

PROLOGUE

We were seated at the front table of the Grand Hotel in New York. Guests of Honor at the Best Seller celebration of Royal Blue Publishers new hit *Stepping Stones*.

We had made the New York Times Bestseller list and looked like we could climb to No.1!

I could hardly believe it was happening!

“Why do you think it couldn’t happen to you?” Marianne asked as she sipped wine from the fine crystal glass.

“Your mother must have put that in your head when she was drinking!” She continued, reminding me of my mother’s two personas.

“Guess you’re right.” I said. “When Mother wasn’t drinking she was always telling me I could do anything! But when she was drinking I think she was talking to my father when she said I’d never amount to a hill of beans.”

“Well, it’s not up to her. It’s up to you. Your background has nothing to do with what you can accomplish if you want to. I’ve been telling you that for years.” Marianne said with a little too much attitude.

“Well, I know one thing,” I replied, “you are the reason that book was written. I could not have done it without you!”

“I wish you hadn’t insisted on naming me as co-author, though. Sometimes we have to split up to promote the book or do talk shows. I hate traveling without you!” Marianne said.

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Before I could respond, the announcer's voice boomed over the microphone.

"Ladies and Gentlemen! The Grand Hotel and The Big Band are pleased to welcome the guests of honor, the authors of the best-selling book *Stepping Stones*, Christopher and Marianne Evans for the Spotlight Dance of the evening. Please clear the dance floor for the lovely couple."

A round of applause found us blushing under the moving spotlight as we stood up from the table and walked to the floor.

In the darkened room under the big light we danced as the band played the old classic, *You Belong To Me*.

"I don't like traveling alone either." I said as we danced. "I don't like doing anything without you."

"Sometimes I worry about other women, now that you're rich and famous, especially!" Marianne confessed.

"You have nothing to worry about," I said, as I pulled her close, "I promise. We started this together and we'll finish together."

After the accident on the way home those words would come back to haunt me.

ONE

I never really believed in ghosts. That is until last summer, when I rented the Zimmerman house in Minnesota. My publisher had given me three months to deliver the last book on my contract. It had been three years since my last best-seller and a year since my wife's death. A part of me had died with her. *The writer.*

Marianne was my silent partner. She was the writer behind Christopher Evans, the one the public did not see. Without her ideas and encouragement, I would not have been able to complete my first real novel, *STEPPING STONES*, which made the New York Times bestseller list for five weeks and allowed me to become a full time writer.

Until then I had been writing poems and short stories in little cracks of time while I worked in middle management at a local supermarket chain in Minneapolis. I began to have some success here and there; a contest won, a poem or two accepted in magazines.

The type of things a lot of writers go through.

Marianne kept encouraging me, and together we hammered out *Stepping Stones*.

It was simply the story of my life told as a mystery that led me to the truth about my family's secret life and their escape from the fringe of organized crime in the Thirties. I convinced her to take the credit she deserved and the book listed us both as the authors.

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Now she was gone. In three seconds. The truck driver never even saw us...some cartage company from Annandale, Minnesota.

The writer in me left with her. I was contracted to deliver one more book by the end of the third year. The book signings were the hardest. Though the story sold well this last year, partly due to sympathy I suspect, I had left my job and the funds, though still considerable would not last forever.

The second year without Marianne took its toll. I had no one to share my success with. No children, no pets, no house; just an empty apartment and my computer.

One day, my publisher called.

“Look, Christopher, you need to get away. I know a realtor in Annandale, who has a house available for the summer. He needs someone to rent it and will cut the rent in half if someone would clean the place up a bit. It’s across the lake from the Last Resort. It’s been empty for a while. He wants to turn it into a bed and breakfast someday...it might be just the thing for you. Lots of atmosphere; you might get some ideas. What do you say? I need that book, and you are a good writer. You could be a great writer. You can take it on Monday. You can spend the summer there. If nothing else, you can help my friend.”

Ed Harris could be pretty convincing. He was the owner of Harris Publications and Royal Blue Publications was his leading imprint.

“Okay, Ed. I’ll help you out. I’ll deliver your book, too. But don’t expect much.”

I accepted the offer as a sort of last resort also. If I couldn’t make a comeback, I would quit writing forever.

Though I wouldn’t let on to Ed, he had lit a spark of hope in me. Maybe the old house could do it!

The Last Resort was somewhat famous. Set on Zimmerman Lake, it was home to many vacationers, mostly

LAST RESORT

businessmen and even some gangsters in the Thirties and Forties, but I did not want to be reminded of my family's history or the connections I wrote about in my first book. Both of my great-aunts had gotten involved with the wrong crowd. Minneapolis was not far from Chicago then, either.

Minnesota was a sportsman's paradise with its many lakes and good hunting. I never had the chance growing up to do anything like that with my father; he had left when my mother became pregnant. Marriage wasn't his thing. I never saw him. But I heard plenty about him when Mother hit the bottle!

Growing up in the city, I had always felt like a fish out of water. I had to join the Navy to learn how to swim!

But I wasn't staying at "The Resort". I was staying in the house across the lake.

"Atmosphere; Clean the place up a bit?" I said as the headlights lit the overgrown brick pillars at the front of the driveway. I wasn't prepared for The Zimmerman House! It looked haunted! Must have been sixty years since it was lived in! As I eased my little Mercury into the driveway, I thought about turning around. If I had a cell phone I'd call Ed...

I had to stop the car just inside the old stone gate and get out of the car to clear the brush blocking the path. At one time this had been a rustic brick drive. Now there were weeds growing in every crack. The stone walls were crumbling, the irregular shaped blocks separating from each other. The lilac bushes had gone wild and grew across the drive to meet each other.

Strange too was the bed of petunias along the inside wall, wild but still looking recently tended. Marianne once told me that petunias had to be planted every year.

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Though the summer sun was still in the Western sky, there was a haze surrounding the old two-story house. A big house, though. It must have five bedrooms at least.

The realtor said there was some furniture left in the house; I could only imagine what it looked like.

“There are tools in the shed and cleaning products in the kitchen. I’ve arranged to have a phone put in and my number is on my card. Don’t hesitate to call if you need anything.” Phil Hanson’s words echoed in my mind as I pulled the car up to the front porch counting the six steps I’d have to climb with the computer.

Wishing Marianne were here, I touched the gold, heart shaped locket that hung from the rear view mirror. It had been my mother’s and I had presented it to Marianne after we were married, hoping she would hand it down to our child one day.

Shaking off the memory, I gave it a little push and left it swinging back and forth as I opened the car door and got out, trunk key in hand.

I stood on the porch with my suitcase, looking out past the old stone gate. The lake was visible across the road. A flight of old wooden steps led to the remains of a dock. At one time the beach must have been sandy and clear and the Zimmerman’s pontoon must have hosted many parties. Now the dock was buried in silt.

I tried to see the Resort on the other side of the lake, but it was too far.

The words “last resort” echoed from my lips in a whisper and I turned to the house.

A chill ran down my spine. Did I just see the curtains move?

TWO

“Come on, Christopher! You don’t believe in ghosts!” I told myself out loud, re-assured by the sound of my own voice.

I looked at the window again. Through the dirt on the glass I could see the yellowed moth-eaten drapes, were they white at one time? They hung motionless, as still as the air and the eerie quiet of this place. There was a sense of timelessness here.

Maybe it was just me. I was used to the sounds of the city. Cars and people rushing around from place to place, as if they had somewhere important to go. I used to watch them in the store agonizing over the little purchases that seemed so urgent as they went about their lives all wrapped up in themselves. I used to think they were so self-centered, thinking only of their own little world.

That was until my own world was shattered. Now the little things Marianne and I used to do seemed very important and I would have given anything to have them back.

I shook off the feelings and memories and the chill that had fallen over me. I was here for a reason. I had something important to do. I had a book to deliver, and this old house was going to help me do it!

I walked across the old painted floor of the porch to the front door. The house was big, but not a mansion. It was a lake home and not as opulent as it might have been.

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Still, the tall spires and gabled rooftops spoke of modest wealth.

The front door was tall and rounded at the top. There were three little panes of glass across the front, dusty and needing cleaning. The doorknob was tarnished, as was the brass plate behind it and I imagined what it must have looked like when it was new.

Turning the knob, I remembered the keys. The house was supposed to be locked.

I set the suitcase down and fished in my jacket pocket for the keys. There were six keys on the ring, front door, back door, garage, tool shed, basement and attic.

Which was which? The keys were old; Phil must have given me the originals.

I tried to match them by appearance and name on the lock, but there was no name on the doorplate. I would have to use the process of elimination.

Grasping the knob again with the chosen key ready, I was surprised when it turned and the door opened slightly, away from the key.

Must have been unlocked, I thought to myself. "It must have been." I answered back aloud.

I put the ring of keys back in my jacket pocket and picked up the suitcase. Remembering some old movie, I kicked the door gently and as it swung open on the old rusted hinges, and yelled out, "Honey, I'm home!"

Chuckling at my own humor I stepped inside. The musty, stale air assaulted me and I felt the oxygen being drawn out of my lungs. Gasping for breath, I turned and stumbled on the transom, almost falling down the steps.

"Well, that was graceful, Christopher!" I was still talking to myself as I recovered, leaning on the porch railing. I decided to leave the door open for a while.

LAST RESORT

“The first thing I’m going to do is open all the windows and doors and air this place out!”

No one disagreed with me, so that’s what I did. Stepping back in I took inventory of the number of windows. There was a large picture window in the living room to my left, the kind with the stained glass corners and leaded across the top and two large double hung windows in the outside wall. To my right was the sitting room with a smaller picture window overlooking the porch and a smaller window in the sidewall by the stairway.

Above the picture window in the sitting room was a row of four smaller windows, which also did not open. All of them were framed in wide, dark woodwork.

The house was very masculine, heavy and dark. It needed a woman’s touch, which the once white draperies and lace must have provided.

I walked across the old braided rug, each step raising little puffs of dry dust. The rug separated from the shock of being used again and I made a note to myself not to try and save it.

Reaching the first window, I pulled back the curtains, which tore in my hand and collapsed to the floor as if finally they could rest. I wouldn’t be saving these either!

The lock on the window was made of brass, but now looked black with age. It was sticky to the touch and I prayed that time had not sealed the windows shut.

A little pounding with the heel of my hand broke the windows’ sleep and a telltale *snap!* announced its resurrection.

One by one, in the dining room and the kitchen - wherever I could find one, the windows opened reluctantly, victims of my now perfected technique. The curtains came down in pieces and I retraced my path, scooping them up as I went

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and kicking the last ones onto the porch. I would find the trash later.

Whatever light came into the house through the now naked windows seemed to be eaten up by the darkness within. I wondered if there was a way to brighten this house up and still retain its original appearance. But I was only supposed to clean it up a bit, not restore it. I would only be here for three months anyway.

Yet, if I were going to work here, I would have to do *something* with it!

Leaving the curtains on the porch, I continued my tour, a few butterflies in my stomach as I started thinking of the project, and the potential this house had. They don't build them like this anymore!

"This would be a candidate for This Old House, or America's Most Haunted! What do you think, Norm?" I talked to myself aloud again, justifying the idea now taking shape in my mind. "No wonder Phil thought of the bed and breakfast! There must be a lot of history connected with this house, local history anyway."

I continued my tour, noting the house had already begun to inspire me; if not for a story, than as an investment. Maybe I could partner with Phil and I wouldn't even have to write...

The sudden slam of the front door shook the house. My heart jumped into my throat! The timing was coincidence, wasn't it? The house could not read my mind. A strong sudden breeze...of course it was, "Just the wind".

Resuming the tour though, I was careful with my thoughts. But I couldn't shake the feeling that something or someone was watching me.