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The Stolen Inheritance

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Introduction

Ava Grayson never imagined her life would be marked by anything but struggle. The city was a harsh place for a young artist with a mountain of student debt and an empty refrigerator. Days trickled by in cramped, paint-splattered apartments as she scraped together odd jobs and commissions, her dreams of a glittering gallery show fading beneath the weight of survival. Every missed call from her mother and unopened letter from distant relatives felt like a reminder of the family fractures she had never been able—or willing—to mend.

It had been years since Ava had spoken to her grandmother, Vivienne Grayson, the reclusive matriarch of the family. Whispers of Vivienne's eccentricities and tempers had always swirled around family gatherings, but Ava's mother had made it clear: the Grayson estate, the family fortune, even the faded black-and-white portraits lining the ancestral halls, were things best left unspoken. Ava pictured the manor only vaguely—a shadowy, imposing relic in the English countryside, shrouded more in mystery than memory.

Then, in a single afternoon, Ava's life jolted off its weary tracks. The letter arrived on heavy cream paper, its wording clipped and formal: Vivienne Grayson was dead, and Ava, her estranged granddaughter, was the sole heir to not only a sprawling estate, but also to the complicated legacy her grandmother had left behind. Disbelief warred with fear as Ava, nearly penniless yet suddenly the owner of untold wealth, faced an uncertain future.

Arriving at Grayson Manor, Ava found her inheritance less a gift and more a confounding curse. The estate was ransacked, dust clinging to overlooked corners and valuables clearly pilfered. The servants eyed her warily, and the villagers regarded her claim with open hostility. Legal threats began to mount from the Kemble family, powerful locals who were convinced that Vivienne's fortune was rightfully theirs. It became painfully obvious to Ava that the troubles of the living were entwined with the secrets of the dead.

But hidden beneath the layers of inheritance paperwork and whispered threats was something even more dangerous—a series of coded journals penned in Vivienne's unmistakable hand, hinting at a tragedy buried deep in the manor's past. The more Ava read, the clearer it became: this inheritance was not just money or property, but the key to a mystery capable of toppling the fragile peace the village clung to.

Now, with her own safety in question and her loyalties divided, Ava must untangle the web of deception spun long before her arrival. To claim her inheritance, she'll have to

uncover the truth about her family—no matter how deadly those secrets may be. For Ava Grayson, the path home is perilous, and the most valuable legacy she stands to inherit may not be gold, but the truth.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Letter

The envelope sat on her worn kitchen table, a stark white rectangle against a splatter of dried ochre paint. Ava had been staring at it for a full five minutes, a lukewarm mug of instant coffee growing cold in her hands. It wasn't the kind of mail she usually received – no urgent bills, no circulars for discount takeaways. This was thick, substantial, and bore a crest she faintly recognized from an antique photo album her mother had once, briefly, shown her. The return address was a law firm she'd never heard of, nestled deep in the English countryside.

Her small London flat, perpetually smelling of turpentine and stale toast, felt even smaller under the weight of the unopened letter. Outside, the city hummed with its usual relentless energy, a cacophony that typically soothed Ava. Today, it felt like an insistent whisper, urging her to just *open it*. But a creeping dread, cold and sharp as a winter draft, held her back. Family news, especially from her estranged maternal side, rarely heralded anything good. More often than not, it signaled another request for money, or a thinly veiled accusation of her perceived failures.

Eventually, the silence in her flat became unbearable. With a sigh that felt too heavy for her twenty-seven years, Ava tore open the flap. The paper was heavy, embossed, and somehow smelled faintly of old books and something floral. Her eyes scanned the formal script, skipping over the legalese, until two words leapt out at her: "Vivienne Grayson" and "deceased."

A strange, hollow feeling settled in her stomach. Vivienne, her grandmother. The woman she hadn't seen since she was ten, and even then, only briefly, during a stilted, suffocating Christmas visit that had ended in a shouting match between Vivienne and Ava's mother. Ava remembered Vivienne as a formidable figure, all sharp angles and sharper words, draped in impractical fabrics and smelling of lavender. The memory was vague, more a collection of fleeting impressions than a clear picture.

The letter continued, each carefully chosen word a small hammer blow. Vivienne Grayson had passed away peacefully in her sleep. After outlining the formalities, the solicitor, Mr. Alistair Finch, dropped the bombshell: Vivienne had left her entire estate, Grayson Manor, and all associated assets, to Ava. *Sole heir*. The words shimmered on the page, almost unbelievable.

Ava read it again. And again. *Sole heir*. To a sprawling estate in the English countryside? The same estate her mother had always dismissed as a crumbling, drafty mausoleum, haunted by the ghosts of generations of Graysons? Her, Ava, the woman who currently had £37 in her bank account and whose most valuable possession was a

set of slightly cracked Winsor & Newton oil paints? It felt like a cruel joke, a cosmic prank designed to mock her perpetually struggling existence.

A choked laugh escaped her. The irony was almost too rich. For years, she'd dreamed of financial stability, of enough money to simply *create* without the gnawing anxiety of rent deadlines. She'd painted vibrant, emotional pieces in her tiny studio, fueled by coffee and a fierce, quiet determination, but the art market was a fickle beast, and talent didn't always pay the bills. Now, this. A fortune, dropped into her lap by a grandmother she barely knew, a woman who had, by all accounts, actively avoided contact with her own daughter and granddaughter for decades.

Her phone buzzed, startling her. It was her mother, Deirdre. Ava stared at the caller ID, a familiar knot tightening in her chest. Deirdre and Vivienne's relationship had been a perpetual warzone, fought with bitter silences and cutting remarks. Ava had always been caught in the crossfire, a collateral casualty. It was part of why Ava had pulled away, seeking her own path, however difficult. The family drama, the unresolved resentments – it was a burden she hadn't wanted to carry.

She let it go to voicemail. She needed a moment to process this. The letter had also included a train ticket, first class, and instructions for a car service to meet her at the station nearest Grayson Manor. Mr. Finch had been... thorough. He'd even attached a preliminary inventory, a long list of properties, investments, and — most bafflingly — a substantial art collection. Vivienne, it seemed, had been far more than just reclusive. She had been incredibly wealthy.

Visions of Grayson Manor, pieced together from fleeting childhood glimpses and her mother's disparaging remarks, began to form in Ava's mind. A grand, imposing structure, overgrown with ivy, perpetually shrouded in mist. A place where shadows lengthened early and secrets lingered in the air. Her mother had once called it a "house of ghosts." Ava had dismissed it then as melodrama, but now, faced with this incredible, unsettling inheritance, the phrase took on a new, chilling resonance.

A fresh wave of anxiety washed over her. This wasn't just money. This was an obligation, a responsibility, a complete upheaval of her carefully constructed, albeit precarious, life. She was an artist, a loner by nature, comfortable in her own quiet world of canvases and solitude. How was she supposed to navigate a vast estate, a legal team, and presumably, a staff? And what about the family she'd never really known? Vivienne's will was surprisingly straightforward, leaving everything to Ava, but it had to be a point of contention for others in the family. She couldn't be the only living relative, could she?

The letter had hinted at potential challenges, speaking vaguely of "interested parties." Ava's stomach churned. She pictured stern-faced lawyers, distant relatives with avarice in their eyes, all ready to descend like vultures on Vivienne's fortune. She,

Ava, the struggling artist, was now the unsuspecting prize in a high-stakes game she didn't even know how to play. The idea of confrontation, of navigating a world of wealth and intricate legalities, felt utterly overwhelming. She just wanted to paint.

But something else tugged at her, a quieter, more insistent pull. Curiosity. Why her? Why the estranged granddaughter, the one who had practically severed ties with the Grayson lineage? Vivienne had been reclusive, yes, but not entirely cut off. There were other family members, surely. Why would Vivienne bypass them all for Ava? Was it a final, defiant act of spite against her own daughter, Deirdre? Or was there something else, something deeper, a hidden reason for this unexpected legacy?

She looked around her small, messy flat. The peeling wallpaper, the paint splatters on the floorboards, the stacks of finished canvases leaning against the walls, waiting for a buyer who might never appear. This was her life, a constant grind. And now, this letter. It was a lifeline, yes, but it felt like one thrown from a very great height, by a hand she couldn't see, towards a boat she wasn't sure she wanted to board.

A decision, swift and unexpected, formed in her mind. She would go. She would go to Grayson Manor, not just for the money, but for answers. She would face whatever challenges awaited her, brave the legal battles, and confront the family ghosts. Because something about this felt less like an inheritance and more like an unfinished story, a mystery waiting to be unraveled. And for an artist who saw beauty and truth in the hidden layers of life, that was an irresistible call.

She picked up her phone and dialed her mother's number. "Mum," she said, her voice surprisingly steady, "I've just received a letter about Grandma Vivienne. I think I'm going to England." The silence on the other end of the line stretched, thick with unspoken history. Ava knew, even before her mother spoke, that this journey was going to be far more complicated than just claiming an estate. It was going to be a journey into the very heart of her family's past, and perhaps, into the truth of who Vivienne Grayson truly was.

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