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The Infernal Heirloom

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Introduction

Tessa Quinn had always considered herself practical—a trait hard-won from a life spent repairing what others had forgotten. Yet as the train wound its way through the mist-covered hills of coastal New England toward Briar Hollow, the town of her childhood, even Tessa couldn't ignore the unsettling tangle of anticipation and dread tightening in her chest. Her grandmother's passing had summoned her back after more than a decade of silence, not with grief, but with a legal summons: she was now the owner of the crumbling Quinn mansion and whatever secrets still lingered inside its gothic silhouette.

As the taxi rolled up the rain-slicked drive, the mansion came into view, looming and vine-choked, windows staring blankly onto the overgrown gardens. It was a place whispered about in town—where the reputable Quinn name was stained with tragedy, scandal, and the ever-present rumors of curses. Tessa's mother had raised her on stories of superstitions, only to flee the family home in the dead of night years ago. Now, Tessa returned alone, unwillingly inheriting both her grandmother's legacy and the sense of isolation that once drove her mother away.

From the ornate banister caked in dust to the intricate molding lost beneath years of neglect, every corner of the mansion pulsed with memories—some sharp and bright, others locked behind doors Tessa had long ago promised herself never to open again. The townsfolk regarded her return with wary curiosity, their eyes reflecting both pity and suspicion, as though she carried not just keys to the estate, but to the town's oldest wounds. Still, Tessa greeted each ghost of her past with a craftsman's resolve, determined to bring order from chaos one plank and pane at a time.

But that resolve would be tested far sooner than she could have anticipated. It was while unpacking in her grandmother's study, light filtering through warped glass, that Tessa discovered the peculiar locket—a piece of intricate clockwork on a tarnished chain, unlike anything she'd ever seen. What began as idle curiosity soon turned sinister when her touch unwittingly unlocked something best left undisturbed. Shadows thickened in the corners; floorboards whispered beneath her feet. The sense of being alone in the house became a mercurial thing, shifting with every breath.

At first, Tessa clung to logic, dismissing strange occurrences as the tricks of an old house—drafts, rodents, the product of sleep-deprived nerves. But as the days stretched on, her skepticism faltered. Doors slammed of their own accord. Frigid air gathered around the locket when dusk settled. Haunting lullabies drifted down empty halls. Reluctantly, Tessa had to consider what locals had always believed—that the Quinns bore more than material inheritance, and the mansion itself was bound by

something that would not be ignored.

Even as questions multiplied, the roots of Tessa's legacy tightened around her. With every new clue she unearthed, it became clear that the path to the truth would demand more than restoration skills. To survive, and perhaps redeem her fractured family line, she would need help—a partnership as fraught with secrets as the mansion itself. And so, Tessa stepped quietly into the heart of Briar Hollow once again, where the past was very much alive, and fate ticked inexorably forward.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming Shadows

The last time Tessa had seen the Quinn mansion, she was ten years old, clutching a threadbare teddy bear and her mother's hand, the scent of lavender and dust thick in the air. Now, standing on the crumbling flagstone path, the smell was different – a pervasive dampness mingled with something vaguely metallic, like old blood and rust. The house itself loomed, a skeletal hand against the bruised twilight sky, its intricate gingerbread trim rotting like neglected teeth. No wonder the townsfolk of Briar Hollow whispered.

Her taxi, a rattling relic driven by a taciturn man named Silas who seemed to know her lineage better than she did, had already rumbled away, leaving her with two worn suitcases and a legal folder that felt impossibly heavy. The iron gate, once a grand entrance, hung lopsided on a single, groaning hinge. Tessa pushed it open, the screech echoing through the oppressive stillness of the overgrown front yard, where ancient rose bushes clawed at the air like desperate fingers.

The front door, an imposing slab of oak, was predictably locked. Tessa fumbled with the key her grandmother's lawyer had given her – a heavy, ornate thing that felt cold even through her gloves. The tumblers groaned in protest, a sound like an old man clearing his throat, before clicking open with a resonant thud. The sudden silence that followed felt even heavier. She stepped inside, and the air hit her first: stale, cold, and thick with the aroma of disuse, mildew, and something else indefinable, like forgotten memories.

The grand foyer was swallowed by shadows. Moonlight, struggling through grimy leaded-glass windows, cast watery patterns on the checkered marble floor. A sweeping staircase, its banister carved with grotesque gargoyles, ascended into the gloom, disappearing somewhere above. Tessa remembered playing hide-and-seek here, her childish giggles echoing off the high ceilings. Now, the only sound was the thud of her own heartbeat against her ribs.

To her right, a vast drawing-room lay shrouded under dust sheets, looking like a graveyard of ghostly furniture. To her left, the library, its shelves crammed with leather-bound volumes, beckoned with a familiar, dusty promise. Her grandmother, Elara Quinn, had been a woman of formidable intellect and even more formidable eccentricities. Tessa remembered glimpses of her, a stern, elegant figure, always with a book in hand, her eyes sharp and knowing.

Tessa pulled out her phone, its screen a small beacon in the oppressive darkness. No signal. Of course. Briar Hollow wasn't exactly known for its modern amenities, and the

Quinn mansion was particularly isolated. She sighed, tucking it away. This would be a long night. She moved through the foyer, her footsteps surprisingly loud on the marble, feeling a familiar tension in her shoulders. This was a house she'd been taught to forget, a chapter of her life tightly shut.

The kitchen, when she finally found it, was a time capsule. A colossal cast-iron stove dominated one wall, and a porcelain sink stood chipped and stained beneath a grimy window. A faint smell of old tea leaves lingered, a ghostly echo of daily rituals. Tessa found a working faucet after some effort, sputtering rusty water, and managed to fill a kettle she found tucked away in a cupboard. A cup of instant coffee would have to suffice.

As she waited for the water to boil, Tessa's gaze drifted to the pantry door, slightly ajar. A sudden, sharp draft snaked around her ankles, despite the house being entirely closed up. The door creaked further open, revealing only blackness within. Tessa told herself it was just the house settling, the way old houses did. But a shiver, unrelated to the chill, traced its way up her spine.

She located a fuse box in the mudroom and, after some trial and error, managed to restore power to a few key areas. Lights flickered on, dim and yellow, pushing back the darkest corners but doing little to dispel the pervasive gloom. The house seemed to absorb the light, drawing it into its ancient bones. She found an old cot mattress in one of the servants' quarters and dragged it to her grandmother's study, deciding it would be her temporary sleeping quarters. The room felt less... ominous than the grand bedrooms upstairs.

The study was a sanctuary of sorts, lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, overflowing with texts on botany, local history, and arcane symbolism. Elara Quinn had been a collector of peculiar knowledge, a fact that had always fascinated and slightly unnerved Tessa even as a child. A heavy oak desk stood in the center, buried under stacks of papers, half-finished crosswords, and an assortment of strange, small objects.

Tessa spent the rest of the evening making a list. Repairs needed: leaky roof, crumbling plaster, burst pipes. Restoration projects: countless pieces of furniture, a collection of antique clocks, intricate tapestries. The sheer scale of it was daunting, but Tessa, a meticulous restorer by trade, felt a familiar pull to the work. There was satisfaction in breathing new life into forgotten things.

As the first tendrils of dawn painted the sky a bruised purple, Tessa finally drifted into an uneasy sleep, her mind replaying the day's arrival. The house creaked and groaned around her, a living entity settling into a new rhythm with its unwilling inhabitant. She dreamt of shadows that danced just beyond her sight, and a faint, rhythmic ticking sound that seemed to emanate from the very walls. She woke with a start, the ticking

still echoing in her ears, though the room was silent.

The sound, she realized, wasn't coming from the house itself, but from somewhere close. She sat up, rubbing the sleep from her eyes, and scanned the cluttered desk. Her gaze landed on a small, dark object half-hidden beneath a stack of old journals. It was a locket, intricately carved, unlike any piece of jewelry she'd ever encountered. It appeared to be made of tarnished silver and something that looked like miniature clockwork.

She reached for it, her fingers brushing against its cool, smooth surface. It was oddly heavy for its size. Even in the dim light, she could make out tiny, almost imperceptible gears and springs embedded within its casing, hinting at a hidden mechanism. A thin, delicate chain, equally tarnished, was looped around it. As her fingers closed around the locket, a faint, almost imperceptible vibration seemed to hum through it.

A sudden, sharp draft swept through the room, making the papers on the desk rustle. Tessa glanced at the window, but it was firmly closed. The air grew perceptibly colder around her, a localized chill that prickled her skin. She tightened her grip on the locket, a prickle of unease turning into a full-blown shiver. The house was awake. And it was watching.

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