

# Medium Rare

by Nancy Haddock, ...

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“Is—is this where she wants the sofa bed?” Patti Coleman whispered the question even as her anxious gaze skittered past me to probe every corner of her spacious window-encased sunroom.

“Patti, *she* is Angelica and you don’t have to whisper. She’s standing by the French doors to the garden.”

I’d told my client the same thing for the last hour. No need to whisper. No need to fear. Then again, Patti *was* being haunted—even if the haunting was relatively benign. It wasn’t everyday that one rearranged furniture at the behest of a ghost.

A ghost who had a better sense of design balance than Patti herself.

Not that I’m a designer, mind you, or a ghost buster, either. And don’t ever call me a medium. That term makes me sound half cooked. Or sound like a kook.

Or worse, a charlatan, which I’m not, no matter what a certain male ghost investigator of my acquaintance might think.

An oh-so handsome specimen of a male who trips my feminine triggers way more than I want to admit, damn his vivid blue eyes. He was only on my mind because he'd left a cryptic voice mail this afternoon. A message I'd yet to decide if I'd answer.

For the record, I am Colleen Cotton, a psychotherapist who studied my butt off to get my Ph.D. and license, then came home to St. Augustine, Florida to open a practice. Clients barely trickled into my office door until my friend Dove referred a woman who was being driven to distraction by a ghost. After one evaluation and one spirit intervention, word of mouth discretely spread, and voilà! I became a therapist to the haunted.

Admittedly, I'm darn handy with the dead-but-not-departed, and I should be after years of up-close and personal experience. If it goes bump by day or night, I can often see it, usually hear it, and always feel it. Seeing as I grew up in a town where you can't, pardon the expression, swing a cat without hitting a ghost, dealing with hauntings keeps me busy and helps pay the student loans.

Trouble is I'm good enough at my job that, once I've brokered accords between the living and their spirits, the no-longer-haunted patients no longer need a psychotherapist. Or if they do, they don't come to me.

Tonight's intervention was a breeze compared to some. Patti called me about a ghost who kept rearranging the furniture in her enclosed sun porch. The ghost even moved a honkin' heavy sofa bed Patti's husband Jeff was tired of moving back into place.

On my first visit to the house, I'd sat on the same sofa while I'd explained to resident ghost Angelica that home insurance didn't cover things broken by spirits. Angelica cried, apologized, and negotiated a deal that would do Donald Trump proud. In the end, Patti agreed to a new furniture and accessory arrangement, and Angelica promised to stop shoving the sofa, moving knickknacks, and fritzing out the flat screen TV.

Me? I promised never to move another sofa bed. Not even with the furniture sliders Patti had the foresight to buy.

Why didn't I get Angelica to 'go to the Light?' She, like many other ghosts, flat wasn't interested in leaving her haunt. Since she wasn't sucking energy from the occupants of the house—was, in fact, looking out for them as she'd watched after other owners for more than a century—I didn't push her.

I try not to tick off spirits if I can help it. The crankier ones will shove your head into a wall.

Those with evil intent will do worse.

Patti cleared her throat, and I jerked to face her.

"Colleen, I hate to rush you, but Jeff will be home at six. Is the sofa in the right place?"

I eyed Angelica who still stood across the room at the French doors staring through the glass panes into the shadowed tropical garden. The first time I'd met her, she'd worn what I took for a tea gown of the early 1900s. Today, in a dark blue narrow skirt and a poufy-in-the-chest white blouse with three-quarter sleeves, she looked ready to do housework, yet she hadn't lifted an ethereal finger. In fact, she'd seemed as skittish today as Patti herself. Curious, because the emotion Angelica projected felt a lot like fear.

"Well, Angelica?" I asked.

The ghost gave an *eeep* and turned to me. "What? What?"

"I said are the major pieces where you want them?"

She tilted her head, then darted a lap around the space that left a contrail of energy that brushed near enough to both Patti and me to give us the shivers.

"Yes, yes. It is fine now."

"All right, what about the lamps and accessories?"

"Put the tall white lamp by the wall. The rest she can put where she likes."

I cocked a brow. "And you'll abide by the agreement?"

She peered into the deepening twilight and shuddered when she faced me again.

"I will behave, Colleen, but please do not make me leave. Here I am safe."

I gaped a little because, really, what could harm a ghost? "Safe from what?"

"I do not know, but it is not safe out there. I must rest."

With that, Angelica disappeared. She didn't fade or waft through a wall or the ceiling as she had last time we met. She vanished faster than I could blink.

"Safe?" Patti said, her voice squeaky. "Is Angelica threatening us?"

"Heavens, no," I said bracingly. "Angelia says the sofa is in the right place, and to put the tall white lamp on a table by the wall. The rest of the accessories you can arrange as you like, and your things will be safe from her."

"Really? The haunting is over?"

I smiled, nodded, and made all the right noises as I helped Patti finish rearranging the sunroom, but I knew in my gut that somewhere else, a haunting was just beginning.

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The late October wind blasted through my open windows and tousled my short black hair as I drove my Accord south on Avenida Menendez along the bay front. Not so much a cold wind as, well, wild. Unsettled. The town spooks I spotted as I cruised past appeared to be as restless as Angelica had been, flitting from their usual haunts to the sea wall and back again. Major weird.

Then I got stuck on the restored Bridge of Lions that links historic downtown St. Augustine to Anastasia Island and saw a sailboat cut through what first looked like low lying fog. But no, fog and wind don't mix. Those gray-white forms were ghosts hovering over the waters of the Matanzas Bay, shifting around the ship's bow, and giving me a major case of the crawl-out-of-my-skin heebie-jeebies.

I noted the activity in the spiral notebook I kept on the passenger seat. The same spiral in which I also wrote reminders such as the house insurance and taxes being due soon. Another hit to my pathetic bank account, and Patti Coleman's check wouldn't boost my bottom line *that* much. Taking on roommates last year hadn't put me completely in the black either, though Pilar and Jaime had become good friends who put up with the quirks of my household.

How did people get financially ahead and stay there? I shook my head as traffic began moving on the bridge. I inched my way along, seeing ghosts still churning over the white caps of the bay waters. When I reached the apex of the span, a mighty screech coming from the metal bridge deck made me slam on the brakes. A second later, three ghosts shot straight out of the Accord's hood. What the hell?

I don't know how long I sat frozen, my clenched hands trembling on the steering wheel, but a horn honk made me hit the gas hard, and the car leaped forward. I eased into the right lane on Anastasia Boulevard as soon as I could, still shaken by the freaky ghost behavior that was sure new to me.

Clearly the native spirits were restless, but why? Sure storms could stir paranormal activity, but this was a simple windy day in October. Wasn't it? And, yes, we were a scant day away from Halloween when the veil between worlds thinned, but I'd still never seen spirits act like they were jumping out of their own ectoplasm.

Luckily, I had a direct source of advanced ghost knowledge at home, and I'd question him pronto.

And just maybe I should return the call to my least favorite ghost investigator. Give him a heads up on the bizarre ghost activity, and let him choose to believe me or not.

Five minutes later I eased up the incline of my narrow street. Jaime's jeep sat by the mailbox, but a huge black van almost blocked the turn in to my brick driveway. Damn renters across the street threw more parties than the Romans had orgies, and their guests were never considerate. I edged between the vehicles, and drove through the ten-foot stone pillars flanking the drive.

Eight-foot high walls of stacked stone and coquina enclosed my acre tract of land. The property teemed with live oaks and magnolias, their limbs twisted into fantastical shapes by the sea winds and draped with Spanish moss. Yes, having an acre of property is super rare for this area, but then my house—a Victorian with hints of Arts & Crafts styling—was built in 1917, and the land had been in the family long before that. Of course, being located behind the famed Alligator Farm, the air can be ripe when the wind blows just so, but the house is mine free and clear.

Except for those pesky taxes, insurance premiums and repairs.

At the back of the house, I squeezed my Accord into the detached three-car garage crammed with junk. Maybe a giant yard sale was in order to de-clutter and improve my cash flow.

I hopped out with my purse and briefcase, shut the garage door, and crossed the yard and the bricked patio to the back entrance. I had no more than touched the screen door handle when my great-grandfather flew to open it.

And when I say flew, I mean flew.

Da is a ghost.

"Colleen! High time you came home."

I sighed at Da's impatience. "I told you I'd be back about six," I said, plopping my purse and briefcase on the catchall table in the mudroom.

"Yes, well, but we have a situation. Come now, someone is waiting for you."

"Jaime?"

"No, child. A friend picked her up for work."

"Then who exactly is waiting? You didn't invite your ghost cronies for poker night, did you?"

Da snorted. "Bigger doings than poker, me girl, but brace yourself."

Da pushed me through the kitchen I needed to clean and into the sprawling living room where I stopped short and blinked at the man in black who sat in my wing back chair by the fireplace.

Black jeans, black T-shirt, black nylon windbreaker jacket. Only the sneakers had a lick of color—gray and blue. As icy as the look in those blue eyes.

My heart pounded a painful few beats before I found my wits.

“Brick Frasier? What on earth are you doing in my house?”

Brickman A. Frasier, the hot ghost investigator of my dreams and nightmares, glowered at me. His tanned hands gripped the chair arms, and his ashen complexion slowly darkened to a brick red that almost matched his auburn hair. A muscle ticked in his square jaw before he took a breath that expanded his wide chest.

“Let. Me. Up.”

I shivered at the rawness in his sexy voice and took a step closer.

“I’ve been held captive in this chair for half a freaking hour, Colleen. I want out.”

I turned to my sneaky Black Irish great-grand ghost. “Da, what have you done?”

Da’s chest puffed. “Now, now, me wee Colleen, I only made the man comfortable.”

“He’s not comfortable. He’s terrified. Whatever you’re doing to keep him in that chair, stop it this instant.”

With a mighty *humph* and muttering under his ghost breath, Da flew toward Brick, circled him three times counter clockwise, then settled behind the chair, arms crossed.

An audible pop in the ethers made me jump. I don’t know if Brick heard the sound, too, but he shuddered and slowly levered himself out of the seat, as if bracing to be pushed back down.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “Da won’t bother you again.”

“And who,” Brick asked, “is Da?”

“My great-grandfather, the ghost. What exactly happened?”

“What happened?” Brick echoed with a snarl and paced closer to me. “I knocked on your door. It opened. I was jerked into your house by my shirtfront and shoved into that damned chair. I thought it was a stupid Halloween trick until I realized I was pinned there. Does your ghost do that to everyone?”

“Why did you want to see me at all? As I recall from our last encounter, you said it would snow on the beach before you so much as spoke to me again.”

“I—” He fell back a step, and then ran a hand over his near military-short hair cut, mumbled a curse, and sighed. “My ghost investigation team ran into a wall tonight.”

“And that should mean squat to me?”

“It means something to the client. Martha Harrison. She told us you’d done one of your interventions with her ghost last month, and she wants you on site for our investigation.”

I frowned at Brick’s neutral expression. Clearly he didn’t want to lay all his cards on the table, but then he didn’t have to explain Martha Harrison to me. Elderly even by senior citizen standards and a legend in St. Augustine, she’d taught history to generations of students, fought for civil rights, and won her bout with breast cancer and lymphoma both. Far more steel than magnolia, her will

was a force of nature. So much so, that I'd quaked in my sandals when Mrs. Harrison called me to do an intervention with her own home ghost, Xavier.

In her accounting of the situation, Xavier had given her fits for decades and she'd steadfastly ignored him until after she took a tumble on the stairs. A screaming miracle she hadn't broken a hip or worse, but that was her wake up call to do something about her spook.

Xavier hadn't caused Martha's fall, so he refused to go to the Light, or to leave Martha's house at all. Instead, we'd hammered out an agreement for him to stay quietly in the attic and leave her alone. Last I'd heard, Martha's home was as close to spook-free as could be.

Then again, if Xavier was acting as schitzzy as the other ghosts in town, who knew what havoc he was wrecking?

Unintentional or not.

"Listen, Colleen," Brick said, his voice placating, his energy set to soothe instead of confront. "I admit we got off to a bad start."

I snorted and crossed my arms. "Brick, you called me a scam artist."

"I conceded you might be a legitimate sensitive."

"Only after you told certain people I'd bilk them out of thousands."

"I apologized for that."

"Yeah, when one of my clients divulged to you what I actually charge."

"Okay, I had some bad information. I misjudged you, slandered you, and was an all-around ass, but that was months ago. Give me another chance. Come to Mrs. Harrison's house with me. She won't let us set up one piece of equipment until she talks with you."

I rubbed my forehead and thought about his request. Much as I was attracted to Brick, I didn't want to make his life one whit easier. However, if I ignored a command appearance from Martha Harrison, I might as well take down my therapist shingle and go flip burgers. Plus I was itching to know what had the local ghosts acting so goosey, and curious as to whether I could help them regain peace.

"Exactly what kind of problems is Mrs. Harrison reporting?"

"Knocks all over the house, bangs and thuds in the attic, shadows moving. And she's not the only one who's called about paranormal disturbances. I've fielded more calls in the last two weeks than I have for two months."

I recalled my own uncharacteristically full calendar of clients. Ghostly activity on the rise. Angelica restless and in fear. No leap of logic to figure something out of the ordinary was afoot.

Normally, ghosts aren't destructive whether they're seeking attention or simply going about their spirit lives. Panicked ghosts are another story. They could give off scattered, frenetic energy and not know or be able to control their own strength. Worse, a few spooks might get off on having more power to frighten home and business owners. Could I turn my back on a potential problem of that magnitude?

"Please, Colleen," Brick said. "I won't ask anything of you again."

I gave Brick the evil eye. "If I go, I'll do it for Martha, not for you and your team."

"Understood."

"One crack from any of you, and I'm outta there."

“Absolutely.”

“Fine. Do you have a digital recorder on you?”

“Uh, yeah.” Brick blinked in puzzlement, but thrust a hand in his windbreaker pocket and pulled out a voice-activated recorder smaller than my dinky old cell phone.

“I don’t suppose you had that running while you were, um—”

“Forcibly restrained by your ghost? No.”

“Too bad. I’ll bet Da had plenty to say.”

“Anything I’d want to hear?” Brick teased.

I waved away his attempt at levity. “Just turn the recorder on now, please.” He pushed a button and nodded. “Da, front and center. I need to ask you about the town ghosts.”

“What about them?”

Da answered even as he materialized between Brick and me. Brick put his hand out to feel the cold spot Da brought with him, and nearly stuck his hand through the middle of my great grand-ghost’s back. With a violent shiver, Brick wisely stepped back.

“The spirits in town seem to be stirred up. Even afraid. Do you know what’s wrong with them?”

Brick frowned, but I kept my focus on Da’s craggy, semi-transparent face.

Da poked a thumb over his shoulder. “Do you want me to answer so he’ll hear me on that gadget?”

For the sake of the gadget, I responded in full. “Yes, speak into the recorder.”

Da half turned. Considering he hadn’t been a tall man but Brick was easily six-five, that put Da’s mouth right about at recorder level.

“All I’ve heard,” he said, carefully enunciating, “is that there’s a raid afoot. An attack, girl. An attack targeting spirits.”

“What could possibly hurt ghosts?”

“There are dead who feed on earthbound souls. Not many of the dastards, but this one must be a doozey.”

I reached for his aura. “Are you afraid, Da?”

“Not me. I’m safe with family. That’s what most of the others are missing.”

“Family, huh? Okay.” I shifted my gaze to Brick. “You can turn off the recorder now.”

“What’s this about ghosts being threatened?”

“Go on back to Martha’s and listen to the message with your team.”

“You aren’t coming with me?”

He stepped nearer, close enough smell a hint of his cologne and a lot of clean, virile man. My pulse stuttered, then sped.

“Brick, I’m tired. I want to clean up, change clothes, and grab a bite of dinner. I’ll meet you in thirty minutes.”

The muscle in his jaw ticked again, but he gave me a short nod, turned and left the house. I collapsed on the sofa to still my erratic heartbeat.

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My right foot had no sooner hit the bottom porch step when Martha Harrison opened the door of her magnificent Victorian home.

"About time, young woman. You must speak to Xavier and get him to leave altogether."

"Mrs. Harrison," I said carefully as I reached the porch, "I explained to you that Xavier is tied to the old Spanish coins and snuff box you inherited. I can't expel him if he doesn't want to leave, and I refuse to lie to you about that."

Her arthritic hand gripped the cane she'd begun using after her fall. "Even if it would be kinder to fib?"

"Even then."

For a moment, Martha looked every one of her years and more. Then she sighed, straightened her shoulders, and stepped aside to let me enter.

"Then come in and tell him to cease making that racket upstairs."

Right off the foyer to the left, I spotted Brick and his crew crowded in the formal dining room entrance. What? Had they expected to catch me scamming the old lady? The thought made my temper simmer, but I flashed a smile.

"You remember my team?" Brick asked.

"I remember," I said, hoping I didn't sound as grim as I felt.

Who could forget Dan, Don, Deidre and Melody? None of them had shown a lick of respect for my sensitivity any more than Brick had. More, blond, bossy Melody had given off jealous vibes the last and only time I'd worked with Brick's team.

"Ghost woman! You must help us!"

The urgent male voice made me whirl toward the wide doorway on the opposite side of the foyer. The parlor lay beyond, but Martha's ghost Xavier loomed on the threshold.

"He's here, isn't he?" Martha demanded from her stance at my elbow.

I met her troubled gaze. "Yes, ma'am."

"Speak with me, ghost woman!"

I held up a finger to indicate Xavier needed to hold his horses, then I looked over my shoulder at Brick.

"I'm not going to talk to him before you have a chance to document with your equipment, but you might want to get an electromagnetic field meter over here. Now."

Brick looked at Martha. "Mrs. Harrison, may we proceed?"

She waved a hand. "Yes, yes. Do your setup, and be quick about it. I want this investigation completed and my home quiet again."

She went off in the direction of the kitchen, her cane punctuating her footsteps, while Brick quietly gave the order to set up. I kept my eyes on Xavier's husky form floating three feet off the floor.

As on the day I'd done Martha's intervention, Xavier presented himself in dark knee breeches, a light shirt with lace at the neck, a long dark coat and boots. I vaguely recalled he'd lived in St. Augustine even before the Castillo de San Marcos had been constructed, and that was in the 1700s. Or was it earlier? I did a mental shrug. Hey, being born and raised here didn't mean I stored historical dates and events on the front burner of my brain.

"Colleen?"

I startled at Brick's voice, and he laid a warm hand on my shoulder that zinged a shiver of awareness from the top of my head to my toes.

"You want to tell me where the ghost is?"



“And mess with your objectivity?” I shook my head and stepped back. “Find him yourself.”

Brick spared me a probing glance, then moved toward the parlor with the EMF meter. In seconds, the lights on the device danced and Brick called to his team. They came, they saw, they murmured in subdued but excited voices. Then they scattered to set up video cameras and digital recorders, stringing cables in their wake.

Zavier retreated to the ornate fireplace where he paced, shot me the occasional glower, and then paced again. Since the spirit showed no sign of leaving the parlor, I could’ve told Brick to set up there alone. But Martha had reported noises in the attic, so I kept my mouth firmly closed on that score. However, I did have a quiet word with Xavier asking for his patience. He didn’t like the ghost investigation activity, but he agreed to wait. I then cooled my own heels by the front door to be out of the way.

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Twenty minutes later, Brick motioned me into the tech-littered dining room. Three flat screens shared space on Martha’s carved dark walnut table, again wires running helter-skelter. I recognized most of the ghost hunting toys arrayed on the table, including the EMF meters, digital thermometers, and recorders. Heck, I used them in my interventions when I ran into ghosts that wouldn’t communicate with me directly. A tidbit about my work I doubted Brick knew.

“Dan and Melody will watch the monitors first,” Brick said. “Don and Deirdre, bring the usual equipment with you. The two of you, and Colleen and I will start in the parlor. Anything else we need, Colleen?”

Whoa. Did Brick know about my ghost hunting tools after all?

Stunned as the question left me, I had an answer ready. “An infrared thermal scanner and a 35mm camera, if you have them. Old school black and white film sometimes catches what digital doesn’t.”

Brick looked to Don. “You still have your camera?”

“In the car. I’ll get it.”

Don scooted past me with a shy smile that might’ve conveyed a smidge of respect. I wondered if Brick had already played the recording of Da for his team. Intuition said no. He’d analyze my chat with Da as part of the entire body of evidence he collected tonight. I hoped there’d be a lot of it.

When Don returned, he handed the camera to Brick. “Loaded and ready.”

“Good deal. Let’s get the lights out upstairs. Colleen, would you let Mrs. Harrison know we need to go dark? We’ll close the dining room pocket doors to block out ambient light and noise from the command post.”

I found Martha having tea in her compact breakfast nook, but she refused to be left out of the conversation with Xavier. In the end, Brick led her to the settee parallel to the fireplace, where, yes, her ghost still waited.

With the lamps off and only soft ambient light from the street filtering through the drapes, Don and Deidre did sweeps with the EMF meter and the thermometer. They reported no EMF spikes or temperature dips except where Xavier stood.

Brick fired up a yellow and gray hand-held infrared scanner with a small screen built in and began slowly panning the FLIR around the parlor. I stood beside him, curious to see if Xavier would show up in thermal lights.

"Son of a gun," Brick muttered in awe.

I peered at the screen that was maybe three and a half inches square. Sure enough, Xavier appeared as a cold spot. A human shaped violet blob in the middle of a larger turquoise oval standing at the right side of the fireplace. When he planted his fists on his hips, the FLIR picked up both the movement and the new body position. I admit it fascinated me to see a ghost in more or less a human form live on camera. So to speak.

"Okay, let's do an EVP session. Colleen, take the FLIR."

Again, Brick surprised me with his request. I fumbled the camera handoff in the dark, but he wrapped my hands firmly around the handle. His innocent touch seemed more sensual in the darkened room, as did his rumbling voice instructing me to keep the camera aimed at the ghost.

"Don, Deidre, we're going to turn our recorders on together so they're all running at the same time."

Brick did the one-two-three count and confirmed all three recorders were activated.

"This is October 30 at the home of Martha Harrison," Brick said loudly enough to register on the equipment. "Team members present are Brick, Deidre, Don, and consultant Colleen Cotton."

Consultant? I glanced at Brick, caught the white flash of a smile before he suggested that his team move away to triangulate the fireplace.

"Colleen, why don't you start the session? You know the initial questions to ask."

I did know and I complied, no matter how idiotic the queries would sound to Xavier.

"Who is present with us? Please speak loudly enough for the devices to hear you."

"It is I, Xavier."

I nodded at him and asked the next routine question. "Will you give us a sign of your presence?"

Through the lens of the FLIR, I saw Xavier turn first to his left then right as if looking for something to move. Since I didn't trust him not to break one of Martha's treasures, I quickly revised the question.

"Can you knock on the mantle three times?"

I swear the ghost gave me the evil eye for requesting such an easy task, but he complied with three distinct knocks.

"Ask him to do it again louder," Brick said.

Xavier immediately pounded on the mantle three times, hard enough to rattle the framed photos displayed.

"Enough of your games, ghost woman. I must speak with you."

"All right."

"All right what?" Brick asked.

I blew out a frustrated breath. "Brick, I want you to come away from tonight with documentation, but this spirit Xavier needs something and he's not going to play Twenty Questions first."

"Will he talk so the recorders can pick up his voice?"

I cut my eyes to the nodding ghost. "He'll do his best."

"Go for it."

"Can I stop the FLIR?"

"I'll take it."

I heard him plunk the voice recorder on the oval coffee table before he removed the camera from my hands. Free of that responsibility, I eyed Xavier.

"Okay, what's up?"

"He is coming to take our souls."

That tidbit matched what Da had told me, but I needed details. "Who's coming?"

"The pirate, Robert Searle."

"Who's Robert Searle?"

"I don't know why Xavier is speaking of Robert Searle," Martha barked from the settee, "but surely you know of him."

I'd forgotten Martha was with us; she'd been so quiet and hidden in the shadows of the dark room.

"The scoundrel," she continued, "attacked this town in May of 1668. The city held a re-enactment a few years ago. He's featured in the new pirate museum on the bay front."

I skipped past my apparently appalling lack of knowledge and pressed Martha for the scoop. "What else do you know about Robert Searle?"

"The information varies from source to source, even down to the date of the raid, but it was May 29, 1668 according to the historical society library records."

"Searle and his pirates," Brick inserted, "sailed in on one or two captured Spanish ships, didn't they?"

"Indeed," Martha said, her voice taking on a teacher tone. "Searle meant to loot the St. Augustine Royal Treasury of silver ingots. He and his men began the attack and ransacking of the town between midnight and one in the morning. Some reports indicate that Searle slaughtered sixty men, women, and children, and left the bodies lying in the streets."

"That's where some of the ghost stories I've heard came from," said another female voice in the dark room. Deidre. She cleared her throat. "I have a friend in the ghost tour business. I don't know how much the stories are embellished, of course."

"A good bit, I'd wager," Martha said. "According to historical library records, five Spanish soldiers were killed, but those sixty or so men, women, and children were taken hostage and ransomed for firewood, meat, cloth, water, and the like."

"The ladies are each partly correct," Xavier said, and I turned to face his gray-white form.

"You were there?" I asked.

He stood taller, puffed out his chest. "I served as the under-secretary to the overseer of the Royal Treasury."

"Tell us what happened."

"Ask him to speak up for the equipment," Brick said.

Zavier floated almost to the middle of the triangulated voice recorders, presumably to be better heard. “The attack began in the Plaza. The villagers were roused from their beds and marched through the streets. Some men with muskets and swords attempted to fight back. Villagers were killed in the crossfire. One small girl was just six or seven years old.”

Zavier’s voice trailed off, a look of deep sadness on his semi-transparent face. When his eyes met mine again, though, they held urgency.

“You must find that girl, ghost woman.”

“The little girl who was killed?”

“Only she can save us.”

“How can she do that?”

“It is said that she haunted Searle until he sailed away. She rid us of him once. She has the power to do it again.”

“Didn’t she go to the Light?”

Zavier shook his head, but more in frustration than denial. “Find the girl, ghost woman. She is our hope.”

“All right, calm yourself. What’s her name.”

“I know not, but you must find her by tomorrow night. Searle will come when the veil is at its thinnest.”

A loud crash from above made all of us jump. Even Xavier. He looked toward the ceiling, his milky white brow furrowed. Worried.

“Those are the noises coming from the attic,” Martha said. “That’s why I called you people.”

“Zavier, are other spirits here?” I asked.

“All over town, we are banding together for safety,” he admitted, “but we are not safe unless you find the girl.”

Another crash, a bang, and a thud sounded.

“I must go, ghost woman. Tell Martha we mean no harm.”

With that, Xavier zoomed up and through the twelve-foot ceiling.

“Well, Colleen?” Martha demanded. “What did my ghost have to say for himself?”

Since I didn’t want to taint Brick’s evidence, I suggested he and his team regroup to do a preliminary EVP review and analysis. If they had caught Xavier’s voice—and Da’s for that matter—then the ghost investigators would know of the situation first hand. No need for me to recap.

While the team set to work, Martha commanded I come along to the kitchen to help her set out refreshments—a gesture of pure Southern hospitality. Homemade chocolate chip and oatmeal cookies, soft drinks, and water with a side stack of napkins soon filled the round table top.

“Now tell me, Colleen, and don’t hold back. What did Xavier say? What is happening?”

I related my conversation with the ghost, highlighting that the additional spooks were temporary visitors, and that none wished her harm. When I finished, she arched a fine brow at me.

“So the ghosts will leave if you find the murdered girl?”

"All except Xavier," I confirmed. "But it sounds to me like he'll be gone along with most of the spirits in the entire city if this Searle character comes back to consume their souls."

Martha scowled at the tray of cookies before meeting my gaze. "I don't want Xavier destroyed, you know. I just want him to be quiet. I need to be at peace in my home."

"I know, Mrs. Harrison. I think Xavier feels the same."

"I do."

Xavier wasn't visible, but his voice was audible enough that Martha and I both gazed across the tray of treats to see a small, black object float toward us and settle on the table in front of Martha.

"My Bakelite anchor pin," Martha said in awe. "You found it, didn't you, Xavier?"

"It fell off your coat in the attic," he said, again loudly enough to hear and understand.

"When I moved my winter things downstairs to air them. Of course." She turned to me. "My husband gave me this before he shipped out with the Navy."

Martha smiled mistily at the pin, then at the spot where Xavier had stood. "Thank you, Xavier."

I slipped out of the kitchen, ready to go home and think. And, okay, I felt a little misty myself. I could be dead wrong, but I could swear Martha might be developing a soft spot for her spook.

I paused in the hall to let Dan and Melody tromp past me and up the staircase with their load of equipment. Then Brick beckoned to me from the dining room door.

"Come hear the EVPs," he said, turning into the room and expecting me to follow.

I might've balked but color me curious.

Don and Deidre had eyes glued to the monitors. Brick indicated a free seat and handed me a set of headphones.

"I'll play the recording from your house first."

Da's voice came through clearly if more softly than I thought it would. I had no trouble understanding every word, and couldn't help but feel vindicated.

Then Brick switched recorders with the comment that he was playing the one that had picked up the majority of our encounter in the parlor.

I heard Xavier's name without straining, and though his first knocks were faint, the pounding sure wasn't. When our conversation began, some of Xavier's speech was too garbled to understand, but many of his short sentences came across loud and clear. Especially his pleas to find the murdered girl.

When I removed the headphones, Brick switched the recorder off, took my elbow, and urged me outside.

"Am I getting the bum's rush?" I asked when we stood in Martha's front garden.

"Who is the girl the ghost wants you to find? She's not a living person, right?"

"The ghost is Xavier, and of course he doesn't mean a living child. Geez, Brick. Get a grip."

"Hey, with ghosts you can never tell." He tilted his head at me. "So how are you going to track down this ghost girl, Madame Medium?"

“Don’t call me that. I do not conduct séances, and how do you know I’ll do anything about this issue at all?”

“Because you want to help. It’s what you do.”

He had me there, but I shrugged. “In the first place, I don’t know if it’s possible to summon a spirit that’s crossed over. It’s not something I’ve done or ever wanted to do. Plus, what am I going to say without knowing her name? ‘Hey, child who haunted Searle. We need you to come back and get rid of him again.’ That’ll go over big.”

He looked away, over my shoulder. “We might be able to assist you with research. Deidre is willing to do it. See if she can get a name.”

I blinked up at him. “Why?”

“In spite of what you think, when we find real ghost presences, we want to help, too. Help the people whose lives are in upheaval from the haunting, and help the spirits themselves.”

A blast of cold spook air hit my back, and I spun to face the street to find ghosts lining the sidewalk and mouthing two words. Help us.

Great gator gunk.

I took a deep breath and exhaled a long sigh. Okay, so St. Augustine would certainly be an empty place without our non-corporeal residents, and they didn’t deserve to have their souls stolen. I also had a selfish reason to attempt this major intervention. Da might not be worried about Searle, but what if Da’s soul was as vulnerable as any other?

I looked over my shoulder where Brick watched and waited.

“All right. Tell Deidre to do the research. We’ll make a plan from there.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“Guillelmina.”

“Say what?”

Brick walked through my office door at three in the afternoon, fifteen minutes after I’d returned from an impossible consultation with a new client and the out of control ghost that haunted the garden of his bed and breakfast. A little gentle hair pulling, acceptable. Tripping guests, so not okay. The visit left me determined to do all in my power to thwart the specter of Robert Searle so the city spooks would settle down.

As long as I kept thinking of the exercise as a large-scale intervention, I had hopes of pulling it off.

“Who is Guillelmina?” I asked from behind my desk as Brick lowered his tall, handsome self into a client chair.

“The child killed during the Searle raid.”

“Deidre is certain?”

“As much as she can be. Obviously, there’s no mention of the kid haunting the pirate. The historical society library records say he set sail on June 5, 1668 with his booty and a sizable group he’d captured that he considered not to be of pure Spanish blood.”

“Why did he leave with captives?”

“Apparently he sold them into slavery.” Brick grinned. “This dude deserves to go down.”

"All we have to do is figure out how."

"You don't have a plan?"

"Do you?" I countered.

He shrugged his wide shoulders. "You're the medium. I planned to follow your lead."

"Will you please," I said through gritted teeth, "stop calling me a medium?"

"Why does that term bother you?"

"Aside from you yourself branding mediums as charlatans?"

"Hey, I apologized for that."

"During the spiritualism movement of the 1800s and other eras, mediums were often exposed as fakes."

"So you don't like the association? Fine. We still need a plan for tonight."

"We?" I echoed.

"The team and I want to be there. Is that a problem?"

I grimaced. "I'll feel like an idiot working with an audience rather than alone."

"I won't judge you, Colleen. I learned my lesson. Now what do you have in mind for tonight?"

I drummed my fingers on my desk, but no new inspiration struck. Unless a scathingly brilliant idea smacked me upside the head in the next nine hours, I'd have to go with my seat-of-the-pants plan.

"All right, here's my thinking. Ghosts tend to live their existence in patterns, right? They make the same noises, appear in the same rooms, open and close the same doors."

"You're banking on Searle's showing up at the same time he staged the 1668 raid." Brick nodded. "Makes as much sense as anything else."

"Okay, so we'll meet at the bay front about ten. The Halloween night ghost tours should be over by then."

"Fewer people on the streets to distract us."

"Exactly. I'll start putting out the call for Guillelmina and hope she shows up."

We looked at each other in silence, then Brick snorted.

"Pretty thin plan, isn't it? No, no," he added holding up his hand. "Don't poker up. I don't have a better idea unless—"

"Unless what?"

"You contact Xavier and some other spirits you know. Get their input."

"I've already given the ghost-vine a shot. Not one spook has anything to suggest. They're so upset, even their rumor mill has dried up. Tonight could be a spectacular success or a phenomenal failure."

"Then we give your plan our best and hope it works."

\* \* \* \* \*

All Hallows Eve. A half moon and stars shining overhead. Temperature hovering at seventy-two. No wind, but thick white-gray wisps churned above the surface of the bay among the dozens of sailboats gently rocking at anchor. Water ghosts, I thought of them now. Land ghosts also still flitted through the historic downtown. Guess these spooks hadn't found a safe place to take cover.

Brick, his team, and I arrived at the bay front within minutes of each other. The guys wore tool belts stuffed with recorders and meters. Melody wore Don's 35mm

camera on a strap around her neck, and Deidre carried the FLIR. I supposed they had more equipment at the ready in Brick's truck parked across the street, but I doubted they'd need it.

Me? I carried three bottles of drinking water and an energy bar in my backpack, and a vial of holy water in my pocket. Da had insisted. Oh, yeah. And hope. I carried oodles of hope.

The six of us had dodged couples strolling the bay front sidewalk, watched ghost tours come and go, and generally worked to stay inconspicuous. Now the time was ten-thirty.

"The tours are winding down," Brick observed from beside me. "In another hour, the restaurant patrons should be gone."

"But the bars won't close until later," Deidre said.

I'd already thanked the young woman for her research. Now I smiled at her. "If drinkers stumble into the supernatural show, they'll figure they're seeing things."

"Or sober up real fast," Don added.

Brick grinned, then turned to me. "Ready to start contacting Guillelmina?"

"Just let me have some privacy."

He frowned. "I wanted to get this recorded. Is that a problem?"

"If I say yes, will you drop it?"

"No."

"You can be a real pain, Brick."

Dan snorted and Melody coughed.

I took a digital recorder and sat on the sea wall fifty yards or so south of the Castillo de San Marcos, known locally as the fort. This is where the original docks had been built; I did remember that from history class. The spot also put a bit of distance between me and the distraction of Brick.

Bollards linked by heavy, large-linked chains ran the length of the seawall. I leaned against a bollard, and with the recorder running, I took a deep breath.

"Hello. My name is Colleen Cotton. I'm trying to reach a young girl named Guillelmina. Is she here?"

A few adult ghosts pressed closer, but no child materialized.

"Listen, I need to find Guillelmina to get rid of a pirate. Robert Searle. Word has it that he's coming back to St. Augustine to feed on earthbound souls. The ghosts here think you scared him off before, and that you can do it again."

Adult ghosts nodded, but didn't add comments.

"Okay, I see other spirits here. Some of you have been banding together. There is safety in numbers, but there is strength in numbers, too."

A few spooks tilted their heads as if they weren't getting the hint. I laid it out for them.

"I'm saying you can band together to fight Searle. Don't leave the job to a little kid, people."

Now the ghosts stirred, seemed to murmur to one another.

"Hey, if you can't scrape up the courage to drive this Searle guy away, at least help me find Guillelmina."

"We shall."

Faster than I could blink, Xavier popped into sight flanked by five Spanish solider ghosts.



"You shall what, Xavier? Find the child or fight?"

"Both. We shall report back shortly." He turned to the soldiers and snapped orders in Spanish. They zoomed away in a contrail of energy, then Xavier disappeared.

'Shortly' is a relative term, and to a ghost it appeared to be an eternity because after an hour Xavier and the soldiers hadn't returned.

Discouraged but not defeated, I continued calling for Guillelmina as I alternately paced the sidewalk, sat on the sea wall, and took the occasional break to save my voice. Did I feel like a moron saying pretty much the same thing over and over? Yes, but there were worse things in life—and afterlife—than dented pride.

At twelve thirty-five, I'd begun my spiel of asking for the girl again when Xavier appeared.

"Ghost woman," he said with a bow. "She is here."

Xavier floated to the side, and a dark haired girl wearing a long nightdress drifted to stand before me.

"Hello, Mistress Colleen."

My knees caved and my butt landed hard on the seawall. "Guillelmina? You know me?"

A light giggle made me smile. "You said your name each time you called me."

"You've been listening a while, have you?"

Her angelic little face turned grave. "I needed permission to come back."

"Can you drive Searle away again?"

"With help."

She turned to Xavier, held her hand up to him, and together they moved toward the sloping grounds of the Castillo with a legion of spirits following. I'm sure my jaw dropped and my eyes bugged when more spooks zipped in from the direction of the Spanish Quarter and the Huguenot Cemetery. Even the water ghosts ventured onto land.

I was so distracted by the spectacle, I squealed when Brick laid a hand on my shoulder.

"What the hell is happening by the fort?"

I blinked at him. "You can see the ghosts?"

"I see white figures. What gives?"

"Guillelmina showed. I think she's rallying the spook troops."

"No kidding?"

"Looks like it to me." I glanced back at the gathering of ghosts, then caught movement from the corner of my eye.

Something rose from the waters of the bay, fifteen yards from the seawall, right in the midst of five anchored sailboats.

Masts rigged with tattered white sails bearing the red Spanish cross broke the surface first. Then, in slow motion, the dark body of the ship appeared. And so did a figure on the deck. The pirate Robert Searle.

The apparition was white like a photographic negative, but the outline of his body and his arms spread wide gave the clear impression of a large hat, a big-sleeved shirt, and a vest. He held a cutlass in one hand, a blunderbuss in the other, and seemed suspended in the past until his eye sockets turned black.

Searle pivoted toward the ghosts gathered by the fort, lifted the firearm, and took aim.

I shouted without thinking.

“Guillelmina, take cover!”

She cried something I didn’t catch and flew toward the ship with her ghost army following.

Spooks swarmed the ship from the water line to the top of the tallest mast, swirling the vessel as if it were caught in a waterspout. The main body of ghosts surrounded Searle, their numbers so many I lost sight of the pirate. Thumps and shouts, even gunfire and explosions erupted from the center of the spirit storm. For long minutes the battle ensued, the sounds so real and loud to me, that I expected the living people of the sailboats to come topside to investigate the disturbance.

Suddenly, the battle stopped and I saw why. Robert Searle’s unearthly body was lashed to a mast, his black maw of a mouth screaming curses as the ship sank back into the bay.

Huzzahs, cheers, and a rebel yell rent the night, and in the next instant the spooks dispersed. Some zoomed back through town, others settled into the water. Guillelmina, a shy but triumphant smile lighting her elfin face, wafted near me to hover over the seawall.

“It is finished. He will not return again.”

“Thank you for coming, Guillelmina.”

“Thank you for believing, Mistress Colleen.”

Guillelmina glanced toward the fort.

“Do you need help getting back?”

She shook her head. “My mother is just there.”

The ghost drifted off, and sure enough, a figure bathed in blinding white light materialized not twenty feet away. A spirit holding her arms open to embrace the child. When Guillelmina’s energy merged with her mother’s, a shaft of light shot high into the night. And then they were gone.

I stared at the sky, expecting to feel awe or triumph or simple satisfaction. Something besides this empty sort of sadness and bone deep exhaustion. I had to leave before I fell into a comatose heap.

“Colleen,” Brick’s voice rumbled in my ear.

I’d forgotten he stood with me during the battle, and tripped into his chest as I turned. When he caught me close, I realized I still held the digital recorder in my hand.

“Here,” I said, shoving the device in his chest. “I think it ran for that whole event.”

“Uh, that’s great, but are you all right?” He peered into my face, then looped an arm around my sagging shoulders. “Come on. Let’s get you another bottle of water and a snack.”

I stood straighter and shook my head. “No, Brick, not now. I just need to get home.”

“Then let me drive you. Don can follow and bring me back.”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine. I just, well, I hope you got what you wanted tonight because I won’t be doing an encore.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Two days later, I'd more or less recovered my strength. Da informed me I'd lent more of my own energy to the ghosts than I realized. That's why I'd been so wiped out.

Brick hadn't contacted me, but Martha called to say her home was blissfully quiet again, and that Xavier had found another piece of jewelry she'd been hunting.

I smiled at her message, but not so much at the spate of calls to cancel consultations and interventions. Of course, I'd known that hauntings might subside when the local spooks no longer felt threatened, but I was left with precious few clients to see in the coming weeks. I needed an infusion of funds fast.

I also needed to stop thinking about Brick, my attraction to him, and his lack of communication. So, when Saturday dawned cool and clear, I threw on my oldest work clothes and headed to the garage to sort through generations of what I hoped might be valuable junk. If I didn't unearth a treasure or two to help pay my taxes, I'd invade the attic next.

By noon my back yard was pot-marked with furniture pieces, over fifty boxes, and old bicycles. Only a few items appeared to qualify as vintage or antique so far, but I held hope for what the boxes might be hiding.

I traipsed in the back door to grab a bite of lunch, and had just entered the living room when the front door burst open and a man holding a huge bouquet of fall flowers stumbled over the threshold.

"Brick? What are you doing here?"

"Call off your Da," he ground out, "and I'll tell you."

I snapped the order to cease, and a chuckle echoed.

Brick straightened his blue polo shirt, closed the door, and strode across the room. "How are you, Colleen?"

"Surprised." And desperately working to deny the thrill of seeing him again.

"Recovered from our big night?"

Something about the sparkle in his eye said more than words. "Did you come to tell me you got paranormal evidence from Halloween?"

"We got a mother lode of it, and the team is urging me to put it on YouTube. But that's not why I came by," he said as he paced closer. "It's not why I brought you flowers."

He stood so near that a petal of one deep orange mum tickled my chin, and his breath fanned my face. "Then why are you here?"

"I had to apologize again. You may not like the term, Colleen, but you are a rare medium. One who is the real deal. One I'd work with again any time, if you're interested in a limited partnership."

"How limited?"

"Let's discuss it over dinner," he said with a slow, sexy smile. "Is seven o'clock tonight too soon?"

As it happened, seven was perfect. As perfect as the kiss we shared on my doorstep at the end of the evening.

A promise of more to come.

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