

A GOTHIC ROMANCE & DOLLMAKING EXPERIENCE

The Secrets of BLACKWOOD MANOR

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THE SECRETS OF BLACKWOOD MANOR

A Gothic Romance

Featuring Evangeline Blackwood

*"Old houses do not forget. They simply wait for someone willing to
listen."*

PROLOGUE

The Lady Who Vanished

In the autumn of 1871, a storm settled over Blackwood Manor and refused to leave.

For three nights rain beat against the tall windows, the chimneys moaned, and the woods beyond the iron gates bent beneath the wind. On the fourth night Lady Cordelia Blackwood climbed the great staircase carrying a single candle.

A footman saw her pause beneath her own portrait. A maid heard her footsteps continue toward the third floor. At half past midnight the housekeeper found the attic door standing open.

Cordelia was never seen again.

Her shoes remained beside her bed. Her cloak still hung in the entrance hall. No horse had been taken from the stable, no carriage had passed the gates, and every outer door was bolted from within.

Her father ordered the household never to speak of it.

The portrait was moved from the drawing room and hung above the staircase where Cordelia had last been seen. In the years that followed, servants began to whisper that the lady's eyes did not always look in the same direction. Some nights they faced forward. Some nights they seemed to turn toward the upper landing.

And on the coldest moonlit nights, a point of golden light appeared deep within the painted darkness behind her, as though someone were walking through the portrait with a candle in hand.

The Blackwoods called it nonsense.

The servants called it a warning.

The house waited.

PART I

THE STAIRCASE



The portrait watched. The candle led. The house remembered.

CHAPTER I

The Return

Blackwood Manor had been waiting.

Evangeline Blackwood returned to the manor on the last afternoon of October, beneath a sky the color of tarnished silver.

Blackwood Manor had always looked less built than summoned. Its chimneys rose like black fingers above the bare trees, and the stone facade seemed to absorb the weak daylight rather than reflect it. When Evangeline was a child, she had believed the house slept during the day and woke after sunset.

Years away had not cured her of the idea.

She stood beneath the porte cochere while the last of her cases were carried inside. The front doors opened before she could knock.

Mrs. Wren, the housekeeper, had grown smaller and whiter since Evangeline had last seen her, but her expression remained exactly the same: an efficient mixture of affection and disapproval.

"You have your grandmother's timing," she said. "Always arriving with weather behind you."

"I was hoping you would say I had improved."

"I have known you too long to lie on the doorstep."

Evangeline smiled and embraced her.

The smile faded as soon as she crossed the threshold.

The entrance hall smelled of beeswax, old roses, damp stone, and the faint mineral cold peculiar to houses that have outlived too many people.

Furniture stood beneath dust cloths in the adjoining rooms. The chandeliers were unlit. Somewhere deep in the house a clock ticked with slow authority.

Her grandmother had been dead for three months.

The will had left Evangeline everything: the manor, the grounds, the remaining furnishings, and enough debt to make the inheritance feel more like a dare.

"The solicitor wrote that a surveyor was coming," Evangeline said as Mrs. Wren led her toward the stairs.

"Not a surveyor. A restoration architect."

"That sounds more expensive."

"It usually is."

"Do I know him?"

Mrs. Wren's mouth tightened almost imperceptibly. "Adrian Mercer."

Evangeline stopped.

The name struck with absurd force.

Adrian had grown up in the gate lodge, the son of Blackwood's last estate steward. As children they had climbed the ruined orchard wall, stolen pears, mapped passages no one else remembered, and been scolded for leaving muddy footprints on carpets older than either of their families. At seventeen, Evangeline had believed they would remain inseparable simply because she could not imagine the world arranged any other way.

At nineteen, Adrian left without saying goodbye.

She had not seen him since.

"How convenient," she said.

Mrs. Wren glanced at her. "I did not hire him. Your grandmother did, six weeks before she died."

That was worse.

Evangeline looked up toward the staircase and found herself beneath Lady Cordelia's portrait.

The woman in the painting was younger than Evangeline remembered. Or perhaps Evangeline had simply grown older. Cordelia wore a dark gown, pearls at her throat, and an expression of quiet intelligence sharpened by something almost defiant. Her left hand rested upon the folds of her skirt.

On one finger was a small antique ring.

Evangeline's own hand rose to the pendant at her throat.

The pendant had belonged to her mother. Its tiny engraved setting held no precious stone, only a pale piece of moonstone veined with blue. Around it curled a delicate four-petaled design.

The same design surrounded Cordelia's ring.

"Was she wearing that before?" Evangeline asked.

Mrs. Wren looked up. "Wearing what?"

"The ring."

"Lady Cordelia has been wearing whatever the painter gave her for one hundred and fifty years. I should think she is unlikely to change now."

Evangeline almost laughed.

Then she noticed Cordelia's eyes.

They were not looking at her.

They were turned toward the stairs.