

Haunted Hearts

Chapter One

Peering out from its perch atop an art store's display shelf, an oversized lighted jack-o-lantern with a crooked toothy grin and fixed triangular eyes stared at Devin. The bright mockery was clear and its electric glare burned through her.

"Stuart Evans," Devin almost spat out loud. If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't even be on this stupid Halloween Ghost Tour tonight.

With an angry scowl, the small portly guide cautioned her to silence. Devin was in no mood to be chastised by anyone, least of all, this short, nearly bald man standing before her. He looked like he had been stuffed into his ridiculous colonial costume with its beige shirt, brown vest and jacket with off white lace jabot. His white socks barely reached his knickers and heavy silver buckles adorned his polished shoes. The tricorne hat was trimmed in gold and was too small for his fat head. If he thought it covered his receding hairline, it didn't.

Still, the others, the tourists, the ghost hunters, the college students with nothing else to do this night, had shelled out ten dollars on what was reputedly St. Augustine's most popular Ghost Tour. Known for its nightly Ghost Tours, Halloween always brought out the Tourists in droves.

Enchanting the first thirty or so times she had taken the tour, the stories now were redundant. It was hard to concentrate. A light breeze, traveling in from the mainland, carried the thick, heady fragrance of orange blossoms. Moonlight danced in and out of the shadows, casting a silvery glow on the long shafts of Spanish moss that dangled from the tops of majestic oaks.

Less than an hour before the moon's zenith, darkness shrouded the St. George's cobblestone pedestrian walk. Historic museums sat next to quaint cafés and souvenir shops. Nearly all sold ghost tour tickets offering visitors from around the world a peak into St. Augustine's haunted history.

Candles flickered brightly inside jack-o-lanterns and a gaggle of undersized witches, ghosts and hobgoblins rushed past her. Of all nights to be on this stupid tour, she thought watching the children run down the dark cobblestone street; she should be home passing out the four pounds of Halloween candy she had purchased for this occasion. Gritting her teeth, she tried to focus on the tour.

The group came to a halt at the end of St. George Street. Standing across the Old City Gates all attention had been diverted toward the Huguenot Cemetery which, in the early days of St. Augustine had been a swamp. Centuries ago, the land had been drained and today it resided respectfully at the intersection of Orange and San Marco Avenue.

To the east, the magnificent coquina walls of the Castillo de San Marcos cast long shadows across the manicured lawn surrounding the old fort. They eclipsed a view of the city's natural harbor and the deep waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

An unearthly silence fell upon the group.

In slow motion, the guide turned to a stately watch tower built by the Spanish settlers in Florida's oldest city. His voice, resonated with authority, each word carefully articulated as he began his tale. "Carlos Castillo died in 1702; struck down in his prime by a British cannon. Visitors beware for Castillo has been known to approach tourists and ask for help. You see, to the unsuspecting, he appears to be just one of the many reenactors at Castillo de San Marcos. He will tell visitors in either Castilian or proper English, because he spoke both; that he has lost his fiancé's engagement ring. The unsuspecting tourists will help him look for his lost ring; however, after searching with him for a bit, the tourists will suddenly find him gone. They will report this to the park rangers; only to discover they had an encounter with one of St. Augustine's most famous ghosts."

Several ladies standing next to Devin squealed, shuddering in either real or imagined terror. The largest matron looked for a moment as if she were going to swoon but she, rallied, fanning her face with a hotel brochure.

A set of eight-year old twins dressed as Disney Princess costumes cried and clutched handfuls of their mother's flowing skirt. Two college students snickered. The rest, including Devin, simply waited for Castillo to appear from the darkness.

The plump tour guide beamed. Ignoring the college students, he focused his attention on the frightened tourists.

Devin frowned. This was all so unnecessary. The group was going to be in frenzy by the end of the tour. She glanced at her watch and brushed away a loose tendril of hair from her cheek. Forty-five minutes to go.

Next to Devin, a woman with a smart, short bobbed haircut clucked at the guide's remarks. Her too red lips curled into cynical smile and her green eyes sparkled.

She leaned closer to Devin. In a patronizing tone, she said, "Castillo? Lord love a duck. He stood there like a fool and watched the canon ball come right at him; blew his head right off."

The woman took a drag from her long, gold, filter-tipped cigarette holder and blew three eloquent circles into the dark street. Her beautiful green eyes gleamed like glassy emeralds. She coolly regarded Devin, and then with a twirl of her long strand of pearls, she shrugged and sashayed away.

Watching her leave, Devin noted the fringed skirt which, at least to her ambiguous fashion sense, seemed out of style. She wasn't sure. Standing there in her long handmade cotton dress, she was never quite sure what was "in or out" in fashion, nor did she truly care. She had no reason to.

Devin couldn't help but admire the woman's sassy jaunt as she crossed the cobblestone streets in four-inch heels. She knew anything but a good all terrain; suitable shoe on these age-old streets would have sent her flying.

Still, Devin was distracted by the woman's attire. The dress just seemed odd. Loose fitting, it hugged the woman's small hips and the silk hem line barely overlapped her rolled white stockings.

Perhaps that was the style, Devin mused, where? Romania? Who knew? Tourists from all over the world flocked to St. Augustine, Florida, and fashion sensibilities often took a holiday as well.

Devin shrugged. She was out of the mainstream of fashion, spending her time working at Pandora's Box, St. Augustine's most popular psychic book stores.

As if knowing Devin was watching the woman in cut a quick glance over her shoulder and smiled. Devin felt like she had been invited to play a game but didn't know the rules. She smiled back and focused her attention on the tour guide and her three charges.

With long unbound and often times unruly hair, she felt the last person to criticize anyone's style or lack of it. Regarding herself as moderately attractive, she considered her deep blue eyes her best features.

One of her clients suggested a dab of makeup to heighten her exotic cheekbones to bring out the fire of her sapphire eyes. Had it been anyone but the local Mary Kay representative, she might have given the advice some serious consideration. After all, who was there to notice here at Pandora's Box? Hunky men were a rarity, well except for Stuart Evans. He didn't count. He was, she thought with a private smile, defiantly hunky.

The three from New England were captivated by Castillo's life or more significantly his death. Their eyes glittered in rapture as the portly tour guide droned on with more tales of adultery, murder, gore and ghostly resurrection.

Devin frowned. How and why did she have to baby sit this silly group of would-be psychics? Then she remembered, her boss had volunteered her services before she could say no.

Looking after the women wasn't the real reason Devin was incensed. She was angry at herself. At 26, she should be going out, having fun but she preferred to dream about a man she could never have and continue her studies in paranormal psychology.

Despite her grandmother's prophesy that she had the "gift", as it was known in the family, she had yet to pick up on her first ghost, spirit, specter, phantom, poltergeist or cold spot. She tried to tell herself it didn't matter. It did.

"Be patient," her grandmother had promised her over and over again. "It will happen to you when you least expect it. But Devin, it will happen."

"Our next stop is Somerset House," the guide announced and immediately the ensemble began working their way down the dark boulevard.

Sudden anger burned Devin's cheeks. If, not, for the new owner of Somerset House, she'd be home with her black cat, Samantha, sipping herb tea and finishing Esther Mitchell's latest romance novel.

The woman with short black hair returned to Devin's side and regarded her casually. "You don't like him, do you?"

"Who?" Devin glanced at the tour guide. She didn't know him well enough not to like him.

Her companion laughed. "The new owner of Somerset House."

Devin's mouth went dry. A thread of agitation surged through her and left her senses in spinning. She must be psychic, a real one. Either that or she'd noticed Devin's knee jerk reaction at the mention of Somerset House.

"You meant Stuart Evans." Devin said in a strained whisper, "The new owner of Somerset House. No. I don't like him at all."

"He doesn't believe in ghosts," the woman said with a knowing expression. She took another drag from her cigarette and pursed her lips into an exquisite "O." The cigarette smoke formed three perfect rings that floated in the night air before drifting into soft wisps and vanishing down the dark street.

"Stuart Evans," Devin agreed, "is a jerk."

Her friend smiled. Their bond was instant. "I'm Devin, Devin O'Shea."

The woman smiled and blew took another long drag of her cigarette. "Nice to meet you, toots. I'm Roxy McClannahan."

Watching her, Devin noticed there was no smell to the cigarette; probably a Virginia Slims. She took note a second time of the long black cigarette holder in Roxy's slender white fingertips. It must be one of those stop-smoking filters that she had seen on TV. She hoped it worked. Smoking could leave you dead.

Instead, she offered her new friend a generous smile. "Nice to meet you, do you live around here?" Even though she had tried to keep her voice low, some members of the group turned to look at her oddly.

"That's a long story," Roxy's reply came on the edge of her laughter. "You live close by, don't you?"

Devin smiled. "Yes, I'm a local. I work at Pandora's Box. We have a lot of books there on ghosts."

"I know," Roxie said with an infectious grin. "I've seen you there."

"Really?" Devin asked a bit surprised; she thought she knew all the customers who frequented Pandora's Box, apparently not. Realizing the Ghost Tour had moved down the street toward Cordova Street, Devin said, "We better hurry."

Roxy raised a fine arched eyebrow. "Still, that Evans fellow is rather handsome, if you like that sort?"

"I hadn't noticed," Devin lied. She thought of his chiseled profile, the heavenly dark brown eyes. His biceps that strained against the fabric of any shirt he wore. His chest was broad, massive and tapered down to a trim set of six pack abs and long, powerful legs that carried his body with an easy grace.

At six-one, he had movie star good looks and should be carrying a license for those lips. Devin was glad darkness hid a blush that was burning her face.

They stopped beside a magnificent Victorian Mansion which rested on a half acre plot.

"Somerset House is one of St. Augustine's most notorious haunts. Built by Cyrus Somerset, in the late 1880s, this grand hotel boasts a total of six ghosts," the guide bellowed out to the small group.

"Lord love a duck! Not six, four. Four." With a frown, Roxy turned to Devin. "Why can't they get their stories straight?"

Devin shrugged. She had always heard there were six ghosts but Roxy spoke with such authority, she sounded as though she knew better.

“So I take it you had the dubious pleasure to meet the new owner?” Roxy kept very smooth, elegant stride next to Devin.

“He’s had several run-ins with the owner of our store, Pandora.” Devin paused trying to figure out a way to explain Pandora. She opted for the truth hoping her new friend would be discreet. “I love my boss but she’s well, let’s say different, in a metaphysical kind of way.”

A flash of compassion crossed Roxy’s classic features. “I know the type.”

Her response pleased Devin. She smiled at Roxy noting her creamy white complexion, the soft snowy shape of her hands and elegant neck. This girl should get out in the sun more. She didn’t look healthy.

“Pandora is not her real name.” A treasonous rush of emotion cautioned her. She ignored the warning. “Her name is not really Pandora. It’s Mary Louise Palmer, but don’t tell her I told you. She prefers Pandora.” She leaned closer to Roxy. “Pandora is having an issue with ‘him’ right now.”

Roxy grunted. “Lord love a duck! Who isn’t?”

“Stuart Evans brought Somerset House last fall, and has been renovating it since,” Devin said in a cool voice. She hoped this would be news to Roxy, it wasn’t.

“I know,” Roxy cooed, “the ghosts don’t like it at all.”

Devin hurried on. “He was in the store earlier today and got into a huge row with Mary Louise, ah, I mean Pandora. He owns the Somerset Inn and Pandora converted the old carriage house into her store. He wants her to leave and has even offered Pandora a ridiculous price to break her lease.”

“He’s like that,” Roxy interjected, “wants everything his way.”

Devin couldn’t resist sharing more. “Pandora was furious. She ordered him out of the shop. You know, she thinks that Pandora Box is haunted, and of course, everyone knows Somerset House is one of most haunted hotels in America.”

Roxy nodded and took another drag of her cigarette. “No argument there.”

“I shouldn’t be saying this,” Devin took a deep breath. Madness possessed her. “But after he left the store, Pandora went on a rant telling everyone he was evil incarnate. She even got out her smudge pot. It’s supposed to cleanse the air of evil spirits. Then as usual, she got a migraine after the cleansing. She always does. She says it’s a sign that her incantations have worked. I think she gets her migraines because it stinks to high heaven. Anyway, she promised those tourists over there that she would be on the ghost tour tonight. She’s laid up in bed now, so she talked me into accompanying her friends from New England. Lucky me.”

Devin and Roxy hurried to catch up with the ghost tour. In a tremulous whisper, Roxy leaned close to Devin and said, “Well, I am glad you came, sweetie.”

Joining the ghost tour, the portly guide sent Devin a silent reprimand indicating that she should stay with the group.

Devin thought of Stuart Evans again. Rushing into the shop today, he barely acknowledged her presence. He didn’t know she lived for the sight of him, nor, she vowed, would he. She moved closer to Roxy.

“There was a big article about him in the newspaper today. It seems everyone at the Chamber of

Commerce just thinks he's the boy wonder of the hotel hospitality industry. They expect him to revitalize the Somerset House to its days of glory."

Devin was sure he could be pleasant enough in dealing with people as long as they weren't leaching from him or psychic.

Roxy nudged her and pointed to the Tour Guide. In a low and silvery voice, she said, "This is my favorite part."

"Somerset House is home to six spirits," the Guide began with a backward wave toward the stately mansion.

"Four!" Roxy corrected him.

"The hauntings include cold spots and the visions of one of St. Augustine's most famous and beloved ghosts. Apple Brown Betty."

"Oh great," Roxy said her voice rich in disapproval, "she gets all the attention, as usual."

"Apple Brown Betty is a 'revenant', a ghost of time; she's dressed in turn of the century clothing. Revenants come in several colors; The White Ladies are true revenants because they are connected to a specific house or location. Blue Ladies tend to be beneficent and the Green Ladies are spirits of healing energy. The Pink Ladies or Red Ladies are often times associated with bloody acts of violence. Brown Ladies such as our Apple Brown Betty have strong historical ties to the location and more likely than not seeking justice or looking for some kind of recognition."

He took a long breath and continued. "Apple Brown Betty is so named because people claim to smell baked apples when she is near. No one truly knows who this spirit is though many believe she is the ghost of Elizabeth Somerset, the daughter-in-law of the Inn's builder. As we move pass the Somerset Inn be sure to see if you can smell the scent of baked apples, after all, Apple Brown Betty may be near."

Everyone in the group immediately began sniffing in unison. The wind carried with it only the tropical scent of flowers with a sweet misty smell of the sea. Apple Brown Betty was elsewhere tonight, Devin thought watching the group continue to smell the air for the scent of apples.

The tour guide was pleased as he often was with his own voice and knowledge about the ghosts in St. Augustine. He shifted slightly. "There are two boys who play impish pranks on guests."

Roxy moaned. "There's only one! Lord, love a duck; he seems like ten at times! Good night in the morning!"

"And there is one evil spirit who has been known to terrorize anyone brave enough to stay in this haunted hotel."

A sliver of cold passed over Devin. She shuddered as the draft sucked warm air from around her. Looking at Roxy, she noticed Roxy's face was ashen. Roxy must have felt it too.

Devin's stomach twisted into a knot. Her heart was jumping in her chest. Her breath was shallow. Her pulse began to beat erratically. She had lived for this moment all her life.

Looking toward Somerset House, Devin saw the lights of the parlor. Not ready to reopen for business, only Stuart Evans would be in residence. Except, of course, for the ghosts! Her senses were reeling and the hair on the back of her neck prickled as icy fingers ran up and down her spine. The air around her grew chillier and she knew she was experiencing a cold spot. Ghosts were near. Real ghosts.

Devin took quick note of the visitors on the Ghost Tour. Each face was riveted on the Tour Guide. No one had the slighted look of alarm. Only she felt the desolate abyss of frigid air. The gates of the supernatural were opening up to her. She breathed in the terror, savoring each icy bite. She wanted to run but knew her legs would not carry her from this place. Not tonight.

Her breath was jagged. She began to shake.

“The other known ghost,” the tour guide continued, “is the spirit of a 1920’s flapper girl who was murdered almost eighty years ago today.”

Devin’s heart was hammered in her chest. Roxy leaned closer to Devin. A chill seemed to grow between them.

The moon was now cleansing the ground in soft white light. The wind carried with it the sweet scent of exotic flowers and rustled a scattering of dried leaves at her feet.

Devin slowly turned to Roxy. It was too late to run. She knew.

“Yes,” Roxy murmured in a voice as cool as ice water, “the girl who was murdered 78 years ago. That would be me.”