

“Ends and Beginnings”

The nostalgia was so strong it nearly overwhelmed her. It had been over two years since she had last visited her great uncle's estate where she'd spent the better part of her formative years, and now standing in the grand library surrounded by the books and trinkets of the place that defined her childhood, she was overcome with emotions. It suddenly hit her that she would never be a little girl again skipping through the darkly lit mahogany halls, the sound of her small feet echoing as they collided with the cool marble floors. She would never be that carefree again. The weight of responsibility that now pressed relentlessly on her shoulders was a constant reminder of that fact.

Fondness of the past and the ache of what would never again be mingled in her chest and flooded her with a strange emotion that she couldn't quite place. It was like the feeling of realizing you'll never be able to read your favorite book or hear your favorite song for the first time again. Like watching the final episode of your favorite TV show and pausing just before it's over because you don't want it to end. Like the melancholy that disrupts the profound joy of a perfect moment as it's still happening because you know it won't last forever. Yet it was tinged with a quiet excitement for what was to come and the cautious hope that just maybe, the future might hold something just as good, or possibly even better than what once was. Whatever the exact feeling was, it made it hard to hold back the tears that were quickly filling her eyes and blurring her vision as she ran a finger across the dusty leather spines of the antique books that lined the imposing wooden shelves.

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Earlier that morning, driving beneath the canopy of ancient oaks that lined each side of the mile long gravel drive with her uncle's sprawling mansion looming in the distance, the task at hand seemed nearly impossible. The late October leaves fell from above like a thousand fiery red, orange, and gold embers dancing on the wind before drifting to rest on the gravel in a pattern that reminded her of a vivid and ornate Persian rug. Much like the ones in nearly every room of the manor that was waiting for her at the end of the drive. She couldn't help but marvel at the fact that the death of the leaves gave life to such beauty in the final phase of their life. Soon those bare branches would be covered in glittering frost that would purify the land and create a clean slate for life to begin all over again come spring. Ends and beginnings. The death of the vegetation would give way to new life, just as the death of her great uncle would allow for her own new beginning, as the beneficiary of his massive estate. Both bittersweet and beautiful; grief and hope existing in tandem.

She had no idea how she was going to do it. She didn't know the first thing about owning anything, let alone a 40 room Victorian mansion on 100 acres of remote Vermont woodland. About 20 miles from the nearest town, a tiny village with a population of 50 that was considered in the middle of nowhere itself, the estate was desolate and she had no one to help run it but the staff that choose to remain after her uncle's death. Growing up, she spent more time at the manor than not. Her father's uncle ran the estate that had been passed down through their family for generations, keeping it in immaculate shape and preserving their family's heritage with a gusto that she admired. He never married and never had children of his own, thus loving her father and herself as if they were his own.

As a teenager when her parents were tragically killed in a car wreck on an icy January night, it was her great uncle who took her in. He ensured that she never wanted for anything,

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buying her first car and sending her to the best university money could buy. She returned to the manor during every college break, and it quickly became her home. But now, looking at the impressive manor for the first time as its new owner, she didn't quite recognize it with the weight of her newfound responsibility clouding her vision. She hadn't stepped foot through its threshold in over two years. Living in New York City and desperately trying to climb the corporate ladder since graduating, she found herself with little time to make the drive to the picturesque and secluded Vermont countryside. Then, about three months prior, she got the call that changed everything. Her uncle had passed away suddenly and had left everything to her.

Sliding into one of the rigid yet inviting leather armchairs near the library's crackling fireplace, she bathed in the warmth of the flickering flames and watched as the same falling leaves she had marveled at on her drive to the manor cast shadows through the colorful mosaics of the stained-glass windows that patterned the room. She couldn't help but wonder how she had ended up here. It still didn't quite feel real, but it was. Her life completely upended since the last time she had inhabited these walls; she was uncertain as to how she would ever do the estate justice and carry on her uncle's remarkable legacy. But now, as she was forced to confront the end of her life in New York, the loss of her beloved uncle, and her new obligation to this property and her family, she knew that two things could be true at the same time. Endings could be devastating and full of grief, and new beginnings could be beautiful and full of promise. Ends and beginnings, one inherently led to the other. This was a law of nature and one she could count on. Any time she needed a reminder, she would remember the leaves.