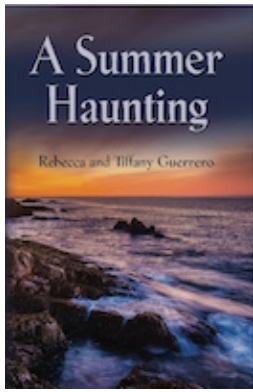


A Summer Haunting

Rebecca and Tiffany Guerrero





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First Edition

Prologue

1889

The sun's rays are too bright, Marie thought. Even with her eyes closed, she could see their brightness. "Don't be ridiculous," Marie laughed. "How can you see the light with your eyes closed?" She smiled because she could feel herself slipping into a philosophical state, and that was out of character for her. Who cared about philosophy when there was real life to be lived? *What time is it?* Marie questioned as she stretched her legs towards the foot of the bed, reaching so that her toes almost touched the baseboard. It was time to get up; she swung her legs to the side and sat up quickly. As she crossed the room to push aside the thick drapes from the window in her second-story bedroom, she noticed the bright sunshine as it beat against the window, warming the trees and bushes down below on the rear patio.

Although Marie felt the startling cool floor beneath her feet, she knew it was going to be a grand day and she was more than ready for it. Today, she would go to the brand new healing spa for a massage and personal bath. It had just been built over the past month and was one of the first to be opened in the United States. Exciting changes were coming quickly and this was just one of them. She began to tiptoe through the room, lifting her feet and kicking her legs in some primordial dance. She was going to be one of the first people to visit the spa: none of her friends had gone yet. "The first, the first," Maria sang as she continued her dance. Not wanting to wear herself out, she let herself fall backwards onto the bed. After her visit

to the spa, she had plans to meet her best friend, Ella, at the hair salon.

Oh yes, she was ready for the day. Then tonight would be the grand finale. Tonight would end all her days and nights of being alone. She would finally tell Frank that she was pregnant and it was time for them to be together. It was his choice – leave his wife or their relationship was over. And she knew deep in her heart he would choose her.

“We need to leave, Marie,” Ella warned as she pounded on the thick mahogany door of Marie’s room.

“You’re here early. How did you get in?” Marie asked, yanking the door open.

“Your father.”

“He’s here?” Marie asked, walking back to her bed. “Strange. Why would he be home?”

Ella rushed to Marie’s side. “I don’t know, but we have to hurry. We’re already late.”

Marie pushed past her friend and walked to the top of the stairs. She stared down the winding wooden staircase; complete silence and darkness welcomed her. Shrugging, she headed back for her room, stopping for a moment to notice her best friend’s beauty. Ella had her dark hair pulled back from her face in a tight bun while dark tendrils framed her face. Marie noticed the sudden frown that crossed her friend’s face.

“They are not going to fix our hair if we don’t go now,” Ella warned.

“They will. Don’t be ridiculous,” Marie said, walking by Ella before letting herself fall backwards onto her bed again. She suddenly didn’t feel like moving. A feeling of dread had

overpowered her. It felt as if everything she had planned for the night wasn't going to work out. She sat up suddenly. *No*, she thought, *I won't let anything stop me*. Marie again looked at her friend and felt a sudden tinge of jealousy: Ella was so beautiful with her dark, exotic looks and slim figure. She would get everything she wanted and not have to worry about using manipulation and secrecy to get ahead. Marie also admired the way Ella dressed: she always wore light dresses in the summer and earthy-colored suits in the winter. Today she was wearing a beige dress that flowed to the floor with miniature blue and pink flowers dotting the material. Marie knew her own mousy-hued hair and green eyes paled in comparison to Ella's beauty. She shook her head to clear it. *No more negative thoughts; I won't allow them*, Marie thought. *They'll just mess up my day. Besides, it's time to go*. She linked one arm through Ella's as they exited the room.

"You're beautiful," Ella said, as she and Marie left the beauty salon. She linked her arm through Marie's and continued. "Waiting for you was absolutely worth it." Ella laughed as if she had no cares in the world. Turning to Marie, she continued, "Most of the day's gone, but I would rather spend it with you than with anyone else."

"Sure, let me tell Edward and see what he has to say about that." Edward had been Ella's beau for the past year and a half, but they hadn't yet broached the topic of marriage.

Ella giggled and responded, "Yes, well, tell him and I will deny saying it."

As they continued their walk on the wooden walkway before the stores lining the street, Marie said, “Well, you look amazing. You’re definitely ready for tonight’s ball.”

“True, but I need to go home for a short while. There are a couple of things I have to check on and then I’ll be at the spa. I’ll meet you there in a couple of hours.”

Marie stopped, nodded, and then said, “We’re going to be grand tonight.” She felt slightly disappointed that Ella wasn’t going to the spa with her now because of the anticipation surrounding the facility. But she had to act like the adult; after all, she now had someone else to worry about besides just herself and Frank – the baby. Besides, Marie rarely saw Frank except for the brief moments they stole away from the town and everyone’s prying eyes.

As Ella turned from her, she felt as if a shadow had crossed the sun. She watched as Ella walked about a half block away from where she stood. As Ella climbed aboard the horse-drawn streetcar, she turned to smile at Marie and waved briefly.

Marie was thankful that there had only been one person at the front door of the spa. He was a young man, probably not even out of his teens, but he was attractive with black hair, dark eyes, and muscles that were obvious beneath the tight white shirt he was wearing. Marie couldn’t help taking several quick glances at him. She knew she was wrong, but she hadn’t been able to help herself. Despite her attention being diverted to this young man, she was glad she had agreed to meet Frank here. The place was almost empty so it would be easy to find a

corner to be alone. And besides, she didn't need any busy bodies meddling in her affairs. Nevertheless, she felt silly: she had just gotten her hair fixed for the ball. Whatever had she been thinking? What would she do if her hairdo started to fall from the heat in the sauna? No, she hadn't been thinking. Getting her hair fixed hadn't even entered her mind when she agreed to meet him. Besides, she had thought Ella would be with her and both of them would be ready for tonight. But then what would Ella have thought about Marie being alone here with Frank? No, she was not in her right mind.

Now she stood naked with only a towel draped around her torso. As she opened the wooden door to the sauna, she was glad no one else was present, but she felt spooked as if someone were watching her from some far corner. There was no one there. The empty dressing room and sauna created an eeriness that seemed to seep to the soul. As she sat on the wooden bench and pressed her back against the wood slabs that made up the walls, she wondered, *Why is there no one else in here and where is Frank?* The heat, though, made her drowsy. She quickly allowed the thoughts to fade as she closed her eyes. "Nice and hot," she mumbled, drifting to sleep.

Something had awakened her. Marie bolted up and looked around; she felt disjointed and instinctively knew she had to get out of the room. It was hot, too hot. Even though she felt the sweat on her skin, she also felt the prickling as if her skin were slowly being pulled from her body. She reached for the doorknob and pushed against the door. The heat stung her fingers; she wanted to place them in her mouth to cool them, but she knew she couldn't stop. She had to get out of here. Her

eyes were burning as if all the moisture had been pulled from them. Even though she banged on the door, nothing happened; the door was jammed. She again tried to push it, using all her strength to force it open. It wouldn't budge, and there was no other way out. Frantically looking out the door's small window, she saw nothing. She began to pound on the door, screaming, "Help! Let me out of here! Let me out!" She began to panic; there was nothing more to be done. She had to protect her baby; hugging herself across her torso, she knew she had made a mistake coming here alone. And there was no one to help her. She felt the sharp stabs in her skin as the heat continued to build, and the room began to spin as if Marie had stood too quickly. She again began to pound on the door, determined to get out, but before she could pound on the door again, unconsciousness enveloped her.

1

Present Day

California blue, not a cloud in sight, Clarisse thought as she stared at the sky. She felt good, better than she had in months. “Nothing will stand in my way now,” she said as she crossed Orange Avenue. She smiled at a passing car and then felt silly because she hadn’t paid attention to the driver. The car had been a magnificent specimen before her and then was gone like a fleeting thought. Even though she wasn’t a car aficionado, she did pride herself on knowing all current models. That one had been a Porsche Boxster. *Nice*, she thought. She felt light as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she felt invincible.

Clarisse was certain her life was going to change and she was determined never to experience the ordeal she had gone through during the past two years. She let out a short laugh that was almost a grunt and glanced around to see if anyone had heard. Even though she had known only anger and resentment in the past, she felt pure relief today. The anger and resentment were gone. After their two-year separation, she was ready to see her husband. He had surprised her, though, with not only the call that had come out of nowhere but with planning the action that was surely to happen this weekend.

Maybe he’s changed, she thought as she stood before the massive white hotel, and then mentally added, *If he has, let’s hope for the better.*

As she was looking around, she realized this was a truly wondrous place to reunite. She immediately noticed the lobby

through the ornate windows as she stood on the veranda. The burgundy exterior carpeting was in direct contrast to the stark whiteness of the hotel. From her stance she could see that the lobby was full of historical detail. As she studied the room she felt as if one of the literary stories she taught in her classes had come to life before her eyes. Had George remembered all the times she had read excerpts of the Victorian writers to him? The hotel reminded Clarisse of Emily Dickenson and Charles Dickens – everything had been elaborately handcrafted: Layer upon layer of white scrolls in the woodwork surrounded the endless windows and the woodwork surrounding the many steps leading up to the entrance of the hotel. He must have instinctively known how special this setting would be to her. She smiled as she touched the gold doorknob and gently pushed against it. There was something familiar about this place. Even though she had never been here, a feeling of belonging settled within her. It was probably just the works she had studied, flooding her memory; after all, she was a Literature professor, and had spent over twenty years teaching students analyzation and writing.

As she opened the door, she quickly took in her surroundings. There were only a few people milling about. A young woman, in her mid-twenties, was standing behind the registration desk. She hadn't noticed Clarisse, but Clarisse didn't mind. She wanted a few moments to be by herself so that she could explore this marvelous place that seemed so full of mystery.

The burgundy carpeting cast a past-era ambiance over the lobby and the long, winding staircase gave a feeling of luxury.

Clarisse felt that she was in the presence of greatness. How many actors and actresses or politicians, for that matter, had visited this same hotel? How many secrets did its walls contain? She silently praised George for choosing such an exquisite setting for their reunion. She felt good about reuniting with him and judging from what was before her, he must have had the same feelings.

Clarisse suddenly felt as if she were being watched. She glanced around, but saw no one looking at her, not even the staff who worked in the hotel. Men and women were talking to the people they had come to the hotel with or they were bustling through the lobby. She instinctively knew, though, that she was being watched, studied almost, in the same way students stared at her on the first day of the class. With one hand, she tried to shoo the perception aside, but it, like a persistent child, refused to leave. Clarisse felt a familiar dread. Since her grandmother's death, ten years before, there were times when she saw shadows of people. Normally she saw them out of the corners of her eyes. The shadows would stand in doorways, or sit on furniture, but always, when she turned to look, there was no one there. Because this unnerved her, she asked her mother if she, too, had experienced the same thing. At first, she had been afraid her mother would think she had lost her mind, but her mother explained to Clarisse that several young women in the family line had experienced something similar. Her mother had told her, "No one knows for sure who or what they are. The only certainty is someone close to the person who sees the shadow is going to die." No males in the family had experienced this. There was no logical explanation.

It was a mystery. Over the years, when Clarisse saw these shadows, she had often closed her eyes or turned away. She had believed that if she acted like she hadn't seen them, nothing bad would happen. It hadn't worked.

"May I help you?" The woman from the other side of the registration desk had finally noticed her. Not that Clarisse really cared; she could have just stood there in the middle of the lobby and allowed all its beauty to take hold of her -- consume her. She felt as if she had been transported into a different time.

Clarisse shook her head and quickly stepped to the desk. "Yes. I'm Mrs. Salas. I believe my husband has already made a reservation."

The woman opened a ledger and, using one index finger, scanned the names and room numbers. "Well, I'm sorry, but. . ."

"No, there must be some mistake," Clarisse said, leaning forward so that she, too, could see the names.

"Well, let me see." The woman flipped one page and then another. She looked up at Clarisse by casting her glance upwards, but her face still pointed toward the ledger.

"I'm sure it has to be there. I've driven all the way from Los Angeles. My husband wouldn't do that to me. Don't you have a computer? Look it up there." Clarisse looked from one side of the desk to the other. *This is ridiculous; don't all major companies have a computer – at least one?* Clarisse thought; she knew she was quickly losing it as she heard the tone within her voice: she was whining. She had never tolerated that one

thing – not from her daughter, not from her students, and now she would not tolerate it from herself. “I’m sorry.”

Her husband wouldn’t make her come here and then abandon her, would he? Surely, he hadn’t changed that much and there wasn’t that much animosity left from the past, right? *I mean, we fought a lot, but all this time; he had to have gotten over it.* Clarisse quickly glanced behind her and then scanned the still-active lobby. People were passing through it like they were on a mission. None of them, though, were carrying luggage.

“No, wait a minute.” The woman stared at Clarisse with disbelief mixed with something else; what was it? Fear? Clarisse slightly shook her head to clear it. What was there to be afraid of? She looked down at her hands, and then again at the lobby behind her.

“Here you are,” the woman said.

Clarisse released a loud sigh and ran her fingers over the sweat that had begun to form on her forehead. “Thank you.”

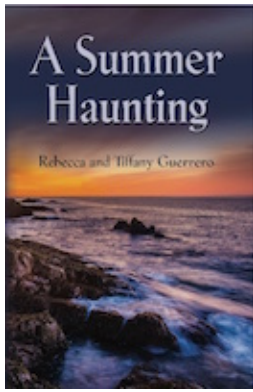
“Well . . . um.” The young woman was obviously searching for the right words. “Is something wrong?” Clarisse asked.

“No. . . not really,” the woman quickly looked around the lobby, “it’s just . . . well. . . I hope you like the room. It is the accommodation that has captured the most attention among our tourists.”

Clarisse still didn’t understand what the woman was trying to tell her. Something was definitely wrong. Clarisse’s eyebrows furrowed as she stared at the woman to see if she might reveal what she was trying to hide, but her facial expression didn’t change.

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“Let me get Miguel to help you with your bags,” the woman said, staring at something behind Clarisse.



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