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Shadow of the Heir

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Introduction

Evelyn Hart never expected an invitation to return home, let alone an inheritance that would shatter what little peace she'd managed to cobble together. For years, she had learned to distance herself from the legacy of the Hart name—a name whispered in the city's most hallowed circles, entwined with both charity gala prestige and rumors as old as the family's fog-shrouded estate. While her relatives raised glasses to ancient glory, Evelyn fashioned her life from paint, canvas, and the stubborn hope that solitude could heal. Her world was small, honest, and free from the choking grip of family secrets—or so she thought.

News of her father's death arrived unbidden, as cold and final as winter frost. The reclusive billionaire patriarch of the Hart dynasty had not spoken more than a handful of words to her in a decade. In place of affection, they'd traded letters of formality and silence shaped by old wounds. She set aside her brushes with trembling hands the day the call came, shards of unfinished landscapes littering her apartment. The summons was clear: she was to attend the reading of her father's will at the family mansion, a place she hadn't set foot in since she was a girl haunted by marble corridors and locked doors.

Even as Evelyn travelled back to Blackwood—her childhood home and the stage of every memory, both treasured and traumatic—she could not shake the sense she was walking into a story already in progress. The mansion's silhouette waited atop its lonely hill, ringed by ancient oaks and secrets, its windows glinting with hostile welcome. Within its walls, the Hart family had always fought for dominance with the ruthless etiquette of a dynasty used to hiding its darkest truths beneath velvet and gold.

The will's revelation stunned everyone, Evelyn most of all. Named as the sole heir to the estate—while cousins, aunts, and uncles bristled with veiled anger—Evelyn was thrown into a treacherous inheritance as much defined by vintage gold as by the ghost of a curse. She felt the weight of suspicion and resentment from the family she'd left behind, each sidelong glance a reminder that power and money warped loyalties, and that her sudden fortune might soon come at a deadly cost.

For Evelyn, stepping into Hart House meant more than claiming rooms heavy with dust and memory. It was crossing a threshold into a labyrinth of encoded warnings and dangers disguised as family. As cryptic journals and old threats begin to surface, Evelyn is forced to confront the uneasy truth: the past is not truly behind her, and the Hart legacy has always been written in secrets, shadows—and blood. This is her journey through the heart of darkness, where every locked door could hide a friend, a

foe, or the answer to a legacy that may yet claim her as its next victim.

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CHAPTER ONE: Ashes and Inheritance

The sky wept, a monotonous drizzle blurring the ancient oaks that lined the winding drive to the Hart family mausoleum. Evelyn stood apart from the cluster of mourners, a lone figure in a charcoal suit that felt less like mourning attire and more like a costume. Her breath plumed in the cold air, each exhale a silent counterpoint to the hushed murmurs of relatives she barely recognized. The scent of wet earth and dying lilies clung to everything, a heavy perfume of finality.

It had been ten years since Evelyn had last seen her father, Jonathan Hart, alive. Ten years since she'd walked away from the gilded cage of Hart House, trading marble halls for a cramped studio apartment and the suffocating weight of expectation for the liberating freedom of anonymity. Their relationship, if one could even call it that, had been a series of polite, distant exchanges, each word carefully chosen to avoid the raw nerve of their estrangement. Now, he was gone, reduced to an urn of ashes, and Evelyn felt little but a hollow ache where grief was supposed to be.

Her gaze drifted over the small gathering. Her aunt, Lavinia Hart, a woman sculpted from expensive fabrics and sharper angles, dabbed at her eyes with a lace handkerchief, though Evelyn suspected the tears were more for lost influence than lost love. Standing beside her was cousin Julian, a man whose ambition was as ill-fitting as his too-tight suit, already eyeing the distant Hart House as if mentally drawing up blueprints for renovation. Then there was Marcus Thorne, her father's long-time legal counsel, a man whose presence was as unsettling as the rustle of old paper. He caught her eye across the gravesite, a flicker of something unreadable in his expression before he looked away.

The eulogy, delivered by a distant cousin Evelyn couldn't place, was a saccharine tapestry of carefully curated achievements, glossing over the man Jonathan Hart truly was: reclusive, demanding, and utterly devoted to the preservation of his family's image, even if it meant sacrificing personal connections. Evelyn remembered a different man, fleetingly, from her childhood – a man with kind eyes who would read her stories by the flickering firelight, before the weight of the Hart legacy had seemingly crushed whatever tenderness he possessed. That memory was a faint echo now, almost drowned out by years of silence and neglect.

As the urn was gently placed into its niche within the granite crypt, a shiver traced Evelyn's spine. It wasn't just the cold. It was the sudden, overwhelming realization that her father's death, rather than closing a chapter, was merely opening a terrifying new one. She had always thought of herself as a spectator to the Hart family drama, a distant star in a foreign galaxy. But something in Marcus Thorne's brief glance,

something in the way Lavinia's gaze lingered on her, suggested she was about to be pulled back into the volatile orbit she had worked so hard to escape.

The small reception at Hart House afterwards was a study in forced civility. The air hung thick with the scent of lilies and the unspoken question of the will. Evelyn found herself trapped between Aunt Lavinia's thinly veiled inquiries about her art career—which Lavinia clearly considered a charming, if misguided, hobby—and Julian's overly solicitous offers of "any assistance you might need." It was all a carefully choreographed dance around the elephant in the room: who would inherit Jonathan Hart's vast fortune?

Evelyn retreated to a quiet corner of the drawing-room, a space she remembered from childhood as forbidden territory, filled with priceless antiques and an air of hushed reverence. The elaborate Persian rug, the oil portraits of grim-faced ancestors staring down from the walls, the scent of old wood polish—it was all eerily familiar, yet foreign. She felt like an intruder in her own past. A tall, imposing woman with severe grey hair, whom Evelyn dimly recalled as Mrs. Albright, the housekeeper, silently offered her a glass of chilled white wine. Her eyes, though, held a depth of knowledge that suggested she saw far more than she let on.

"Thank you, Mrs. Albright," Evelyn murmured, accepting the glass. The housekeeper merely nodded, her expression unreadable, before melting back into the shadows. Evelyn watched her go, a strange sense of unease settling over her. Mrs. Albright had been a fixture in Hart House for decades, a silent observer of all the family's triumphs and transgressions. Evelyn wondered what secrets the old woman held, what truths she had witnessed behind those impenetrable eyes.

The chatter in the room suddenly died down as Marcus Thorne, brief case clutched in hand, cleared his throat. "Ladies and gentlemen, if you please, we shall proceed with the reading of Mr. Jonathan Hart's last will and testament." A ripple of anticipation, thinly disguised as respectful solemnity, swept through the room. Evelyn felt a familiar tightening in her stomach. She hadn't expected anything, not truly. Her father had effectively disinherited her years ago through his silence and emotional neglect. This was merely a formality, a final, public acknowledgment of her status as an outcast.

As the family gathered around the polished mahogany table in the library, Evelyn felt like an outsider looking in on a play she had no lines in. She took a seat furthest from the head of the table, near the tall, leaded-glass windows that overlooked the fog-shrouded grounds. The library, too, was steeped in history, its shelves groaning under the weight of ancient tomes. A faint, almost imperceptible, scent of old paper and something else—something metallic, like rust or old blood—lingered in the air.

Marcus Thorne opened the brief case with a crisp click, extracting a thick, sealed envelope. He cleared his throat again, a nervous habit Evelyn remembered from her

few childhood encounters with him. The silence in the room was absolute, broken only by the crackle of the fireplace. Evelyn braced herself for the inevitable, for the polite dismissal, the token sum perhaps, that would sever her connection to the Hart fortune once and for all. What followed, however, was a shock that would reverberate through the very foundations of Hart House, and irrevocably change the course of Evelyn Hart's life.

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