

THE
DEVEREAUX
LEGACY

CAROLYN HART

THE DEVEREAUX LEGACY

CAROLYN HART CLASSICS

*With a
New
Introduction
by the
Author*



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INTRODUCTION

Looking back to previous books is an odd experience for an author. I remember reading about a panel that clever British author Joyce Porter once described. When panelists were asked whether they ever reread a book once it was in print, Joyce Porter and all the panelists but one responded absolutely not.

The exception was a male author who described picking up earlier books and whiling away hours in delight. Joyce Porter commented that once you've written the first of however many drafts, rewritten to an editor's suggestions, copyread the MS, and proofed it, the idea of rereading the book at a later date for pleasure was unthinkable. Or, as I would put it a trifle more tartly, you would have to be out of your ever loving mind!

However, I will confess to a bit of fun in looking at some books that are now going to reappear almost three decades after they were initially written.

The Devereaux Legacy is one of these books. It reflects a day before cell phones and constant linkage to the world. It was, in fact, much easier for an author to thrust a heroine into danger. Now, when the heroine is cornered by the villain, she whips out her cell and dials nine-one-one.

The Devereaux Legacy also reflects a bit of my past as a writer. In the late seventies, there was very little interest in books by American women mystery authors. New York believed in two kinds of mysteries, the hard-boiled private eye books written by American men and traditional mysteries written by dead English ladies.

I was a writer living in Oklahoma (as I still do) and I had no contact

with New York. I attended writer conferences in hopes of gaining some understanding of why the kind of books that I had been writing and selling were no longer finding a publisher. During this period, I wrote seven books in seven years and during that time sold none of them.

Finally, the path seemed clear. Romance novels were Queen. You couldn't sell a mystery. You had to write romance.

I took an idea for a mystery, added what I hoped would be an appealing romance, a ghost who may presage evil, and a beautiful old South Carolina plantation. The result was *The Devereaux Legacy*, which sold to Harlequin as a gothic romance.

I hope today's readers will enjoy returning to that slower-paced world and I am grateful to Seventh Street Books for making this adventure possible.

Carolyn Hart

CHAPTER ONE

Leah looked up at the cross-topped steeple, then pushed through the iron gate in the old brick wall east of the church. The brick walkway, smoothed from years of use, led to a side door. She was nearing her goal after a long journey, both in space and in time. Her hand tightened on the Dhurrie purse her grandmother had given her for Christmas. It contained the fragment of the last letter her grandmother had ever written and the much-read magazine article that had brought Leah to this small town in South Carolina.

She climbed three shallow steps and opened the side door. A golden pool of light spilled out from an open doorway midway down the hall. A typewriter clicked rapidly.

Leah hesitated for just an instant. She was so near now. Soon, she would know the truth. The article must have been wrong. It must have been. Still, it took every ounce of will to go forward, to walk into the office.

A plump middle-aged woman with tortoise-shell glasses and a generous smile looked up and paused in her typing. "Hello. May I help you?"

"Yes, please. Can you tell me where the Devereaux graves are in the churchyard?"

"Of course." The woman turned and picked up a large stiff-backed book from the shelf behind her. She thumbed through the pages, then stopped. "The Devereaux family graves are in the oldest part of the cemetery. Here, let me show you on the map—"

Leah watched as the plump finger pointed out the path that would lead her to the graves.

“Thanks. Thanks very much.”

“If you have any trouble, you can ask one of the gardeners.”

Leah found the graves eventually. It was dim and still in the old part of the cemetery. Spanish moss hung in thick gray swaths from the live oak trees, creating a shadowy enclave of moss and lichens among the age-worn stones that carried the name of Devereaux. But it was not these stones she sought. They didn’t constrict the breath in her throat and make her heart thud erratically. The stone she sought was a thin sheet of shiny granite carved in the shape of a sailing sloop. It glimmered in the dim light that filtered through the glossy-leaved live oaks, looking like a ghost ship sailing toward a murky horizon.

Leah stared at the names incised upon it:

Mary Ellen Devereaux Shaw, Age 24, Lost at Sea

Thomas Marquis Shaw, Age 28, Lost at Sea

Leah Devereaux Shaw, Age 2, Lost at Sea

Louisa Abbott Shaw, Age 59, Lost at Sea

She reached out a hand to touch the shiny granite, so warm from the August heat. But that warmth couldn’t touch the iciness in her mind. Not many people ever stood and touched a gravestone that bore their name—for she was Leah Devereaux Shaw.

Why was her name there? What did it mean? Who had ordered this memorial in the belief that she had died at sea?

Died at sea? Part of it was true, or so she had always thought. Her mother and father had been lost at sea. That was what Grandmother had told her. Grandmother Shaw. Louisa Abbott Shaw. And why was her name listed there, too? She certainly hadn’t perished at sea. She’d died one month before, in Rockport, Texas, and been laid to rest in the graveyard of St. Luke’s Episcopal Church. This graveyard was in Mefford, South Carolina.

Although cicadas whirred in the heavy August heat, Leah still felt cold. She would have bet her life on Louisa Shaw’s honesty and integrity, but this stone memorial proved that Louisa had lied to her. Not once, but over and over again.

Leah had grown up believing that her parents had been lost in a

hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico, off the Texas coast. She'd never heard a word about South Carolina.

Not one word.

She stared at those names cut into the granite and felt incredulous—and betrayed. Why had Louisa lied? Or was this stone a lie? Why had Louisa never told her of Mefford?

Leah opened her purse and took out Louisa's last effort to communicate. It still hurt her to look at the letter, because the words were so frightening, so unlike Louisa, and because that sudden sharp splotch of ink signaled the end of a vital and loving life. Louisa had suffered a massive heart attack as she'd written the letter, and Leah had found it when clearing out the house several days after the funeral.

Dear Carrie,

You will believe this is a voice from the grave. I can't expect you ever to forgive me, but I feel that I must write. By chance—or perhaps Providence—I came across the article about The Whispering Lady. Oh, dear God, Carrie, if the ghost walks again, it means I was deceived that night. It means that evil . . .

And that was all. That, and the article that had been roughly torn from a magazine, an act so foreign to the meticulous and orderly woman.

Leah had read and reread those few sentences, then the page torn from the magazine. It described the reappearance of The Whispering Lady, one of the South's most famous ghosts, seen again after an absence of many years at Devereaux House in Mefford, South Carolina.

Even now, standing in the dim and isolated part of the cemetery, Leah remembered the shock she'd had on seeing her family name in print. Worse was to come because the story emphasized that The Whispering Lady returned only when a Devereaux was fated to die. The article recounted her appearances over the years, including the time just before the daughter of the house, Mary Ellen Devereaux Shaw, and her husband, Thomas, had been lost at sea.

But it wasn't tales of ghosts that had brought Leah to Mefford. It was the totally unexpected link to South Carolina.

Suddenly, a lizard skittered over Leah's sandal. She gave a little cry and jumped back. The lizard, surely as frightened as she, sped away, diving into a tangle of creepers and weeds. A little haze of dust and a deep smell of rot shimmered in the hot air. The lizard had disturbed an old gravesite that had lain hidden beneath subtropical growth for many years.

She didn't take it as an omen. She didn't believe in omens. Or in ghosts. Yet she felt that Louisa's heart attack had been triggered by the magazine article.

No, she didn't believe in ghosts, but she'd traveled a long distance to lay some ghosts to rest herself. How had her parents died? And why was her name on that granite memorial?

Leah shivered again, though the air was thick and heavy, hot as spongy asphalt.

Abruptly, she swung around and hurried back to the brick path that led out of the cemetery. At that moment, she wanted to leave it all behind. Deep inside, she was afraid. If Louisa had lied to her, lived a lie, there must have been a compelling reason. She'd been a good, kind person who'd always done her best for Leah. Leah knew that her grandmother had loved her; she had no doubts about that at all. So, if Louisa had lied . . .

From beneath the dappled shade of the live oak trees, Leah came out into the side street. The heat pressed against her, and she felt enervated. Perhaps she'd drive directly back to the airport at Savannah and fly home to Texas. Leave the past alone.

Her hand was on the door of the green Vega she'd rented, when she looked across the street and saw a white frame building. It was the Mefford Historical Society. Leah hesitated. Maybe she should try to find out something more about the Devereaux. The magazine article had said that the Devereaux family—her family—had been part of Mefford for many years.

It was pleasantly cool inside the building. A woman sat behind a counter to the left of the door, absorbed in a book, her vividly red hair falling softly about her face. Leah turned to the left, drawn by the pamphlets stacked on a

table. As she glanced at the piles of pink, yellow, green and white brochures, she had an inkling of the importance of the past to this little town. Some of the titles that caught her eye were Battle Sites, The Thompson House, A Guide to Historic Beaufort and Sheldon Church Ruins.

She picked up a small white booklet, *Historic Mefford Homes*, and found the listing for Devereaux Plantation. The picture of the house showed it glowing creamy white in the late-afternoon sunshine. It had a high, stuccoed foundation, and two sets of steps mounted to the first-floor veranda. Wrought-iron railings framed the steps in graceful arabesque curves. Leaded windows sparkled in the fanlights. Sleek Doric columns supported the second-story veranda. The house was a magnificent symbol of an era long past, yet fascinating in the reality it reflected of another age. Leah could imagine a carriage turning up the oyster-shell driveway, carrying an elaborately gowned woman and her escort. She could almost see their faces. . . .

Absorbed in the photograph, she began to read the history of Devereaux Plantation, skimming over facts and years. Claude Devereaux had brought his sixteen-year-old bride to Mefford in 1711, the year the settlement had begun. The house they'd lived in was one of the oldest low-country mansions and was still inhabited by the Devereaux family.

Leah had come to South Carolina to find out the truth about her parents. She'd discovered their names and her own inscribed upon a gravestone. Somehow, it had never occurred to her that she might have living relatives. She was so much an orphan, so accustomed to thinking that the only family she had in the world was Louisa, that she had never expected to find any living kin.

She looked down at the booklet and turned to the back of it to study the map. There was no Devereaux house on it, but a footnote offered the information that the house was four miles outside town, on the Mefford River.

Dazed, Leah took the booklet and another brochure containing a history of Mefford and went over to the counter. The redhead still sat there, immersed in her book. She wore a lovely lilac dress that emphasized her fair skin.

"I'd like to buy these pamphlets," Leah said and opened her purse to get some money.

The woman reached out for the booklets, revealing a heavy gold bracelet on one wrist and fingernails that were painted a dark red. "That will be seven dollars and fifty cents. Would you like . . ." As she looked up, she drew her breath in sharply and stared at Leah with widened eyes. Shock flattened her face, making her seem suddenly old. Still staring, she repeated, "That will be seven dollars and fifty cents."

Slowly, Leah found the money, then asked breathlessly, "Who are you?"

Almost fearfully, the redhead replied, "I'm Cissy Winfrey." When it became apparent that her name meant nothing to Leah, she glanced away and picked up the book she'd been reading.

Leah hesitated, but the woman ignored her. Yet she knew she hadn't imagined what she'd just seen. Her face had shocked Cissy Winfrey. Should she challenge her and demand an explanation of her odd behavior? The woman would probably shake her head and look puzzled, and Leah would be turned away. Reluctant to appear a fool, she headed for the door and opened it. On her way out, she glanced back and saw the redhead reach for the telephone.

Outside, the heat struck her with a physical force. She felt heavy and languid, as though she moved in a dream. She walked slowly back to the car and rolled the windows down farther, waiting a few moments before climbing in. She knew why she was taking so long, drawing out the time. She wanted to go to Devereaux Plantation, but she was afraid. She didn't belong there, no matter what her name was. She was an intruder, back from the grave, like a lost spirit seeking its earthly home.

Irritably, she started the Vega and lurched out into the street. At the stop sign, she looked again at the lovely old church, then glanced at the street sign. Beaufort Drive. The tour of historic houses began here. She opened her guidebook, read for a moment, then turned right, knowing she was delaying the time when she must decide whether or not to go to Devereaux Plantation.

But the drive had a thoroughly unexpected effect on Leah. She

hadn't planned on falling in love with Mefford. That wasn't part of her carefully reasoned plan. Yet the homes she passed struck her with delight. They weren't mansions, at least not to the eyes of a Texan, but were sturdy clapboard and brick buildings, surrounded by moss-hung live oaks, magnolias and weeping willows. Leah was charmed by their stately porticoes, their elegant wrought-iron fences and gates, their lush, fragrant gardens.

She drove up one street and down another, picturing other days and other lives. On Cornwall Street, she admired a small but perfectly proportioned two-story house with upper and lower verandas. A glance in the guidebook told her that this was one of the oldest houses in Mefford and belonged to the Winfrey family.

Winfrey. That was the name of the red-haired woman at the historical society. Leah's feeling of uneasiness returned.

The tour ended at the LeClerc house, which had a garden open to tourists. Leah pulled up to the curb, hesitated, then got out of the car. She was still delaying making a decision about going to Devereaux Plantation.

She pushed through a creaking gate and walked down a brick path. Crape myrtle masked an old wall. Honeysuckle spread along an iron fence. Banks of azaleas followed the contours of the gently sloping ground. The whole effect was of a natural woodland, an enchanted semitropical glade, heavy with fragrance, dim and shaded in the quiet of a summer afternoon. A wasp hovered near the honeysuckle. Leah slapped at a mosquito on her bare arm.

It was so dim in the shade of the live oak in the center of the garden that she didn't see the elderly lady coming, her soft-soled slippers slapping noiselessly against the path.

"No trespassers here," a reedy, high voice warned. "I have my pistol, and I'll shoot it."

Leah looked up, startled. "I'm sorry," she said quickly. "I thought the guide book said the garden was open to visitors."

The woman wore a faded, shapeless cocoa-colored dress. She leaned on her cane, and her wizened face split in a grin. "Everybody thinks I'm a crazy old lady. But I have a pistol." She thumped her wooden cane for

emphasis, then peered nearsightedly through the gloom. "My, you're just a girl, aren't you? Perhaps I'll take you inside and show you my mirror that belonged to Empress Josephine or the inkwell that George Washington gave to my great-great-grandfather." She drew nearer to Leah. "Perhaps I'll even show you—" Her eyes squinted at Leah, and her words broke off sharply. She poked her head forward. "You, girl, come out of that shadow."

Leah hesitated. Mrs. LeClerc swung her stick forward and tapped Leah's arm. Slowly, Leah stepped out into a patch of sunlight, standing close enough to the woman to see the question in her dark brown eyes.

Mrs. LeClerc touched Leah's arm with a claw like hand that had no more warmth or substance than a feather.

"Blood tells," she said huskily. "Bad blood and good blood. There's no getting away from it." Then, almost angrily, she asked, "What are you doing, tramping around my garden, pretending to be a stranger?"

"I am a stranger."

Mrs. LeClerc thumped her cane pettishly. "My husband was cousin to the Devereaux. I've spent a hundred evenings in that drawing room."

Leah shook her head and shrugged her shoulders.

For a moment, the surety in the woman's eyes faded, and she looked puzzled. "You don't know what I'm telling you?"

"No."

"Then I'll say it plain, young lady. Yours is a fated face. There's been love and hate and death, and no one knows what happened, no one. They tell me, too, that The Whispering Lady walks again at Devereaux Plantation. You'd best beware." She took a deep breath and sagged against her cane. "I'm tired now. I'll go in."

Leah watched her until she disappeared inside the house.

A fated face. What could that mean? Leah had no idea, but she realized she couldn't slip into Mefford and not be noticed. Yet she had every right to be there if she wished, no matter how much she might look like these Devereaux whom she didn't know.

Abruptly, she made her decision. She was going to visit Devereaux Plantation.