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Inheritance of Lies

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** - Homecoming Shadows
- **Chapter 2** - Ghosts in the Hallway
- **Chapter 3** - The Will's Words
- **Chapter 4** - Faces from the Past
- **Chapter 5** - The Locked Drawer
- **Chapter 6** - A Fractured Childhood
- **Chapter 7** - Whispers in the Town
- **Chapter 8** - Broken Promises
- **Chapter 9** - Old Scars, New Wounds
- **Chapter 10** - The Uninvited Guest
- **Chapter 11** - The First Threat
- **Chapter 12** - The Key and the Code
- **Chapter 13** - A Stranger's Warning
- **Chapter 14** - Secrets in the Attic
- **Chapter 15** - A Dangerous Game
- **Chapter 16** - Hunter and Hunted
- **Chapter 17** - The Breaking Point
- **Chapter 18** - Blood Ties
- **Chapter 19** - No Safe Haven
- **Chapter 20** - Betrayal Unveiled
- **Chapter 21** - The Final Puzzle
- **Chapter 22** - Truth Exposed
- **Chapter 23** - After the Storm
- **Chapter 24** - Picking Up the Pieces
- **Chapter 25** - The Last Inheritance

Introduction

Maya Sullivan always thought she'd left her hometown behind for good, trading its quiet corners and whispered gossip for the hard edges and bright lights of the city. Success came quickly in her life: prestigious degrees, victory in the courtroom, and a reputation for unflinching tenacity—all things she wanted her family to see, if only to prove that she was nothing like the girl who spent her nights tiptoeing past closed doors and holding her breath against the arguments that rattled through those thin old walls. Yet, as the dusk settles over the horizon and Maya drives past the faded welcome sign of her childhood home, a wave of memories rises—some gentle, most edged in unease. She's come back, but not by choice.

Her father, Thomas Sullivan, is dead—a fact as sudden as it is unbelievable. The official version calls it an accident, yet even from hundreds of miles away, Maya could sense there was something off in her mother's voice, something left unsaid. There's the will, of course, that's brought her back, but also the nagging whispers that burrowed into her sleep: secrets she suspected, suspicions she dismissed, all gathering like storm clouds as the family estate loomed larger and larger in her headlights.

The house itself greets Maya with a silence that is nearly accusatory. Every familiar creak of the floorboards, every faint whiff of her father's aftershave lingering in the study, feels like a test she can't hope to pass. This place was once a sanctuary and a prison, filled with memories that don't quite fit together when she tries to recall them. Photos line the hallway, capturing smiles that look rehearsed—a lifetime of pretending. Now, she finds herself in the center of it all again, but as an outsider with new eyes, trained for evidence, lies, and loopholes.

Her father's funeral is scheduled for the next day, and there is a palpable tension in the air—a sense that her return has upset a delicate balance. Old friends offer condolences edged with curiosity. Former rivals stare too long, as if searching for cracks in her polished city armor. Maya's mother, brittle and distracted, vacillates between grief and agitation, never quite meeting her daughter's gaze. There is talk of the accident at the community center and the corner store; some stick to the official story, others offer loaded glances and hurried silences.

Staying in her childhood bedroom, Maya tries to sleep but is haunted by questions. The details of the accident—the late hour, the unfamiliar stretch of road, the absence of witnesses—replay obsessively in her mind. As a lawyer, she knows the difference between oversight and omission, between what is said and what is meant. Her father's death does not add up, and the sealed envelope labeled with her name, sitting atop

his desk beside the will, suggests he may have known that secrets have a way of surfacing, no matter how deep they're buried.

Now, unpacking her suitcase in a space that no longer feels like hers, Maya prepares to do what she's always done best: search for the truth. But as the darkness gathers outside her window, she senses that in this town, truth comes at a cost—and that the inheritance her father left behind might be more dangerous than she ever imagined.

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CHAPTER ONE: Homecoming Shadows

The following morning, the house was a hive of activity, a strained ballet of hushed voices and nervous energy. Maya descended the grand staircase, each step a creaking reminder of the past. Her mother, Eleanor, stood in the foyer, her usually impeccable silver hair a little dishevelled, her eyes red-rimmed but dry. She clutched a lace handkerchief, twisting it into a knot.

"Maya, darling, you're up," Eleanor said, her voice thin. She didn't quite meet Maya's gaze, a familiar evasiveness that prickled at Maya's carefully constructed composure. "The funeral director will be here soon. Have you... settled in?"

Settled in. The words hung in the air, hollow and ironic. Maya had slept fitfully, the old house groaning around her, each sound amplified by the silence of her father's absence. She'd spent hours staring at the cracks in the ceiling, the familiar patterns on the wallpaper, trying to reconcile the successful lawyer with the small, anxious girl who once inhabited this room.

"As much as one can," Maya replied, her voice steady, professional. She observed her mother, noting the faint tremor in her hands, the way she kept glancing towards the closed study door. "Mother, about Dad's... accident. Has anything else come to light?"

Eleanor's grip on the handkerchief tightened. "The police have been very thorough, Maya. They've assured us it was an unfortunate accident. A deer, they said. He swerved. These things happen." Her tone was too firm, too rehearsed.

"A deer?" Maya countered, her legal mind already dissecting the narrative. "On Old Mill Road? Dad knew that stretch of road like the back of his hand. And he was always so careful, especially at night."

"He was tired, perhaps. Or distracted." Eleanor finally met Maya's eyes, and for a fleeting moment, Maya saw a flicker of something she couldn't quite place – fear, perhaps, or a deep-seated weariness that went beyond grief. "Please, Maya. Not now. We have enough to deal with."

The deflection was clear, but Maya pressed on. "What about his car? Was there any damage that suggested an impact with an animal?"

Eleanor wrung her hands. "It was totaled, Maya. Irreparable. They towed it away. There's nothing left to see."

A small alarm bell chimed in Maya's head. No car to examine, no physical evidence beyond the police report. It felt too clean, too convenient. Her instincts, honed by years of cross-examination and sifting through half-truths, screamed that something was amiss.

The doorbell chimed, a merciful interruption. It was the funeral director, a somber man in a dark suit who smelled faintly of lilies and formaldehyde. Eleanor quickly retreated into her role as the grieving widow, leaving Maya to navigate the awkward pleasantries.

Later, as they prepared to leave for the funeral, the first trickle of old acquaintances began to arrive, offering their condolences. Mrs. Gable, their elderly neighbor from across the street, embraced Maya with surprising strength, her voice a reedy whisper.

"Such a tragedy, dear. Your poor father. Always such a pillar of the community." Mrs. Gable's eyes, however, darted around the foyer, lingering on the study door, then on Eleanor. Her smile was tight, her sympathy edged with something sharper.

Maya offered a polite thanks, but her attention was drawn to a familiar face lingering near the entrance. David Miller. He had been her closest friend in high school, a kindred spirit who understood her restlessness. Now, he was a little heavier, a little more weathered, but the warmth in his hazel eyes was unmistakable.

"Maya," he said, his voice a low rumble. He extended a hand, and their fingers brushed, a spark of an old connection. "I'm so sorry about your dad. I heard... I just got back into town myself."

"David," Maya replied, a genuine smile touching her lips for the first time since her arrival. "It's good to see you." His presence offered a strange sense of comfort, a familiar anchor in the swirling unease.

"Are you staying long?" he asked, his gaze lingering on her, a question in his eyes.

Before Maya could answer, a sharp, nasal voice cut through the air. "Well, look who the cat dragged in. The prodigal daughter returns."

Maya's smile vanished. Standing by the living room archway, arms crossed, was Brenda Hayes. Brenda, who had been Maya's fiercest rival in high school, both academically and socially. Brenda, who seemed to revel in making Maya's life just a little bit more challenging. She was impeccably dressed, her blonde hair coiffed to perfection, a subtle smirk playing on her lips.

"Brenda," Maya said, her voice cool, devoid of emotion. "Still living in your mother's

shadow, I see."

Brenda's eyes narrowed. "Some of us appreciate family loyalty, Maya. Unlike others who abandon their roots for the bright lights of the big city." Her gaze flickered to David, a possessive glint in her eyes. It seemed some things never changed.

The tension was palpable, thick enough to cut with a knife. Eleanor, sensing the brewing storm, intervened with a strained laugh. "Girls, please. Not today."

David shifted uncomfortably, and Maya felt a familiar urge to retaliate, to put Brenda in her place. But today, there were bigger things at stake. She simply offered Brenda a tight, almost imperceptible smile. "Some of us are also too busy to dwell on the past, Brenda."

With a final, disdainful look, Brenda turned away, her high heels clicking on the hardwood floor as she made her exit, presumably to wait for them at the funeral home.

The funeral itself was a blur of faces and platitudes. People spoke of Thomas Sullivan as a pillar of the community, a kind man, a generous soul. Maya listened, detached, as if hearing about a stranger. The man they described was a caricature, a smoothed-over version of her father. The real Thomas Sullivan was more complex, more guarded, and often, more distant than anyone would ever admit.

After the committal, as the last mourners drifted away from the graveside, Maya found herself standing alone for a moment, the cold wind whipping through her hair. She looked at the fresh mound of earth, a profound sense of emptiness settling over her. Her father was gone. And with him, it seemed, any chance of reconciliation, any hope of understanding the man she had never truly known.

Back at the house, a small reception was being held. Eleanor moved through the crowd like a phantom, occasionally offering a weak smile or a nod. Maya found herself gravitating towards her father's study, drawn by an invisible thread. The door, which had been closed all morning, was now slightly ajar.

She pushed it open, stepping into the familiar scent of leather, old books, and her father's faint cologne. It was exactly as she remembered it, meticulously organized, every item in its place. The large mahogany desk dominated the room, its surface clear except for a few items: a silver pen holder, a leather-bound diary, and a single, sealed envelope addressed to her.

She picked up the envelope, her name, "Maya Sullivan," written in her father's precise, almost calligraphic hand. Her heart hammered against her ribs. This was it. The reason she was truly here. The first clue in a puzzle she didn't yet understand.

As she reached for the paper knife on the desk to open the envelope, her gaze fell upon something else, half-hidden beneath the diary. A small, tarnished silver key. It looked old, ornate, and utterly out of place among her father's otherwise modern desk tools. She picked it up, feeling its surprising weight in her palm. It wasn't a house key, or a car key. It felt... significant.

A chill ran down her spine. The official story of her father's death was already crumbling in her mind. Now, with the mysterious key and the sealed letter, a new narrative began to form, one that whispered of secrets, of something far more sinister than a simple accident. Her legal training, usually her greatest asset, now felt like a curse, sharpening her suspicions, refusing to let her accept the easy answers. She knew, with a certainty that resonated deep in her bones, that her father hadn't simply died. He had been part of a game, and she, unknowingly, had just been handed the first piece.

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