

EVIE WOODS
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

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Story
Collector

Even ordinary people have extraordinary
stories to tell...

THE STORY COLLECTOR

EVIE WOODS



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The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.

Robert Frost

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Thornwood House

Where Thornwood House now stands was once ancient woodland. It is said that when Lord Hawley purchased the estate in 1882, as a marriage gift for his wife, he ordered the entire site to be cleared before building works could commence. However, in the middle of this site grew a gnarled old hawthorn tree, a fairy tree, and 'twas said that misfortune would befall any man who so much as scarred the twisted bark. A seeress from the locality warned the Master not to touch it, saying that The Good People would have their revenge on anyone who tampered with their dwelling place.

But Lord Hawley was an educated man from Surrey, England and held no truck with local superstition. The plans were drawn up for his mansion house and he paid the workers handsomely to get the job done. Yet the local men still refused to be a part of it, and Hawley was forced to employ workers from his own homeland to cut the tree down. The seeress foretold no end of misery, but for the first few years, everything in Thornwood House seemed perfectly content.

However, when Lady Hawley fell pregnant with twins, she did become mightily sick and there was a fear for her life. Mercifully, she and the babies survived, but the real horror was yet to come.

A few weeks after they were born, the Mistress began to act very strangely and insisted that the children were not hers. A physician was sent

for and rumours spread that the woman was suffering from hysteria.

The seeress, on the other hand, knew that it was not Lady Hawley's mind that had weakened. She knew that when a mother did not recognise her own child, it could only mean one thing: a changeling. The Good People had finally exacted their revenge by taking the human children and replacing them with evil, sickly souls. If they did not perish immediately, they would live to become mischievous and destructive individuals, intent on creating bitterness and hate wherever they went.

Before the Hawley twins ever saw their first birthday, Lady Hawley threw herself from the top window of Thornwood House.

Chapter One

New York

25th December 2010

Were it not for that tacky ceramic sheep in the gift shop, Sarah would never have even heard of Thornwood, much less got on a plane to Ireland and spent Christmas there.

‘Have you got everything you need?’ Jack had finally asked, after an hour of silently watching her reclaim all her worldly possessions.

‘Um, yes, I think that’s it,’ Sarah said, looking about her at all the empty spaces she was leaving behind. Most of her belongings were already shipped and boxed in suspended animation in a Massachusetts storage unit. ‘Well, at least now you can have that snooker table you always wanted in here,’ she added, trying to sound cheery, but regretting it as soon as she heard it out loud. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean —’

‘It’s okay,’ he said, touching her lightly on the arm and giving her a crooked smile. ‘I don’t know what to say either, but you don’t have to pretend, Sarah.’

The easiest thing would have been to fall into his arms and bury her pain

somewhere neither of them could find it, but she'd tried that already and two years later, it still wasn't working. They were living in a house of unspoken needs and muffled emotions.

'Are you sure you want to leave today? I mean, it is Christmas, after all,' he said, nodding towards the lacklustre tree that blinked optimistically in the corner. 'You could wait till New Year's...'

'What difference does it make, really? We'd just be delaying the inevitable. I have to leave now or I never will. Besides, your family's expecting you for the big Natale Zaparelli, so you better get a move on too.'

He exhaled a long and weary sigh, stuffing his hands in his pockets. Sarah wondered bitterly what bothered him more: her absence from the Zaparelli family Christmas or him having to explain it.

'I wish it didn't have to be like this.' Jack shifted from one foot to the other. He didn't know where to place himself and finally, like an unwanted object in his gallery, he leaned against the nearest wall.

'Come on, Jack, it's taking all of my strength to do this. Please don't go soft on me now or I might just crack,' Sarah said, reaching for her purse and coat.

'All right then, beat it, lady and don't let the door hit you on the way out! Better?' he asked, with a half smile.

'Much.' She hugged him, briefly but fiercely, and turned on her heel, dragging her suitcase behind her. 'I'll call to let you know I've landed safely,' she called behind her.

'Maybe just a text message,' he said, adding in almost a whisper, 'I don't trust myself not to beg you to come back.'

Newark Airport had a sense of business as usual but with a halfhearted nod to the holidays. It reminded Sarah of when she was a child and spent Christmas in the hospital having her appendix removed. The worn-out decorations only served to remind her of where she wanted to be, but wasn't, and now the airport felt the same. Where were all of these people going?