



Ghosts of Graveyards Past

WILL A FORGOTTEN ROMANCE
FROM THE PAST LEAD TO
PRESENT DAY LOVE?

LAURA BRIGGS

GHOSTS OF
GRAVEYARDS
PAST

Laura Briggs

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Dedication

For Mary, whose love for history has inspired more
than one story.

Praise for Laura Briggs

Ghosts of Romances Past

5 out of 5 P's~ When this book came up for review, I knew I just had to read it and I would love it to pieces...Laura did a wonderful job in living up to the renditions of the 'Ghost Tale'

~ Paula Phillips, The Phantom Paragrapher

Only in Novels

5 out of 5 Hearts~ The plot was refreshing, the pace was good and I hated to see the story come to an end.

~ Theresa Joseph, The Romance Studio

Hidden in Pages

4 out of 5 stars~ Author Laura Briggs does a wonderful job drawing out her characters and, even though this story is short, we get a really good view of what the future holds for Adelle and Brandon

~ Telstar, Long and Short Reviews

Christmas with Miss Austen

5 out of 5 Twinkling Lights~ ...Christmas with Miss Austen is a well-paced and charming tale that is easy to read in one sitting

~Kimberly Truesdale, Indie Jane

1

It was mid-October, with crimson and yellow leaves curling away from branches on trees that lined the highway. Ignoring the chill in the air, Jenna Cade lowered the rental car's windows. The cool breeze fanned strands of gold hair before her eyes and rustled the map beside her in the passenger seat. Her destination, a rural town in Alabama, had been circled in red.

Three months and four states had slipped past since Jenna first began her journey. Not a pleasure trip, but a tour in search of the Deep South's forgotten burial grounds—cemeteries dating back hundreds of years, somehow lost in the fray of time and property development, their existence little more than lore to those living around them.

Such gravestones were scattered across wooded hollows, remote pastures lands, even the muddy banks of a swamp. Hallowed grounds haunted by nothing and no one, Jenna's feet the first to tread their soil in decades for all she knew.

"Dead Cemeteries," as her agent, Joyce Edel, referred to them.

Jenna preferred the less macabre *Stories Behind the Stones*, a title penciled in the notes of her work portfolio. Its pages bulged with material from visits to sites in Georgia, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Photographs and gravestone rubbings mostly, her

observations recorded on a handheld device she kept in her knapsack.

At night, she played back the recordings as she typed a first draft. Her voice sounding tinny and faraway on the machine, a breathless quality as she noted, "There's a face sculpted into this marble—a woman's face. Young features, a wide mouth and oval eyes..."

Other oddities greeted her past the acres of brush and bramble. In one place, the hollowed shell of an old church watched over the monuments, its stone foundation the only part untouched by the flames of a past fire.

"How does this even happen?" her agent asked, reading over the materials Jenna e-mailed from the weeks she spent on the road. "It's like these people just got erased from history, like no one even remembers them. They've just—disappeared."

"I know," said Jenna, the same photos spread before her on the bed. She had never seen anything look so desolate, even when researching a manuscript for the communities rendered ghost towns by the railroad deals. She had dug broken pottery and arrowheads from the dust of former Native American villages, but this was her first time to unearth someone's headstone from a deserted landscape.

She tried to imagine her own grave in some isolated wood someday, thorn plants tangled round the moss-encrusted stone. Unlikely, considering the Cade family's attentive nature for previous generations, with family burial plots and with memorial and decoration days observed every year since she could remember.

But then, hadn't someone cared for these

individuals, as well?

“Most cemeteries aren’t on the tax roll,” a city official had explained the first time she phoned to report a neglected burial site. “If the legal descendants are dead or untraceable, the city may supervise a grant for maintenance. Otherwise, it’s up to the community to find the money and resources.”

It was this last option Jenna hoped the book would set in motion. If she could put a story with the stones, then readers might feel a connection to neglected cemeteries in their towns and neighborhoods.

But how did one describe a stranger’s heart or capture the tone of a voice long since faded from any ear? The answer evaded her as she crushed carpets of poison ivy to find just a pile of rocks for a marker or sometimes deep impressions in the earth where a grave may or may not be planted.

Babies’ graves were the easiest to identify. She knew them by the sight of a lamb’s shape etched into the surface, or sometimes a single flower severed from the stem. A broken sword might represent a youth cut down in his prime, a broken branch the same.

Slave cemeteries, she learned, were nearly impossible to document. The few inscriptions were chipped away by harsh elements, the limestone crumbling beneath a green film no amount of scrubbing would ever remove. There had been one in Mississippi—a boggy strip of acreage known among the locals as Angel’s Pass—where the tombs were half-swallowed by greedy, spongy brown earth.

Jenna’s boots sank, her knees caked with mud as she knelt to examine the damaged markers. Even the ones lacking names bore traces of a design, or maybe a special curve in the stone’s shape. Proof that someone,

somewhere, had once cared.

Such markers were too fragile to withstand even the gentlest of gravestone rubbings, the stone yielding a hollow sound when she tapped it with a pencil. She photographed them instead, angling mirrors to slant the sunlight so it bathed the carved portions in shadow. That was an old trick, one safer than brushing the cracks with flour, or wrapping the stone in tin foil to make an imprint.

“Believe in ghosts?” more than one person asked whenever she spoke of the project in the towns surrounding the cemeteries. Their mouths would quirk in a sly smile as they waited for her response.

The answer was always the same: a firm “No,” a shake of the head, and a faint laugh. Her fingers instinctively moved to the silver cross around her neck, a graduation gift from her parents when she left their family home for the university in Annapolis.

Faith in her Heavenly Father had long ago replaced any childish fears she might have harbored for phantom visitors stealing between this world and the next. These days, her sole fascination lay with how the people lived before the flesh had wasted into bone, and, from there, into dust.



The cemetery at Sylvan Spring was almost a ghost in its own right.

At least, that was the slant the newspaper story had taken. Filed among Jenna’s research papers, the article was dated eight years back, and focused on the stretch of woods that bordered the rural Alabama town.

Hikers who braved its paths in search of the spring had claimed to see old headstones planted among the acres of foliage. None could ever find the cemetery a second time, and accounts of where it had been seen varied so much that the article's writer chose to call it a "ghostly encounter," the stones appearing and vanishing as mysteriously as a phantom.

Her agent was certainly far from convinced, reminding her that the publisher was adamant; the upcoming New Orleans site had to be a prominent feature. "Take a week, maybe ten days, and check this place out," Joyce told her, "but remember—there's no time for detours. No second guesses, especially when the site in Louisiana is a sure thing."

A graveyard with a confirmed location, and volunteers already on site to help with the genealogical research. This was the silent implication of her agent's words.

"Ten days," Jenna agreed, her gaze falling on the destination circled in red. Less than eighty miles of country road remained between herself and the truth of her latest search.

Dusk arrived ahead of her, bathing the town in a soft glow. She had expected to find a tourist trap after reading about the local spring, but there were no spa centers among the collection of buildings that slid past her windshield. There were churches of different denominations and a prayer chapel with stained glass. Also, a tarot card reader, whose cottage-like building seemed to hunker in the shadows, its porch banisters swathed in kudzu vine.

More businesses caught her eye: a crystal and candle emporium named Moonspell, a custom-design jewelry store, and a pottery shop with local goods on

display. The strains of a live folk band echoed from the open door of a pub-themed restaurant on the corner.

Her accommodation for the week, a historic inn, was located at the end of the square. She parked before the white-washed structure her agent had called “old-fashioned and overpriced,” when she booked the room on her client’s behalf.

Jenna conceded the first part of the statement, her gaze taking in three stories of gables and balconies and the trellis with its mask of purple wisteria. A black-wrought-iron fence hugged the corner, hinting at a possible flower garden in the back.

As she climbed from the car, something else caught her eye: a banner flapping in the breeze between two lampposts. The words, *Ye Old Hallowed Days Festival* had been formed in curving script, a date given for the following weekend.

Painted below was a series of strange shapes. Triple spirals and interlocked circles, an intricate set of knots that formed a shield. A Renaissance festival was her first guess, or something of a medieval nature. Maybe some sort of Halloween celebration, given this time of year.

It was likely to be the last one, yet something about the symbol seemed ancient, almost pagan-like. Her mind flew to the card reader’s business and the shop of crystals and mineral rocks. At a glance, this place seemed to offer as much to New Age crowds as it did to the Christian congregation.

Inside, she questioned the clerk about it as they checked her reservation.

“Oh, the Celtic thing,” said the girl, scarcely younger than Jenna, hair bleached blond and in short spikes, a piercing in her left nostril. “Yeah, it has to do

with the county's heritage society. They thought it up decades ago to keep town history alive, but it's grown since then. Games and booths and stuff like that were added to it."

"Is it supposed to be for Halloween?" Jenna guessed. Perhaps the celebration was only a harmless fall-themed cultural festival with no connection to the hints of occult dabbling she'd seen elsewhere in the town. She was curious to know the truth.

The girl's brow furrowed. "I think it's more of a history thing, maybe something to do with a legend? Anyway, it's something that happened ages ago. A curse or hex on the town."

"Curse?" Jenna echoed. "What—like a drought or a grasshopper infestation or something?" She couldn't help the laugh that escaped as she tried to imagine what kind of old superstition could possibly demand its own celebration, short of the usual one that had people carving pumpkins and donning costumes at this time of year.

"Not sure," the girl answered with a shrug. "I've only lived here a couple years, but someone told me it goes back to stories in the 1800s." She shrugged again as if to emphasize her lack of certainty, and then turned to the computer screen beside her.

This explanation was more bizarre than Jenna imagined, making her wonder how many other legends the town might have.

Shifting her knapsack, she reached for a brochure display on the desk—lots of pictures of quaint shops where workers demonstrated such techniques as candle making and basket weaving.

"Is there someplace I can learn more about the town's history?" she asked, thumbing through the

glossy pamphlet. "A university or genealogy center, some place with old records and deeds."

"There used to be a museum, but I heard all its stuff burned in an accident." The girl paused mid-type, thinking. "I've seen a historical society over by the library. An old building with stained glass windows."

"Perfect," said Jenna, pocketing the brochure. She would need help from local researchers to identify the names on the headstones—if there *were* any to identify, that is.

"You're in the Dragonfly Room," said the clerk, sliding a key across the desk. "We serve breakfast at eight, and you'll find the dining hall through that set of accordion doors by the stairs..." she broke off as the phone by the computer rang.

Jenna wanted to ask more, to find out if the festival could somehow tie in with her research for the book.

But the clerk was busy moving a reservation for someone, her fingers stroking over the computer keyboard as she talked.

For now, Jenna would have to be content with unpacking her bags, and the glimpse of the town below through her second story window.

2

The shops were still locked when Jenna made her way outside the next morning. She had skipped breakfast in her eagerness to explore the town, pulling her cellphone out to snap pictures of the old-fashioned buildings in the square. Architecture that was mostly 1920s, though some looked as if it might be Queen Anne period.

She found the historical society next to the library. Its windows were still dark, a sign advertising the hours as 10AM to 1PM, no weekends.

Maybe its volunteers would be eager for a credit in her upcoming manuscript. The other sites had required a genealogist to hasten the process of identifying the graves, some of whom were still at work on the slave cemeteries, the damaged stones threatening to never yield answers beyond what met the eye.

"Morning," said a woman who passed her on the sidewalk, her arms cradling a tray of plant seedlings. She had a stocky build and pleasant face, her auburn hair pulled back in a handkerchief. She unlocked the door to a shop called *Old World Herbs*. Once inside, the woman left the closed sign facing out as she fussed with a window display.

Jenna continued down a series of streets, feet turning where a sign indicated the Sylvan Grove Cemetery would be. She hoped its older stones might give her some clue as to when the wooded cemetery

fell out of use—and out of memory. Surprised to find the cemetery gates open when none of the shops were, she peered past the entrance. Rows of cold gray monuments glittered in the morning light. The air was crisp and her denim jacket seemed insufficient as she moved forward.

It was quiet here except for the occasional bird cry and the rustle of dry leaves beneath her boots. The older graves would be somewhere in the back. She glanced over more recent dates on nearby tombs. Her breath hitched as, out of the corner of her eye, she saw something move.

A figure had appeared among the markers on the other side of the graveyard. A man, his hair dark and slightly ruffled. Not the caretaker, and certainly not a spirit, though her heart continued to beat as if he were an apparition.

Dressed in jeans and a green utility jacket, he crouched before a tomb that was sculpted in ivy. One hand rested against the chiseled pattern as the other clutched a bouquet of wild flowers.

They were too far apart to speak, to do anything more than exchange a look, except his face was turned away.

She continued to walk, her steps slow and noiseless, as she stared at the stranger.

As if sensing her gaze, he turned, revealing a profile with features young, but tired, in the morning light.

Another second and he was gone, her glimpse of him obscured by the spread of angelic wings from an elaborate monument. A faint flush covered her cheeks. Shame, perhaps, for disturbing a mourner come to pay their respects.

She didn't see him again, didn't look back to see if his gaze followed her through the paths. Quick steps carried her to a far corner of the yard where a pair of weeping willows stood guard over tombs as old as the 1880s. The slabs of limestone and slate were impressively preserved, sunlight reflecting off the gilded lettering.

The stones changed to the more durable marble and sandstone the further she moved into the 1900s, implying a shift in the town's fortunes. Instinctively, she raised her camera, focusing the lens on hand-carved designs that seemed far more varied than those of modern tombs made by machines.

Winged skulls with gap-toothed smiles. An angel with a scroll and another with a trumpet; a hand that reached to snuff a candle. Lambs, butterflies, and hands folded in prayer. Her finger traced the beveled edges, lips forming a sad smile. Angling the camera lens so that no sunlight obscured the carvings, she snapped a picture.

Footsteps crunched behind her, and she turned, half-expecting to see the stranger with the wildflowers.

Instead, an older gentleman strolled, a trash sack in one hand as he collected withered bouquets and pieces of ribbon shredded by the wind. "Good morning," he said, one hand doffing his cap in a gentlemanly manner.

Jenna smiled, hoisting her camera as she said, "These headstone engravings are beautiful. I couldn't resist a few pictures."

"Yes, they are impressive," the man agreed, his voice pleasant as he studied the ones she had just photographed. "Taking care of them is an honor, though my knees are getting a bit weak for the job."

This was said with a chuckle as he patted the worn patch in his corduroy trousers.

"You work here, then?" Jenna asked. She wondered if he had an inkling of the wooded burial ground or if those rumors were mostly for the tourists.

"Robert Kendrick," he said, extending a hand. "I look after the place during the week. My retirement job, I call it."

Shaking his hand, she said, "Jenna Cade. I'm here researching a book—a history narrative about cemeteries in the Deep South."

"A young lass interested in history." Humor sparked in the gentle gaze that studied her beneath the cap. "That is a rare thing these days." With some difficulty, he bent to yank the stray weeds from the base of the stone with the lamb engraving.

Stowing her camera back in the knapsack, Jenna crouched beside him. "Do you know how far back the stones date? I noticed some from the 1880s and wondered if there were any older than that."

"The oldest I know of are about ten years before that," he said. "Some of them my own family. My great-great-uncle, Lucas Kendrick, traveled here from Georgia to make a homestead in the 1850s."

"Did he fight in the Civil War?" she asked, realizing she hadn't seen any military emblems among the rows, although some men from the town must have enlisted.

"Ah, not Lucas, A farming accident mangled one of his legs as a boy. Others served, though, and were killed in battle. Their resting place became a mass grave, with those who shared their fate that day."

Her fingers stopped plucking the weeds with the somber thought. The image was not a new one; she

had learned of the battle conditions from text books and the history documentaries she viewed obsessively as a college student. It never failed to impress her with its sense of loneliness, the wounded and dying, stranded so far from a home they would never return to, even in burial.

Her companion rose to his feet, extending a hand. "Don't trouble yourself on my account, dear. The youngsters from the high school volunteer on the weekends and catch the odd weeds these blurry old eyes miss."

She dusted her hands, remembering the question she should have asked before. "I wonder if you could tell me...if you've ever heard stories of another cemetery in this place. An old one that hasn't been taken care of by anybody in the town. Somewhere in the woods, I think, near the spring. "

His look of confusion told her that he hadn't, even before he answered. Though he did have some advice to offer as they moved slowly back through the stones. "I do believe there's a local fellow around who does some gravestone carving by hand. If anyone could tell you about local gravesites, it might be him."

"I thought carving stones by hand was a lost art," Jenna said. She had developed a special fondness for the craft in her recent travels, learning to distinguish the skill of the expert from the amateur. The beauty of the former could still amaze even beneath the thickest layers of grime.

"It is a dying trade," Robert agreed with a sad smile. "But I've seen this fellow's work advertised in the paper sometimes. What's his name again? I haven't spoken to him in some time, but then, I don't get around much." He patted his stiff limb and gave a faint