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# Echoes of Ashcroft Manor

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## Introduction

Few places are as irrevocably entwined with the strands of their history as Ashcroft Manor. Sequestered off the winding country lanes of Somerset and concealed among ancient yews, the manor stands as a testament to a time when fortunes and misfortunes alike were fashioned behind closed doors. Its crumbling facades and vine-clad turrets suggest grandeur now fading, watched over by the cautious eyes of the few who remain and the unseen presence of those rumored never to have left.

It is into this veiled world that I, Lila Montgomery, step—drawn as much by professional curiosity as a personal fascination with the unknown. My career has been built upon chasing elusive truths buried beneath centuries of dust and silence, unearthing stories others prefer remain forgotten. Yet nothing in my years as a historian and writer prepared me for the magnitude of secrets woven into every stone and shadow of Ashcroft Manor.

From the moment I crossed the threshold, I felt an intangible weight settle upon my shoulders—a heaviness born of unanswered questions and unresolved grief. The invitation, simple and direct, had carried with it the promise of both challenge and adventure: "Pen the comprehensive account of our family home. Tell all that ought to be told." It held an unspoken caveat as well: beware of what the telling will cost you.

The current Ashcroft descendants were cordial yet distant, each seemingly molded by the constraints of expectation and caution. The staff—the ones who truly knew the manor's rhythms and secrets—offered clipped answers, eyes darting over my shoulder as if watching for someone I could not see. By candlelight in the library, the edges of the room would flicker, hinting at movements too subtle or swift to be wholly of this world, leaving me braced for revelations that lay just out of reach.

Rumors had long encircled Ashcroft Manor, whispering of a tragedy that has kept the estate in a suspended state of mourning. Of all the whispered names, none was more haunting than that of Lady Evelyn Ashcroft, a figure as much myth as memory, whose untimely death carved fissures into both family and foundation. Now, as dusk slips silently through the stained-glass windows and the manor exudes both invitation and warning, I sense the story does not rest in peace, but rather seeks—perhaps even demands—to be told.

So here I begin, with pen in hand and heart steeled for what lies ahead. The history of Ashcroft Manor is a palimpsest of love and loss, secrets and sacrifice. As I trace the silhouettes of those who came before, I am prepared to follow the echoes—wherever, and to whenever, they might lead.

## CHAPTER ONE: The Gates of Ashcroft

The gravel drive crunched under the tires of my rented Skoda, a sound that felt inappropriately mundane against the looming backdrop of Ashcroft Manor. The gates themselves were an elaborate wrought-iron affair, depicting intertwined roses and thistles, now rusted to a rich, earthy hue. They stood ajar, as if perpetually awaiting a grand arrival, or perhaps, a desperate escape. Beyond them, a tunnel of ancient yews, their branches interwoven like gnarled fingers, swallowed the sunlight, plunging the path into a premature twilight. My GPS, usually so assertive, had gone silent miles back, leaving me to navigate by instinct and the occasional weathered signpost pointing towards 'Ashcroft Estate - Private.'

I eased the car through the gates, the silence of the country road immediately replaced by the rustling of leaves and the faint, distant caw of a rook. The air grew cooler, carrying the scent of damp earth and something else—something metallic, like old coins, and faintly floral, like long-dead roses. It was an atmospheric assault, a sensory prelude to a building I had only ever seen in faded photographs and architectural diagrams. Even from this distance, the manor seemed to breathe, a colossal stone beast hunkering down amidst overgrown gardens.

My initial impression of Ashcroft Manor was one of magnificent decay. It wasn't crumbling into ruin, but it carried the distinct patina of neglect, a quiet surrender to the elements. Windows, tall and narrow, stared out like vacant eyes, reflecting the bruised afternoon sky. Some panes were opaque with grime, others gleamed unnervingly clean, suggesting sporadic attempts at upkeep. A formidable front door, studded with iron and flanked by stone gargoyles, promised both grandeur and an impenetrable barrier.

Parking the car in what appeared to be a disused courtyard, choked with weeds pushing through cracked flagstones, I took a moment to compose myself. Lila Montgomery, historian, writer, seeker of truths, was about to confront a legend. I retrieved my worn leather satchel, heavy with notebooks, recording devices, and a well-loved copy of "British Architectural Oddities," a book Ashcroft Manor would undoubtedly feature in. The weight of the task settled upon me, a mix of excitement and trepidation.

As I approached the front door, its sheer size became more apparent. The gargoyles above me seemed to leer, their eroded features still conveying a sense of mischievous malice. I lifted the heavy brass knocker, shaped like a lion's head, and let it fall with a reverberating *thud*. The sound echoed not just through the cavernous hallway I imagined beyond, but seemed to reverberate in the very air around me, a ripple on

the surface of deep, still water.

A few moments passed, then more. Just as I was about to knock again, the door creaked open, revealing a slender, elderly woman with sharp, intelligent eyes and a severe bun of grey hair. She was dressed in a crisp, dark uniform that looked as though it had seen many years of service. Her expression was neutral, but her gaze was unsettlingly direct, sweeping over me from head to toe before settling on my face.

"Miss Montgomery, I presume?" she asked, her voice surprisingly soft, though with an underlying firmness that suggested she was accustomed to being obeyed. "I am Mrs. Albright, the housekeeper. The Ashcroft family awaits your arrival."

Her tone offered no welcome, only a statement of fact. I felt a prickle of unease. This was not the warm reception one might expect when undertaking such a significant commission. "Yes, that's right. Lila Montgomery. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Albright."

She offered no reciprocal pleasantries, simply stepping back to allow me entrance. The interior of the manor was a shock after the muted exterior. It was vast, echoing, and surprisingly dark, despite the afternoon light filtering weakly through the high windows. The air inside was cool, heavy with the scent of aged wood, dust, and something indefinably melancholic. A grand staircase swept upwards, its banister intricately carved, disappearing into the shadows of the upper floors.

"The family is in the drawing-room," Mrs. Albright stated, gesturing vaguely down a long, dimly lit corridor to my left. "Please follow me. Your luggage will be brought up shortly."

I trailed behind her, my footsteps unnervingly loud on the polished floorboards. Tapestries, faded with time, adorned the walls, depicting hunting scenes and pastoral landscapes. Their colours, once vibrant, were now muted and somber. Every object in the hall seemed to possess a silent history, a story waiting to be coaxed from its quiet existence. I found myself instinctively reaching for my mental notebook, already cataloging details.

The drawing-room was slightly brighter, illuminated by tall windows overlooking what must have once been a manicured lawn, now a wilderness of overgrown shrubs. Two figures rose from plush, velvet armchairs as we entered. A man and a woman, both appearing to be in their late forties or early fifties, though their faces held a weariness that suggested a longer passage of time. They bore a striking resemblance to the faded portraits I'd seen online - high cheekbones, dark eyes, and a certain patrician elegance.

"Miss Montgomery," the man said, extending a hand that was surprisingly cold to the

touch. "I'm Arthur Ashcroft. And this is my sister, Eleanor."

Arthur was tall and lean, with silver threading through his dark hair. His suit, though impeccably tailored, seemed to hang on him. Eleanor, more petite, had her dark hair pulled back in a severe knot, echoing Mrs. Albright's style. Her eyes, however, held a flicker of something I couldn't quite decipher—curiosity, perhaps, or a deep-seated anxiety.

"Thank you for having me," I replied, trying to inject a professional warmth into my voice that I didn't entirely feel. The atmosphere was thick with unspoken tension, like an old house holding its breath.

"Mrs. Albright will show you to your rooms," Eleanor said, her voice soft but strained, avoiding eye contact. "We thought the east wing would be most suitable. It's quieter."

"We trust you'll find everything you need," Arthur added, though his gaze seemed distant, preoccupied. "Your research materials have been placed in the library. Mrs. Albright will show you that as well."

Their politeness felt like a veneer, barely concealing a profound disinterest, or perhaps, a guarded reluctance to engage with the very history they had commissioned me to write. It was as if I was a necessary inconvenience, a stranger brought in to perform a delicate operation on a beloved, but ailing, family member. I had expected a deeper connection, a shared excitement about unearthing the manor's past, but instead, I was met with an almost palpable sense of detachment.

"Thank you," I managed, feeling the familiar stir of a challenge. "I'm eager to get started."

Mrs. Albright, who had remained silent throughout the brief exchange, now turned, her gaze firm. "This way, Miss Montgomery."

As I followed her out of the drawing-room, I cast a glance back at Arthur and Eleanor. They had already resumed their seats, a silence falling between them, their forms silhouetted against the pale light of the window. They looked less like hosts and more like guardians of a mausoleum, resigned to their silent vigil. The door clicked shut, severing the connection, leaving me once again in the hushed, echoing grandeur of the manor. The east wing, Mrs. Albright explained as we ascended the sweeping staircase, was less frequently used. "It receives good morning light, however," she added, as if attempting a conciliatory gesture. The statement, however, felt more like a justification than an invitation.

The upper corridors were even darker than the ground floor, lined with more portraits, their subjects staring down with an unnerving intensity. They were mostly men and

women in period dress, their faces uniformly solemn, as if happiness had been deemed an inappropriate emotion for portraiture. Many of them bore the same distinctive features as Arthur and Eleanor—the Ashcroft lineage was clearly strong, its characteristics enduring through generations. I wondered, briefly, if they were all as melancholic as their descendants.

My room was at the very end of a long, narrow corridor. When Mrs. Albright pushed open the heavy wooden door, a sliver of sunlight pierced the gloom, revealing a spacious chamber with high ceilings and a grand four-poster bed. The furniture was antique, heavy, and ornate, clearly of a different era. A large wardrobe, a dressing table, and a plush armchair completed the arrangement. The window offered a view of dense, unkempt woodland, a dark green wall that seemed to press in on the manor.

"Dinner is at seven," Mrs. Albright informed me, her voice cutting through the silence. "We will send a maid to fetch you. The library is on the ground floor, past the drawing-room, towards the north wing. You'll find it well-stocked. Is there anything else you require?"

"No, thank you, Mrs. Albright," I said, managing a faint smile. "This will be perfect." She merely nodded, her face unreadable, and exited, closing the door softly behind her. The click of the latch resonated, sealing me in.

I walked to the window, pushing aside the heavy velvet curtains. The view was indeed of the sprawling, untamed estate, the distant peaks of the Somerset hills a hazy silhouette on the horizon. The air here felt different, crisper, carrying a faint, earthy scent that was somehow both invigorating and slightly unsettling. Below, an ancient fountain, its stone cherubs green with moss, stood stagnant in a neglected rose garden. It was a picture of faded glory, of beauty allowed to languish.

My satchel thumped onto the antique desk, a jarring sound in the quiet room. I unpacked a few essentials: my laptop, a collection of pens, and a well-thumbed paperback for leisure reading—though I suspected leisure would be in short supply here. As I arranged my notes, a chill seemed to seep into the room, despite the afternoon sun still attempting to warm the windows. It wasn't a physical cold, but something more internal, a premonition perhaps. I shivered, then shook it off. This was Ashcroft Manor, after all. What else could I expect?

I decided a reconnaissance mission to the library was in order. After all, the heart of any historical project lies in its archives. Retracing my steps down the silent corridor, I found the staircase and descended carefully, my senses alert. The manor seemed to sigh around me, the old timbers creaking, the distant whispers of the wind sounding like muffled conversations. Reaching the ground floor, I followed Mrs. Albright's directions, past the drawing-room, into a deeper, even darker section of the house.

The library, when I finally found it, was a vast, imposing chamber. Floor-to-ceiling bookshelves lined every wall, laden with leather-bound volumes that looked untouched for decades. The air here was thick with the scent of old paper and wood polish, a perfume for a historian. A large, ornate desk sat in the center of the room, already laid out with what appeared to be my research materials: stacks of ancient ledgers, yellowed letters tied with brittle ribbons, and several heavy, leather-bound journals. A single, powerful reading lamp cast a pool of inviting light over the chaotic arrangement.

My heart quickened. This was what I had come for. This was where the secrets lay buried. I approached the desk, my fingers tracing the spine of a particularly old-looking journal. The cover was devoid of any title, merely a faint impression of a family crest. I opened it carefully, the paper rustling like dry leaves. The handwriting inside was elegant, flowing, and clearly feminine.

The first entry was dated October 1787. "The weight of this house already feels like a shroud. I fear what it will ask of me." I paused, a shiver running down my spine. This was more than just history; it was a personal lament, a whisper from the past. I felt a sudden, intense curiosity, a sense of an unfolding drama. Who was this woman? And what "weight" was she speaking of? The story was already beginning, long before I even picked up my pen. I felt a distinct presence in the room, a subtle shift in the air, as if someone had just entered behind me, only to vanish the moment I turned my head. The manor was not merely old; it was alive. And it was watching.

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