

THE ECHOES OF THE ELK'S ESTATE

THE LIAM AND BOO SERIES
BOOK TWO



WILLIAM MIERZEJEWSKI

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CHAPTER 1

IT STARTS WITH A DREAM

For several months after the events in Iron River, Liam would wake up every night in a panic. He was experiencing horrific night terrors. The night terrors as Liam would describe them seemed to replay his experiences with the beast. Sometimes the dream would be Liam and his friends driving along Route 2 as the beast advanced quickly toward them. Another dream replayed Liam running away from the beast and sheltering inside the church. But the dream that seemed to replay the most was his time in the cave where his friend and protector Nick Rosalie stood as a shield and ended the nightmare that plagued a community for generations.

Liam and Boo's parents, Annie and Will, tried their best to comfort their children after the events of last summer. Boo suffered the same trauma as her brother—nightmares, a loss of security, and problems with controlling her anxiety. Through some initial counseling with a behavior therapist, Boo seemed to recover faster than her brother. Liam took longer to rehabilitate his mind and spirit. Though not fully recovered, his parents felt that the worst was behind them. The behavioral therapist worked diligently with Liam and assured him that surviving the event was one step. The next step was surviving its memories and not allowing those memories to haunt and plague his future. After some time, Liam seemed to finally relax and put the beast and the nightmares to rest.

All that could be heard in the twilight of this particularly warm and humid summer night was the running of the ceiling fans and air conditioners in their bedrooms. Inside Annie and Will's bedroom, Annie slept comfortably while Will tossed and turned in his sleep. He was dreaming but not about the events of Iron River. His dream was in a familiar setting. Something from his childhood.

During Will's childhood years, his mother, Bethany, worked as a housekeeper for the Catholic Church at Elk's Estate. Elk's Estate was located in Elkins Park, Pennsylvania, and was built by the extraordinarily wealthy Elk family at the turn of the twentieth century. The estate itself extended along a twenty-acre area. The main entrance to the estate was off the beautiful oak tree-covered setting of Ashbourne Road. A turn off the main road led into a tree-covered half-circle drive-up with tall black iron gates on either side that intersected in the middle with a large archway with the letters "E.E." across it. The gateway led to a 100-yard drive-up with oak trees and pines edged alongside the road to the main house. Arriving closer to the main house, the road led past a separate colonial coach house. The road separated at the entrance of the main house and formed a large circle, which extended along the other half of the property. This road led along the Victorian Rose Garden, outdoor event areas, a few cottages, and a small pond. The main building was the Elk's family mansion, which was also known as The Retreat House to the Catholic Church during their ownership. The exterior of the building was mainly constructed of concrete and gray stone and topped with an orange tile roof. The size of the mansion would rival most local elementary schools. The main entrance to the mansion included two circular gray stone staircases that led up to a vast walkway and two large oak doors.

This is where Will finds himself in his dream. He looks around the property from the vantage point of the front entrance. The weather is gloomy, bleak, and cloudy. There's a continuous breeze. He can't feel the wind, but he can see the movement of the trees and the fall of the autumn leaves. He hears the wind race through the trees and alongside the mansion while it sprinkles thousands of dry crinkled leaves that bounce and roll along the road. He also hears echoes from someone's indistinct voice. He walks back down the stairs. Not a soul in sight. From the bottom of the stairs, he sees one of the oak doors opening. He tries to race up the stairs. He wants to move quickly, but every step seems more difficult to reach and climb. Through his incredible effort he finally reaches the top of the stairs. He knocks on the door and says, "Hello?" No answer.

He walks through the entrance and into the grand hallway. To his left is a small hallway with a flight of stairs, which leads down to a lower level. Will looks down the stairs. Nothing can be seen. Just pitch blackness and a complete void of life. To his right is an entrance to a long hallway. He can

see all the way down this hallway. The pendant-hanging lights move anxiously back and forth as though they were being moved by the wind or disturbed by something. Again, he says, "Hello? Can anyone hear me!" No answer.

He moves forward into the main living room. The forty-foot ceilings are spectacularly decorated with hand-crafted paintings that resemble the classic masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance. The furniture from the era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is both beautiful and old. He remembers this room and how he used to run through and play as a boy. He hears someone's echo past the main living room. He walks through the living room looking up and around to see if anyone is there. No one on the second floor or the main floor. He moves into another hallway that leads to another set of circular staircases. The voices are getting louder and begin to sound familiar.

The green carpeted circular staircases run on either side up to another set of double doors. He begins to walk up the stairs, and he notices the wallpaper. It's the same as it was when he was a boy. He thinks, *I remember playing on these steps with my toys while Mom was busy vacuuming and dusting. God, I remember how she would get so mad at me for running up and down these stairs. Rightfully so. That's how I got this mark on my wrist. By cutting myself on the sharp decorative railing.* He reaches the top of the staircase, and the double doors open.

He enters a gathering of some type. There are tables and chairs on either side of the wood-paneled room. The room is full of men wearing suits and tuxedos. Vocal jazz music plays in the background and echoes off the high ceilings. One of the men approaches Will, puts his arm around Will's shoulder, and says, "Hey, Little Ski! Glad you were able to join us." Will, being confused and bewildered replies, "Little Ski? No one has called me that in years. That was what the guys at my dad's firehouse called me. My dad's nickname was Ski. Who are you?" The man laughs and says, "Good memory, Little Ski, but I guess not too good. I was a friend of your dad. You met me on a few occasions when your dad was still with the fire department. My name is Stan." Will looks at Stan and answers, "Oh yes, I remember. I would see you at some of the union parties. What are you doing here? And what happened to this place? This room used to be the old Catholic chapel where the priest held mass." Stan replies with a slight grin,

“Yeah that all changed after some guy came here and made this some type of banquet hall room. Some of the locals and long-term residents are still not too happy with it. But we are here to congratulate you on becoming a firefighter and following in your dad’s footsteps. We even heard you’ll be promoted to an officer soon. We are all just so proud of you, especially your old man.” Will, looking astonished answers, “I’ve been with the department for several years now. My old man? Stan, he died years ago. He never saw me graduate.” Stan laughs at Will’s reply and answers, “Of course I know that, Little Ski. We are all in the same boat as your old man. See, just look for yourself. He’s over there in the corner with some of his buddies.”

Will looks over his shoulder in the direction of Stan’s pointed finger. Will sees his father sitting in the corner, smiling and raising a cocktail glass to him. That’s when Will wakes up and almost jumps straight out of bed and onto the floor. *What the hell was that all about? I often dream about The Retreat House. Some are good, some aren’t so good, but this one was so crazy and vivid. I haven’t seen my father since his death fifteen years ago.*

CHAPTER 2

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TRAVEL PLANS

Will shouts and rises quickly out of bed. Annie wakes up startled from Will's reaction to his dream. She exclaims, "Jesus, honey! What's going on? Are you okay?"

Relieved after figuring it was a dream, Will replies, "What? It's nothing, my love. Just a dream. But God it seemed so real."

Annie questions, "Was it about my parents' lake house again?"

Will starts to lay back into bed again and answers, "No. Tried to block that place from my brain for a while now. No, this was about that Retreat House I told you about."

Annie replies, "What, that place where your mother worked when you were a kid?"

"Yes. That place. I dream about that place from time to time. Haven't been there in over twenty years. It was such a happy place in my childhood. Kind of like my sanctuary away from the rest of world."

Annie replies, "Maybe this is your mind's way of healing after the events of last summer. Think of the ripple effects it's had on the family."

"Maybe you're right. Maybe it's my mind's way of reflecting on a happy time in my life. But it's been on my mind lately, especially since we're heading out to Philly in a couple of days."

Annie replies, "I think it's great what your sister is doing out there. From what you described, it sounds like such a wonderful place. Something worth saving."

Will says, "It's certainly worth saving. Can't wait for you and the kids to see it. You'll be amazed by this place. I'm glad we decided to head there for our family vacation this summer."

Annie started to get comfortable again. Before falling back to sleep she says, “Me too, honey. Now let’s get some sleep. We’ve got a lot to do tomorrow. Good night.”

“Good idea. Good night, my love.”

Liam wakes up to the smells of his dad making breakfast and his dog, Lady, jumping onto his bed and licking his face. Liam exclaims, “Okay, Lady. Stop! I’m up! I’m up. No! I’m not taking you for a run until later in the morning. And that’s a maybe.” Liam wipes off his face and gets out of bed.

The morning sun is rising from over the neighboring houses as he looks out his bedroom window. He hears the familiar sounds of the neighborhood. The next-door neighbor working on his car inside his garage. The landscaping company trimming his other neighbor’s grass. The distant sound of a police car or an ambulance siren drifting off in the distance. He says to himself, “Good morning, Chicago. What treats do you have in store for me today? I guess we will find out after breakfast. Smells like Dad is cooking a feast. Smells like bacon and biscuits.”

Liam puts on his slippers and starts to head downstairs as Lady runs quickly past him. Boo was already up and helping Dad by being the taste tester. Liam walks over to his sister to see what’s on her plate. Liam says, “Looks like Dad is outdoing himself. Scrambled eggs, bacon, and biscuits with gravy. Wow!” Liam tries to steal a piece of bacon from Boo’s plate, but being protective of her precious bacon, she slaps Liam’s wrist and says, “Not happening! Go get your own.”

Liam walks into the kitchen to find his dad in his glory—making a signature breakfast, brewing coffee, and listening to country music. Liam grabs a plate and says, “Wow, Dad! You must have slept well. You’re cooking up a feast in here.”

Will replies, “One weird dream in the middle of night. No biggie. The rest of the night I slept like a baby. Thank God for it. The day before we ran all night at work. Needed some good rest before we start our vacation. Figure I’d cook up what we had left in the fridge, especially since we’ll be leaving soon. We got lots to do, kid.”

Liam fills his plate and asks, “What, like chores?”

Will answers, “You better believe it. After breakfast I can use your help doing the yard work.”

As Will continues to talk to Liam, Annie walks into the kitchen after walking up from the basement. She slides past Will and Liam, snags a piece of bacon from Liam’s plate, grabs a cup from the cabinet, and pours herself a cup of coffee. Annie says, “First load of wash is started. After breakfast I’ll get the suitcases out of the attic. While you and Dad are taking care of the yard work, Boo and I will be cleaning the house and doing the laundry. And I’ll have to bring you with me when I drop off Lady at Nana’s house.”

Liam rolls his eyes and asks, “Why do I have to go? Can’t you just take Boo? I promised my friends we would play some baseball at the park.”

Annie answers, “You know that you’re Lady’s favorite. She gets all nervous when we drop her off at Nana’s house. Poor thing always acts like we are abandoning her, and we’ll never return.”

Liam laughs. “Well, we almost didn’t make it home after our last summer vacation. So, who’s to say? Maybe she senses something.”

Annie takes a long sip of her coffee. “First of all, true story. Second, not going there. Let’s leave the past where it belongs. And lastly, I’ve got no problem if you want to hang out with your friends as long as you get all of your work done.”

The whole family sits down at the dining room table to have breakfast. Liam looks at Will as he’s drinking some of his coffee and asks, “So, Dad, just yard work, housework, and drop Lady off at Nana’s? Anything else?”

Will answers, “That’s basically it. That’s all the help I’ll need from you, son. Then I need to get fuel for the van and roll past Mr. Krazel’s house. Have to drop off some tools I borrowed to repair the shed.”

Liam sees a good opportunity and says, “I might hang out with my friends later and possibly do pizza and a movie at their house. Do you want me to drop it off for you?”

Will answers, “That’s sounds like some good teamwork, son. Let’s plan on that.”

Getting a little irritated, Annie interjects, “Not so fast! Will, I don’t want Liam staying out too long with his friends. I don’t want any late-night stuff. We have an early call.”

Will stares at his wife for a moment, looks at Liam, and says, “Duly noted. Don’t worry, honey. I’ll make sure he gets his chores done. Plus, it’s his last opportunity to see his friends for the next couple of weeks. But your mom is right. We do have an early call. So, be home no later than 9:00 p.m. Okay? Deal?”

Liam smiles. “Deal. What time are we leaving tomorrow?”

Will answers, “No later than 7:00 a.m. Maybe sooner since that stretch of I-80 around the Illinois–Indiana Border can be a headache to get through. The plan is to drive to our hotel just outside of Cleveland. Hopefully arrive in time for dinner. Then the following day drive until we arrive to your Uncle Pete and Aunt Claire’s house.”

Boo asks, “Where do they live again?”

Will answers, “In Doylestown, Pennsylvania.”

“Will Neil and Ellie be there when we arrive?”

“I talked to your Aunt Claire about your cousins, honey. Neil and Ellie should be home. They’re looking forward to seeing you.”

Will finishes the rest of his meal quickly. He tends to eat like a firefighter. Even when he’s off duty he eats like the bell is going to go off. Soon after, the rest of the family clears the table and begins their chores. Will grabs the van keys from the hallway closet hook, gives Annie a kiss, and says, “I’ll be back soon. Gonna fuel up the van. I already have the tools in the van. I’ll save Liam a chore and drop off those tools and get some snacks for the road. Text me if you need anything else.”

Annie smiles. “Will do. Love you, be careful.”

“You know me. Always. Love you too.”

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