

HEARTS HAVEN

HAUNTED HEARTS

TANYA STOWE

CAN SUZY GET OUT  
OF THE WAY OF HER OWN FEET  
AND LET THE ANGELS DO THEIR WORK?

# Haunted Hearts

Tanya Stowe

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## **Haunted Hearts**

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## Dedication

For David, Corey, and Dusty because they love the  
season.



## Praise

### Praise for *Tender Touch*

I loved this book and can say in all honesty that it is one of the best I've read in the past year...and possibly longer. ~ Delia Latham, author of *Gypsy's Game*

### Praise for *White Christmas*

Ms. Tanya Stowe has, once again, written a great book that grabbed my attention and refused to let go! ~  
The Romance Studio







# 1

*One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three.*

Suzy Bennett stopped counting her steps for a moment and glanced up at the Angelina Forest on each side of the trail. Signs of fall exploded from the dark green of the forest in bursts of yellow, burnt orange, and gold. The crisp air, scented with the musk of falling leaves, was perfect for a brisk walk. Suzy needed a fast pace to work off the tension of the day.

The quarterly financials were due and landing on her desk for approval with depressing speed. No time for a break today, she'd barely had time to breathe. Accounts and numbers still danced through her head...along with the changing count of her steps.

*One thousand ten. One thousand eleven.*

This trail, skirting the forest near Suzy's Heart's Haven bungalow, was a lifesaver. She walked this path almost every day, to enjoy Angel Falls' wonderful, temperate weather, to watch the forest change, and to burn off steam...even on days like today when she'd left work late. The sunny blue sky was already sliding into lavender and shadows hung at the edges of the trees. What would she do when winter came and she couldn't get out and clear some of the numbers from her head? These walks kept her going. Well, the walks and the hope that she might see her Rochester.

*He was Suzy's deep, dark secret.*

If her sisters ever found out that she walked miles every day just for a glimpse of a handsome, dark stranger, she'd never hear the end of it. They'd laugh themselves silly over the notion that Little Miss Suzy had romantic ideas about anyone.

All three of her sisters had inherited their mother's dark-haired beauty while Suzy ended up with their dad's mousy brown hair, fussy ways, and head for numbers. Growing up, they'd had a storybook about a little brown mouse that constantly cleaned her house and fretted. *Little Miss Suzy*.

In spite of her best efforts, Suzy could not rid herself of the nickname her sisters still used to irritate her. Never mind that she had starry-eyed yearnings and read every classic romance ever written over and over again. No one believed she had wild romance in her heart...not Little Miss Suzy. The fussy, brown mouse image actually began to fit when she was promoted to head accountant at her firm, and her life settled into a never-ending pattern of work, home, and more work.

Then one day she saw *him*, walking across the clearing. Rounding a bend where this portion of the trail was elevated over a ravine, Suzy could see all around her. In the distance, *he* had left the edge of the forest to cross the small open meadow, moving toward the trees on the other side. His jean-clad legs cut the distance with such purpose as his brown, wavy hair blew away from his face. He swayed slightly as he walked, confident, sure. With his short-sleeved, white T-shirt tucked in and clinging to his muscular shape, his arms swung naturally. He worked out. Definitely.

From a distance, Suzy noted balanced, appealing features. So many attractive qualities, but the thing that

most captured her attention was his purposeful stride. He was so determined, so certain, as he cut across the open meadow, like a hero from a romance. She could easily envision a long dark coat, flapping at his legs as he moved toward his lady love.

From there, Suzy's long-suppressed imagination had taken flight.

He became Heathcliff, hurrying across the moor. She was Cathy, who gingerly picked her way down the incline of the trail...it seemed her clumsiness wouldn't leave her even in her daydreams...and then ran across to leap into his arms. But frankly, she couldn't quite see herself making the leap either without some sort of mishap.

Better yet, he was Rochester to her mousy Jane Eyre.

Rochester. She wondered where he came from, how he made his living. How did he get that taut waist and those muscular arms? In a gym or training for a joust? Did he move with such purpose because he was meeting someone, a woman forbidden to him because of a family feud? Did he walk every day to escape the oppressive responsibilities of a multi-national corporation? Could he leap tall buildings in a single bound?

After seeing him that first time, Suzy kept her routine the same, and every day she caught a glimpse of her Rochester coming or going, crossing the clearing, fueling new stories in her head. Stories that drove the numbers away.

*One thousand fifty-one. One thousand fifty-two. One thousand fifty-three.*

Suzy sighed. Well, the stories drove most of the numbers away. She couldn't stop counting her steps,

even when she tried.

The breeze lifted her running jacket with a cold touch, piercing all the way through her light T-shirt. Autumn had well and truly arrived at Angel Falls. They'd had a late summer but now, daylight grew short, and fall was just around the corner. Suzy could feel it in the air and see it in the dark of the forest. Shadows that had clung to corners now ate up great spaces, like dark ooze creeping over the land.

Suzy shivered and zipped up her short jacket. Her imagination was getting the best of her. She should head back...but no, not before she reached the clearing. Would her Rochester be there? She'd missed seeing him the last two days and wondered if it would be the same today. Picking up her speed, Suzy turned the corner.

*One thousand sixty-three...*

The next number died on her lips. Suzy came to a grinding halt. In the center of the clearing, her Rochester stood stock-still, hands fisted at his sides, his gaze uplifted.

Suzy took two steps forward, closer to the edge of the trail. She squinted into the twilight, not believing what she saw. A dark cloud floated over him. As she watched, it shifted, crystallizing into the shape of a woman with flowing hair, stretched out...right above Suzy's Rochester.

She gasped, stepped back, and tripped over her own feet. Then she tumbled down the side of the trail and screamed all the way to the bottom.

\*\*\*\*

Scott Lunsford watched the image shift and

shimmer into the shape of Julie's face. The dark mist wavered in a perfect imitation of her long hair.

The misty image mocked him. He wanted to punch it away, but it would do no good. He had tried before. The mist would scatter and soon reshape itself into Julie's image. It disturbed him, frightened him, and made him feel powerless.

Almost as if it read his mind, the ghostly lips smiled in response, pleased at his frustration. Now Scott couldn't resist. He swung at the image, dissipating its unholy pleasure.

Suddenly, a scream carried across the clearing. Scott spun just in time to see a young woman in a blue running suit rolling down the side of the Angelina Forest Trail. When the scream stopped, Scott was already running to help her.

He reached her side just as the young woman raised off her stomach. A long twig protruded from the brown strands of her short, slightly upturned hair. She sat on her bottom, batted away the twig, and then winced, and turned up her palms to examine multiple cuts.

"Are you all right?"

She jumped. Scraped palms forgotten, she quickly looked up and all around. "Where is it?"

"Where is what?" Scott sunk to his haunches beside her, his EMT training kicking into gear as he examined her for more injuries.

"That thing, floating over your head. Where did it go?"

Scott froze. "You saw it?"

"Her," she said with a nod of her head. "Most definitely a her."

As the words penetrated, Scott felt the fear and

tension drain out of him, right through the soles of his feet into the ground. He sagged, his relief was so great.

"Do you have some kind of light machine? Is that how you made it?"

Scott gave a shake to his head and looped one arm over his upraised knee. "I don't even know what 'it' is, so I'm pretty sure I didn't make it."

He looked up into the prettiest bright green eyes he'd ever seen, fringed with dark lashes and widened in shock.

"I was afraid you were going to say something like that." Her tone dropped to a near whisper. "But...but you did see it, right?"

"Yes, I saw it."

Now it was the woman's turn to sag in relief, giving Scott the chance to study her. For the first time he noticed a red overtone burnishing those upswept strands of brown hair and a sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose. A bright pink abrasion on her right cheek needed to be cleaned. She also had a nasty cut on one knee where her running suit had snagged and torn open.

Apparently noticing the direction of his gaze, she reached for the tear in her pants but immediately winced in pain.

"Ouch!"

Scott took both her palms in his hands and turned them up, revealing a number of angry, rock-and-dirt-embedded gashes. "That was a pretty nasty tumble you took. We need to get you checked out."

Rising to his feet, he gripped her elbows and lifted her.

"Wait—we can't go. We have to look for that...that—"

“Ghost?”

She stiffened and looked up, once again rendering him a little stunned by the full power of those wide, green eyes.

“It’s not a ghost.” She gave her head a firm shake. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

Scott gave a short laugh. “I hope you’re right. Ghost or not, we need to get you home. Where do you live?”

“At Heart’s Haven.”

“That’s a good two miles back down the trail. It’s a little late to be out that far.”

She shifted and looked away. Her uninjured cheek took on a pink tone bright enough to rival the other one. Why was she embarrassed?

“Well, my place is closer,” Scott said when she didn’t offer an explanation. “Let’s go there, and then I’ll drive you home.” He gestured in the right direction.

She tried to take a step, but her knee buckled.

“I was afraid of that,” Scott said. “You came down hard on that side. Probably bruised it pretty badly.”

In one sweeping movement, he scooped her up.

“You can’t carry me all the way back.”

Getting a close look at the perky hairstyle, those wide eyes and freckles, Scott said the first thing that came to his mind. “You don’t weigh more than a pixie. We’ll make it OK.”

He walked toward the forest, and she peered back over his shoulder at the clearing. “Are you sure we shouldn’t investigate this a little bit more? Maybe just look around.”

“No need,” he said with a shake of his head. “We’ll investigate next time.”

“How do you know there’ll be a next time?”

Tanya Stowe

Scott sighed. "Because your 'not a ghost' has been haunting me every night for the last month."



## 2

Suzy couldn't believe she was actually in her Rochester's arms...and he was carrying her across the forest like a real hero.

*Be still my heart.*

She tried not to stare. She really did. But he was every inch as gorgeous as she'd imagined. His eyes were hazel, leaning toward the brown side. His chin was just as strong as it had seemed across the clearing. Only now, no dark stubble shadowed it. He'd shaved—and his hair seemed lighter. Surprise flitted through her.

"You cut your hair."

"Yeah, it was starting to look...Hey, how do you know that?"

Warmth flooded her cheeks, and the one with the scrape tingled. She almost reached for it, but that would only draw attention to her blush. She clamped her fingers shut and looked the other way. "I see you walking all the time. You're the only one out there...at the same time...every day...with me."

The minute she'd stumbled through the words, Suzy regretted them. They sounded so personal, almost intimate. She was making a fool of herself.

"Funny. I've never seen you before."

*Not so funny, Suzy thought. It's the story of my life. Little Miss Suzy, the "blend in with the landscape" brown mouse.*

“Yes, well, this is the first time I’ve seen you with your companion.” Her tone sounded almost accusatory.

Scott paused. “Please don’t tell me that’s why you fell off the side of the trail.”

The look of contrition on his face knocked all of Suzy’s embarrassment right away. “Don’t blame yourself,” she rushed to explain. “I fall a lot. I’m not known for my gracefulness.”

A wry grin tilted those very firm lips. “What are you known for?”

That flash of white teeth made her a little giddy and the word “counting” almost slipped out before Suzy caught herself. She’d keep that little piece of info to herself. He didn’t need to know she was a numbers geek as well as clumsy. TMI. Too much information.

“My name is Suzy Bennett,” she offered instead.

“Scott Lunsford.”

Rochester sounded better. More heroic. Scott sounded like an average, every day guy. But Suzy didn’t share that thought either. In fact, it might be best if she just stopped talking altogether. Now, if she could just stop her mind from rattling on and on.

In spite of the fact that she didn’t “weigh more than a pixie,” Scott was showing wear and tear from their trek across the forest. His breath came in little pants, and Suzy absolutely refused to let her imagination go with that fact. But she couldn’t seem to stop blushing.

*OK, girl. You are going absolutely ga-ga. Get control.*

Well, *that* was easier said than done, locked against his rock-hard chest the way she was. He radiated heat like a furnace. And he smelled good, too. Like the forest and...man. All Suzy wanted to do was

curl up against him and close her eyes.

"I—I think I can walk. My knee's not that bad. It was just a little tender."

"It's better we keep it immobile until we can get some ice on it. Besides we're almost there."

Scott stepped out of the forest into a clearing. Across the way stood a large, dilapidated Victorian home. Suzy had passed it many times on the road going home. Abandoned for years now, the place had lost all its window glass to local kids, who used them as targets for their rock-throwing games. Suzy had seen parked cars and lights flashing in the windows late at night, until someone got wise to the local teen hang-out and boarded up the windows and doors. She'd even heard stories about it being haunted.

Suzy caught her lower lip between her teeth to keep from saying the word out loud. She held firmly to her conviction that ghosts do not exist and absolutely refused to repeat the rumor.

"It might not look like it now, but this place was a grand old lady once." Scott stepped onto the large, wraparound porch and stopped at the entry where light wavered through leaded glass set into the upper portions of a pair of double doors. "I'm going to set you down so I can get the key, but don't put any pressure on that knee. Keep all your weight on your good leg."

Suzy obeyed his instructions as he pulled a key out of his pocket. Next thing she knew, he swept her up in his arms again and pushed the door shut with his foot. Warm air rushed over her and the smell of new paint tingled her nose.

They stood inside a foyer that ran the width of the house. In the center of the room, an antique chandelier

hung over an oak, claw foot table. The crème-colored, lotus-shaped globes lit the room with a soft, golden glow. Directly across from the door was a large oak staircase. The balustrade with rounded newel posts gleamed in the light, and Suzy breathed a soft, "Oh."

"Thanks." A slight smile lifted Scott's lips. "I just finished this room. Stripping and sanding that wood back to its natural color was a major undertaking, but I thought it would be worth it. You just proved me right."

He carried her into a room on the left and directly to a large wooden rocker in front of a fireplace. A vintage floor lamp with art deco lines stood beside the rocker, and he flipped the switch. Bright light flowed over Suzy.

"Let's have a look at that knee."

Scott knelt and pulled the edges of her torn running suit away. Already, a bruise had started to form on the point of her kneecap. After a few moments of examination, he said, "Not much swelling. That's a good sign. Any pain?"

"Just from that nasty looking cut," Suzy said.

"It's only nasty because it's dirty. Let me get something to clean it."

He stepped into the next room and flicked a light switch. Suzy caught a glimpse of stainless steel appliances, copper pots hanging from the ceiling, clean marble counters, white cabinets, and a small breakfast table for two.

A sudden, unwelcome thought chilled her blood. Was her Rochester married? Her heart thudded in her chest and suddenly, she had trouble swallowing.

Returning with medicine bottles, bandages, and a bag of ice, Scott dropped to his knees in front of her. In

one hand, he held a small wash basin. "Soak your hands in here to loosen up some of that dirt and gravel."

He pulled the edges of her pants further apart and probed at her knee with his fingers. After a medical style examination, he began to clean the scratch. When salve and a bandage had been applied, he wrapped a towel over the ice bag and placed it gently on her knee.

"That seemed like a pretty professional job." Suzy attempted to distract her thoughts from the very deft, suntanned fingers touching her knee. Such beautiful hands and long, strong fingers. Could a man's hands be beautiful?

"I'm a firefighter and an EMT." He barely even glanced in her direction. Grasping one wrist, he pulled her dripping fingers out of the wash basin. His tone and attitude made it clear no more information in that arena would be forthcoming, but Suzy had to probe. How else would she know if there was a Mrs. Lunsford?

"Well, all those first aid skills must come in handy when the family needs medical aid."

He slanted a wry look in her direction.

"Or for accident prone neighbors," she quickly added, chaffing under his gaze.

"There's no family. Just me." He popped the lid back on the antiseptic. "And accident prone neighbors are always welcome to my skills...such as they are."

Suzy wasn't sure where that comment had come from or what it meant. All she really understood was the "just me" part.

He carried the medical supplies back to the kitchen, and Suzy released a huge sigh of relief—which quickly turned into a shiver.