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The Shadow of Ashford Manor

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Introduction

The moors of northern England have long been shrouded in legend and mist—a quiet veil draping the wild, rolling land in secrecy. It was on such a morning, chilled by the damp breath of a waning autumn, that Evangeline Blackwood first caught sight of Ashford Manor. Rising from the fog like the remnant of a faded dream, the manor was a patchwork of towering gables and cloistered wings, its stone walls stained by the passage of time and the weight of untold stories. To Evangeline, newly orphaned and seeking both employment and refuge, its silhouette held the promise of transformation—a fate she welcomed, even as an undercurrent of unease whispered at the edges of her anticipation.

Evangeline's arrival at Ashford was met not only by the crumbling grandeur of the estate, but also by an unsettling quietude that seemed to deepen with every footstep upon the intricately tiled floors. The housekeeper's warning glances and the children's shy, guarded eyes spoke of troubles not easily named. Yet it was Lord Ashford himself, a man shrouded in mourning and mystery, who most unsettled her. His manner was cold, his gaze unwavering, as if he sought to measure Evangeline's worth against losses she could neither name nor comprehend.

Despite the imposing spirits that haunted Ashford's memory, life within its walls was a study in contrasts. The laughter of the children, fleeting as it was, became Evangeline's lifeline amidst the suffocating shadows. Each day introduced a new corridor, a new locked door, a new question. The house—and its master—slowly began to reveal themselves, not through words, but through glances and gestures, half-spoken truths and the persistent echo of footsteps in the night.

But beneath the routines and rituals of the manor, something restless lurked. Whispers in the dark drew Evangeline from fitful sleep, and the glimmer of candlelight in forgotten corners hinted at presences unseen. She learned to listen—to the children's stories, to the servants' silences, to the peculiar language of Ashford's creaking beams and sighing tapestries. The sense of being watched grew more palpable with each passing night, compelling Evangeline to confront both her own fears and the estate's hidden torments.

Even as friendships blossomed and hearts tentatively reached across chasms of grief, Evangeline sensed the manifold dangers exile from the outside world brought. Every kindness was shadowed by the threat of betrayal, every moment of peace haunted by a legacy of pain. And yet, it was this very darkness that drew her onward—toward the secrets that would bind her fate to Ashford's, and to a love that could heal or destroy.

Thus began Evangeline Blackwood's journey into the labyrinth of Ashford Manor: a journey marked by longing and loss, courage and peril, trust and ultimately, the hope for redemption. In these pages lies her tale, at once a romance and a reckoning, traced in the shadowed halls where the past refuses to rest.

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CHAPTER ONE: Arrival on the Moors

The last village had long since vanished behind the relentless undulations of the moors, leaving Evangeline alone with the jolt and creak of the hired carriage and the vast, brooding sky. Rain, a fine, persistent drizzle, had begun to fall, smudging the distant horizon into an indistinguishable grey. Her small satchel, containing her few worldly possessions and an even fewer number of comforting memories, lay beside her on the worn leather seat. Each mile further into this desolate landscape seemed to peel away another layer of the world she knew, leaving her feeling increasingly vulnerable and yet, strangely, expectant.

Her destination, Ashford Manor, had been described to her by the agency in London with a certain hushed reverence, as if its very name carried a weight of importance and sorrow. "A fine estate, Miss Blackwood, though... private. Very private," the agency mistress had said, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Lord Ashford, a widower, requires a governess for his two young children. A sad situation, but an excellent opportunity for a resourceful young woman." Evangeline, with her own recent sorrows fresh upon her, had seized the opportunity, eager to trade the stifling pity of relatives for the solitude of a new life.

As the carriage ascended a particularly steep incline, a sudden gust of wind rattled its windows, bringing with it the scent of wet heather and damp earth. Evangeline pressed her face to the glass, straining for a first glimpse. Then, through a momentary thinning of the mist, it appeared. Not the elegant country seat she had perhaps envisioned, but a formidable edifice of dark grey stone, sprawling across a plateau like a slumbering beast. Its many chimneys pierced the low clouds, and its windows, even from this distance, seemed like dark, unblinking eyes.

The drive grew more challenging as the carriage navigated a narrow, winding track, flanked on both sides by ancient, gnarled trees whose bare branches clawed at the sky. They were truly on the estate now, the air growing colder, heavier. Evangeline felt a prickle of unease, a sensation she promptly dismissed as mere nerves. It was a grand house, certainly, and perhaps a touch melancholic, but what else was to be expected of an old manor on the moors, home to a grieving family?

Finally, the carriage lurched to a halt before a massive, iron-studded oak door. Above it, a faded coat of arms was carved into the stone, its intricate details worn smooth by centuries of wind and rain. The driver, a taciturn man with a perpetually grim expression, dismounted with a grunt and began to wrestle with the heavy knocker. Its clang echoed through the stillness, a sound that seemed to swallow the very air around them.

The door creaked open, revealing not a liveried footman, but a gaunt, severe-looking woman with her hair pulled back so tightly it seemed to stretch the skin of her face. This, Evangeline surmised, must be Mrs. Oakhaven, the housekeeper, whose formidable reputation had preceded her even from London. Her eyes, a sharp, assessing grey, swept over Evangeline from the crown of her simple bonnet to the tips of her sensible boots.

"Miss Blackwood, I presume?" Mrs. Oakhaven's voice was as crisp and unyielding as the starch in her apron. "You're late. Lord Ashford dislikes tardiness."

Evangeline felt a blush creep up her neck. "My apologies, Mrs. Oakhaven. The journey was longer than anticipated, and the roads quite treacherous."

"Indeed," the housekeeper replied, though her tone suggested little sympathy. "Come in. The driver will see to your trunk." She stepped aside, revealing a vast, dimly lit entrance hall. The air inside was cool and faintly scented with old wood and something else – something metallic and faintly sweet, like dried potpourri gone stale.

The hall was impressive, if somewhat oppressive. A grand staircase, its banister intricately carved, swept upwards into shadow. Portraits of grim-faced ancestors stared down from high on the walls, their eyes seeming to follow Evangeline as she stepped across the threshold. Tapestries depicting hunting scenes, faded with time, hung between the portraits, muffling any sound.

"This way, Miss Blackwood," Mrs. Oakhaven commanded, already halfway across the cavernous space. Evangeline hurried to follow, her footsteps echoing unnervingly on the polished flagstones. She felt incredibly small, a tiny figure swallowed by the immense, silent house. Every shadow seemed to deepen, every corner to hold a secret.

They passed through a series of grand, yet sparsely furnished, drawing rooms, their windows overlooking vast expanses of grey moorland. Dust motes danced in the slivers of weak light that penetrated the heavy velvet curtains. It was clear that these rooms, despite their opulence, saw little use. A sense of disuse, of life having retreated from these formal spaces, hung heavy in the air.

Finally, Mrs. Oakhaven led her to a smaller, more intimate room, still grand but with a roaring fire in the hearth that offered a welcome warmth. Seated by the fire, a book held open in his hand, was a man. He rose as they entered, and Evangeline found herself facing Lord Ashford.

He was a striking man, even in the dim light. Tall and lean, with broad shoulders and dark, tousled hair that fell across a high forehead. His eyes, the colour of deep winter

skies, held an intensity that was both captivating and unsettling. He was dressed in dark clothes, emphasizing his pale complexion, and a perpetual shadow seemed to cling to his sharp, aristocratic features. He looked, Evangeline thought, like a man haunted.

"My lord, Miss Blackwood has arrived," Mrs. Oakhaven announced, her voice unwavering.

Lord Ashford gave a curt nod. His gaze met Evangeline's, and she felt a sudden, inexplicable shiver. There was no warmth in his eyes, only a profound weariness, a distant sorrow that seemed to reach out and touch her. He looked as though the very act of existing was a heavy burden.

"Miss Blackwood," he said, his voice a low rumble, surprisingly deep. "Welcome to Ashford Manor. I trust your journey was not too arduous." It was a polite formality, spoken without genuine curiosity.

"Thank you, my lord. It was... long," Evangeline replied, feeling her carefully rehearsed composure beginning to fray under his intense scrutiny.

"Mrs. Oakhaven will show you to your rooms and then you will be introduced to the children," he continued, turning his gaze to the housekeeper. "Ensure she has everything she needs. And the children are to be ready for their lessons after luncheon."

"Yes, my lord," Mrs. Oakhaven affirmed.

With another brief, almost imperceptible nod, Lord Ashford dismissed them. He returned to his armchair, his eyes immediately falling back to the pages of his book, as if their conversation had been nothing more than a momentary disruption. Evangeline felt a strange mixture of relief and disappointment. He was exactly as the agency had implied: distant, preoccupied, lost in his own world of grief.

Mrs. Oakhaven led her through yet more labyrinthine corridors, each one seemingly identical to the last, until Evangeline felt a dizzying sense of disorientation. The silence of the house was profound, broken only by the whisper of their shoes on the polished floors and the occasional creak of aged timbers. It was a silence that spoke of secrets, of lives lived and hushed within these very walls.

Finally, they reached a secluded wing of the manor. "This will be your accommodation, Miss Blackwood," Mrs. Oakhaven stated, pushing open a heavy wooden door. Evangeline stepped into a moderately sized room, tastefully furnished but stark. A tall, narrow window looked out onto a courtyard, beyond which rose the imposing rear of the manor. The walls were panelled in dark wood, and a four-poster bed, draped in

heavy velvet, dominated the space.

“Your trunk will be brought up shortly. Luncheon is at one. The children will be presented to you in the nursery immediately after.” Mrs. Oakhaven’s instructions were precise, allowing no room for questions. “I trust you will find everything satisfactory.” Without waiting for a response, she turned and left, the door closing with a soft thud that resonated through the quiet room.

Evangeline was alone. She walked to the window, pulling aside the heavy velvet curtain. The courtyard below was empty, cobbled with moss-covered stones. Beyond it, the moor stretched out, bleak and immense under the relentless drizzle. The manor itself seemed to rise from the earth, a dark, defiant silhouette against the pale sky. She could feel its ancient presence, a sense of deep-rooted history that was both awe-inspiring and slightly chilling.

She unpacked her small satchel, placing her few garments in the empty wardrobe. The room felt cold, despite a small fire already laid in the hearth. A thin layer of dust covered the antique furniture, suggesting that this room, too, had been unused for some time. As she tidied her sparse belongings, a strange sensation prickled at the back of her neck. It was the feeling of being watched, an undeniable awareness of an unseen presence. She spun around, but the room was empty.

Dismissing it as nerves, a common affliction for new governesses in grand, isolated houses, Evangeline tried to compose herself. She smoothed the wrinkles from her travelling dress, splashed her face with cool water from the basin, and tightened the pins in her auburn hair. This was her new life, a clean slate. She would be competent, diligent, and perhaps, eventually, content. She was, after all, a governess; her duty was to the children, and to the household.

Yet, as she surveyed the quiet room, the feeling persisted. It wasn’t a malicious presence, not precisely. More like a pervasive echo, a lingering imprint of lives lived within these walls. The manor, she realised, was not merely a house; it was a living entity, breathing with its own history, its own secrets. And she, Evangeline Blackwood, was now a part of it. A small, insignificant part, perhaps, but a part nonetheless. A shiver, unrelated to the cold, traced its way down her spine.

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