

The Secret of Thorn Lodge

“I told you the place was depressing.” Will said as he pulled into the driveway of Thorn Lodge.

“I don’t know,” said Melissa, determined to stay upbeat, “I’d say it was full of character.”

Will gave her a withering look as he parked the car. It looked like they were not the first arrivals at Thorn Lodge as two other vehicles were there already – both of them, Melissa noted, large and expensive. Although Will had never said as much it was clear that his family, the Blackthorns, were loaded.

Thorn Lodge was a mansion situated at the edge of the village of Condicote. Centuries old, it was a sprawling property with ivied walls, hanging gables and a shingled roof. Despite her statement to the contrary to Will, Melissa also found something oddly disquieting about the place. It was not a homely abode, perhaps because of its ungainly size. The doors and windows were huge, yawning open like the mouth and eyes of some ancient beast. Tall trees and hedges sprung up on all sides, both along the drive and beside the house itself, ensuring that long shadows were cast in every direction and little light got through. It was cold here as well, although that was not the only thing which made Melissa shiver.

While Will was occupied with removing their bags from the boot of the car, a door opened at the side of the house and a middle-aged woman appeared. With her dark hair and ruddy complexion the woman looked enough like Will for Melissa to assume that she was his mother and she approached her with a smile in place and a hand extended in greeting.

“Mrs Blackthorn, it’s good to meet you,” she said, then, noticing the woman’s blank expression, she added, “I’m Melissa, Will’s girlfriend.”

“It’s Miss Blackthorn, actually.” The woman took Melissa’s hand as she corrected her, surprising her with the strength of her grip.

Melissa turned to look at Will, annoyed. He might have mentioned that! And Miss Blackthorn still looked confused - had Will not informed his mother that she was coming home with him for Christmas?

At that point, mercifully, Will interposed himself between the pair.

“Sorry, I should have said before – Melissa, this is my Aunt Rose.”

Melissa nodded dumbly. The resemblance between Will and his Aunt was striking.

“Well I’d better get you two settled. Follow me.” It appeared that Miss Blackthorn was not one to stand on ceremony and with these words she spun around and strode back into the house, not waiting to see whether Will and Melissa tagged along.

Other than briefly asking them how they were and how university was going, Will’s Aunt said little as she led them through the house. Melissa did not mind as this gave her an opportunity to take in her surroundings. The interior of the house was much like its exterior, being large and dark. The entrance hallway was cavernous and the light from the windows offered little in the way of illumination, casting the paintings and sculptures which lined the walls and passages in a slightly sinister light. Although it was the middle of the day Melissa wished that someone would turn the lights on, if only to prevent her from tripping up in the congealing darkness. Unconsciously her hand reached for Will’s and he squeezed it, letting go when his aunt stopped and looked over her shoulder back at them.

“Come, come, there’s no time for dawdling.”

Melissa was beginning to understand why Will had such ambivalent feelings about Thorn Lodge. Back in Oxford, Will rarely spoke about his family, although this did not discourage Melissa from trying to elicit information about them from him as subtly as possible. She knew there were a couple aunts and uncles, a cousin that he was close to, a brother (or perhaps a sister, she was not entirely sure), a distant mother and a dead father. None of them had ever visited Will at university but it had never been clear to Melissa whether this was his choice or theirs. Which was worse, she did not know.

It was a week or so until Christmas but as they progressed through Thorn Lodge Melissa was struck by the almost total absence of any seasonal decorations. Being at Oxford, with its short, eight week terms (as opposed to the three months or more that were usual at most English universities), Melissa was used to arriving home all ‘Christmassed’ to find most people slightly behind her in terms of embracing the festive spirit. The absence of any sign of the impending Yuletide celebration at Will’s home, however, was, she felt, due to something else entirely. It more than the lack of a tree or tinsel – the complete absence of any sense of joy, warmth or frivolity made it seem like the Blackthorns were gathering together for a funeral rather than for the holidays like a normal family. That was probably appropriate, however, for Melissa was beginning to get the sense that the Blackthorns were anything but a normal family.

Their long walk through the house ended when Aunt Rose took them into a large drawing room full of people who were, Melissa assumed, the rest of Will’s family. A man and woman who appeared to be of an age with Aunt Rose were talking in front of the large fireplace. Melissa had no idea who the woman was but since the man looked enough like an older version of Will to be taken for his father if she did not already know that he was deceased, she identified him as his Uncle Theo. A much older woman sat on the sofa sipping tea from a porcelain cup – Melissa assumed her to be Will’s Great Aunt Clementine. None of them seemed to notice their arrival and they were greeted instead by a much younger woman, slender and dark-haired like Will, who hugged him warmly. Despite the clear familial resemblance to Will, Melissa felt an odd twinge of jealousy towards the girl and wondered whether she was his sister or his cousin. She did not have to wonder long.

“Melissa, this is my daughter Phoebe.” Aunt Rose said. “Phoebe, this is Will’s new... girlfriend.”

Melissa bristled at Will’s Aunt’s slight but noticeable delay in identifying her and at her use of the word ‘new’ – they had been going out for almost two years! She quickly forgot her annoyance, however, when Phoebe enfolded her in a hug that was almost as affectionate as the one that Will had benefited from a moment earlier.

“I’m so pleased to meet you at last,” said Phoebe, “I’ve heard so much about you.”

I wish I could say the same thing, thought Melissa, wondering at the same time when Will and Phoebe had spoken at such length. Will had rarely mentioned his cousin in all the time that she had known him and she had naturally assumed that they were not all that close, an assumption that appeared to be flawed from the way that they were interacting at the moment. Phoebe had casually linked one arm through Will’s and, almost as if she was trying to avoid leaving Melissa out, she linked the other through one of hers as she led them towards a place by the fire.

As she was introduced to the rest of Will’s family Melissa discovered that the woman that she had seen talking to Uncle Theo was his wife Carla. They both seemed friendly enough, much more so than Aunt Rose in any case. As for Will’s Great Aunt,

she simply looked up at Melissa and gave her a vacant smile before returning to sip her seemingly bottomless cup of tea. “She’s very old and isn’t always all there, so to speak” Phoebe explained to Melissa in a whispered undertone when they were safely out of Clementine Blackthorn’s hearing. Melissa nodded dumbly, wondering as she did so how she had ended up walking into the middle of a Noel Coward play without her knowledge.

The only members of the Blackthorn family missing from the drawing room were Will’s younger brother Edmund and his mother. Although curious to meet both, Melissa was also tired after the long drive from Oxford and accepted Phoebe’s offer to show her to her room with little reluctance.

As soon as they left the drawing room behind Phoebe turned to Melissa with a long-suffering smile upon her face.

“I’m so sorry that you were exposed to the full Blackthorn treatment like that. I would say that it’s not normally like this but I’m afraid that things are just warming up – wait till Uncle Theo gets at the sherry!”

Melissa attempted to return Phoebe’s smile as she responded; try as she might she was finding it difficult to feel entirely at ease around any of Will’s strange family.

“Oh, that’s perfectly alright,” she said, then, encouraged by Phoebe’s open demeanour, asked the question which had been on her mind since she had first arrived, “You aren’t big on Christmas then?”

Melissa had tried to keep her voice light but Phoebe’s expression tightened imperceptibly at her query nonetheless.

“No,” she said slowly, “We don’t really celebrate at this time of year, not since...”

She paused and Melissa stepped in hurriedly, realising suddenly that she was somehow treading on dangerous ground.

“You don’t need to explain, really, I was just being nosy.”

“It’s okay,” said Phoebe, although she seemed to be making a visible effort to retain her composure, “it’s just that I can’t believe it’s so hard to talk about this after all these years. You probably know that when Will and I were very young his father died on Christmas Day.”

Melissa nodded, although she had actually not been aware of the part about Will’s father’s death actually having happened at Christmas – had she known then she might perhaps have thought better of coming to Thorn Lodge at this time. She was, however, more shocked when she heard Phoebe’s next words.

“It’s Will I feel the most sorry for. I mean just imagine being a young boy and coming across the body like that.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Melissa, not quite believing what she was hearing.

Phoebe turned to her and it might have been a trick of the light but suddenly all that Melissa could see were her dark eyes, the rest of her face appearing to be in shadow.

“Didn’t you know?” she said “Will’s father committed suicide at Christmas and he was the one – poor thing – who found him.”

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Perhaps unsurprisingly after Phoebe’s revelation, Melissa slept poorly that night. Her dreams were filled with images of a young Will, shrunk in her mind’s eye but retaining the same slim frame and dark hair as her boyfriend. He was lost and alone in Thorn Lodge, wandering its endless corridors in search of something or other

– perhaps his parents, his bedroom or simply a way out. Melissa felt despair at the sight of the little lost figure but the stronger emotional response that was evoked in her was one of fear. Fear of what exactly she could not have said, only that it was something about the house and Will's connection to it. It was the same sense of unease that she had felt from the moment that she had seen Thorn Lodge, only heightened now that she knew the fate of Will's father. It was almost as if there was something malign about the house itself – like it was a presence in its own right, quite apart from the humans who lived within it.

Gradually the sense of the house being a presence increased until Melissa had the strange feeling that she was not alone in her room. She reached towards wakefulness and her eyes opened to admit the first light of the day. It was still early, that queer moment between night and dawn when everything seemed grey in colour. At home and in her college room Melissa normally slept with the curtains closed to keep out the artificial light of street lamps and car headlights but here at Thorn Lodge, where the only light outside came from the sun and the moon, she had left them open. She was therefore able to see quite clearly standing in the doorway of her bedroom a familiar figure – the child from her dream that had once been Will. Melissa blinked, thinking that she was seeing things or that perhaps she was still half-asleep but, try as she might, she could not deny the evidence of her own eyes. Standing impossibly before her was the same young Will that she had dreamed about – his features unmistakably the same as those of her boyfriend but without the maturity of youth.

She screamed. The boy in the doorway smiled.