

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Hidden
TREASURE

TÉA TRELAWNY

ELLORA'S CAVE *Quickies*®

Hidden Treasure

Téa Trelawny

Lara Lacy inherits her family's Victorian home with its impossible mortgage – and a ghost that could reveal a hidden treasure. If only Lara believed in ghosts. But too many fake mediums have convinced her that anyone claiming to communicate with ghosts is a liar and a thief.

When Lara's inventive lover Nate Hoffmann claims he can contact the ghost, her anger flares and she flees their Caddo Lake love nest. But when Nate follows her home, determined to help the woman he loves, Lara gives in to physical and emotional hunger. Stripped bare – in all ways possible – the lovers engage in deep exploration and eager discovery.

Passionate reconciliation opens Lara's eyes to her deepest feelings. But will the greatest treasure of all remain hidden?

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HIDDEN TREASURE

Téa Trelawny

Dedication

To those who seek what is hidden...you may find it in your hearts.

Chapter One

Lara bolted upright in bed, heart slamming inside her chest.

Nate came up a split second behind her, sheets rustling in the quiet of late evening.

“Are you all right, babe? What’s wrong?”

Moving backward, her thoughts coursed through the dream, fixing every detail into her mind, chilling her core that had so recently warmed while making love with the man of her...dreams.

She shuddered.

“Babe?” He brushed her hair back behind her ear and pressed his chest against her back. Heat coursed from his naked flesh and into hers, driving the cold away. Chilling memories, however, remained.

“I’m fine.” Her throat felt raw and she remembered gasping violently as she awoke. “Just...it was just...a dream.”

“About Charlotte?”

Charlotte Lacy. Her dear aunt. Buried just three days ago.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Come here. Tell me about it.”

His arms slid around her and she turned in to him. Lara and Nate had been together for only a few months but already he was as essential to her as air and water. He would bring her back from the dark place of the dream...if she let him.

She wrapped her arms around his neck, desperate to forget the dream, her aunt’s death, the horrible phone calls...and the next loss that remained ahead of her.

“Tomorrow,” she murmured, burying her face against his strong throat. “I’ll tell you tomorrow.”

He lay back upon the pillows, drawing her down with him. Her bare breasts flowed over his hard chest, aching around each nipple as his tightening arms pressed her closer.

“Sleep now,” he quietly said.

But she didn’t want to sleep. Sleeping meant the dream might return. And it was early yet, with night just settling in.

“Love me,” she whispered, and nuzzled her lips against the hollow just below his ear. Caught in his embrace, she felt gooseflesh rise upon his arms. A more obvious piece of flesh rose against her hip. Although they had made love that afternoon, their short nap had obviously rejuvenated him. Very obviously.

His cock grew harder and his arousal stirred her own. She needed him. Right now. To chase away the shadows that had fallen over her life.

Pushing herself up onto her hands and knees, she swung one leg over his body, straddling him. His arms, forced by her movement to loosen their grip, slid down her back and his hands cupped her ass cheeks.

The moon, a few days from its fullness, eased its light through the small window in his cabin bedroom. Illumination fell across his face. Dr. Nate Hoffman was a handsome man, with a firm jaw and a generous mouth. And his eyes...dark chocolate brown, they were capable of expressing the deepest of emotions. A few lines radiated from the outer corners of his eyes but he didn’t look weary like many men in the medical profession. A radiologist, he worked long hours, giving his time to critically ill patients and their families. But he found some sort of peace and comfort in helping others, and Lara had discovered soon after meeting him that he could pass on that peace and comfort to those who needed it. She needed it now.

“Love me,” she said again.

Palming her ass, digging his fingers into her flesh, knowing exactly what she was asking for, he positioned her over his cock. But instead of impaling her on that throbbing blade, he teased her. He moved his hands up and down, forward and back,

manipulating her body so that her moist vaginal lips rubbed against his cock without taking it inside.

Her desire intensified and she glared down at him as he continued to delay, teasing her with the promise of release. She could see his eyes and the wicked light that gleamed within each black pupil. His dark brown irises were nearly invisible.

“You want it, babe?” His voice came at her, husky and commanding. “Tell me you want it.”

The raised window allowed the night sounds and the breeze off Caddo Lake to enter with the moonlight. Summer air brushed over her thighs and up her weeping channel as he used his legs to force hers farther apart. They didn’t bother with protection because they planned to marry and start a family right away. Only Aunt Charlotte’s death had delayed their plans.

Don’t think about that. Think about Nate and what he can do for you...what he’s doing to you.

“Tell me you want it,” he said again and one of his hands slid down the crease in her ass, reaching for the damp opening to her core. She hadn’t realized how hot that part of her body was until his cool finger slid inside her.

“I...I...oh I want it.” Her throat still felt raw from the gasp that had accompanied her sudden awakening, and her mouth was dry. But she could fix that last part easily enough.

Bending her elbows, she lowered her mouth to his. If he intended to continue to taunt her lower body, if she couldn’t have his cock inside her right now, she’d take his thick, wet tongue.

Forcing his lips apart with her own, she kissed and sucked, drawing his tongue inside her mouth. Instantly, her mouth began to water. So did another part of her body. Conveniently, her position had her back arching and her ass sticking up into the night air. It also pushed her legs farther apart and allowed his questing finger to sink farther

into her. The muscles along her passage shuddered and tightened as he stroked her deeply.

They shared a moan as she ground her pelvis downward, seeking more. His finger slid free and her slick vaginal lips surrounded his cock. He'd grown so big and hard, she was certain he wouldn't be able to hold off much longer. She knew she couldn't. Almost desperate to have his cock pumping inside her, she continued her assault on his mouth while her hands crept around to slide between their upper bodies. Her fingers captured each of his nipples and gave them quick squeezes.

A more guttural moan rumbled through him and he thrust his hips upward, impaling her with a swiftness that had her jerking her mouth from his.

"Nate. Yes." Closing her eyes, she tossed back her head and began to ride him. His hands still held her ass, but she was in control, pumping her pelvis up and down, focusing all her energy on where their bodies joined. Pressure built in a coiling sensation that seemed to squeeze everything inside her. Wetter, tighter, closer –

The sudden ringing of her cell phone ignited her climax, extinguishing it almost as quickly. Nate came too. Their shared pleasure was wonderful but painfully brief and Lara swore under her breath as her orgasm rippled away. Nate's groan rumbled into a chuckle as she rolled to the right and reached over the side of the bed for her purse. The phone rang again as she frantically dug it out of the side pocket of her overstuffed bag. She wouldn't have answered it at all except that she was expecting a call about an important job interview. Most prospective employers wouldn't call so late in the day, but this was for a second shift position with a Dallas firm. The hiring manager had warned her to expect a call at any hour. Considering how long she'd been out of work, it was a call she couldn't afford to miss.

Nate could hardly catch his breath. Laughter and orgasm made it difficult to breathe, but he couldn't stop either as Lara's lunge for her phone twisted his cock inside

her. The aftershocks her move inspired had his stomach muscles tightening so that his upper body lifted partway off the mattress.

Lara gasped as she tumbled forward, sliding completely off him, and Nate laughed again as he caught her just in time to keep her from falling off the bed.

Her phone beeped as she pressed the connect key. "Hello?" she said, her voice muffled and tight—but was it from the effort not to laugh or because she was hanging upside down with his arm wrapped tight around her waist? He tried to ease the pressure of his forearm against her abdomen.

"Yes, this is Lara Lacy...what?" Her voice shot up a sharp octave on the last word. "No, I am not interested in your services. Do *not* call me again!"

Nate's amusement faded as she threw her phone toward the pile of clothes beside the bed. "What's wrong?" he asked, releasing her as she shifted to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. He sat back against the headboard.

"Some people..." Leaning over again, she grabbed her T-shirt from the clothing pile. The phone clattered off it and across the pine floor. "I can't believe...and right after that dream..."

Her voice muffled as she dragged the shirt over her head. She hadn't bothered to wear a bra for their afternoon date, an omission that he greatly appreciated. Now, with regret, he watched her beautiful breasts disappear beneath the dark blue cloth of the T-shirt. Her voice fell to an angry muttering as she snatched up her panties and shoved her feet through the leg holes.

"I'm going to assume," he said, "that you're angry from the phone call and not because you didn't get to finish what I thought was building into a pretty amazing climax."

Rising, she turned to face him as she dragged her panties up over her slender hips, concealing a sight he would never grow tired of seeing. *Hidden treasure*, he thought as the curls covering her sweet mound vanished beneath dark blue cotton. At least he could still see her long, pale legs. Her thighs were lean but muscular from regular

swimming and her calves – he’d had fantasies of buying her a pair of red stiletto pumps for her to model for his private pleasure. Just the pumps – no other garments were necessary for that fantasy.

The image had his cock returning to life, and he lifted his gaze back to her face, hoping she might take the hint that was surely gleaming in his eyes. But as moonlight fell over both of them, he could see that her brows were furrowed and her lips tight.

“You assume right,” she said, then stopped dressing and sucked in a deep breath. “I’m sorry, Nate. I just...that isn’t the first call I’ve gotten like that recently.”

“I’m going to make another assumption. That wasn’t from a potential employer.” He knew that she’d been out of work for nearly a year, with only an occasional contract job. The lack of success at finding a permanent technical writing position worried her.

“No. No, it wasn’t.” She sat down on the edge of the bed, her legs still bare. She appeared to hesitate a moment before she said, “I don’t think I ever told you about my family’s lost treasure.”

That wasn’t at all what he’d expected her to say. Sitting farther upright, he rested his arms atop his raised knees. “No, you didn’t.”

“You know that the house – Aunt Charlotte’s house – is very old.”

Lara’s aunt had lived around a nearby curve in Caddo Lake, within walking distance of his cabin. He’d gotten to know the place pretty well since he’d met Charlotte and Lara at the hospital where he worked...where Charlotte had taken her radiation therapy for her cancer. “Turn of last century, right? Victorian?”

She nodded and a sheen of moonlight skimmed down her blonde hair. “It’s known around here as *Maison du Lac*...the House on the Lake. It was built by my great-great-great grandfather Beauregard Lacy for his bride, Shannelle, after they migrated here from France.”

“Charlotte told me the story during one of her treatments. They died fairly young, right?” He’d have known it without hearing the story. The moment he’d entered the house – when he’d helped Lara take her aunt home from a particularly difficult meeting

with Charlotte's oncologist—he'd detected a single spirit in the old place. Female and fairly young, he'd determined at the time. But he hadn't tried to make contact with her. He wouldn't until he'd been invited to do so by either Lara or her aunt.

"Yes. They...drowned. On the lake. I..." She took another deep breath and her shoulders sagged as she exhaled. "In fact, Beau and Shannelle are the reason I woke up so abruptly this evening. I was dreaming about them tonight. About the boat tipping and the water...I could feel it in my own lungs."

He reached out to cover her hand where it lay atop the sheets. "No wonder you woke up in such a state."

"I guess everything kind of hit me. Losing Aunt Charlotte, being out of work for such a long time..."

"Losing the house, itself?"

Her hair caught the moonlight again as she nodded slowly. "And the phone calls. Apparently this part of Texas is full of people who not only believe stupid ghost stories, but they believe they can help me find my family's alleged treasure."

Guilt rolled through Nate. He hadn't told her of his gift yet. He'd been waiting for the right time. Considering her current state, he feared he might have waited too long. *Sounds like she doesn't think much of spirit mediums.*

"This is going to sound crazy but..." She sighed before going on. "I've had several calls from people who claim they can communicate with the ghost of my great-great-great grandmother Shannelle Lacy."

She paused and looked at him, but Nate didn't respond. How could he?

She continued. "Apparently Aunt Charlotte sought out some of these so-called mediums before she died, hoping to find someone who could help her locate Shannelle's missing jewels. She thought they would be worth enough to pay off the mortgage on the house."

"What made her think there were missing jewels?"

Still resting her hand in his, Lara drew her legs in to sit cross-legged in front of him. “According to family stories, Shannelle owned a lot of valuable jewelry. None of it was ever found after she and Beau died. After Aunt Charlotte found out that the bank planned to foreclose...she told me just before she died that she had invited several of these mediums to come to the house to try to contact Shannelle’s spirit. She paid them thousands of dollars. Nate—” She turned her hand to clasp his tightly and now the moonlight caught a sheen of tears in her eyes. “Nate, she could have used that money to pay down the mortgage. If she had, maybe the bank wouldn’t have—”

She broke down then. Nate reached out to her and gathered her into his arms. He’d expected this sooner or later. The stress of taking care of her dying aunt, having no job, learning that Charlotte had taken out a mortgage on the family home—and then fallen so far behind on the payments—had to have taken a toll.

He held her close as she cried, not caring that her hot tears were coursing down his chest. For her he would give or do anything. When he’d learned of Charlotte’s financial situation, he’d wanted to help her with the mortgage on the house, but his own financial condition wasn’t that great. He was still paying off student loans for medical school. And the mortgage on this cabin as well as rent on an apartment near the hospital. And of course, neither Charlotte nor Lara would hear of it. But now...

“The funny...thing is...” she said between sobs. “The jewelry...might really be there. Hidden...where we can...never find it.”

“What makes you think that?” he whispered, pressing a tender kiss to her temple.

“There were actually...photographs taken of...Shannelle wearing some of the pieces.” Her sobs grew less frequent but she made no move to leave his arms. That suited Nate just fine. He would hold her all night if she needed it.

After a few minutes, she went on more calmly. “The idea of a hidden treasure actually makes sense. There are receipts from when Beau purchased some of the pieces.” She sniffled. “He sold some, too, over time and kept receipts for those sales. If

he had sold all of it—and he wouldn't have because some of the pieces were precious to Shannelle—there would have been receipts for those sales, too.”

“He was that meticulous?”

“Apparently. Aunt Charlotte showed me files of the records he kept. There were appraisal records, too.”

“The jewelry was really valuable?”

She nodded, her hair rubbing against his chest. The sensation was like having strands of silk draped over his body. In spite of her sadness, he couldn't stop the flash of heat that swept through him when the ends of several locks of her hair slipped between the sheet and his body. A couple of strands tickled the head of his cock.

Apparently unaware of his growing state of arousal, she sighed. “I could pay off the house with it and then live like a queen. I wouldn't need a job.”

Her words got through the growing fog of need in his mind and hope swept through him. He shifted his grip to her arms and gently sat her back from him. “I think I can help you, Lara.”

Her eyes still shimmered and she blinked to clear the tears. A smile tickled one corner of her mouth. “That's so sweet. But we've already discussed this, Nate. You can't afford to help me catch up on the mortgage.”

“No, but I can help you find those jewels. If they exist. You see...” He paused, nervous at confessing his secret even to her, and then forced out the confession, “I can ask Shannelle where they are.”

She blinked again and that furrow reappeared in her forehead. “I don't understand.”

“I can talk to spirits.”

The tiny smile vanished along with the furrow in her forehead. In fact, every muscle in her face seemed to turn to stone. “That's a cruel joke,” she whispered.

“It’s not a joke, Lara. I really can talk to spirits. I’ve been able to since I was very young.”

She shook off his hands and shot to her feet. Snatching her jeans off the floor, she shoved her feet into them. “How dare you make fun of me when I’ve done nothing but bare my heart and soul to you?”

“But, Lara—”

“I’ve spent many nights in that house and I *know* there is no ghost there. There are no ghosts anywhere!”

He pushed himself to the edge of the bed. “Lara, I can prove—”

“And what will you charge me for this proof, Nate?” She yanked up the zipper on her jeans and then bent over to grab her cell phone and her purse. Then she strode to the chair where she’d left her sandals. “I understand the going rate for a séance is about two hundred dollars.”

Snatching up her sandals, she whirled toward him. “Thank you, Mr. Hoffman, but I think I’ll hold on to what little money I have left!”

She stormed out of the room and, seconds later, Nate winced at the slamming of the front door.

* * * * *

Shadows crept over the lake behind the house. Somewhere out there, beneath the cypress trees, Shannelle and Beau had drowned.

Over a century ago. Shannelle stood at her bedroom window and blinked back tears. *So many years gone by.*

Beau had gone into the light, his hand reaching back for her. But she hadn’t taken it. She had sacrificed her one chance to go with her beloved husband, choosing instead to return to the house on the lake...to their child.

Years had passed. Decades. In all that time she was little more than a peculiar draft in the night, unsought and unneeded by any of her descendants. And yet something held her there.

She knew now what it was.

Chapter Two

Lara entered the house at dusk three nights later. The joy that had always greeted her...did not. Aunt Charlotte was gone and soon the house would be gone, too.

Life as Lara knew it would never be the same.

But I'm going to spend a few more nights here. No matter what the bank has to say about it. No matter what Nate or anyone else said about ghosts and hidden treasure.

She leaned back against the front door and it closed with a decisive click that echoed throughout the foyer. Tonight she would not think about Nate or the argument that might have ended their relationship. She would not allow the image of his sexy mouth and dark, penetrating eyes to cloud her judgment—or spark her imagination to return to those hot nights they had spent in his small cabin. Nights when his hands and his lips performed magic on her body, on her soul, making her believe in happily ever after.

As he had done so briefly just three nights ago.

She shook her head, determined to focus on enjoying these last moments in the house that had always felt like home to her. *Maison du Lac* was a cherished landmark on Caddo Lake in east Texas. But it was more cherished to her than to anyone else. Behind the old Victorian structure, willows dipped their feet into Caddo Lake while cypress trees waded deeper into the murky water. The half-light of evening brushed the interior of the house in pale blue silence.

Twilight is when the spirit walks.

She shook off that thought, too, and pushed away from the door. She would not let old ghost stories influence her perception.

She moved forward. With its high ceilings and rare wood paneling, the house was beautiful. Aunt Charlotte had taken great care of it.

And all in vain. Once the bank took possession, they would raze the house and replace it with a lakeside resort. Or so she'd heard from a friend who worked at the bank that owned the mortgage. This house that had passed from one generation of Lacys to another would no longer exist.

Soon the house will be dead...just like the rest of my family.

The twilight air seemed to shift before her. A chill crept up her spine. For a moment she thought a shadowy figure moved down the narrow staircase. A quick blink convinced her that she was just seeing dust dancing on the fading light that filtered through the front windows.

Shouldering the backpack that contained her overnight things, she decided to check out the first floor before bringing in her other suitcase. She wanted to see what shape the old place was in. When she'd come to stay a couple of months earlier, she'd focused on caring for Aunt Charlotte and so hadn't paid much attention to the condition of the house. It was during that extended stay that Lara had discovered that Aunt Charlotte—a proud "old maid" when she'd died of breast cancer that had been detected too late—had experienced serious financial trouble in the past two years. Charlotte had been convinced by a well-meaning acquaintance to mortgage the house to pay off her mounting medical bills but then her ill health had left her unable to work, causing her to fall behind on the payments.

Now Lara had inherited the property—along with that mortgage that she couldn't afford. With no job, her savings account had dwindled to near nothing. She had no choice but to let the house go. Losing the old place hurt in the depths of her heart. Although she'd never lived there for any length of time—her parents had raised her in a modern Dallas condo—she'd spent vacations and holidays there, and the house was precious to her.

Lara blinked back a burning tear as she passed through the dining room toward the kitchen. The bank had promised to be patient until Aunt Charlotte's will passed

through probate but Lara knew that it would quickly start foreclosure proceedings on the house after that.

She entered the kitchen and flipped on a light. Tidy and clean, the room smelled like the lemon cleaner Lara had used to scrub it down the day after her aunt's funeral. Nate had helped her, keeping her spirits up until he'd made his offer.

"Spirits...ha-ha," she muttered as she checked the lock on the back door. Her memory took over in spite of her determination not to think about Nate and his ridiculous claim.

But it was impossible to put him completely out of her mind. Since Aunt Charlotte had introduced Lara to him at the hospital where she'd taken her chemo treatments, they'd been struck by love at first sight. He owned a cabin on Caddo Lake, which made their rendezvous convenient when Lara moved in to help her ailing aunt. In spite of her sadness over Aunt Charlotte's impending death, those few months had been filled with what Lara thought was love and passion between her and Nate. Even now she loved the man, but his claim...

"At least he didn't ask me for any money," she said, giving the kitchen another visual once-over before she turned off the light.

Grief-stricken on several fronts when she'd stormed out of his small cabin, she'd driven straight through that night to her Dallas condo. But with the loneliness there, having no job to go to, no family in which to confide, she'd headed back to east Texas to spend these last few nights at *Maison du Lac*.

She returned to the front parlor and dropped her backpack on the sofa. Then she headed up the stairs to take stock of what she needed to go through. As Charlotte Lacy's only living relative, she had inherited everything. Unfortunately, "everything" didn't seem to be much of anything. Aunt Charlotte had sold off her more valuable possessions little by little in order to pay her bills.

Foregoing lights, Lara moved through the second floor rooms by the half light, saddened by the fact that most of the original early twentieth century furniture was

gone. Two of the four upstairs bedrooms were completely empty while a third held only a cheap metal bed frame and a folding chair.

Reaching the last room—the master bedroom that Aunt Charlotte had made her own—Lara reluctantly entered it. The mahogany bed was clothed in clean white sheets and an antique quilt lay across the foot of it. The double wedding ring pattern added the only color—deep blue—to the white background. It was the quilt that Shannelle Lacy had made for the home her husband had built for her.

Sorrow settled deeper inside Lara. Her family had certainly seen its share of tragedy. Shannelle and Beau Lacy had died when their son was only two years old, victims of a boating accident out on the lake.

Sad at the thought of the Victorian couple's storybook life having such a tragic end—and the gloomy turn her own life had taken—Lara approached the bed. She ran her hand over the quilt. She could imagine Shannelle, as a young bride, working on it for her new home. Shannelle's son, William, and his descendants had cared for the lovely piece down through the generations, usually keeping it folded away in a protective cover. Aunt Charlotte had wanted it on her bed in those last few days.

Sadness turned to longing as Lara stood there and she couldn't resist sitting on the bed. The old frame gave a lonely creak, followed by an eerie sigh from the mattress.

Fingers of fear tiptoed through her and she glanced over her shoulder. For just an instant, she'd felt almost as if real fingers had brushed the nape of her neck. Of course there was nothing there.

She continued to sit on the edge of the bed and scan the quiet room, taking in the view that Aunt Charlotte had seen in her last days. The curtains on one window that overlooked the lake had been pulled aside, as if someone had stood there peering out at the darkening landscape. The window itself was closed and locked, but Lara felt an unexpected draft that carried the whiff of something sweet.

Before she could identify the scent, something creaked again. Springing off the bed, she whirled around. Shadows hugged the corners of the room as the twilight deepened

around the house, but those shadows belonged to the furniture and the walls themselves. There was nothing paranormal about them.

Old houses make noises, she told herself as her heartbeat quickened. No matter what Nate—and others—had told her, no matter what Aunt Charlotte had so desperately wanted to believe, there was no ghost in this house.

Stepping to a window closer to the bed, Lara lifted the sash to let in the warm evening breeze. The sweet scent—*lavender?*—vanished, leaving her to wonder if she'd imagined it.

Folding her arms over her stomach, she walked around the room. Several personal items remained there. Aunt Charlotte had wanted her most precious possessions around her as she died so she and Lara had put off packing anything in the bedroom.

Lara recognized trinkets that she had admired as a young girl. During early childhood visits with Aunt Charlotte, she'd been allowed to sleep in the big, comfortable bed with her aunt. Listening to bedtime stories in Aunt Charlotte's gentle voice, she'd look around, taking in the beautiful angel figurines on the bedside tables, the paintings of Caddo Lake scenes by local artists, the silk flowers that ringed the mirror on the dressing table.

She came to the fireplace. Photographs and knickknacks decorated the mantel. Many photos were of Charlotte and her brother—Lara's father. He and Lara's mother had died five years earlier, victims of a car accident. Although Lara was already in her twenties, the loss had hit her hard and Aunt Charlotte had been there to help her through it. Lara had tried to return the favor when Aunt Charlotte fell ill.

Above the mantel hung a painting of a young couple and their baby—Shannelle, Beau and their son William. The expressions of parental love were so intense that the sight created warmth in the pit of Lara's stomach—warmth and longing for a happily-ever-after love she had thought she'd found with Nate.

She turned to face the bed once more and thought over their time together in these recent months. To her knowledge Nate had never lied to her before...not about anything.

But how can I possibly believe him about this? She hugged her arms tightly over her stomach. But if I love him, how can I not?

* * * * *

Nate stopped in his tracks. The creaking sound had come from upstairs, like a foot stepping on a loose floorboard. Such noises often indicated the presence of spirits.

Closing his eyes, he opened his mind, using the gift that he normally kept secret from everyone. Even close friends rarely believed him, so he kept his lifelong ability to himself. That was why he'd waited so long to tell Lara about it, and then only because he wanted to help her.

And look how that turned out.

Despite her disbelief, Lara was the reason he'd come here tonight. Even if she never came back to him as a lover, he wanted to make sure that she could keep her family home. So he'd let himself inside with the key Charlotte Lacy kept under a loose board on the porch. Now, standing in the foyer, he detected a faint presence inside the house.

Upstairs, he thought, and opened his eyes.

As he reached the top of the stairs, he saw that the door at the far end of the corridor stood open. He knew his way around the house, having visited Charlotte several times after she returned home from the hospital and he knew that was her bedroom. If Shannelle's spirit had settled anywhere, he believed it would be where she'd spent so many happy days – and undoubtedly happy nights – with her husband. He just wished he'd known of Charlotte's desire to contact the spirit before she had died. He might have given her some comfort in her final days.

Focusing on the pale moonlight that spilled through the doorway, he walked along the corridor. When he reached the doorway, he paused on the threshold. He expected to see an empty room, at most a wisp of a supernatural figure. Instead...

It can't be.

Lara lay on the antique bed, her arms bent so that her hands rested on each side of her head. Her position resembled one of surrender. Her blue eyes were closed, her lips parted, her chest rising and falling as if she peacefully slept. Her gleaming blonde hair spread around her head like a halo.

Desire heated the blood in his veins. She was the only woman for him. He'd suspected as much within an hour of their first meeting. The innocent kiss that hid so much passion on their second date had supported his theory. The first time they'd made love convinced him they were meant for each other. From what he'd heard of other relationships, few people came together in such fiery fervor time after time as they did.

He hadn't expected to see her here tonight. Never mind the argument they'd had. She'd been so upset at the thought of losing her family home so soon after losing her beloved aunt that he'd assumed she would never return to the house again. Obviously he was wrong.

His gaze fixed on her breasts. She wore a thin pink T-shirt with a scooped neckline. The pink cotton clung to her full breasts, revealing their near perfect roundness. He became aware of his palms as he remembered the weight of those breasts upon them. The softness of her flesh. The heat that throbbed through the pale blue veins that ran just beneath her skin. How he loved to trace those heated trails with the tip of his tongue. It had been several nights since he'd touched her, held her, tasted her, but he could remember every detail of her body. And the memories made his mouth water.

Her eyes fluttered open and her gaze drifted in his direction. Laying as she was in pale moonlight, her blue eyes appeared dark. For a moment, time seemed to hang still. He knew he stood in shadow in the doorway and could only guess at how she must

perceive him. Did she possibly – in that moment – believe in spirits? Could she believe in him again? Or would she rise from the bed and command him to leave her sight?

Slowly, she pushed herself up on her elbows. His heart began to beat a little faster, a little harder, and a coil of nervousness formed in his gut.

“Hi.”

Her voice reached him as a sultry sigh. There was no anger, no derision, and the softness warmed the core of him that still wanted her so.

“Hi.” He tucked his hands into the pockets of his jeans, hoping to ease the tightness just below them and the nervousness that twisted just a little higher. It didn’t help either condition. “I thought you went back to Dallas.”

She pushed herself up to a sitting position and swung her legs off the edge of the bed. Was it his imagination or did he see a flash of guilt in her eyes?

“I did but there was nothing to keep me there,” she replied. She pressed her hands into the sides of the mattress, and her back was stiff, her shoulders back as if she was preparing herself for something. “I came here to finish packing up the house. And... maybe... to prove that ghosts don’t exist.”

Pain jabbed Nate’s heart. “Lara –”

“But then, while I was lying here, I decided that I needed to apologize to you.”

Not understanding, he frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” She took a deep breath and released it slowly before lifting her chin. “I thought I wanted to prove that I was justified in walking away from you the other night. But then... well... I decided that I didn’t want to prove any such thing.”

Nate waited, not sure what she might say next. But he knew what he hoped for.

“I love you, Nate, and I should have believed in you.” Her lips curled softly. “I *want* to believe in you and... I’m sorry I didn’t.”

He continued to stand there and stare at her, almost afraid that any movement or sound on his part would shatter this illusion. Could it be true?

She lifted one hand. "Come here and I'll prove it to you."

Chapter Three

Nate's pulse began to throb at all the pressure points in his body. He drew his hands from his pockets and moved slowly toward the bed. A warm breeze crept through an open window nearby, bringing with it the scents of summer grasses and leaves, flavored with damper scents that came from the swampy shallows of the lake. It was an intoxicating, natural scent. But not as intoxicating or natural as hers.

He reached the bed. He took her outstretched hand, finding some ease as her fingers curled around his palm.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," she quietly said.

"You had a right to after all you've been through," he murmured, love for her welling inside him. "I'm just sorry I sprang that news on you. It wasn't the right time."

Her lips curled upward. "It's behind us now. Time to move forward."

"Yes." He released a heavy breath.

She tightened her fingers around his. "I've never stopped wanting you, Nate. I've never stopped loving you. And I won't stop believing in you."

She tilted her head, parted her lips and he couldn't help but to take what she offered. He leaned down to kiss her. Soft, full, her lips melded with his, pressing his apart with persuasive firmness. Sinking into the kiss, he slid his hands around her lush body and pulled her close. Her breasts molded against his chest, and her heat flowed through their T-shirts to warm his skin. Even better, not even her bra could disguise the hard points of her nipples as she pressed closer to him. His own nipples grew hard in response, pricking through the fabric.

We should talk about this. The thought flitted through his mind, but then all the blood in his head seemed to rush downward. Thinking became almost impossible. All he consciously knew was that she was here and she was his.

He slid both hands down her backside to press his fingers into her ass and lift her against his throbbing cock. Although they both wore jeans, he felt the heat of her feminine area flow over his groin. That heat became even more evident when she lifted one leg, sliding her knee up the outside of his thigh and leaning into him. She rubbed her body against his, dragging a moan from deep inside him at the rough sensation of denim polishing his hungry cock.

The release of that moan forced him to widen the kiss and, to his delight, she took quick advantage of it. Slipping her tongue past his lower lip, she slid it over his. Then she lapped at the roof of his mouth, tangled that fleshy morsel with his and began to draw and suck. His gut clenched and every muscle in his body tightened. Sliding one foot forward, he bumped her back against the bed.

“Mmm...” Now a low moan of surprise rumbled up from her chest. Her mouth released his. Tightening her arms around his neck, she pressed her forehead to his chin and whispered, “I think...we’re...falling.”

“I fell a long time ago,” he answered, almost as breathless as she.

She raised her head again, her gaze meeting his. “Oh, Nate...I’m so sorry.”

“Shhh.” He rubbed his lips gently across hers as he said, “I love you, Lara. I feel like I’ve loved you forever.”

She sighed. “I love you, too.”

“Show me,” he said, taking her up on her offer. With their argument so recent, this moment, this behavior, was unexpected. But he was determined to take advantage of it.

Her hands slid from his shoulders, down his chest, her fingertips brushing his nipples where they strained against the thin cloth of his T-shirt. Catching his breath, he gazed down into her eyes, recognizing a mischievous gleam in them. Holding her gaze, he tried to focus on her hands as they coursed ever downward. They reached the bottom of his shirt and slipped under it, then began to creep back upward.

The bottom of his shirt caught on her wrists, rising with her hands, revealing his bare stomach to the warm evening breeze. While she leisurely stripped his shirt toward

his head, sparking sizzling trails along his flesh every time her fingertips brushed it, her lips nuzzled the cords of muscle in his neck. Her tongue darted out, tasting him as she nibbled down to his collarbone. Her tasting and touching sent shivers chasing across his skin.

“You taste wonderful,” she murmured, drawing back only long enough to pull his shirt over his head. “Salty and sweet at the same time.”

He raised his arms to allow her to strip the shirt completely off and then he took her into a loose embrace once more. “I want to taste you,” he said as her fully clothed body aligned with his half-naked one.

She laughed lightly and then, bending her head, floated her mouth over one of his nipples. Her breath warmed the flesh around the areola, causing the hairs surrounding it to rise.

“You can taste me in a bit,” she replied, digging her fingers into his jeans-covered ass. “Let me eat my fill first.”

Her tongue flicked his nipple and he gasped as a jolt of need shot from that straining point down through his gut and straight into his cock. Her lips locked onto the taut peak and she began – as promised – to eat her fill of him.

The sensation was impossible to describe and even more impossible to resist. Nate couldn't help thrusting his hips toward her as she devoured his nipple and his own mouth began to water with hunger to taste her naked flesh. Her sucking, the nip of her teeth – each sweet assault heightened his yearning for her until he couldn't stand it any longer.

Grabbing her at the waist, he took a step back, breaking the connection of her mouth with his chest. She looked up, eyes shadowed, mouth wet.

“My turn,” he said. Gripping the bottom of her T-shirt, he stripped it off over her head. He made short work of her bra and then, before she could protest, he pushed her back upon the bed and leaned down to take one of her breasts into his mouth. Her

already hard nipple tightened into a sweet bud as his tongue swept over it, and it was her turn to gasp.

“Nate!” Her cry was quiet, as she didn’t have the breath to speak in even a normal voice. What he was doing to her nipple—sucking and nibbling, drawing it deep into his mouth—sent waves of physical and emotional longing coursing through her. It was a need so primal that the last working part of her mind chided her for even thinking she could live without him.

His free hand came up to palm her other breast, kneading the flesh, knuckling her nipple and plucking at it until twin straws of sexual hunger coiled down from her breasts, joined together and arrowed directly into the core of her. Her vagina throbbed and grew moist, and she could smell her arousal.

He raised his head and, in the fall of moonlight through the windows, she saw a sexy grin spread over his face.

“I love the way you smell, baby.” His voice rasped across the evening air. His dark brown hair tumbled forward onto his forehead. “Warm and sweet, and proving that you want me.”

“I do want you,” she managed to say.

His hands slid down her naked torso to the buttons on her jeans. He held her gaze again as, one by one, he freed the buttons. She had removed her sandals earlier, so her jeans slid down her legs with little effort on his part, leaving her lying across the bed in only a slim pair of bikini panties. The white scrap of cloth didn’t remain in place very long, following the jeans to the floor.

“You are beautiful,” he murmured, standing back to gaze at her. A warm breeze crept through the open windows to caress her body, but it was his gaze that heated her flesh. His dark eyes touched every part of her that was visible.

Feeling naughty and inspired by her own cravings, she drew her legs apart and allowed him to see parts of her that weren’t normally visible. It was a total surrender of

her body to him and doing so only heightened her desire for completion. Immediately the scent of her arousal grew stronger in the warm night air.

Drawing in a sharp breath, he dropped to his knees. He gripped her thighs with his big hands and pushed her legs even farther apart.

“Very beautiful,” he said and then he pressed a kiss to the pulsing core of her.

She hadn’t expected that! Lara’s body arched and another rush of moisture poured from her. Nate’s tongue lapped at it and he groaned with pleasure.

But his pleasure could not possibly compare to hers. Her pulse beat quickened, making her labia feel heavy and tight as he stroked his tongue along the outer lips, leaving twin trails of fire. Her clit throbbed with anticipation of his touch and, when his tongue finally found it, flicked it, sparks shot through her.

She began to rock her hips, wondering vaguely where that whimpering sound was coming from. Just as she realized it came from her and that she was about to burst into a flaming orgasm, he lifted his mouth.

“Sorry, sweetheart, but I want us to come together tonight. It only seems right.”

Although her body wept with disappointment as his mouth moved away, his words sparked an even more profound longing in her heart. She hadn’t realized she’d closed her eyes until she found herself lifting heavy eyelids. Moonlight silvered his body as he stepped out of his jeans and briefs. The view of his cock, heavy with his desire, was brief, and then he was covering her with his hard warmth. His thighs nudged between hers and his cock thumped heavily against her swollen, hungry sexual lips.

“You see what you do to me?” he asked, his voice harsh now as he rested his forehead against hers. “You see what I’ve been living with for the past couple of days?”

“I can’t see it, but I can sure feel it,” she managed to answer.

“You can see it later. Right now it has work to do. Very pleasurable work.”

He lifted his hips, drew back slightly and then the rounded head of his erection parted her, slipping inside her tight passage as if she had been the mold for his molten steel. A perfect fit, familiar and yet new...it was amazing how wonderful and right he felt inside her. But then he always did feel just perfect.

Spasms began to run through the walls of her vagina as he stroked deep and then pulled out again. Holding himself up on his hands, he angled his body so that first his shaft and then the head of his cock slid over her clit. It took only two strokes and then, as if a match had flared to life, her orgasm struck. It was a flaming eruption of satisfaction that flashed throughout her lower body, up through her torso and down through each of her thighs. Even her knees seemed to climax, so intense was the tightening and releasing, and pleasure shot down her calves and across her feet to curl her toes.

And in spite of the powerful sensations rocking through her, she felt him climax right behind her.

* * * * *

Shannelle paced the upper corridor. The energy of love vibrated through the night air, flowing through the open doorway of the bedroom she had shared with Beau. It filled her with a vigor she'd never felt in life or the afterlife. She felt aglow with it.

She smiled, understanding exactly what was taking place beyond that threshold, and hoped it would continue...for her sake as much as theirs.

Because it wasn't quite enough yet. She needed to gather more power, enough to make sure Nate Hoffman heard her speak. She would not let him block her out as he'd done before.

Stopping in the center of the corridor, she closed her eyes and opened her arms to absorb the energy.

Just a little more.

* * * * *

Nate drew Lara's limp body closer against his. She belonged to him again. He'd never felt so at peace and energized at the same time. At this moment he felt as if he could accomplish anything.

But would it last? Would she stay with him...or would her doubts return? Now that she'd slaked her immediate desire for him, would she remember why she had been angry with him? Could she really believe in him or had her physical desires driven her to only temporarily forgive him for what she'd originally seen as a lie?

As much as it might hurt, he needed to know.

He brushed his lips against her shoulder. "Lara?"

"Hmm?" She snuggled back against him. For a moment, the feel of her sweet curves against his cock almost made him forget what he wanted to ask her. It certainly had his satisfied cock experiencing a renewed hunger

With difficulty, he tried to focus on his concern, to form his thoughts into words. "What you said earlier...about what I can do..."

She turned her head toward him. With moonlight falling through the sheer window curtains, he could just make out her expression. He thought he detected the glimmer of a smile and that renewed his hope.

"You mean being able to talk to ghosts?" she asked.

"Yeah. The other day you said you don't believe—"

"I *didn't* believe," she interrupted, turning. Her breasts slid across his arm and chest and then she pressed her naked form fully against his. Her nipples had relaxed but she still felt wonderful, her body warm and supple as they lay side by side, facing each other in the moonlit bed.

She lifted a hand to cup his cheek as she gazed intently into his dark brown eyes. "But a big part of loving someone is having faith in them. You've never lied to me,

Nate, about anything. So why shouldn't I believe you when you say you can communicate with spirits?"

"Well...you have spoken with your share of charlatans lately."

"You're no charlatan and I should've known that." Her thumb caressed his lower lip, and her eyelids lowered as she focused on watching it. "You love me, so I know in my heart that you would never hurt me with a lie."

Joy swept through him. Few people had ever before professed to believe in him so unconditionally. Wrapping his arms around her, he hauled her close for a passionate kiss that he prayed would convey to her just how much he truly did love her.

Apparently it did. She melted into his arms and Nate thought he might die from the pleasure of it. With her breasts crushed against his chest, he felt her nipples tighten and dig into him like sweet little drills. With every breath either of them took, those hard points bored into him. Caught up in the blissful sensation, he was only vaguely aware when one of her knees stroked up along the outside of his thigh. The curls that covered her mound tickled his thigh and he realized that her movement had opened her body to him. He lifted his own knee, dragging it along the inside of her thigh. The motion parted her legs, opening her farther to allow his cock entrance as they continued to lie side by side on the bed.

They both uttered soft groans as he slid inside her, the sounds mingling as their mouths met once more. Her inner vaginal muscles embraced his cock and drew him deeper into her passage. Her inner thigh, resting against the outside of his hip, tightened and embraced his lower body even as her arms wound around his shoulders. A quick movement of her knee and a push of her chest sent him onto his back.

Surprised, Nate grunted and threw his arms around her. Her mouth still locked on his, she straddled him, drawing him in deeper and rotating her hips so that his cock shifted in a way that went beyond interesting. In fact the movement nearly drove him over the edge.

Another groan, sparked by the unbelievable pleasure of her body manipulating his, must have escaped him for she stopped moving suddenly. She lifted her mouth from his. Under the dim light of the moon, through the curtain formed by her hair, he thought he saw her smile again.

“You like that?” she whispered.

Before he could draw breath to answer, she rotated her hips again. Nate’s gut clenched as even more intense need swept through him.

“Oh baby,” was all he could say.

Pushing herself partially upright, leaning on the palms of her hands where they pressed into the mattress on each side of his head, she began to ride him. The sensation was so magnificent that Nate couldn’t speak. Barely able to breathe from physical bliss, he could do nothing but watch her luscious breasts jiggle in front of his face. One of them came near his mouth and he captured it with his lips and drew the peak inside. Her nipple was so rigid that it was like a large pea against his tongue. Dimly he thought that he would never be able to eat peas again without remembering this moment. Hunger flamed through him and he opened his mouth wider, devouring as much of her as he could.

Lara cried out again and began to pump her hips up and down. She arched her back and her breast popped out of his mouth. Tossing back her head, she closed her eyes and made that sweet little whimper that always shot straight to his cock. The sound and the sensation it sparked had him thrusting up to meet her, driving himself ever deeper inside her until he thought he might split her in two.

“Yes,” she hissed out and then louder, “Nate!”

He closed his eyes, focusing on the slick heat that surrounded him, on the burning in his balls, in the stiffening of his cock. And then the world flew apart in a flash of light and electricity.

* * * * *

A cool breeze crept along Nate's right arm where it lay across Lara's bare back. Collapsed upon him, she shuddered lightly and snuggled closer to him, sighing softly in her sleep.

The breeze grew colder. At some point after their last round of lovemaking, he had pulled part of the sheet over their bodies. But his part of the sheet covered only his torso and upper thighs. His legs were still exposed to the night air.

"Hello?" A whispered voice rose from somewhere beyond the bed, and Nate's chill intensified.

With gooseflesh sweeping from his ankles to his knees, he lifted his head from the pillow and looked toward the bedroom doorway. The mellow moonlight was nothing compared to what he saw illuminating that narrow opening. A soft golden glow surrounded the figure of a woman. Tall and slender, she wore a beautiful blue gown from another time period. Full and lacy, its skirt reached to the floor. She smiled at him and the prickles of gooseflesh coursed up his thighs.

"Yes, Nathaniel," the woman said. "I'm real and I'm here."

Nate glanced at Lara as she stirred again and slid off his body to snuggle against his side. Apparently, even in her sleep, she experienced the same chill that swept over him.

With difficulty he drew his arm from under her and pushed himself fully upright. This was the first time a spirit had gotten through his mental barriers so easily.

"Shannelle?" he whispered.

"Yes." The woman's eyes burned a bright blue. The expression on her pale face looked like relief and joy and hope, all mingled together. "I've been waiting so long to talk to someone."

"Nate?" Lara questioned softly as she rolled onto her back. Her eyelids fluttered upward. "Is someone—?"

She gasped and bolted upright. Reaching with one hand, Nate caught the edge of the sheet and lifted it up to shield her naked body from the figure hovering in the doorway.

Lara released a tiny yelp and then she grabbed his arm. "What the...? Who is...?"

"Be calm, *cheri*," the spirit said with a lilt of amusement in her faint voice. There was also a strong French accent. "I do not mean to frighten you."

"But... How can...? Who is...?"

When Lara's voice faded, Nate glanced in her direction. Later, he was certain, he would laugh at the memory of the expression he saw on her face. But for now, a gentle explanation was in order.

"Sometimes there's enough energy in the air to allow other people to see the spirits, too," he said quietly, not bothering to explain his unexpected theory any farther just now. He gestured toward the woman in the doorway. "Shannelle Lacy, I'd like to introduce you to my fiancée, Lara Lacy. Your great-great-great granddaughter."

"Ah, Lara. It has been a pleasure to watch you grow into such a lovely young woman," Shannelle said. "I had not counted on speaking to both of you tonight, but am grateful for the opportunity."

"I'm the one who should be grateful," Nate replied. Because it had become natural to him over his lifetime, he talked to the spirit as he would talk to any living person. It must seem quite strange to Lara but it was a part of him she had said she would accept. He nodded at Shannelle. "I'm grateful to you for allowing this communication."

"It is not so much an allowance as an opportunity. I have waited so long to talk to anyone." Hope and sadness mingled in her voice now.

The figure drifted closer to the bed and Nate felt Lara tremble against his side. Making sure the sheet remained in place over her breasts, he tightened his arm around her. "It's all right," he said to Lara. "She won't hurt you."

"But she...she..."

“Alas, I am a ghost,” Shannelle said, her beautiful mouth making a pretty pout. “And I have been waiting here unnoticed since my death so many lifetimes ago.”

“Not completely unnoticed,” Nate said. “From what I’ve heard, you’ve been a legend in this family for many years. I’m just sorry I didn’t have a chance to talk to you while Charlotte was still alive.”

Her pout turned up into what looked like a knowing smile. “I have spoken with her since she passed.”

Lara gasped again and began to shudder more intensely.

Nate tightened his grip around her as he nodded toward the spirit. “Charlotte passed on easily?”

“*Oui*. She is happy. She went into the light...as have all other members of my family before her.” Shannelle turned her gaze toward Lara. “Now there is only one left.”

“Oh...my...” Lara leaned into Nate, almost as if she was trying to get behind him. But she continued to watch over his shoulder.

“Why have you stayed in the house, Shannelle?” he asked, eager to take advantage of this manifestation before the energy faded. “Why haven’t you gone on into the light, too?”

“I have watched over our loved ones—mine and Beau’s,” Shannelle said. “I have hoped to communicate with them—I’ve tried—but no one ever noticed more than a cold breeze or a sigh in the night. I have waited for someone like you to come and free me.”

The spirit drifted closer to the foot of the bed. The chill in the air around Nate and Lara grew, and Lara’s trembling intensified farther.

Shannelle lifted a hand to her throat. “I need to tell you where we hid my jewels. Then, perhaps, you can save the house for Lara.”

A bone-chilling cold settled inside Lara's bones and her vocal chords seemed paralyzed. A ghost—she was actually looking at and listening to a ghost!

The legend is true!

Shannelle Lacy was a beautiful woman in spite of the fact that Lara could see through her. Her image was clear and she was surrounded by a serene light. Her dress and hair—it was obvious that she had lived in Victorian times.

Shannelle folded her hands together in front of her full skirt. "I knew that Charlotte was ill for many years and her financial state became quite dire."

Guilt tiptoed through Lara. If only she had known, too.

Shannelle went on. "Unfortunately, when she died she passed her financial trouble on to Lara. But with your assistance, Nate, I can help." Shannelle drifted to Lara's side of the bed. "I've stayed to safeguard the jewelry until one of my descendents would need it to keep the house. I protected them for you, Lara."

It seemed impossible, but the cold intensified as the ethereal woman came closer. Lara's knees began to tremble under the thin sheet and her teeth actually chattered. This was crazy, unbelievable. She was face to face with her great-great-great grandmother, a woman dead for over a hundred years. Even though she had told Nate that she believed in him, she'd never considered the notion that she might actually see a ghost.

"Beau built a cleverly hidden safe for our valuables." Shannelle smiled with what appeared to be pride. "He was a genius at working with his hands...and quite imaginative."

"He must have been," Nate said. "Your descendants have been looking for those jewels for years. Let me get dressed and then show me where the safe is hidden."

"It is where anyone can see," Shannelle replied. "But no one would suspect. Join me at the fireplace when you are ready and I will show you the secret. But hurry. I fear this energy will not last long."

The spirit turned toward the fireplace that stood against the outer wall of the large bedroom. Releasing Lara, Nate swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for

his clothes. Still not believing what she was seeing, Lara swung her gaze between him and the figure that hovered between the foot of the bed and the fireplace.

“Do you think...” she whispered, leaning close to him as he quickly dressed. “Do you think she watched us...when we were...you know?”

“Do you really want to know?” Nate grinned at her. “You should put on your clothes now. That is, if you want to help us find the treasure.”

Chapter Four

Lara still couldn't believe what she was seeing as her head popped through the opening of her T-shirt. The ghost stood—hovered—in front of the fireplace, a hazy image of what used to be a living human being.

Real. She's real.

Lara's jeans were already on as she settled her T-shirt around her hips, but she ignored her sandals. They didn't seem important. What was important was what she was seeing.

Joining Nate at the foot of the bed, she leaned back against the footboard and continued to stare at the strange figure. As clear and detailed as any living person, Shannelle was nevertheless semi-transparent. Lara could see the bricks of the fireplace through her body and clothes.

Chills continued to move through Lara and her skin went rough with gooseflesh. Nate, on the other hand, seemed not at all bothered by the fact that they stood in the presence of someone who had been dead for over one hundred years. Fastening the last button on his shirt, he walked right up to the ghost.

The woman smiled at him before shifting her gaze toward Lara. "I hope I have not frightened you too much, *cheri*."

"N—o," Lara replied, her voice feeling rusty around the single word.

Nate chuckled. "She really can't hurt you," he said again and then stepped closer to the spirit. "Where is the safe, Shannelle?"

"Here." The spirit gestured toward the mantel. "You see this carving?"

The strange situation—and the continued chill—made Lara’s knees tremble. Reaching behind herself, she gripped the footboard of the bed while she watched the unusual scene.

“These flowers?” Nate asked.

“Yes.” A wistful expression came over the spirit’s face. “Magnolias were my favorite.”

Lara shifted her gaze to the fireplace. What looked like magnolia flowers and leaves had been carved into a strip of polished molding that ran around the base of the oak mantel.

Shannelle lifted one hand and pointed toward a carving just off-center of the mantel. “Press hard at the middle of this flower,” she said to Nate. “It takes quite a bit of pressure. We didn’t want anyone who was dusting the mantel to accidentally open it.”

Nate did as instructed. Lara heard a sharp click and then a section of the molding slid forward, away from the mantel, to reveal an open space.

“There,” Shannelle said, smiling as she clasped her hands together over her breasts. “Reach inside and you will find my jewelry box.”

Nate stepped to the opening and plunged one hand inside. His eyes went wide and then another grin spread slowly over his face. He drew his hand out of the open space and Lara caught her breath. In his grip was a beautifully carved wooden box.

Shannelle sighed. “At last.”

Carrying the box to the bed, Nate placed it on the ruffled bedclothes.

Lara half turned to watch him. Excitement rose inside her as she considered what this could mean. If that box contained what Aunt Charlotte had believed it would, it could make her a rich woman who was well able to pay off the mortgage on the house.

Joy shot through her, followed immediately by an even stronger chill. Shuddering, she looked to her left.

"I am sorry, *cheri*." Shannelle smiled as she drifted past within inches of Lara to hover next to Nate. "I do not mean to make you uncomfortable."

"No...problem," Lara managed to say as the spirit of her ancestor moved farther away. The chill that was attached to the spirit remained but Lara noticed that the light emanating from Shannelle had dimmed somewhat, almost as if she was losing energy.

Nate chuckled at Lara as Shannelle peered around his arm. "You get kind of used to it," he said and then he turned his attention back to the box. Lifting the lid, he let loose a slow whistle.

Lara leaned forward as he tilted the box so that she could see inside it. Dark blue velvet lined the interior of the box and upon that lining lay several pieces of jewelry – necklaces, rings and bracelets. Hanging from hooks in the box lid was the most beautiful piece of all – a diamond and ruby necklace.

"That's the one," Lara said. "The one I saw in that old photograph of Shannelle."

"It was a wedding gift from my beloved Beau," Shannelle said.

Nate lifted the necklace off its hooks and not even the dimness of the evening could disguise the sparkle of the gems. He whistled softly.

"It looks as if you'll be able to save your home, Lara," Nate said.

"They are valuable enough?" Shannelle asked.

"I'm no expert, but I'd say so."

"Then my job is done. I can go into the light." A tender smile touched the spirit's face. She gazed at Nate with shimmering eyes. Then she turned her smile in Lara's direction. "I could not have done this without both of you," she said. "Without your love for each other to give me strength."

Lara glanced at Nate and then back at the ghost. "I...don't understand."

Shannelle fluttered her eyelashes and then looked at Nate. "You will explain it to her after I am gone?"

"Yes." He placed his free hand on Lara's waist. "I'll explain it."

“Merci,” Shannelle whispered. *“Be happy.”*

The room seemed suddenly to brighten and Shannelle’s gaze slipped past Lara. Her eyes went wide with what appeared to be joy. Unexpectedly, warmth coursed along Lara’s back, driving out not only the chill from the spirit, but also every trace of worry. A sense of peace and joy came over her.

Turning slowly, Lara saw what appeared to be an open doorway through which a soft golden light poured. A man stood in that light, a loving smile upon his handsome face. Lara recognized him from the portrait above the fireplace mantel. He was her great-great-great grandfather Beau Lacy.

But before she could even think about what she should do or say, Shannelle gave a happy cry. Another chill slammed into Lara, briefly paralyzing her, as Shannelle rushed straight through her and leapt into Beau’s arms. By the time Lara recovered from that cold, the light and the spirits had vanished. The room returned to moonlight and natural summer warmth.

Nate moved close to her and slid his left arm around her waist. *“She’s gone,”* he murmured and pressed a kiss to her temple.

Still awed by what she’d witnessed, Lara turned to stare up at him. She saw the shimmer of tears in his eyes and her heart swelled with love. He cared about the spirits. He did good work with his gift. Letting herself trust him, she realized, was the smartest thing she’d ever done. Never again would she allow doubt to come between them.

She rested her hands on his upper arms. *“What is it you’re supposed to explain to me?”* she asked.

His lips curled up in a sexy smile and he lifted his right hand to dangle the diamond and ruby necklace in front of her. The gems sparkled in the moonlight.

“First,” he said, *“why don’t you let me put this on you?”*

Lara nodded and, lifting her hair, she turned her back to him. The necklace felt cool against her skin, and heavy.

“There,” Nate murmured. “Turn around. Let me see.”

She turned and he gazed down at her. That sexy smile turned even sexier.

“It suites you,” he said. Both his hands slid up under the back of her T-shirt. His fingers tickled across her skin before he pressed his palms flat against her and drew her toward him. He lowered his head to skim his lips over her cheek.

“Love is the greatest power in creation,” he whispered. “Our love gave Shannelle the energy to appear.”

“Oh,” she sighed and nuzzled along his jaw. “That’s nice.”

“I’m feeling a little energized right now,” he said, dragging one of his hands around her ribs to tickle the underside of one of her breasts. She hadn’t taken the time to put on her bra – she’d been in too big a hurry to dress in front of –

“Wait a minute!” Drawing back her head, she stared up at Nate again. “Are you saying that our...that because we made...” She looked at the rumpled bed and words failed her. Stunned, she dragged her gaze back to his.

Nate’s hand slipped back down to rest on her waist. “Would you rather go somewhere else?” he asked with an understanding smile. “Do we need to talk about what happened before we can –?”

“Just...please...” She pressed her palms against his chest. “Tell me that – with this gift of yours – ghosts won’t appear every time we make love.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Not unless we make love in a haunted house again. I can’t imagine that any future clients would ask us to do that. That’s never been part of my service offering before.”

She took in a deep breath and then pushed the air slowly out. “Speaking of your service offering...you’ve been doing this part-time, right? I mean, do you plan to make this your life’s work?”

“No, Lara. I only do it for people I know, or for people who have been referred to me by friends. Radiology is my job. Not this.”

“Not that I would mind,” she hurried to add. “I mean, I know you think of it as a gift and if it’s your life’s calling—”

“Can we talk about this later?” he interrupted, his dark eyes glittering. “I mean, there’s another calling I’d like to answer right now.”

Hearing the taut need in his voice, seeing the hunger in his gaze, she felt a resurgence of her own passions. She leaned into him. It didn’t matter that their lovemaking had given Shannelle the energy to appear. In fact it was a good thing. Sliding her hands up his arms to his shoulders, Lara twisted her fingers in the cloth of his T-shirt and tugged his head down toward hers.

“You’re right. Talking is the last thing we should be doing,” she whispered before planting her lips on his. There were just the two of them here now. The house was hers—or soon would be—and there was no better way to christen it than to repeat what had happened between them a short while earlier.

As if reading her mind—or perhaps it was her lips that gave him the message—Nate sank into her, mouth open and hungry. He kissed and sucked and explored her mouth and tongue as if he’d never kissed her before. His avid attention had her pulse racing and a wonderful yearning swirling through her.

Then his hands returned to their most recent position—one on her back while the other slid under her breast. The side of his finger stroked back and forth, tickling her flesh until her nipple rose to attention once more. Gooseflesh prickled over her but not from any chill in the air—supernatural or otherwise. This came from what was happening inside her. And from the knowledge that any moment he might take her nipple between his fingers, pinching and plucking at it. Then his mouth would follow—

Oh, she could barely breathe. Tilting her head, she drew back slightly, snatched a breath of air and then her own hunger drove her back for a deeper taste of him.

His fingers crept upward, their tips circling her nipple until it rose to an exquisitely painful point. Closer and closer he drew to it and then—at last—he caught it between

his knuckles. Like a string tightening on a violin, need tightened inside her, and she cried out.

Her sudden cry emboldened him and he shoved up her shirt. His mouth shifted downward, covering her breasts with hungry kisses that quickly became nibbles and suckles. Her need quivered like a plucked violin string now.

Both of them began to move their hands with urgency. They stripped each other of their clothing until they stood naked once again, Lara wearing only the necklace. They pressed up against each other in a fall of moonlight—body to body and mouth to mouth. Breath to breath.

After a timeless moment, Nate lifted his lips from hers. Parched and breathless with her love for him, Lara gazed up into his brown eyes and saw his love for her gleaming there. Bracing her with a hand against her back, he slowly—oh so slowly—lowered her to the bed once more.

The sheets were cool against her bare back, but the heat of her desire quickly warmed them. It may have been friction too, as Lara could not control the lower portion of her body as he held still above her. Her hips undulated, her legs moving, so eager was she to have him touch her and taste her and fill her. To have him join her once more in the physical demonstration of their love.

Because that was the main thing. The two of them, together, had accomplished the impossible. How much more would the energy of their love reveal to them? How many more miracles would their love bring about?

Nate traced her restless body with his gaze. Slowly, he bent to press a kiss to her breastbone, then licked and nibbled a path of fire down her body to her curl-covered mound. An involuntary, shuddery sound rose from her throat as he pressed a kiss to her nether lips, and then his tongue parted them. Torturing her, he licked at each side of her throbbing labia, along the outside and the inside. A sound rose from his throat, a sound she'd heard once when they'd taken turns licking at a vanilla ice-cream cone.

“Delicious,” he murmured and then dipped his tongue into her opening.

“Oh...my...oh!” Lara gripped his hair, holding him there, encouraging him to eat at her until, unable to bear the torture any longer, she dragged him upward. Kissing him, tasting herself on his lips and his tongue, she lifted her hips, seeking the head of his cock. She reveled briefly in the thought that their lovemaking had the power to make visible the unseen. This thought fled again as his cock pressed between the throbbing lips of her vulva, touching the entrance of the aching passage his tongue had so recently ravaged.

And oh how it did ache. Lara had never experienced such tightness before, such divine tension. Moisture welled within her, trickled past the opening to coat her vulva. Another growl of pleasure rumbled through Nate’s chest as he pressed his cock home. Her body stretched, accommodating his girth, drawing him in toward the heated core of her. Once more the scent of arousal swirled around her, driving her hunger to new heights.

He broke their kiss, pressed his forehead to hers and their gazes locked. Their hands joined, resting on the mattress just above her head. Staring intensely into her eyes, Nate drew the head of his cock to the edge of her opening before he drove deep again. Lara cried out at the remarkable sensation of steel sliding through her tight passage and, although she held his gaze, her vision blurred at the edges until he was the focus of her sight and her very being. Need built, coiling tighter and tighter within her as she met his thrusts faster and faster. Energy surged through her and she could almost imagine it lit the room around them.

She came once...twice...screamed with the wild pleasure sweeping her ever upward. He kept thrusting, dragging and pounding at her until Lara exploded in pure, sweet sensation. She vaguely heard Nate release a guttural groan as he followed her over the brink and into shared ecstasy.

* * * * *

Sunlight touched the sill of the window. Nate lay facing the light, Lara on her side with her back to him, her naked body cuddled up close to his once more. The cool breath of early morning stirred the edges of the open curtains behind the bed.

“Mmm.” Lara stirred in his arms and murmured, “I could stay here all day.”

He brushed a kiss against the rim of her ear and whispered, “Me, too.”

A deep breath and a sigh caused her body to melt into him in an even more relaxed state. Nate smiled, content, and tightened his embrace around her.

“Once I get to the bank with some of that jewelry, we’ll be able to do just that,” she murmured.

Memory flowed over him. The pleasure of their lovemaking had pushed their spiritual encounter—and the finding of the jewels—to the back of his mind. He looked at the diamond and ruby necklace that encircled her slender throat. It gleamed quietly in the morning light. “That’s right—you’ll be a lady of leisure.”

“Mmm. Do you think so?”

“I’m no expert on jewels but I’ll bet your great-great-great grandmother’s jewelry is valuable enough for you to pay off the mortgage, refurnish the house and live comfortably for a good long time.” He hugged her, happy that he’d been able to help her and Shannelle. “It’s your home at last.”

Lara turned in his arms so that she faced him. She tiptoed the fingers of one hand across his chest to his shoulder and then applied enough pressure with her palm to push him onto his back. Her breasts, soft pillows of delight, pressed against his chest as she leaned over him. Dangling, the necklace grazed his chest. “It’s *our* home, Nate.”

Joy swept through him as he gazed into her eyes, glittering blue in the pale light of morning. “Ours?” he asked on a raspy breath.

“Well you did tell Shannelle that I was your fiancée, didn’t you?” She smiled and leaned down to kiss him softly. One of her legs slid over his and then, as if they’d never been apart, they came together again.

About the Author

Whether it's a spirited elevator in an old Manhattan highrise or a haunted castle on a Welsh hillside, Téa Trelawny is there, waiting and watching and spinning the stories she finds. A multi-published author, she writes stories filled with sexual energy, devoted lovers and a twist of the supernatural. When she's not writing, Tea entertains herself with research into the paranormal, looking for tales of love with an edge of magic.

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