ForeWord Reviews

GENERAL

The Secret Ever Keeps
Art Tirrell
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“Learning the truth about yourself doesn’t necessarily make you happy,” says Jake Eastland. He should know. At age 93, he contemplates his life as a bootlegger and a thug, a tycoon and a killer, with regret, not for the crimes he’s committed, but for the family he’s never known.

This all changes when Laurel Kingsford shows up on his doorstep. A dynamic young woman with a distinguished background in oceanic research, Laurel retreats to the only place she’s ever felt safe following the loss of her job, her life savings, and her fiancé. A genteel old inn overlooking Lake Ontario’s southern shore, the Twice Told Hotel was where Laurel spent idyllic childhood summers in the company of her grandmother, Jean. Jake Eastland built the Twice Told in 1940 and it was where he, too, retreated after his marriage to a society gold digger named Jean ended. Obviously, Jake and Laurel have much in common. They should: unbeknownst to Laurel, Jake is her grandfather.

If this were merely another derivative “sins of the father” saga, such coincidences would be improbable, if not imponderable. Fortunately, the author capitalizes on his lifelong background as a resident of Lake Ontario’s shoreline communities and his penchant for competitive sailing to craft a high-seas thriller replete with expected elements—killer storms, sabotaged equipment, and a race-against-time quest for sunken treasure—plus one stunning twist: the treasure implicates George Washington in a devastating political scandal.

If such cloak-and-dagger intrigue isn’t stimulating enough, Tirrell throws in not one, but two, romantic triangles. This is an ambitious plot for a first-time author to navigate, but Tirrell does an admirable job of making it all coalesce by endowing his character-driven narrative with a romantic sensitivity and his intricately crafted story line with a riveting focus. It is Tirrell’s rhapsodic description of Lake Ontario’s tortuous shoreline that lends the novel its authenticity and allure: “horizontal slabs of black-tinged slate … devoid of life, beautiful in its raw wildness. And yet something more, some darker tension seemed compressed within, as if the place held its breath and waited.”

Jake Eastland has been holding his breath, waiting for someone to love for ninety-three

years. As he relates his life story to Laurel as a way of preparing her for the eventual revelation that she’s his granddaughter and heir, Tirrell’s multigenerational saga segues effortlessly between the internecine wars of Prohibition-era rum runners and the insidious perfidy of modern-day fortune hunters. Learning the truth about her connection to Jake’s notorious background may not make Laurel happy, but it does make for an accomplished and assured fictional debut.