



SOMETIMES, THE HARDEST PATH TO WALK
IS THE ONE THAT LEADS YOU HOME.

CSPA BOOK OF THE YEAR AWARD WINNER

MARIANNE EVANS

FISHER MEN OF ANTIOCH #1



The Return

Marianne Evans

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

The Return

COPYRIGHT 2018 by Marianne Evans

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* Copyright 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC
www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0154-7

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To John and Mary Hilger ~ No one could respect the nourishing, loving and Godly lives you lead more than me. Thank you for the inspiration (and research help!) you provided not only for *The Return* but for the entire *Fishermen of Antioch* series. The Fisher family is fictional, but the truth of their stories is something you live out day-by-day. Love you!

What People are Saying

4 ½ * Top Pick – A great read, the narrative is a balanced blend of skillful character development and anticipated—as well as totally surprising—scenes that are sated with plenty of romantic tension.

~ Romantic Times on *Forgiveness*

Marianne Evans is the queen of Christian romance.

~ Nancee Marchinowski, Book Reviewer and
Blogger at *Perspectives* by Nancee

This talented author satisfies both heart and soul

~ NYT Bestselling Author Ruth Ryan Langan

Fisher Men of Antioch

The Return
The Stronghold
The Journey

Other books by Marianne Evans

Devotion
Forgiveness

Woodland Church Series:

Hearts Surrender
Hearts Communion
Hearts, Key

Sisters in Spirit Series:

Aileen's Song
Siobhan's Beat
Kassidy's Crescendo
Maeve's Symphony

AND MANY MORE

'Quickly bring the finest robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' ~ Luke 15:22-24

1

Phillip Fisher crouched into a squat and dug his fingertips into hard, dry earth that crumbled free against the exerted pressure. He crushed the soil into his palm and then opened his hand slow, allowing particles to whisper, sift, and swirl against an arid—too arid—gust of air. His gaze moved across low-lying green leaves burnished to rich gold by the rays of a setting sun. He took in the sway and toss of underdeveloped soybean plants, and his brow furrowed. Pushing to a stand, he swiped dirty hands against a pair of well-worn jeans—the only pair he had ever allowed within the stylized, designer-laden wardrobe of his recently vacated condo in Indianapolis. He eyed the family farmhouse.

An ache built deep in his chest as considerations of all he had done wrong barreled through his mind. All the figurative slaps in the face he had delivered to the ones most precious to him—the ones who remained sheltered inside the sturdy, if time-worn, walls of his childhood home.

A curving breeze whispered through the beds of vegetation. Dust skimmed against his face like a stroke from God, and he knew one thing to be true. He needed to come to terms with his life. Fast.

In deference to that goal, Phillip clenched his jaw and rejected further introspection. There was no time for regrets, only action. Reclamation.

Don't travel backwards when you're trying to get to the future.

Isn't that what Pop would say? Probably. The Fisher family patriarch, Jonathan, constantly preached one nugget of wisdom after another. Nowadays, Phillip wondered why he hadn't paid closer attention.

He latched his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans as more hot air blew, tossing his hair, filling his senses with the pungent aroma of grass, fertilizer, and sunbaked earth. Without question, Pop needed help this season. All it took was a glance to realize the upcoming fall harvest would be rough. Maybe Phillip could help. Maybe he could redeem himself through hard work and dedication. In return, he hoped for nothing but the chance to begin again.

He studied the farm even closer as he crossed a pathway that framed the southern boundary of their four-hundred-acre spread. Cream colored paint peeled slightly in spots. The black shingled roof, worn and patched in a few places, would need replacing sooner rather than later. The wraparound porch remained timeless and welcoming, dotted by his mother's cheery, bright flower plants. Brown wicker chairs were angled toward the west where a flat lay of land had always set the stage for magnificent sunsets.

All the same, times weren't great. A frown pulled at the corners of his mouth, puckered his brow. He saw

it all, loved it all, even as his chest swelled, because he sure hadn't shown this farm, or his family, any semblance of that emotion over the past few years.

Almost from birth, the spirit within him had striven for much more than the tiny, rural community of Antioch, Indiana could provide. A memory dance sent him reeling backwards by three years to the day he graduated college and left Antioch for the rarified, big-city realm of Indianapolis.

He blocked that bitter recollection in its tracks. A resolute stride led him up wooden porch steps that creaked comfortably and then on to a screen door he opened against a protesting squeak.

He stopped short.

Should he push through the closed front door? He already knew it wouldn't be locked. Should he knock? Should he—

The door swept open. Against every ounce of doubt, uncertainty, and pain came the weathered, loving eyes of his father. And all it took was that look to make Phillip dissolve into the boy—the son—he had once been.

"Phillip. Welcome home."

The greeting came out gruff and thick. Without a moment's hesitation, Pop pulled him into a silent bear-hug. Pop was a big man, tall and stocky. Farming—his life's expectation and legacy—had molded him into a rock-solid, formidable life form.

Until now.

Now, the rock-solid countenance showed fissures. Lines had deepened around his mouth and cut grooves against the corners of tired, though determined, eyes. Big shoulders sagged a bit. Dad was ailing; a former indomitability wavered beneath a heart beginning to

slow, and wane. Those facts topped the list of reasons why Phillip knew it had been best to return home to Antioch. So, he enjoined the hug full force, sinking into a moment of reunion and precious affirmation. After that, he was dragged across the threshold.

“Anna! Anna, come in here.”

That happy, booming summons vibrated through the air. Scurrying footfalls approached from the rear of the house, and seconds later Mom stood framed in the narrow archway fixed between the kitchen and family room.

“Phillip!” She wiped her hands briskly on the apron always fastened at her waist then dashed forward to claim a hug of her own.

“Mother and I were in the kitchen. Saw you walking up. Could hardly believe our eyes.” Dad coughed—cleared his throat in a heavy way, though he smiled with unfettered joy. “Are you in town for a visit, or longer, or...”

The leading edge of that question wasn’t lost on Phillip. He wrapped his arms around the shoulders of his parents and was led straight to the kitchen table, of course. Where else would they convene but the foundation of nourishment, welcome and gathering?

Since Phillip didn’t answer his father’s question right away, Pop seemed content to move on. “Have you talked to your brothers?”

“I texted Ben when I landed at the bus station and—”

“The bus station?” Mom’s arched brow and wide eyes spoke volumes, telegraphing the silent question: What on earth were you doing at a bus station, and why weren’t your brothers charging forward to help?

Phillip shifted uncomfortably. “Yeah. Anyway, he

wanted to help out, but he's—"

"He's over at Dunleavy's getting a couple replacement parts for the tractor." Dad chimed in. "Considering repairs for the irrigation system, too. Still, Aaron could have stepped in. I think he's out back in the barn seeing to Dollie and Marcus. Simple maintenance. That could have waited a spell."

Dollie and Marcus, the family's two horses. Regarding Aaron, Phillip hadn't even attempted to reach out. Way too much acrimony simmered beneath the surface of their relationship to enable any kind of request for help.

Once again, Pop plowed on, ever steadfast and unflappable. Except for his health...except for a massive, giving heart that grew weaker and weaker. "Do you have any luggage? Plan on spending a few days?"

"I plan to spend a few days and then some. I brought a few things with me, but I'll get 'em later."

Weeks ago, Phillip had opted to either ditch or store his possessions in Indy. Bare necessities had followed him in a large duffle that currently rested in a secured locker at the depot in town. That included the lease he had let expire on a car he'd driven based on name cachet alone. No sense spending money on a designer vehicle that no longer fit his lifestyle or mindset. Besides, Pop had a workhorse of a pickup truck parked in the barn that had logged well over a hundred thousand miles yet remained solid and dependable.

His folks opted not to push on that count, a fact for which Phillip was eternally grateful. How could he explain selling his car, his furniture and all those material trinkets that had overtaken so much of his

soul? There'd be time enough for that later—he hoped—if acceptance and forgiveness ran deep enough.

Phillip heard the back door open and close. Heavy, booted footsteps approached at a fast clip and into the kitchen strode his brother, Aaron.

“Hey, Dad, I—” Realizing Phillip’s presence, Aaron froze, and stared. A hot silence fell through the atmosphere while a firestorm of hostility and anger sparked along a live wire. “Phillip.”

The one-word acknowledgement lacked any pretense at warmth and came across more like an indictment than anything else. Phillip expected no less. Knew he deserved no better.

“You’re back,” Aaron continued. Acid ate its way through those two simple words.

“Yeah, and I hope I—”

In the millisecond it took Phillip to blink, his brother’s fist connected soundly with his jaw. Phillip saw stars, dancing dots; he swayed and nearly toppled before he heard Aaron’s bitter growl.

“Welcome home. I’ve got work to do.”

The resounding crack of the slammed front door filled the air like a gunshot.

~*~

It was the height of summer; that left *Sundae Afternoon* packed with customers. Mila Thomas’s approving gaze captured youngsters laughing with glee, spinning on retro-style chrome and padded stools at the front counter of her sweet-treat shop. She took in teenagers with their heads bent over milkshakes or sodas or the sundaes for which her family’s shop was

deservedly famous. Every window-side table overlooking Main Street was occupied. There were adults and seniors who reclined against the back of leather booths, appearing to be happily engrossed in conversation and people-watching. Sundae Afternoon was Mila's pride and joy because it carried on a few of what she felt were the more necessary components of living: connection, community, and simple pleasures.

Mila snapped a clean, damp towel from a metal rod beneath the service counter, all set to wipe the surface clean of condensation beads and milk splatters. She focused her attention on Trudy Sellers, a long-time waitress at the shop. Presently, Trudy's focus was fixed on the shop entry. When Mila followed the trajectory of her colleague's gaze, her motions came to a standstill.

A block of sunlight poured through the glass of the wide, double doors. Dead center and perfectly framed, Phillip Fisher stood in the light—all wide-shouldered, six-foot-plus, chestnut hair, and dark-as-night eyes of him.

"Well, I'll be." Mila murmured the words, transfixed. "So, the rumor's true. He's come back." Mila sucked a sharp breath, and the slight gasp she made wasn't lost on her friend.

Trudy shot a wizened gaze in Mila's direction. "Back in town, and handsome as ever."

Mila didn't respond verbally, but she certainly wouldn't argue the point. She raked her childhood friend with a lingering glance while Phillip scoped an empty spot to occupy. Handsome? Absolutely. But life, it seemed, had roughened some of the store-bought polish and preppy-ways she recalled from times gone by. In their stead, lived a visible realism, a depth that

intrigued her as he strode to the front counter and folded onto a stool.

Mila got a closer view of his face. She gasped. He sported a big, fresh bruise along the squared line of his jaw. What in the world...?

The front counter server took Phillip's order for a hot fudge sundae with the works.

Mila retrieved the coffee pot from Trudy's grip and gave her colleague a sweet smile. "I've got this one."

Trudy snorted. "Oh, I'm sure you do, missy."

Mila added a touch of sashay to her walk, a little oomph to her smile. "Phillip Alexander Fisher. I guess a hearty welcome back to Antioch is in order. How are you?"

"Mila."

There was smoke and silk in his tone as his gaze lifted from the laminated menu. The stroke of his gaze, the welcoming quirk of his lips, caused her pulse to trip into a pleasant thrum. Trudy wasn't kidding—he was indeed as handsome as ever, with thick waving hair that now curved just past his shirt collar. Mila filled his coffee cup then set aside the steaming, fragrant pot. "I heard you were back."

Phillip replaced the menu in its metal holder. "How on earth?"

"Oh, trust me. The town grapevine is alive and well. Since he was stuck at Dunleavy's, Ben texted Hailey Beth when you asked for a ride home from the bus station."

"Ah, yes, your scholarly and earnest baby sister, Hailey Beth. Never thought to ask HB for help, but, yeah, I suppose she could have been my maiden in shining armor."

“Basically, that’s what Ben indicated when he asked her to help, but she couldn’t break away. She’s managing the grocery store now.”

Phillip frowned. “Really? Since when? Why isn’t your dad at the helm?”

“Dad’s taken on more of an advisory role since her graduation from college last year. He’s letting her stretch her wings a bit.”

Quiet fell; discomfort arrived with vengeance as Phillip’s sundae was delivered. “So, you’ll not ask me the obvious?” He posed the query, appearing dubious.

“You mean like why you hiked it to the farm on foot, without benefit of a ride from one of your brothers? You mean like why you’re sporting a bruise on your face that’s roughly the size of a fist? Yeah. The thoughts had occurred.” Despite the somber topic, Mila kept her attitude light and judgment-free.

“I’ll ignore the questions and tell you that I’m a customer today because I made a return to town just now—courtesy of Pop’s beat-up old truck—to grab my luggage from a storage locker at the station, I’ll settle in temporarily at the farm.”

He sounded so defeated, so overwhelmed. Was his voyage home that riddled with strife? Mila softened further. “Aaron could have—”

“He was busy.” The three-word snap made her rear back. Seeming to realize his mood was focused in the wrong direction, Phillip’s shoulders bent, and he finally dug into his ice cream treat. “Sorry. Aaron’s a touchy subject for me right now.” He flexed his jaw back and forth. “Literally.”

“Do you mean to tell me he’s the one who gave you that bruise?”

“His strength has improved since our younger

days, that's for sure."

Their younger days. When the three Fishermen—as they were called—seemed tight as could be, united by an unbreakable bond. As such, she could only imagine the way Phillip's arrogant and hasty exit a few years after college had fractured a great deal of loyalty and trust within their close-knit clan. For Aaron, especially. Ever since Mila could remember, the middle Fisher had looked up to and revered his big brother.

"He missed you, Phillip. You get that, right?"

"Sure I do, as evidenced by the blooming purple and brown splotch on my face. After the blowup, Pop stormed after him—I hope to give him the thrashing he deserves—and I escaped on fast feet to let matters settle."

Escape and running. Again. Mila sighed at Phillip's pattern of behavior. "Do I need to explain to you—you of all people—that being left behind has just as much consequence as doing the walk-away?"

The look he delivered just about seared her skin. "And so, with that, I'm in the wrong yet again. Vacating and abusing everyone's expectations. I swear, it's the story of my—"

"Oh, honey, you can go sell that sad tale somewhere else. If he didn't care, if your leaving hadn't affected him, he wouldn't be so hostile, now would he? He'd be able to just let it slide and let it ride. Right?"

Following that decisive interruption, Mila stared him down in a way that succeeded in drawing his complete focus. But the stare-down backfired. She didn't just look at him, she fell into him, absorbed him in all his shades while he raked her with a questing gaze as though seeing her for the very first time. And

in many ways, perhaps that was just the case. Times had changed in their handful of years apart; too bad she couldn't cushion him from the blows of that separation...and desertion.

Fighting a tingling brush of butterfly wings in her tummy, Mila continued their battle. "You disappeared without a second look back. That hurts. It left a mark on the folks around here who've always cared about you."

He gobbled his sundae, seeming to ponder things for a bit. "Guess I never realized people held me in such great stock. The family, yes. As a unit of the Fishermen, yes, because of my dad and my mom, and my brothers. Beyond that..." On a shrug, he let the sentence dangle.

Mila hoped her eye-roll and vigorous head-shake displayed exasperation in no uncertain terms. "Don't be an idiot, Phillip. You're who and what you are because of everyone around you, because of your family and what all of you create together." Remembering her self-assigned task, Mila wiped the counter with hard, circular motions, her thoughts so storm-tossed she had to wonder. Why was she reacting this way? Was she, in some small way, one of the people who had been marked by his leaving?

Evidently so.

Phillip stilled her efforts at needless cleaning by settling his hand over hers. The gentle glide of his fingertips against the back of her hand, the dewy warmth of the cloth, seeped through her skin.

"Do you want to know why I came to your shop, Mila? It's because I knew somehow, some way, you'd understand, and you wouldn't sugarcoat the facts."

Her shoulders eased from taut to relaxed; her lips

softened to a smile. "Well, I do try." Tension gradually evaporated. "I'm touched that Sundae Afternoon was one of the places you wanted to revisit, seeing as how you've only been here a few hours."

Phillip looked up, pinned her with a body-warming gaze. "What can I say? Sometimes a guy just needs a heap of ice cream and a friendly face."

Mila leaned across the slim, chrome lined counter that separated them and gave his cheek a kiss. She wanted to welcome an old friend home—nothing more. It took her by surprise when that simple, natural brush of lips against warm, musk-scented skin galvanized her senses and lifted her heartbeat into a fast rhythm.

"Just for that, your serving is on the house."

"I can pay for dessert, Mila."

Humility, trampled pride, flickered through his eyes the instant before he lowered his head and toyed with the spoon that rested in his serving bowl. He picked at layers of vanilla, chocolate, nuts, and bananas now congealing into a mix of colors, textures, flavors.

"I have no doubt of that. Let's just call it a welcome home treat, friend to friend."

He relaxed a trace; full lips lifted into a reluctant smile. "You always were a sweetheart."

"Still am," she sassed, giving him a wink and moving away so she could regroup...and focus on a few other folks who crowded her establishment on this bustling, sun-drenched day.

All the same, her pulse continued to skitter and throb. Phillip Fisher was back. Injured physically and emotionally, for sure, but all the same, he was back.

Why in the world did that fact send a thrill down her sensory chain?

2

Phillip climbed into his dad's pickup and pulled away from the curb in front of Sundae Afternoon. During his return trip to the farm, the all-consuming memory of reuniting with Mila Thomas rode shotgun in ways both tempting and irritating. On the tempting side of the coin, she haunted him—with those great big brown eyes and that heart-shaped face framed by long, flirty curls of brunette hair that danced free from the confines of a loose ponytail. She had hardly changed since high school. Her demeanor remained unspoiled and as sweet as any treat to be found within the walls of her famed shop.

On the flip side, he was irritated by that reaction because just like that, she had slipped beneath his skin, and rollercoaster emotions toward Mila were the last thing he needed right now. Right now, he needed to earn back the good graces of his family. Right now, he needed to find a place to live—preferably in town and far from Aaron's hostility. Beyond those daunting circumstances, the Thomas and Fisher families often found themselves at loggerheads over business matters related to the Antioch farming industry. Nevertheless, her tenderness—something he craved—flooded his senses. The memory of her simple but evocative kiss, the way she had leaned in to brush his cheek with satiny lips, elicited a fresh rush of heated pleasure. The way her peaches-and-cream features softened with

affection as they'd chatted stuck to the grooves of his memory and played a sweet, unexpected song.

Dust kicked into a wavering gray and yellow plume as he turned onto the dirt drive leading to the barn of the family farm. Mila was right. He needed to face the turbulence if matters were ever to be resolved with Aaron. The jerk.

Hmm. Not a great start on reconciliation from an attitude perspective. Determined to readjust his thinking and try to understand his middle brother's hostility, Phillip braced an elbow against the open window frame, his touch on the wheel loose and easy.

Aaron walked across the wide entry of the barn, lugging a bale of hay as though God Himself had orchestrated precisely what Mila suggested Phillip find. An opportunity.

Going tense, Phillip slowed the vehicle to a stop then rested his forearms against the thin black steering wheel. He leaned forward, peering through cloudy glass into a land full of memories—into the moment of his leaving.

Sad but quietly resolute, Pop had stood at the center of the farm's great room, his attention focused hard on Phillip. "Go. I won't stop you, and I won't try to change your mind. Some things life and God need to show you on your own without the safety net of home and family. But know this. We'll always be here. No matter what comes, this is your home. None of that changes. Hear?"

He had, but despite Pop's caring words, Phillip had tasted nothing in the air but antiquity, an endless life-cycle that would mean precisely...nothing. What was the point of living and dying for the land? For crops? For never-ending battles with weather cycles,

and merchants, and on-again, off-again workers paired with equipment that worked, or didn't work, at its own seeming whim? What about money—or more precisely, the lack thereof, which eradicated any sense of security, and at times, even dignity? No. No way could he do it. There had to be much more to life than struggle and strife.

All the same, splinters lodged in his heart. This wasn't his father's fault. "I know you mean every word, Pop, and truly, I don't mean any disrespect."

"Not directly, no. I realize that."

That piece of gentle acceptance arrived in the form of a laced arrow that pierced the bulls-eye of Phillip's spirit. He'd clenched his jaw to keep from crumbling and vacating a plan that was foolproof, and most of all, *right*. Pop would never understand the drive, the need for fulfillment that nipped at Phillip's heels. He needed to break the chains, and that required a touch of temper. "Could you please have some faith that I can actually make something of myself outside of a farm I never understood? A farm-based existence that would only lead to a life I've never wanted? It's not about money, or acclaim, it's about security. Fulfillment. It's about finding the life *I* want, not a life that's dictated to me."

"I get the conflict, son. I've battled it myself when times go bad, but that's when you bear down. That's when you pray, press on, and find the pathway God intends. Maybe this is it for you. Like I said, nothing's stopping you, but we'll always be here."

Steel-eyed determination and a gruff tone accompanied the statements. As ever, Pop was unflappable. Steady as a compass arrow pointing due north.