

The Secrets of Blackwood Manor



Chapter 1

The Arrival in St. Jude

The train from London Paddington was almost empty when it pulled into the small, misty station of St. Jude on the coast of Cornwall. Clara Vance looked out of the window. Outside, rain fell gently over grey stone houses and steep green hills.

Clara was thirty-four years old. After a painful divorce and five stressful years working in a noisy London marketing agency, she needed a completely new life. Three weeks ago, she had answered an advertisement in the newspaper: *Archivist and Assistant needed for historical document reorganization at Blackwood Manor.*

She grabbed her leather suitcase and stepped off the train. The air smelled of salt and wet earth. A tall man in a navy blue coat was waiting near the exit, holding an umbrella.

"Miss Vance?" he asked. His voice was polite but cold. "I am Thomas, the house manager at Blackwood Manor. Lord Blackwood sent me to pick you up."

"Good evening, Thomas. Thank you for meeting me," Clara replied with a polite smile.

They walked to an old black Bentley parked behind the station. During the twenty-minute drive along narrow, winding country roads, Thomas spoke very little. Clara watched the dark sea in the distance.

Blackwood Manor sat on top of a cliff overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. It was an impressive, three-story Victorian house built from dark stone, with large windows and heavy iron gates. As the car stopped in front of the grand entrance, the wooden doors opened.

An elderly man stepped out onto the porch. He wore an elegant tweed jacket and leaned on a wooden walking stick.

"Welcome to Blackwood Manor, Miss Vance," said Lord Arthur Blackwood. He was seventy-two, with sharp blue eyes and neat white hair. "I hope your journey was comfortable."

"It was very pleasant, Lord Blackwood. Thank you," Clara said.

"Come inside out of the rain," Lord Blackwood said, leading her into a warm entrance hall decorated with old paintings and an enormous crystal chandelier. "Tonight, we have a small family dinner. My nephew, Julian, and my business partner, Mr. Gregory Vance—no relation to you, I believe—are already here. You can refresh yourself in your room first, and then join us in the dining room at eight o'clock."

Clara followed Thomas up a wide oak staircase to a cozy bedroom on the second floor. A fire was burning in the fireplace. She unpacked her clothes and looked out the window. Through the rain, she noticed a small light flickering in an isolated stone building at the end of the garden.

Who could be out there in this weather? she wondered.

Chapter 2

The Dinner Party

At eight o'clock, Clara walked down to the dining room. The room was grand, with long velvet curtains and a large oak table set for four people.

Lord Blackwood sat at the head of the table. To his right sat his nephew, Julian Blackwood—a young man in his late twenties with dark eyes and an expensive watch. Julian looked bored and kept checking his phone. To Lord Blackwood's left sat Gregory Vance, man in his fifties with greying hair and an aggressive manner.

"Ah, Clara! Please sit here," Lord Blackwood said warmly, pointing to the empty chair next to Julian. "Everyone, this is Clara Vance, our new archivist."

Julian nodded casually. "Welcome to the middle of nowhere, Clara. I hope you like rain and old books."

"I like both, actually," Clara replied calmly.

"Don't mind Julian," Gregory Vance interrupted, cutting his steak forcefully. "He thinks anything outside of London is a waste of time. Personally, I am here for serious business."

"Business can wait until tomorrow morning, Gregory," Lord Blackwood said firmly. "Tonight, we enjoy our dinner."

Throughout the meal, the atmosphere was tense. Clara quietly observed the men. She noticed that Julian kept looking nervously at his uncle, while Gregory looked annoyed every time Lord Blackwood spoke about the estate's history.

"My family has owned Blackwood Manor for over two hundred years," Lord Blackwood mentioned while tea was served. "And tomorrow, Miss Vance will begin organizing the historical documents in the library. Some of those papers are extremely valuable—not just historically, but legally."

Gregory paused with his teacup halfway to his mouth. "Are you talking about the original land deeds, Arthur?"

"I am talking about everything, Gregory," Lord Blackwood said coldly. "Including my latest revised will."

Julian suddenly looked up from his phone. "Your will, Uncle Arthur? You updated it again?"

"I did," Lord Blackwood answered quietly. "It is safely locked in the safe in my private study. It reflects my true wishes regarding the future of Blackwood Manor."

Before anyone could say another word, Lord Blackwood suddenly gasped. He pressed his hand to his chest, his face turning pale. His tea glass slipped from his fingers and shattered on the floor.

"Arthur!" Gregory yelled, standing up.

Lord Blackwood collapsed forward onto the table.

Chapter 3

The Investigation Begins

The dining room descended into chaos. Julian stood frozen in shock, while Gregory rushed forward and checked Lord Blackwood's pulse.

"Call an ambulance!" Clara shouted to Thomas, who had just entered the room carrying a tray of coffee.

Thomas immediately dropped the tray and ran toward the hallway telephone. Clara knelt beside Lord Blackwood. His breathing was shallow and uneven, but he was still alive. She noticed his teacup lying shattered on the carpet, dark liquid pooling around the broken porcelain.

Within twenty minutes, the sirens of an ambulance echoed through the quiet coastal night. Two paramedics loaded Lord Blackwood onto a stretcher and rushed him to the regional hospital in Truro.

Shortly after the ambulance left, a police car pulled up the driveway. Detective Sergeant Miller, a calm woman in her late forty with sharp grey eyes and a heavy trench coat, stepped into the entrance hall.

"Good evening. I am Detective Miller," she announced, taking out a small notebook. "The hospital contacted us. Lord Blackwood's doctor suspects poisoning. Nobody leaves this house tonight."

Julian began to protest immediately. "Poisoning? That's ridiculous! My uncle has a weak heart. It was obviously a heart attack!"

"That is for the medical examiners to decide, Mr. Blackwood," Detective Miller replied coldly. "Until we have the official lab results, this house is a crime scene."

Detective Miller began interviewing everyone one by one in the library. When it was Clara's turn, she answered the detective's questions clearly and truthfully.

"You mentioned Lord Blackwood talked about a revised will stored in his study," Detective Miller noted, writing rapidly in her notebook. "Did anyone leave the dining room before he collapsed?"

Clara thought back carefully. "No. Everyone remained at the table. But Gregory Vance seemed very angry when Lord Blackwood mentioned the documents, and Julian looked very surprised."

"Thank you, Miss Vance. You have good observation skills," Detective Miller said. "I am going to inspect Lord Blackwood's private study now."

Clara followed the detective to the second floor. When Detective Miller unlocked the door to the study, she stopped in her tracks. The room was in complete disorder. Drawers were pulled out, papers were scattered across the Persian rug, and the heavy iron safe in the corner stood wide open.

The revised will was gone.

Chapter 4

Whispers in the Dark

The discovery of the open safe changed everything. Detective Miller called for a forensic team to process the study for fingerprints. Because the weather outside turned into a violent thunderstorm, no one could leave Blackwood Manor even if they wanted to.

Unable to sleep, Clara walked down to the small kitchen on the ground floor at two o'clock in the morning to make a cup of herbal tea. As she walked down the dimly lit corridor, she heard hushed, urgent voices coming from the pantry.

She stopped behind a decorative wooden pillar and listened.

"...you were supposed to make sure he didn't change it!" a voice hissed. It was Julian's voice.

"Do not question me, boy," Gregory Vance's deep voice replied sharply. "I had no idea he was meeting with his lawyer last week. If that new will is registered, neither of us gets a single penny from the estate."

"Where is the document now?" Julian demanded. "Did you take it from the safe during the confusion?"

"I didn't take anything!" Gregory snapped. "Someone else was in that study before the police arrived. And if you aren't careful, Julian, the police will think you poisoned your own uncle for his money."

Clara held her breath, her heart beating wildly in her chest. She carefully backed away from the pantry and quietly hurried down the hall.

Instead of going back to her bedroom, she looked out of the corridor window toward the garden. Through the heavy rain, she saw the same small light flickering in the isolated stone building—the old greenhouse at the edge of the grounds.

Who is out there in the middle of a storm? Clara thought. *And why are they using a lantern?*

Deciding to trust her instincts, Clara took her raincoat from the hall, grabbed a small flashlight from a kitchen drawer, and slipped out through the side door into the dark, rain-soaked night.

Chapter 5

The Secret Passageway

The cold rain stung Clara's face as she sprinted across the slippery grass toward the old greenhouse. The wind roared off the sea cliffs, pushing heavy clouds across the night sky.

When she reached the greenhouse, she tried the heavy iron door handle. It was unlocked. Clara stepped inside, her flashlight cutting through the damp darkness. The air smelled of wet soil, dead leaves, and something unusual—a sharp, sweet chemical scent.

On a workbench in the back of the greenhouse lay several glass bottles, a pair of wet rubber gloves, and a small metal key. Nearby, Clara noticed fresh, muddy boot prints on the stone floor. She bent down to examine the key. There was an engraving on it: the crest of the Blackwood family.

Suddenly, a loud snap echoed behind her. Clara spun around, raising her flashlight.

"Who's there?" she called out, her voice trembling slightly.

Standing by the doorway was Thomas, the house manager. He wore a dark raincoat, and his boots were coated in thick mud. He looked calm, but his eyes were sharp.

"You shouldn't be out here in this storm, Miss Vance," Thomas said in a quiet, measured voice.

"Thomas... what is this place?" Clara asked, keeping her flashlight pointed at the workbench.

"And why is there a key with the family crest out here?"

Thomas stepped forward into the dim light. "Lord Blackwood asked me to keep certain items safe from his nephew and Mr. Vance. That key opens the private archive beneath the library."

"The archive?" Clara repeated. "Is there an archive under the house?"

"There is a hidden passageway behind the bookcase in the library," Thomas explained. "It leads down to an old stone room built into the cliff. Lord Blackwood knew his life might be in danger. He moved the most important documents—including his new will—there days ago."

Clara looked at the wet rubber gloves on the table. "And the chemical smell?"

Thomas hesitated for a moment. "That is belladonna extract—a dangerous plant liquid. Someone stole it from the greenhouse shelf yesterday. That is what was put into Lord Blackwood's tea."

Chapter 6

Red Herrings

Clara and Thomas hurried back inside the manor through the kitchen entrance, drying off with towels.

"We need to tell Detective Miller about the greenhouse," Clara said.

"Detective Miller is currently sleeping in the guest room until morning," Thomas replied quietly. "And before we wake her, you should see what is inside the hidden archive, Miss Vance. Lord Blackwood hired you because of your expertise. He trusted your name."

Clara nodded. Together, they walked into the quiet library. Thomas moved to a large carved oak bookcase on the north wall. He reached behind a thick leather-bound volume and pulled a small wooden lever. With a soft click, a section of the bookcase swung forward, revealing a narrow set of stone steps leading down into the dark.

Clara switched on her flashlight and descended the stairs, with Thomas following close behind. At the bottom of the steps was a small, cold room carved directly into the rock.

In the centre of the room sat a heavy wooden table. On top of it lay a thick leather binder labelled *Estate Records & Final Testament*.

Clara opened the binder. Inside was the signed, witnessed will of Lord Arthur Blackwood, dated just four days ago. She scanned the elegant handwriting quickly.

"Listen to this," Clara whispered. "Lord Blackwood left the majority of his fortune and the manor to a local nature conservation trust, ensuring the land could never be sold to property developers."

"That explains Gregory Vance's anger," Thomas noted. "He wanted to buy the coastal land to build a luxury resort."

"Yes," Clara said, turning the page. "But look at this note attached to the back. It's a list of payments made over the last six months from Julian Blackwood's personal account to a local pharmacy in Truro."

Clara stopped. Something wasn't adding up. If Julian was paying a pharmacy in Truro, why was belladonna stolen from the manor's own greenhouse?

Suddenly, the heavy wooden door at the top of the stairs slammed shut with a loud bang, and the sound of a key turning in the lock echoed down into the vault.

They were trapped.

Chapter 7

Unmasking the Truth

Panicked silence filled the cold stone vault. Thomas rushed up the stairs and rattled the heavy oak door, but it was firmly locked from the outside.

"It's no use," Thomas said, breathing heavily. "This door is reinforced with iron."

Clara took a deep breath, forcing herself to stay calm. She shined her flashlight around the stone walls. "There must be another way out. Houses built into sea cliffs like this usually have ventilation tunnels to prevent dampness."

Near the floor in the corner of the room, Clara spotted a narrow iron grate covered in dust. She used her flashlight casing to unscrew the rusty latches holding it in place. Behind the grate was a small tunnel leading upward.

"This shaft leads to the old laundry room on the ground floor!" Thomas exclaimed.

Clara crawled through the tight tunnel first, pulling herself up onto the floor of the dark laundry room, with Thomas right behind her. Once outside the room, they heard the low hum of voices coming from the main hall.

Sneaking toward the grand staircase, Clara saw Julian standing in the hallway, holding a small metal canister and a briefcase. Gregory Vance was standing near the front door, looking pale and nervous.

"Where is Detective Miller?" Clara whispered to Thomas.

"Her room is on the east wing," Thomas whispered back. "Go get her. I'll make sure they don't leave."

Clara crept quietly up the stairs to the guest wing and knocked loudly on Detective Miller's door. Within seconds, the detective opened it, holding her service flashlight and already awake.

"Detective, come quickly!" Clara said concisely. "Julian and Gregory are downstairs with a briefcase, and someone just locked us in the secret vault under the library!"

Detective Miller's eyes narrowed. She pulled her coat on and immediately followed Clara down the stairs.

Chapter 8

A New Beginning

Down in the main hall, Detective Miller stepped into the light, her voice echoing off the high ceiling. "Nobody move!"

Julian dropped his briefcase in shock. "Detective! What is the meaning of this?"

"I think you know, Mr. Blackwood," Detective Miller said, stepping toward him. "Where were you ten minutes ago?"

"I was in my room!" Julian claimed defensively. "I was packing my things to leave as soon as the storm clears!"

"He's lying," Clara said, stepping forward beside Thomas. "Julian knew about the secret archive. He found out about his uncle's new will days ago and tried to destroy it tonight."

"You have no proof!" Julian shouted, his face turning red.

Just then, Detective Miller's phone rang. She answered it, listened quietly for a few seconds, and then lowered the phone with a grim expression.

"That was Truro Regional Hospital," Detective Miller announced to the room. "Lord Blackwood has regained consciousness. He is stable and able to speak."

Gregory Vance gasped, leaning heavily against the wall.

"And," Detective Miller continued, "Lord Blackwood told the doctors that he saw his nephew, Julian, pouring a clear liquid into his tea right before dinner."

Julian's face went completely pale. He backed away toward the front door, but Thomas stepped smoothly into his path, blocking the exit.

"It was supposed to just make him sick!" Julian confessed hysterically, dropping to his knees.

"I just needed him in the hospital for a few days so I could search the house and find where he hid the new will! I was drowning in gambling debts!"

"And you, Mr. Vance?" Detective Miller asked, turning to Gregory.

"I had nothing to do with the poison!" Gregory said quickly, raising his hands. "I only helped him search the study after Arthur collapsed because I wanted to find the land development contract!"

"You will both have a lot of time to explain yourselves at the station," Detective Miller said, pulling out her handcuffs.

Two days later, the sun was shining brightly over the blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The storm had passed, leaving behind crisp, fresh sea air. Clara stood in the library at Blackwood Manor, organizing the old leather-bound books on the shelves. Lord Blackwood sat in a comfortable armchair near the window, sipping a mug of hot herbal tea.

"I cannot thank you enough, Clara," Lord Blackwood said with a gentle smile. "If you hadn't paid attention to the details, my nephew would have destroyed this estate's history."

"I am just glad you are feeling better, Lord Blackwood," Clara replied warmly.

"Please, call me Arthur," he said, looking around the bright room. "I hope you will consider staying on as the permanent archivist of Blackwood Manor. We have centuries of stories left to uncover."

Clara looked out of the window at the sparkling sea cliffs. For the first time in years, she felt completely at peace.

"I would love to stay, Arthur," Clara smiled. "I think my new life in Cornwall is off to a wonderful start."