

EVIE WOODS
THE SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLER

The 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? Were they all leaving their husbands? Most of them probably didn't even observe Christmas. Was all of this really going on every year while Sarah tucked into her turkey, naively assuming that everyone else had the same traditions?

Her sister, Meghan, would probably be serving her famous Christmas pudding about now. She wished she didn't have to impose on their holidays, but you can't always choose the timing of a marital breakdown. After three years of marriage, she had precious little to show for it. If anything, her life

had shrunk since she'd met Jack. Her only option was to move back in with her parents or stay in her sister's spare room. It wasn't much of a choice: failed daughter or failed sister. Meghan's was the lesser of two evils.

Sarah absent-mindedly wandered through the gift shops, hoping to distract herself from recurring thoughts of what Jack would be doing now. He was putting on a brave face, like herself, but she was sure he would be feeling as lost as she was. At least she could go back to Boston, remove herself from the familiar, everyday things that would bring memories of their life together flooding back. Feeling certain that her hometown would act as some sort of a restorative, she booked the flight like a homing pigeon.

Coming back to herself, she realised she was standing in front of a display of ceramic sheep, in varying shapes and sizes. She must have been staring at them for quite some time, for the shop assistant stepped forward, sensing the possibility of a sale.

'They're super cute, right?' said the young girl with an overly painted face and nose ring.

'Uh, I suppose, if you like sheep,' Sarah replied, not wanting to offend. 'What shop is this?'

'The Emerald Isle Gift Store. You get a ten per cent discount with your Aer Lingus boarding pass,' she added, as if this would sway her decision. 'What part of Ireland are you going to?'

'Oh no, I'm not going to Ireland, just home to Boston,' Sarah assured her, deflecting the sales pitch. She grew up knowing that there was some Irish blood in her family tree (hardly a novelty in Boston) and had always promised herself that, if she ever had the money to do it, she would visit one day. Her honeymoon had seemed like the perfect opportunity, but Jack had argued that two weeks in the Maldives would be much more romantic than shivering in the damp and dreary Irish countryside. Perhaps he'd been right, but the mysticism and charm of the fairytale castles she'd saved on her phone called to her in a way that aquamarine waters never did.

The young assistant sat back behind the counter and was now testing the stretchability of her chewing gum. Given the day, Sarah took pity on her and picked up a rather startled-looking sheep and an Irish newspaper for good measure. She hardly registered tucking the half bottle of Irish whisky under her arm.

'Thank you ma'am and happy holidays!' The girl smiled as Sarah took her gift bag and headed for the departure gates.

Grabbing a cup of coffee to go, Sarah sat apart from the other passengers by the window, where she could see the aeroplanes being refuelled. A light flurry of snow had begun, illuminated by the airport lights to look like flecks of gold dancing through the air. Looking at the screen, she could see that her flight was delayed by two hours. Opening the screw cap, she nonchalantly poured a healthy measure of whisky into the paper cup. A medicinal measure. The coffee was bitter, but mixed with the whisky it flushed her bloodstream with a reassuring warmth. It all felt so surreal. Knowing that you're going to leave your husband and actually going through with it are two very different things. Her emotions were only now beginning to catch up with the reality of the situation. She twisted off the cap again and refilled her cup.

She wasn't getting much sleep since 'The Big Bad Thing' as she now referred to it. Somehow it was easier saying it that way, contained it somehow, so the feelings couldn't get out. Going to bed was like buying a lottery ticket; some nights you won and grabbed a few hours of sleep. Other nights, which were becoming more and more frequent, she woke in a blind panic, hardly able to breathe.

'You're suffering from an anxiety disorder,' her doctor had said, with her perfectly coiffed hair and rather inappropriate high-heeled shoes. I mean, how could you attend to an emergency in those heels? Sarah had wondered, while the doctor's explanation washed over her. Giving it a name didn't help matters. Pills were offered and refused. Jack had a lot to say about that. He had a lot to say about everything and often drowned any thoughts Sarah tried to have of her own. She was advised to cut down on the drinking. She didn't tell Jack about that part and had somehow managed to convince herself that this was a generic piece of advice that didn't really apply to her. She just knew that if she could be on her own for a while, she could sort herself out. Except she wouldn't be on her own in Boston. It was only now beginning to dawn on her that the price of familial support would be more interference. More well-meaning platitudes from people intent on 'fixing' her.

'Another coffee please,' Sarah said, standing at the Dunkin Donuts counter. She tried not to meet his eyes; surely he had smelled the whisky. Not that it mattered, she was well over the legal age. But there was a feeling of guilt there that she couldn't explain. She wasn't drinking for fun or because she had a fear of flying. She was trying to forget. She busied

herself with her bag and spotted the Irish newspaper inside it. She took it out, just for something to look at, when a photo caught her attention on the back page. An image of a beautiful hawthorn tree, blooming with tiny white flowers, standing alone beside a busy road in the county of Clare in Ireland. The headline read: THE FAIRY TREE THAT MOVED A MOTORWAY.

‘Huh!’ Sarah said a little loudly, then bent her head to focus on the words.

Clare County Council finally bowed to local pressure to alter the proposed route of a major new motorway currently under construction, all in an effort to protect a very special hawthorn tree. Ned Delaney, a local folklorist and storyteller, lodged an objection, saying that the hawthorn tree was ‘an important meeting place for the Connacht and Munster fairies’. Delaney (known locally as ‘The Fairy Whisperer’) insisted that to cut down the tree would ‘vex’ the little people and cause untold misfortune for anyone using the road.

Sarah felt as though she were suddenly back in her father’s truck, as a teenager, driving through the countryside to gather bits of dead wood from the forest. He was a bit of a hippie, or a tree-hugger as the neighbours used to call him, and he instilled in her a great respect for nature. He would let her drive on the quieter roads and it felt so freeing, just the two of them, the road ahead and the trees lining the route. They would spend hours together in his workshop making impossibly crooked birdhouses and desk tidies and anything else that could be fashioned from rough wood and a few rusty nails. He always encouraged her and even got her to start sketching plans on paper for more sophisticated projects like coat racks and shelving units. It was thanks to those early days in the workshop that she finally decided to go to college and study art. She had such high hopes when she graduated, but New York didn’t exactly work out as planned, on any level. Her working-class roots had always made her feel like an outsider in the galleries of New York, but now she felt like she didn’t belong at home anymore either. Her stomach churned at the thought of setting up home in her sister’s spare room. She turned her attention back to the newspaper.

Locals were hesitant to admit that they actually believed in fairies, but one resident summed up the general feeling when she said, 'It's better to be safe than sorry.'

Sarah blinked and shook her head. Could this be possible, in this day and age? She flipped the paper over and double-checked that it was in fact a genuine newspaper and not some kind of joke. Then she began to smile to herself and thought again of her father and what a kick he would get out of it. Her mother, on the other hand, had no time for such trivialities. Her mother and her sister Meghan were the practical ones, but Sarah and her father were the dreamers. Or at least she used to be. All of the magic seemed to seep out of her after The Big Bad Thing. Maybe Ireland was the place to find it again?

Glancing out over the concourse from her little table at Dunkin' Donuts, she realised she had walked quite far from her departure gate. In fact, she found herself slap-bang in front of the Aer Lingus departure lounge, with the flight number EI401 bound for Shannon flashing on the screen. An advertisement on a nearby wall showed the striking image of the Cliffs of Moher, standing majestically above the wild Atlantic Ocean, with the tagline, 'Ireland: The land of a thousand welcomes'.

Something inside her shifted, then settled. The decision was made. It was made the moment she saw that silly sheep.