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Beneath the Ivy Manor

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Introduction

I never wanted to come back to Ivy Manor. For years, I let the peeling letters and overgrown driveways become someone else's problem, a burden I could abandon by moving on, by building a life hundreds of miles and as many memories away. But when I heard my mother was missing—a single sentence, relayed over a trembling phone line—I couldn't ignore the call any longer. The manor had always loomed over the Bennett family, its brick walls holding as many secrets as they did shadows. Now, its pull was inescapable.

Uncertainty clawed at me as I drove through Ridgewell, the town that had memorized every scandal our family ever conjured. I watched the ivy strangle the manor gates in the dusk. Years had passed since I last crossed the threshold, but the scent of moss and distant storms was as familiar as my own heartbeat. The silence inside was heavy, answering only with creaks and sighs as if the very foundation mourned my mother's absence. But even as I steeled myself, I knew I had not returned as a daughter. I had come as a detective.

Ivy Manor's corridors were not just home to faded grandeur and loss—they were a labyrinth of broken trusts and whispered betrayals. My mother's disappearance was not a tragic accident, I was certain. There had been too many half-told stories, too many sudden departures and mysteriously timed visitors in our family history to believe it could be so simple. Whispers about hidden fortunes and generations-old rivalries had trailed my ancestors like a bad smell; bullets and bribes, secret children and coded wills—it was all just town gossip until I saw the letter addressed in my mother's careful hand, marked "To Clara, if I am gone."

Returning meant facing those truths: secrets I'd tried for years to outrun, relationships I'd allowed to rot. Faces from my past—old staff with watchful eyes, cousins with grudges, and neighbors quick to lock their doors—waited for me, their expressions a tangle of pity and suspicion. I could feel the weight of their expectations pressing down, as if the whole town sat in judgement. My presence was a stone in the still water of Ridgewell, my every step sending ripples over long-buried histories.

But I was determined to see this through. I owed my mother that much—perhaps more. In the weeks ahead, I would uncover truths about her, about myself, about the very walls that surrounded us. And I would learn how quickly the boundary between friend and foe erodes when trust is a luxury no one can afford. Beneath the ivy, secrets festered. Whether I could survive them would depend on how deeply I was willing to dig—and whom I dared to believe.

I had returned to Ivy Manor, but this time, I would not run. Whatever darkness awaited, I would follow the clues to the end—even if the final truth was more devastating than I could imagine.

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CHAPTER ONE: Shadows Return

The air inside Ivy Manor was thick with the scent of dust and disuse, a strange perfume of old money and decay. It clung to Clara's clothes, invaded her nostrils, and settled deep in her lungs like a physical weight. The grand entrance hall, once a vibrant stage for family gatherings, now felt like a mausoleum. Moonlight, sliced into geometric patterns by the tall, arched windows, lay across the polished marble floor, illuminating swirling motes of forgotten time. Every creak of the floorboards, every whisper of the wind outside, sounded amplified in the oppressive silence.

Clara's carry-on luggage sat beside her, a paltry offering against the grandeur of the space. She hadn't bothered to unpack, not yet. The idea of settling in felt premature, almost sacrilegious, while her mother's whereabouts remained a chilling void. Her eyes scanned the familiar portraits lining the walls - stern-faced ancestors whose gazes seemed to follow her, their expressions a mix of judgment and silent accusation. They were the original architects of the Bennett family's convoluted legacy, the ones who had laid the foundation for every whispered scandal.

A faint clatter from the kitchen, a distant floor away, broke the spell. It was Mrs. Gable, the manor's longtime housekeeper, whose presence was as fixed and unyielding as the manor itself. Clara had expected her, of course. Mrs. Gable had been with the Bennetts for longer than Clara had been alive, a repository of family history, both official and unofficial. Her loyalty was legendary, her discretion absolute, or so Clara had always believed. Now, a tremor of doubt ran through her. In a house where secrets bred like rabbits, who could truly be trusted?

Clara walked towards the grand staircase, its banister a smooth, dark wood worn by generations of hands. Her own fingers brushed against the cool surface, a phantom echo of her childhood, when she'd slid down it in defiance of every rule. The memory, brief and fleeting, brought a faint, unbidden smile to her lips before being swallowed by the prevailing gloom.

Her mother's study was where Clara instinctively headed. It was a room that had always felt like a sanctuary, a place of quiet contemplation amidst the manor's usual clamor. Now, she hoped it would offer a clue, a whisper of direction. The door was ajar, as if someone had left in a hurry. The air inside was noticeably colder, carrying a faint metallic tang that Clara couldn't immediately place.

The room was meticulously organized, almost obsessively so. Books lined the shelves in perfect alphabetical order, the desk blotter free of so much as a stray paperclip. This neatness was unsettling. Her mother, for all her eccentricities, had always been

prone to a certain degree of elegant chaos, papers often piled high, forgotten teacups leaving rings on ancient wood. The unusual tidiness spoke volumes, suggesting either a forced cleanup or a departure under duress.

Clara's gaze swept across the room, searching for anything out of place. A small, ornate silver letter opener lay on the desk, glinting under the faint light filtering in from the windows. Beside it, a single, solitary sheet of paper. It wasn't an envelope, just a folded sheet of creamy, thick parchment. Her heart hammered a frantic rhythm against her ribs.

Her fingers trembled as she reached for it. The paper felt cool and crisp beneath her touch. Unfolding it, she saw her mother's distinctive, elegant script. It wasn't a note, or a message, but a single, cryptic line, seemingly scrawled in haste:

"Look to the roots, Clara. The truth is often buried deepest."

The words hung in the air, heavy with unspoken meaning. "Look to the roots." What roots? The family tree? The literal roots of the ancient oak trees that dotted the manor's grounds? Her mother's penchant for riddles, once a source of amusement, now felt like a cruel taunt.

Below the sentence, there was a series of symbols Clara didn't immediately recognize. They looked almost like shorthand, a private language shared only between her mother and... whom? A jumble of letters, numbers, and strange geometric shapes. It was clearly a code, perhaps a key to unraveling the riddle she'd just read. But without context, it was meaningless.

A gust of wind rattled the windowpanes, making the old glass sing a mournful tune. Clara shivered, though not from cold. A prickle of unease crawled up her spine. This wasn't just a missing person's case. This was a deliberate act, a carefully orchestrated disappearance. Her mother hadn't just vanished; she had left behind a breadcrumb trail, meant only for Clara.

She turned the paper over, hoping for more. Nothing. Just the faint watermark of the expensive paper. The cryptic message was all she had, a needle in a haystack of family history. The sudden realization hit her: her mother had anticipated her disappearance. She had planned for it, leaving behind this singular message, knowing Clara would be the one to find it. But why? And from whom was she hiding?

The door creaked open further, and Mrs. Gable's gaunt silhouette appeared in the doorway. Her expression was unreadable, a mixture of concern and something else Clara couldn't quite decipher. Suspicion, perhaps?

"Miss Clara," Mrs. Gable's voice was soft, barely a whisper, yet it cut through the

silence like a knife. "I heard you arrive. I've prepared your old room. Is there anything else you might need?"

Clara quickly folded the paper and slipped it into her pocket. "No, Mrs. Gable, thank you. I'm just... acclimatizing." She forced a weak smile, hoping her voice didn't betray the tremor in her hands.

Mrs. Gable's eyes, as sharp and discerning as ever, lingered on Clara's face for a moment too long. "Very well, then. Dinner will be served in an hour, if you wish to join me. It's a quiet house, now." Her gaze flickered to the desk, then back to Clara. "A very quiet house."

Clara nodded, her mind racing. Mrs. Gable knew. She had to. But how much? And would she be a help or a hindrance in the coming days? The housekeeper's presence, once a comfort, now felt like a watchful shadow.

As Mrs. Gable retreated, her footsteps echoing down the corridor, Clara pulled the crumpled note from her pocket once more. "Look to the roots." The manor's sprawling grounds, its ancient trees, its very foundations. And then there were the family roots, twisted and gnarled by generations of secrets. This was just the beginning. The truth, like the roots of Ivy Manor's pervasive namesake, would be deeply entwined with the history of this house, and its equally enigmatic inhabitants. The game, it seemed, had begun. And Clara, whether she liked it or not, was a reluctant player. Her mother's coded message was the first move, but what intricate, dangerous game lay ahead?

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