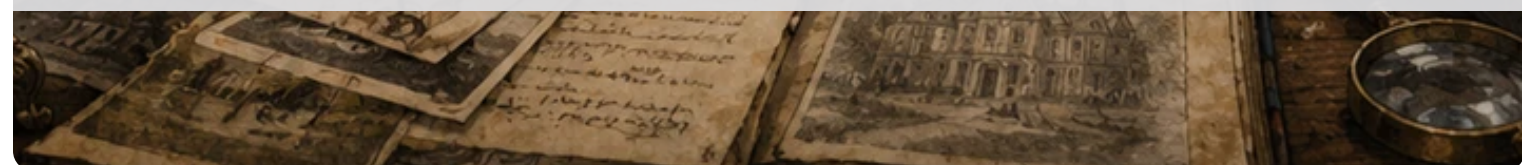




The Secrets of Ashwood Manor

Gabbie Lorraine Petersen





Lilly sat cross-legged on the dusty floor of the town archive, surrounded by fading maps and forgotten letters. Her fingers brushed against a yellowed parchment that detailed a grand estate known as Ashwood Manor, which abruptly vanished from public records a century ago. Intrigued by the sudden omission, she leaned closer under the dim lamplight to scan the eccentric sketches of the property.



That evening, Lilly visited the local diner to ask the town elders about the mysterious property. An old man leaned in, his voice dropping to a whisper as he warned her to stay away from the overgrown woods. He claimed that a elegant woman in Victorian attire still walked the manor grounds, appearing exactly as she did in portraits painted over two hundred years ago.



Driven by curiosity, Lilly packed her camera and notebook to seek out the hidden boundary of the estate. The dense forest grew quiet and heavy around her until the trees suddenly parted to reveal a set of rusted iron gates. Beyond them stood the towering silhouette of Ashwood Manor, its stone walls draped in thick ivy and choked by wild briars.



Stepping through a broken conservatory window, Lilly found herself in a grand foyer where time seemed to have frozen. A thick layer of dust blanketed the velvet furniture, and a massive grand staircase swept upward into the shadows. In the center of the room, a pristine grandfather clock ticked softly, defying the decades of abandonment.



As Lilly approached the hearth, her flashlight illuminated a massive oil painting hanging above the mantle. She gasped as she recognized the sharp, beautiful features of the woman from the town's legends, looking vibrantly alive in a midnight-blue gown. Suddenly, a soft rustle of silk echoed from the gallery above, and a cool breeze swept through the sealed room.