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# Shadows of the Forgotten

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## Introduction

In the winding streets of Kensington, amidst the rhythm of buses and echoes of ancient footsteps, Alicia Thornton's life moved as if caught between worlds. By day, she lectured on the intricacies of pre-Raphaelite painting to disinterested art students, her voice steady against the hum of an indifferent city. By night, her mind wandered to periods she could only study but never touch, her modest bedsit lined with glossy catalogs from art auctions she could never attend. London was a city of opportunity, they said, but for Alicia, it was a place where dreams faded beneath the weight of council rent and unanswered emails.

Alicia's London was not the glittering metropolis found in travel glossies but a place patched together by secondhand bookstores, the warmth of oversteeped tea, and the soft ache of longing for something more enduring than transient exhibitions. Family had always been more legend than reality—a handful of black-and-white photographs of a solemn-faced mother, handfuls from a vanished childhood in Yorkshire, and a father's name she whispered as a talisman against loneliness.

The letter arrived on a Wednesday. It appeared among takeaway leaflets, its thick ivory envelope bearing a wax seal. The address was written in a careful, almost old-fashioned hand: Alicia Thornton, flat 3B. Everwood & Sons, Solicitors. She turned it over three times before sliding her finger under the seal, the flap opening like a curtain to another time.

Inside, Alicia read her own name, followed by the unfamiliar: Thornfield Manor, Haworth Hollow, and a great-aunt Edith Thornton—names that felt both alien and magnetic. The legal prose was dense, but one sentence struck clear: she was the sole heir to an estate she had never been told of. The room seemed to warp, her reality shifting, as if someone had pulled back layers of wallpaper to reveal a long-hidden mural.

With the letter came a sense of unease, and beneath it, a thread of possibility she could not ignore. Alicia wondered if this would be the key that changed her life, or one more ghost story in a city already crowded with forgotten tales. Yet, something steadier than hope took root—the idea that all legacies, even forgotten ones, are waiting for someone to claim them.

At the threshold of a journey into the unknown, Alicia must decide if she has the courage to leave the city that has always been her prison and her comfort. The answers, she sensed, lay not only in a distant manor behind hedgerows and secrets, but within herself—a reckoning with history, loss, and the inheritance of silence that

can only be broken by stepping out from the shadows.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Letter From Everwood & Sons

The letter sat on Alicia's scarred pine kitchen table, a beacon of bewildering formality amidst a landscape of neglected bills and a half-eaten packet of Digestive biscuits. She'd read it four times already, each perusal adding another layer of unreality to her otherwise predictable Wednesday. The firm, Everwood & Sons, Solicitors, was based in a village called Haworth Hollow, a place so obscure it didn't even register on her mental map of England, which generally extended no further than the M25.

Her great-aunt, Edith Thornton, was an even greater enigma. Alicia's mother, bless her reticent soul, had rarely spoken of family, presenting a lineage so sparse it might have been culled by a Victorian novelist keen on orphans. A great-aunt, residing in a manor no less, seemed a fantastical addition to such a threadbare tapestry. Thornfield Manor. The name itself whispered of forgotten grandeur, a stark contrast to Alicia's damp-stained Kensington bedsit.

A tremor of excitement, quickly followed by a healthy dose of suspicion, ran through her. Sole heir. The words had a comforting, almost velvety feel on her tongue. But to what, exactly? And why her? She, who had struggled to afford a weekly tub of hummus, was now apparently a beneficiary of an estate. It was the stuff of penny dreadfuls, or perhaps a rather dry episode of a period drama.

She picked up her phone, her thumb hovering over the search bar. Haworth Hollow. The results were sparse, a scattering of B&Bs, a village shop that doubled as a post office, and a single, rather blurry image of a grey church tower. No mention of Thornfield Manor. It was as if the place had deliberately opted out of the digital age, preferring the quiet anonymity of the forgotten.

Alicia, ever the historian, felt the familiar pull of a mystery. Her professional life, for all its academic rigor, often felt like tracing the outlines of stories already told. This, however, was a fresh canvas, a narrative waiting to be uncovered. Her great-aunt Edith, a woman she'd never known, was now the protagonist of her unfolding drama.

A sudden, sharp pang of her stomach reminded her that existential ponderings did not pay the rent, nor did they fill a rumbling belly. She glanced at the clock. Her evening lecture, 'The Symbolism of Lilies in Pre-Raphaelite Portraiture,' was in an hour. She sighed. The lives of forgotten artists, at least, were more straightforward than the sudden appearance of forgotten relatives.

She spent the lecture, a haze of Pre-Raphaelite angst and art student apathy, replaying the lawyer's letter in her mind. Mr. Elias Thorne of Everwood & Sons had

requested her presence, at her earliest convenience, to discuss the particulars of the estate. There was an urgency to the polite formality, a subtle pressure that suggested this was not a matter to be left to languish.

After the lecture, Alicia declined her colleague's invitation for a pint, opting instead for the quiet solitude of her bedsit. The letter, still on the table, seemed to glow faintly in the dim evening light. She brewed a weak cup of instant coffee, her thoughts swirling like the grounds at the bottom of the mug.

Could it be a scam? Her pragmatic side, honed by years of navigating London's less savory corners, whispered caution. But the wax seal, the formal letterhead, the sheer lack of any obvious demand for money, all argued against it. And what kind of scam would involve an unknown great-aunt and a manor in the middle of nowhere?

She remembered a brief, almost whispered conversation from her childhood. Her mother, unusually wistful, had once mentioned a 'difficult aunt' who lived 'down south.' Alicia had always assumed 'down south' meant Surrey, or perhaps a particularly dreary part of Kent. Haworth Hollow, it seemed, was significantly further south, or at least, significantly further into the past.

The thought of escaping London, even for a few days, was surprisingly appealing. The city had begun to feel like a particularly heavy cloak, its constant demands weighing her down. A change of scenery, a break from the relentless academic grind, even if it involved a potentially mad great-aunt's peculiar legacy, held a certain allure.

She decided to call Mr. Thorne first thing in the morning. It was Friday now, and the weekend stretched before her, an expanse of potential, or perhaps, profound disappointment. She folded the letter carefully, placing it inside a worn copy of a Rossetti biography, as if to imbue it with some academic legitimacy.

That night, Alicia dreamt of sprawling country houses, their windows like watchful eyes, and the faint scent of old paper and forgotten flowers. She woke with a feeling of anticipation, a sensation she hadn't experienced in years. The humdrum routine of her life was about to be interrupted, perhaps irrevocably so.

The next morning, fortified by a stale croissant and a renewed sense of purpose, Alicia dialed the number on the letterhead. It rang several times before a crisp, precise voice answered. "Everwood & Sons, Mr. Thorne speaking."

Alicia introduced herself, her voice a little breathy. "Ms. Thornton. I received your letter regarding my great-aunt, Edith Thornton."

There was a brief pause on the other end, a rustle of paper. "Ah, yes, Ms. Thornton. We were expecting your call. My apologies for the delay in reaching you, but sorting

through the affairs of someone with... such a rich and private history, takes time."

Rich and private history. Alicia filed that away. "I was hoping you could tell me a little more. It's quite... unexpected."

Mr. Thorne cleared his throat. "Indeed. The will explicitly states you are the sole beneficiary. Thornfield Manor and its contents are yours. We need to arrange a meeting for the reading of the will and to discuss the transfer of assets."

"The contents?" Alicia asked, a sudden image of antique furniture and dusty paintings flashing through her mind.

"Everything within the manor, Ms. Thornton. Your great-aunt was quite the collector, we understand." There was a subtle emphasis on 'understand,' as if Mr. Thorne found Edith's collecting habits rather perplexing.

"And when would be convenient for you to visit Haworth Hollow?" Mr. Thorne asked, his voice businesslike, almost a challenge.

Alicia hesitated. Her lecture schedule was relentless, but the sheer novelty of the situation tugged at her. This wasn't just a letter; it was a doorway. "Could I come next week? Perhaps Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"Wednesday would be perfect, Ms. Thornton. I will arrange for a car to meet you at Haworth Hollow train station. The 10:45 train from Paddington should get you there around lunchtime." Mr. Thorne's efficiency was unnerving. He seemed to have her entire itinerary mapped out.

"A car?" Alicia questioned. She was used to navigating the Tube, not being chauffeured.

"Yes, the manor is a little remote. And there's rather a lot to discuss. It would be most convenient."

"Alright," Alicia agreed, a strange mix of apprehension and exhilaration bubbling within her. "Wednesday it is."

She hung up, the receiver feeling surprisingly heavy in her hand. A train to Haworth Hollow. A car. A manor. It was happening. Her life, for so long a monochrome photograph, was about to acquire some unexpected colour. She just hoped it wasn't the lurid green of a financial pitfall, or worse, the dusty sepia of a ghostly curse.

Alicia pulled out her battered suitcase from the back of her wardrobe. It was usually reserved for academic conferences in damp, uninspiring hotel rooms. This trip,

however, felt entirely different. It felt like an adventure, albeit one shrouded in the peculiar quietness of an unsolved mystery. She thought of her great-aunt Edith, the unknown woman who had reached out from beyond the grave to pull Alicia into her enigmatic world. The journey to Haworth Hollow, she suspected, would be far more than a mere geographical relocation. It would be a journey into the forgotten corners of her own family, and perhaps, into herself.

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