jonathan Ashcroft had pulled her into his orbit once before, and it had nearly destroyed her. This time, she would be ready. This time, she would uncover the truth. The game, whatever it was, had officially begun.

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