

SECRETS OF
WAYFARERS INN

Family Secrets

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N E W

Christianity

BECKY MELBY

There are moments when I question why we so willingly put ourselves in danger, but then I try to imagine life in some of the homes I've glimpsed in my trips across the river and think how sad it must be to live only for oneself. —Prudence Willard, Marietta, Ohio, September 9, 1857

Family Secrets

CHAPTER ONE

“Cobblestone!” LuAnn Sherrill sat in the backseat, pressing her forehead against the window—more like a five-year-old in front of a candy counter than a woman who’d just taken the senior discount at the Buckley House. Beneath the tires, red cobblestones murmured of days gone by. History and its untold secrets never failed to ignite her curiosity, but today she had other things on her mind. “We won’t stay too long, right?”

“Right.” The half-hearted answer, coming from Trudy Wallace, her longtime friend who sat in the front passenger seat, wasn’t reassuring.

Trudy pointed at an empty space, and Janice Eastman, LuAnn’s other forever friend, negotiated a nearly flawless parallel park.

LuAnn got out of the car and stared at the building—from its crooked basement windows to the two gables on the top floor. Her breath caught in her throat. How could something this old, this rich in story, be for sale and in such need of repair? The ad in the *Marietta Times* classifieds had described it as a historical warehouse, but clearly it had once been something else. Four stories high, the building must have been a hotel at one point.

She turned around, drinking in the sight of sunlight sparkling on the water and docked boats bobbing gently along the edge of the river. Since she’d arrived in Marietta this morning, everything around her, from the hauntingly familiar smell of the Ohio River to the trill of song sparrows, seemed to welcome her back and remind her that, this time, she was safe.

Trudy and Janice had already crossed the street. She joined them at a massive front door. Trudy pointed to a dirt-covered yellow sign. “The For Sale sign looks like it’s been here about as long as the building.”

The look on the man’s face with the clipboard said he knew the sale was a done deal. And, despite her protests, she knew it too.

You had me at ‘secrets,’ mister. But she wouldn’t admit it yet. “Can we see the basement?”

“Absolutely. Follow me. Might want to use the flashlights on your phones again. There are a couple of bare bulbs, but that’s all.” He led them behind the bar and gestured toward the wall beneath the stairs. He smiled at LuAnn. “After you.”

“After me?” Confused, she looked from him to the wall and back again.

“Step closer and push just to the left of that seam in the wallpaper.”

The seam was barely visible in the pinkish-tan paper covered with faded magnolias. She pushed. And gasped. The door swung in.

“Careful now. Hold the railing.”

The stairs creaked, wood straining against the constraint of rusted nails. The railing was smooth. She walked slowly, feeling the worn dent in the center of each step. Holding her phone high, she imagined it was a kerosene lamp and she was wearing a long muslin nightgown and a lace-trimmed cap as she sneaked down to the cellar for a glass of cider.

She stepped to the left when she reached the bottom. Thin light filtered through dusty windows that were tall enough to allow sunshine to enter if they were cleaned. A monstrous furnace occupied the center of the cavernous room, octopus arms stretching in all directions. When had that been added? And were the fireplaces still used after it was?

A cistern occupied one corner, part of its wall crumbling. She motioned to Trudy and Janice. “Room enough to install a hot tub in here. I saw it on Pinterest.”

Janice toyed with a salt-and-pepper curl, something she did when deep in thought. “Modern comfort meets rustic past. I like how you think.”

LuAnn pointed to an arched doorway. “This is so much nicer than I expected. High ceilings, beautiful brick...”

Trudy nudged her shoulder. “Is that a yes?”

She ignored the question. “Get that furnace out of here and—”

“You could open this up as a restaurant,” Bradley Grimes interjected. She nodded, then turned away, uncomfortable with a stranger reading

The man's voice raised just slightly. Probably amping into sales mode. "Or a bed and breakfast." Janice looked at Trudy, then LuAnn. "We should buy it."

"We should what?" LuAnn started to laugh but was cut off by Trudy. Clapping her hands.

"We should! This would absolutely not be boring."

"You're not serious."

"Serious as a shark attack. Think about it. We are perfect for it and it's perfect for us." Janice looked at the man with dollar signs in his eyes. "Trudy taught hotel services classes and I taught domestic arts. And LuAnn is the best cook and talker-to-people I've ever met."

"Oh, really?" He handed them each a spec sheet, dollar signs growing bigger by the second. "Who knows what fascinating secrets this old place holds, ladies? If the legends are true, there may even be a long-deceased guest traipsing around on the fourth—"

"Do you see this price?" Trudy's eyes bulged. "It's doable. And to save money, we could live on the haunted floor and turn the rest into guest rooms."

LuAnn expected to hear the *Twilight Zone* music at any moment. "Live here?"

"Yes!" Janice ran her hand along a swath of vines carved into the bar. "We could so do this." She tapped her lip with one finger. "Think about it. When, in the forty-plus years we've known each other, have we ever been this freed up? We're all retired. I'm living with my daughter, Tru's just renting now, and you're homeless! How perfect is that?" She grinned. "Lu, you're moving here so we can do things together, have more adventures, right? What if this is what we've been praying about, our 'what's gonna happen next'?"

LuAnn glanced down at the spec sheet. Bradley Grimes, that was his name. And Trudy was right about the price. When she looked up, three faces stared expectantly at her. She took a step back. "Let's be sensible. We haven't even seen the fourth floor. We don't know if it's structurally sound or a wise investment. We need an appraisal and a business plan and..."

"That may mean I need a different Realtor." LuAnn glanced at her watch. "He's late."

Janice shook her head. "No more setting your watch five minutes ahead. You're not on teacher time anymore, girlfriend, you're on retirement time." She high-fived Trudy—honoring the promise the three of them had made to never act their age or ever let themselves be bored.

LuAnn stretched the stiffness out of her neck. School had started two weeks ago in Clarksburg, West Virginia. Without her. But she still couldn't shake the constant feeling she was supposed to be somewhere. Hopefully, once she found a house and could start figuring out what life beyond teaching was supposed to look like, she'd start to relax. Out of habit, she looked at her watch again. As she opened her mouth to mention that this time the Realtor really was late, something caught her eye. A bronze plaque, almost obscured by a thick mass of woodbine.

WAYFARERS INN – BUILT IN 1851

AN IMPORTANT STOP

ON THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD

Trudy touched the knocker at the center of one door. "Imagine what this looked like when it was first built. I bet it was a bustling place. Can't you just see the steamship captains smoking their pipes and flirting with girls in hoopskirts?"

LuAnn stepped up to a window. Cupping her hands, she tried to peer beyond the dusty, wavy hand-blown glass.

"Greetings!" A deep voice came out of nowhere.

LuAnn's pulse skipped a beat. She turned to see a silver-haired man with shockingly blue eyes. He wore a gray summer-weight suit and carried a clipboard and a For Sale sign that did not match the one nailed to the door frame. "Hello. We were just—are you the Realtor?"

"Brad Grimes. Grimes Realty. Just took over this listing." He set the sign down and held out his hand. Firm shake, unwavering eye contact. He shook hands with each of them and followed each introduction with "Pleasure to meet you."

As her students would say, the guy was old school.

“Let me tell you about this magnificent structure, ladies. It was originally called the Riverfront House, but around the time of the First World War, a new owner renamed it after a poem called ‘The Wayfarer.’” He closed his eyes as he recited the lines. “‘Is it the hour? We leave this resting-place made fair by one another for a while. Now, for a god-speed, one last mad embrace; the long road then, unlit by your faint smile. Ah! the long road! and you so far away!’” He opened his eyes and directed his gaze at LuAnn as he continued... “Oh, I’ll remember! But, each crawling day will pale a little your scarlet lips, each mile dull the dear pain of your remembered face.” He took a deep breath and gave a slight bow.

Janice and Trudy cheered and giggled. LuAnn simply stuttered, “R-Rupert Brooke.”

He arched one brow. “You know your literature, ma’am.”

“She’d better,” Janice chimed in. “She taught English for thirty-five years.”

She needed to get the man off romantic poets so he could give them a quick tour before moving on to the houses she hoped he’d found in her price range. When they’d seen this listing in the paper, she was as curious about the building as Trudy and Janice. She’d told the receptionist exactly that when she called. Just curious, not in the market. Before she had a chance to tell him they only wanted a short tour, Trudy jumped in.

“How many rooms?”

“At one time the inn had twenty-four guest rooms and a tavern on the main floor. Unfortunately, some of the walls on the top floor were knocked out. But the others are relatively intact. You’ll find she’s been a bit neglected, but,”—he unlocked the door—“as they say, she’s got good bones.”

He switched the lights on and swept his arm out like a circus barker. The room was dirty and cluttered, but LuAnn was thrilled to see no one had tried to camouflage its character. Wide floor planks, deeply scarred, with square nailheads visible in spots, whispered of frenzied dances and barroom brawls. The outside walls were white-painted stone.

“Look at the ceiling,” Janice whispered.

Pressed tin. LuAnn felt a surge of adrenaline as she looked from the

peeling paint on the tin ceiling to the curved stairway that led to a balcony.

“You’re a history lover, aren’t you, LuAnn?”

He remembered her name? She couldn’t think of his. Grimes Realty. But what was his first name? “I also taught American history.” She walked to the staircase and put her hand on the mushroom-shaped newel cap, feeling the smooth patina of the wood.

Trudy squealed from across the room. “Look!” She pushed aside a stack of flattened boxes, revealing an antique gold cash register.

“I’m told that’s original,” Grimes Realty said. “This was an antique store for many years before it was used for storage. It’s been empty for quite a while. What a waste, don’t you agree?”

All three women nodded.

Janice stood at the bottom of the stairs. “Can we go up?”

“The fourth floor is boarded up, but I can show you the second and third. No electricity up there, but we’ve got daylight.”

LuAnn followed the three of them, wishing she were alone and could stand for a moment in the silence and savor the picture in her mind of a young woman in a feathered hat singing “Miss Nancy Paul” or “The Sailor’s Grave.”

They started with the first room to the right at the top of the stairs.

“This is the only suite, probably a sitting room and bedroom at one time,” Realty Man explained. “The hand-blown glass in the windows is original, as is the woodwork.”

LuAnn took out her phone and shined her flashlight on a hinged iron light fixture on the wall. “Gaslight,” she said under her breath, picturing shadows flickering over a padded settee and four-poster bed and reflecting off the high ceiling. On one wall, a marble hearth surrounded a fireplace that seemed to be made of the same bricks as the pavers on the road.

Room after empty room sent shivers of possibility dancing up her spine. “Someone needs to restore this.”

As they descended the stairs, Mr. Grimes said, “My brother advertised this as a warehouse, but I’m hoping to find a buyer with vision. Can’t you see this as a boutique mall or filled with little vintage shops?”