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The Fifth Heir

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Introduction

Grace Ellery considered herself an ordinary woman, the kind whose footsteps faded into the din of rush hour and whose days poured seamlessly, uneventfully, one into the next. Her life was a tapestry of beige—an unremarkable office job, a modest flat in the city, evenings spent with paperbacks and takeout. The rarest thing that ever crossed her threshold was a letter, and so, when a thick, cream-colored envelope arrived with her name written in looping script, it unsettled her carefully curated world.

The letter claimed to summon her to Delacroix Manor, an estate she had only ever heard mentioned in faded family whispers. It cited the passing of a distant relative whose name barely flickered in her memory, but the contents—“to attend the reading of the will, by request of the late Mr. Delacroix”—were unmistakably real. As the invitation burned in her hand, Grace was swept by disbelief. She had never thought herself an heir to anything, let alone a fortune spun with the name Delacroix.

Traveling through the rain-soaked English countryside, Grace was gripped by a sense of unreality. The journey was long and shrouded in fog, as though she were being guided not by the yellow headlights of her hired car, but by fate itself. Each mile toward the manor deepened her unease—and her curiosity. What secrets, she wondered, did this ancestral estate guard so fiercely? Why summon her, the unnoticed one, to its halls at this storm-struck hour?

Delacroix Manor rose from the mist at the very edge of the moors: grim, imposing, its windows lit with a flicker of warmth that contradicted the jagged silhouette against the sky. As she stepped through the heavy oak doors, a hush so profound it rang in her ears confirmed what she'd already feared—her arrival was awaited, and she was by no means alone. Four other heirs, each a stranger bound to her by blood and rivalry, awaited her in the grand, echoing vestibule. Their wary eyes and tense silences turned the air sharp with suspicion.

Over the next hours, the atmosphere grew heavier—shadows moved in the hallways, the staff offered cryptic smiles, and the old housekeeper seemed to glide rather than walk. Every corner held the promise of revelation or danger. The manor itself appeared to pulse with secrets, as if Grace's footsteps on the marble floors were unlocking memories long buried beneath the dust and stone.

Grace could not know, as she set her suitcase down in the candlelit guest chamber, how profoundly her life was about to change. She could not yet imagine the betrayals and alliances, the buried truths and untold terrors, that awaited her alongside the

legacy of the Delacroix name. But with the winter storm swirling outside, the doors locked against the night, and the weight of a century's worth of secrets bearing down, Grace Ellery's world was about to shift forever—whether she was ready or not.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Letter

The clatter of Grace's keyboard usually provided the only rhythm to her afternoons, a monotonous percussion that blended into the hum of the air conditioning and the distant murmur of her colleagues. Today, however, an alien presence disrupted her carefully ordered desk: a thick, cream-coloured envelope, utterly out of place amidst the stacks of invoices and compliance reports. It felt substantial, almost weighty, and bore her name in a script so elegantly looped it seemed to belong to a bygone era. Her own handwriting was a hurried scrawl, functional but far from artistic.

Her initial thought was that it was a mistake, perhaps a misplaced delivery intended for someone else in the labyrinthine office building. But the postcode was hers, the house number undeniable. And the stamp, a rather grand-looking crest, suggested something far removed from the usual junk mail that fluttered onto her doormat. Curious, and feeling a prickle of unease, Grace picked up her letter opener – a dull plastic affair shaped like a tiny sword – and carefully slit the seal.

Inside, a single sheet of heavy parchment, folded precisely, awaited her. The letterhead was embossed: *Sterling & Finch, Solicitors at Law*. Below it, a date from two weeks prior. Grace's brow furrowed. Solicitors? She'd never had dealings with a solicitor in her life. Her most complex legal interaction had been a dispute with a phone company over an erroneous bill.

She began to read, her eyes scanning the formal language. It spoke of the "demise of Mr. Elias Delacroix," a name that felt distantly familiar, like a half-remembered tune. Elias Delacroix. The name chimed in her mind, vague and elusive. Her maternal grandmother, a woman of few words and even fewer personal anecdotes, had occasionally mentioned a "Delacroix cousin" from a grand family, but Grace had always dismissed it as fanciful tales or distant, irrelevant branches on an overgrown family tree.

The letter continued, inviting her "to attend the reading of the Last Will and Testament of the aforementioned Mr. Elias Delacroix" at Delacroix Manor, a place described with an almost reverent tone. It stated the date and time: a Tuesday, a week from now, at precisely 2 PM. A faint chill traced its way down Grace's spine, despite the office being comfortably warm.

"By request of the late Mr. Delacroix," the letter emphasized, a line that struck Grace as particularly odd. Why *her*? She was a cog in a vast corporate machine, living a life of quiet routine. The very idea of being singled out by a deceased man, a supposed relative she didn't even remember, felt absurd. She reread the paragraph, looking for

an opt-out clause, a disclaimer, anything that would allow her to dismiss this as an elaborate hoax. There was none. Only a strict RSVP date and a contact number for inquiries.

Her colleague, Brenda, from the next cubicle over, leaned her head around the partition. "Everything alright, Grace? You look like you've seen a ghost." Brenda was prone to melodrama, but Grace had to admit, her reflection in the darkened computer screen probably did look a little pale.

Grace merely shook her head. "Just... a strange letter." She folded the parchment carefully and slipped it back into its envelope, tucking it beneath her keyboard. The weight of it felt like a silent accusation, a challenge. It disrupted the beige tapestry of her life, inserting a vibrant, unexpected thread.

The rest of the workday passed in a blur. Grace's usual efficiency faltered, her mind replaying phrases from the letter: *Delacroix Manor, Last Will and Testament, by request of the late Mr. Delacroix*. She tried to recall anything about this mysterious relative. Was he wealthy? Eccentric? Her grandmother had been a quiet, almost timid woman, not one to boast of grand connections. But then again, Grace had never pressed for details, content with her small, predictable world.

That evening, back in her modest flat, Grace brewed a cup of tea, the familiar ritual doing little to settle her racing thoughts. She pulled out the letter again, spreading it on her worn kitchen table. The paper still felt substantial, unyielding. She Googled "Elias Delacroix" and "Delacroix Manor." The results that populated her screen were astonishing.

Delacroix Manor was not merely a large house; it was an estate, ancient and sprawling, nestled deep within the English countryside, notorious for its isolated grandeur and, according to a few archived news articles, a history shrouded in rumour and misfortune. There were mentions of a "reclusive landowner," a family "once prominent, now withdrawn." One article, from a local historical society, even hinted at "unexplained occurrences" and "long-standing feuds."

Grace felt a knot tighten in her stomach. This wasn't just a letter; it was an invitation to a world she knew nothing about, a world that sounded more like the setting of one of her mystery novels than real life. She wasn't the sort of person who inherited ancient estates. She was the sort of person who spent her lunch breaks queuing for pre-made sandwiches.

She considered ignoring it, letting the date pass. But the phrase, "by request of the late Mr. Delacroix," pricked at her conscience. And, if she was entirely honest with herself, a small, adventurous spark, long dormant, had been ignited. What if this was real? What if there was a connection, a legacy, she had never known existed? It was

absurd, but the possibility, however remote, was undeniably intriguing.

The practicalities weighed on her. Delacroix Manor was hundreds of miles away, requiring a significant journey. She would need to take time off work, arrange travel. It felt like an enormous undertaking for someone who rarely ventured beyond the perimeter of her city. But the solicitors' letter had mentioned that travel expenses would be reimbursed. It felt...generous. Almost too generous.

After a restless night, Grace made her decision. She would go. Not out of a desire for wealth, which felt fantastical, but out of a profound, gnawing curiosity. Who was Elias Delacroix? Why had he singled her out? And what, precisely, was she inheriting? It wasn't every day an unremarkable office worker was summoned to a grand, mysterious manor. And so, with a mixture of trepidation and a nascent sense of adventure, Grace Ellery began to make arrangements for her journey to Delacroix Manor. The beige tapestry of her life was about to be rewoven with threads of midnight and crimson.

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