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Crimson Legacy

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Introduction

New York City seemed intent on swallowing Tess Marshall whole. From her cramped walk-up in Brooklyn, she watched the city's relentless current—cabs honking, neon flashing, the constant hum of ambition and disappointment echoing through her window long after midnight. Her canvases leaned half-finished against the peeling walls, smeared reds and grays left to dry alongside overdue bills, rejection letters, and the occasional handwritten note from her landlord. For years, Tess had clung to the hope that art would save her, that a single inspired breakthrough might drag her from obscurity into a life she could call her own. Instead, anonymity clung to her like a second skin, and each day felt heavier than the last.

Family had never been a refuge. The Marshalls had splintered long before she was born—arguments turned to feuds, secrets calcified into silences. Tess's mother seldom spoke of her childhood in Maine, of the old Weatherby estate or the enigmatic grandmother Tess had only met twice: first as a shy, awestruck child, and again at seventeen, when her grandmother's eyes had briefly softened in recognition before returning to ice. Even those brief encounters left Tess haunted by questions she never dared to voice. Was Weatherby House truly as haunted as the rumors suggested? Why had her mother run so far and for so long?

The letter arrived in the pale light of a winter morning, sandwiched between grocery flyers and past-due statements. Tess almost tossed it in the trash—her name was written in a looping, unfamiliar hand, the return address faded, nearly illegible. But curiosity outweighed caution. The first words stole her breath: "You are the primary beneficiary of your grandmother's estate. To claim your inheritance, you must come to Weatherby House before the next full moon." Each line teased a new impossibility. How could she inherit a woman's legacy whom she scarcely knew? Why now, of all times, when the rest of her life was crumbling?

The decision to leave was not made lightly. Doubt gnawed at her, but the prospect of answers—and escape—proved irresistible. Beyond the promise of inheritance, the letter hinted at something more: a riddle bound to the estate, a test written in her grandmother's spidery script and shrouded in decades-old secrecy. If Tess wanted any hope of untangling her family's history—and perhaps understanding her own—it began in the shadowed rooms of Weatherby House.

Stepping onto the train north, Tess felt the city recede and the weight of uncertainty settle in its place. What waited for her in Maine was more than faded wallpaper and ancestral portraits. It was a reckoning: with her past, her kin, and herself. Secrets would be forced into the light, rivalries revived, and the lines between loyalty and

betrayal—love and legacy—redrawn.

As storm clouds gathered over the horizon, Tess had no way of knowing just how dangerous the promise of a “crimson legacy” could be. But one truth remained: she could not return to the way things were. Weatherby House demanded answers—and would yield nothing without a price.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Letter from Weatherby House

Tess's art studio was less a studio and more a glorified closet, a sliver of New York real estate carved out of a crumbling pre-war building in Bushwick. The winter light, when it bothered to filter through the grime on the window, painted the space in dull, uninspiring grays. Today, even that meager light was obscured by a stack of canvas stretchers leaning precariously, threatening to topple onto her latest, half-finished abstract piece. It was meant to convey urban alienation, but mostly it just looked like a sad, muddy sunset.

The hum of the old radiator was the only sound, a wheezing accompaniment to the silence of her phone, which hadn't rung with good news in weeks. Rejection letters from galleries piled up like forgotten snowdrifts on her tiny drafting table, each one a fresh sting. Her landlord, Mr. Henderson, a man whose patience was as thin as his receding hairline, had left a passive-aggressive Post-it note on her door that morning, a not-so-gentle reminder about the rent. Tess mentally calculated how many more bowls of instant ramen she could afford before she had to start selling her blood for plasma.

The arrival of the letter, tucked between a flyer for a discount pizza place and a utility bill, felt like an anomaly. It was a thick, cream-colored envelope, heavy in her hand, with an elegant, almost old-fashioned script for her name and address. Her usual mail was either junk or a harbinger of financial doom. This was different. The return address, faintly stamped, read "Weatherby House, Arundel, Maine." A shiver traced its way down her spine.

She knew that name. Weatherby. It was the ancestral seat of her mother's family, a place Tess had only ever heard whispered about, usually in hushed tones that suggested secrets and sorrow. Her mother, a woman who had fled Maine like a bat out of hell at eighteen, never spoke of it with anything but a tight, almost bitter, expression. Tess remembered vague, fragmented images from her one childhood visit—a grand, echoing hall, the scent of dust and old wood, a stern woman with piercing blue eyes. Her grandmother.

With trembling fingers, Tess tore open the seal. The paper inside was thick, expensive, smelling faintly of lavender and old paper. The first line hit her with the force of a physical blow: "It is with a heavy heart that we inform you of the passing of Beatrice Weatherby Marshall, your grandmother, on December 14th." Tess blinked. Her grandmother. Deceased. She hadn't even known she was ill, let alone still alive. The last she'd heard, years ago, was that the old woman was a recluse.

The letter continued, each sentence a new layer of bewildering information. "Pursuant to the terms of her last will and testament, you have been named a primary beneficiary of her estate. To fulfill the stipulations of the will and claim your inheritance, you are required to be present at Weatherby House no later than the full moon of January." A date followed, circled in red ink: January 25th. That was less than two weeks away.

Tess read the words again, then a third time. Inheritance? From Beatrice Marshall? The woman who had barely acknowledged her existence? It felt like a cruel joke, an elaborate prank designed to mock her current destitution. What could Beatrice possibly have left her? A dusty old teacup? A stern warning to get a real job?

Then came the catch, wrapped in flowery, archaic language: "Furthermore, it is stipulated that all named heirs must participate in the resolution of a family riddle, integral to the true legacy of Weatherby House, which has remained unsolved for generations. Your presence is paramount to this endeavor." A riddle. Of course. Her grandmother, Tess dimly remembered, had always been obsessed with puzzles and cryptic pronouncements. It was probably why no one had ever understood her.

The letter concluded with instructions for travel, a vague promise of accommodations, and the name of a solicitor, Mr. Silas Croft, whom she could contact for further details. Tess folded the letter slowly, her mind reeling. The city outside continued its relentless thrum, but for Tess, the noise had faded, replaced by the chaotic whispers of possibility.

A vast inheritance. The words shimmered, intoxicating and terrifying. It wasn't just about money, though the thought of escaping her current financial quicksand was undeniably appealing. It was about answers. Answers to why her mother had fled. Answers about the Weatherby family. Answers about her own forgotten past.

She walked over to her half-finished painting, picking up a brush. Her usual method felt distant, irrelevant. The muddled sunset looked even sadder now, insignificant compared to the looming gothic mansion her mind was conjuring. Weatherby House. The name tasted like mystery on her tongue.

Could this be real? Could this be her chance to finally break free? The thought of facing her estranged family, the hostile aunt she dimly recalled, the cousins she'd never met, was daunting. The letter hinted at other heirs, all undoubtedly vying for the fortune. A chill that had nothing to do with the drafty studio snaked through her. Her grandmother, even in death, was orchestrating a grand, convoluted drama.

Tess picked up her phone, hesitating over the contact for her mother. What would she say? "Mom, guess what? Your estranged, terrifying mother left me money, but only if I

go back to the house you ran away from and solve a riddle." No, that wouldn't do. Her mother would likely tell her to burn the letter and forget about it.

But Tess couldn't forget about it. The lure of the unknown, the tantalizing whisper of a different future, was too strong. She had nothing to lose, except perhaps her sanity, and that was already hanging by a thread in New York. The idea of trading the concrete jungle for the wild coast of Maine, even temporarily, held a strange appeal. It was a journey into the heart of her own family's forgotten history, a chance to perhaps understand the pieces of herself she felt were missing.

She scrolled through train schedules, a sense of urgency building. The full moon of January 25th. Not much time. And with each passing minute, the decision felt less like a choice and more like an inevitability. Weatherby House was calling. And Tess, against all common sense, felt compelled to answer. She just hoped whatever waited for her there wouldn't devour her whole.

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