

The Town Drunk

Presents

Haunting Elves

Maria Schneider

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When he walked into my detective agency, I was suspicious. No one hired me these days, not since the elves moved into the building across the street with their big sign, “We Can Find... Anything!” Semi-nude fairies peered out between the letters.

“I need your help,” he said, swinging his keys around on one finger. He was bald, fortyish, and covering it well. I almost didn’t catch the hair transplant, but the black replacement on the top of his head was thicker than the flatter, thin strands at the sides.

“Why don’t you hire the elves?” I asked, jerking my thumb towards the window.

Pale blue eyes flicked to where I pointed, but he already knew what was out there. “Mr... Killian—” He helped himself to a business card from my desk. “Can I call you Max? My name is Delan, Paul Delan. I don’t need something found, I need something... lost.” He half-smiled, no doubt thinking himself clever. “I have a haunting problem. I’d like the ghosts gone, not found.” At the mention of haunts, he dropped his glance, but only momentarily.

“So why didn’t you hire the elves?” I asked again. “They know all about underworld stuff. And they certainly have the sixth sense,” I grunted, perhaps unfairly. If I advertised my special abilities I’d probably get more customers, but the downside was I’d have to pay more taxes, because these days, anyone with a perceived edge was taxed at a higher rate.

“They aren’t human,” Mr. Delan sneered. “Besides, have you seen what they charge?” He surveyed my office furniture, a mismatched arrangement picked up on the cheap. He looked back up at me with my overlapping front teeth, day-old beard, and blue jeans. “Let’s discuss your rates,” he said with complete confidence.

Ah yes, the reason I left corporate America. He was ready to give orders to the lowly worker who needed money, the human creature that had always been a part of his world. Arcane abilities and elves had only dared come out into the open after the Oil Crisis. At that point, Americans would have accepted little green men from Mars, never mind a bit of magic, to save their way of life.

I smoothed a hand across my very own brown hair. Because I didn't like him, I charged him more than double. "Two gold pieces per day, plus ten silver for expenses up front."

As I expected, he was affronted. "Are you kidding me? And just how long do you think it will take you to get rid of them?"

"Hard to say. I have to find out what kind of spooks you have, how long they've been there, that sort of thing. I'm assuming it's a recent problem or you would have taken care of it before?" He nodded. "You pay me each morning. Anytime you don't like progress, I'm paid up."

"What if I fire you at noon?" he asked.

"Mr. Delan." I gave him the same see-through look I'd used with my old managers, bosses that needed my skills in order to keep their own jobs. "You can pay me the second gold at lunchtime, but that will be on your time. I am not going to deduct minutes in order to get paid."

He didn't lose his hauteur. "You will accept a credit chip—"

I shook my head before he could finish. "Gold, Mr. Delan." I met his boardroom stare unwaveringly. "I can start tomorrow morning."

He snorted. "Mr. Killian, they are *ghosts*. That means *nighttime*."

I was used to smug attitudes. When managers hire an engineering expert, they still believe they're smarter. "I don't need to see them," I replied patiently. "I need to find out where they are from, how they got there, and how to make them leave."

"Oh." He blinked. "How will you do that?"

"Give me the address of the haunting and the first gold now—or should I meet you?"

No way was he going to leave gold unattended.

Corporate America had changed forever when world debt collapsed onto itself during the Oil Crisis. We went back to the gold system, but wealth is wealth no matter how it is calculated. It generally translates into giant estates, much like the lake house outside Austin where I found myself the next morning.

Delan led me around the back to a deck that was worthy of a museum floor piece. "Ever since I added those," he waved at two white turrets, "there's been nothing but problems. Damn ghosts come all the way to the house so we can't entertain back here at all."

The limestone turrets and short brick wall finished off the designer patio. The grill alone probably cost more than my monthly office rent. Stairs between the turrets led to a pathway and

a pool that included a waterfall. Plants would have grown on each tower's ledge had the clay pots not been shoved out.

"I had the gardener put some flowers in last night so you could see what happens." Mr. Delan pointed needlessly to the beheaded blooms.

"Ghosts usually like flowers," I mused aloud.

"Are you suggesting I try a different variety?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. "No. I mean that many ghosts are restless because they've been abandoned, either in life or death. Sometimes it's a broken promise or justice wasn't done, that sort of thing. Flowers are a tribute. Most ghosts are happy to be recognized. Pushing the flowers out is one thing, but beheading... probably a threat of some sort."

"Who cares?" he yelled. "They're dead, dammit. They should stay dead and stay out of my yard!"

I eyed him carefully. "Anyone buried on this property?" The estate stretched across the limestone bluff overlooking the lake.

"Of course not," he sputtered.

I stepped closer to the tower. If not for the ghosts, flames—probably fairy-globes—would have shown through the strategically placed mini-windows around the top of the tower. I sniffed. "Whew." Definitely the smell of the dead. "You sure the workmen didn't bury anybody in these things?"

"Are you kidding me?" He snorted in disbelief.

"Ghosts usually follow the bodies." Standing next to the tower at ground level, I observed that my head would have stuck out through the space where the lights would go—unless... "They might have buried a body partway underground and left the body standing."

"Absolutely not," he said. "I would have noticed if someone had carted a body in here."

"Uh-huh." Just like my managers thought they knew every line of software I coded. They never looked at the actual code, but they thought they were experts because they asked how things were going once or twice a day.

"Has anyone close to you died recently?" I asked. "An aunt that didn't like you, or maybe your mother-in-law?" I was careful not to imply that he had killed said relative.

"No, for God's sake! No. If it were that easy, I think I could have handled it."

Sure, he'd just order the relative to leave him alone, and since living people probably obeyed

him, he'd expect that from the dead, too. I knelt down. Mr. Delan couldn't know it, but I used a few more senses other than my sight. "Strange." The wall smelled of death too. Unfortunately, my abilities were limited to sensing and smelling death, just as with magic. I could smell magic, identify a magical object and its nature, but I couldn't affect the magic—or death. If there were bodies and ghosts here, I could probably talk to them, but I wouldn't be able to hear their answers.

I inched my way along the wall, following the limestone bricks around the patio. Every single one stunk of death. Unless a whole lot of bodies had been buried under the wall and the towers, the ghosts were tied to the new brick, as Mr. Delan had guessed. I tapped a loose chunk of the limestone off one corner. I turned it over, but there was nothing unusual about it other than the smell.

I turned back to my annoyed employer. "Where did you get the stone?"

He blinked. "What?"

I repeated myself patiently. "The store? The supplier?"

More blinking. "I got a deal on it." He frowned.

"They might have known the stuff was haunted. Might be why you got a good price."

It took several more questions before he finally said, "I got it from the quarry. There was no middleman."

"You have a name?" I asked. "Someone you dealt with?"

He shook his head. He glanced across the oasis that was his lawn. "I didn't handle that."

"Can you put me in touch with whoever did?" I had my gold. If he wanted to stall, it was his money.

"I don't see how that matters," he repeated stubbornly. "I hired you to get rid of the haunts." His eyes were back to mine, giving orders. "Let's leave out the side trips."

"Mr. Delan." I took a deep breath. "If the ghosts came with the stone, then I must figure out where the stone came from. Then I can figure out how to get rid of the ghosts."

"How are you going to make them go back?" he demanded. "Just because you know the place—"

I held up my hand. "If I know where they're from and why they left, I can figure out how to get them to go back. I can fix whatever made them leave."

He frowned. "What if you can't?"

“There is always a way to guide a ghost back to its rest. You just have to figure out what the ghost wants.”

His eyes lit up. “Well, do that! Do that from here. Ask the ghost!”

I shook my head. Slowly. Then again to make sure he would notice. “Have you had any luck talking to them?”

We argued about it for another half hour. He finally overruled me. “You pick the exorcist, but I’m not wasting any more time on this.”

It was his gold. If he wanted to hire an exorcist, fine, but the exorcist was going to want to help the ghosts find peace, too. Unfortunately, the only exorcist I knew was one of the elves next door. I hated to hire the competition, because if I wasn’t careful, the elves were going to put me out of business.

Of course, if I didn’t solve my cases, I was going to lose customers anyway.

The exorcist was even less cooperative than I’d expected, but it was probably because I had asked her to disguise herself. I suspected Mr. Delan would treat her badly if he knew she was elfin.

After less than a one-minute inspection at the house, she declared, “This ain’t no possession. There aren’t any evil spirits here.”

“Something’s haunting my home!” Delan howled.

“No bodies, nothing to exorcise.” She tromped around the estate in her army boots, sniffing this and that, using some kind of wand. The only thing she found was a dead squirrel.

“Take the stones back to the quarry,” was her final advice.

Delan turned his wrath on me, the only employee not headed for the front gate. “I am *not* tearing this down.”

“It’s not a bad suggestion,” I said. “You could sue the dealer for selling you tainted goods.”

I waited in vain for a name.

“Find another exorcist,” he demanded. He threw several pieces of silver and one additional gold on the patio stones at my feet.

I left them there. “You’re paid up for the day. I’ll bring someone by tomorrow.”

Since the guy had paid me for a full day, I went into the office and roughed out the tonnage of rocks in his tower structures. I figured on about a month to build the thing and worked backwards. My computer wasn't pretty, but it had friends in high places. It didn't take long to find the guys who had installed the limestone.

Unfortunately, the guy I talked to was clear. "The bricks were already there. We bring our cat, and when the cat said time to leave, we gone."

Ah, smart man. "Cat told you when the spooks were awake?"

"The spirits talk to the cat; the cat, she leave, we leave."

No matter how many times I offered to grease his palm, he stuck to his story. The stones were there when he was hired.

I got a little bit further when I asked, "You know where he got them? You know any guys who might deliver tainted stuff?"

He hesitated. "Mr. Delan tell us they from the quarry."

"Yeah, he told me the same thing." I waited. The silence stretched out. "You know where I can hire some guys to take the rocks back?"

The bricklayer either chuckled or gagged. "Back? You want to take them back?"

"They're haunted, remember? He's going to have to haul them back out."

Now he definitely chuckled. "Maybe he hire us to break up the wall. We bring our cat. We do the work. But I not haul them. You need hauling, you call Juan. Maybe he can help you. Maybe not."

Juan was not of a mind to help. He did not haul limestone. He also said that he didn't speak English, and claimed he wasn't Juan, he was Juan's brother just visiting.

I didn't believe it, so I kept asking questions. "I'm looking to get cheap limestone like Delan. He said to call you, you could find me some good stuff."

"No. My brother no do it. He haul. He not find."

I was tempted to walk across the street and hire the elves to find the origin of the limestone.

Instead, I took the chunk out of my pocket that I had chipped off the wall. It smelled of death, but only lightly. It wasn't big enough to draw any ghosts. I could easily link it to the quarry in Cedar Park or the one over on the east side of Austin, but I wasn't going to wander around those places looking for bodies. If someone had been killed out there, the ghosts weren't likely to have left with the stones.

No, chances were that Delan knew the deceased. He just wouldn't admit it.

Back on my computer, I looked into Delan's finances.

"Damn. Guy could have bought the elves, their office, and had them find his shoes every morning if he wanted." I traced through accounts in three different countries. No recent inheritances.

Tapping my fingers, I tried the social columns. "Ah-ha. No recent deaths, Mr. Delan?" I scanned back a bit and forward, but the business associate was the only funeral—and Delan had hosted the memorial service. "So how did your buddy get from the funeral site to your stones?" I frowned. It still didn't make sense, but at least I had better questions for tomorrow.

Mr. Delan was defensive about the late Peter Holm. "The coffin? Of course it wasn't here! Are you crazy? It was a respectable gathering in his memory. Good God man, the stones weren't even here then! They weren't put in until..." He waved a hand at the objects in question. "A week or two—hell, a month later."

"The gathering was in May," I said. "Were the stones off in a pile somewhere? Could the ghost have been—"

"The ghost is not Peter. I've seen the damn ghosts. There's three or four bobbing lights sometimes. Flower pots flying from several different places."

"Were the stones somewhere on the property when your friend died?" I tried again.

"No!"

I had another thought. "Did he die here?"

His eyes bulged. At first I thought he was angry, but then I felt the presence behind me. Delan waved his arms as though attacking gnats and shrieked, "Get rid of it!"

Death has a smell, sometimes musty, sometimes of dead leaves, sometimes of blood. This smell was a mix. I expected anger, fear... but I got a disgruntled old man feeling, a swirl of poker players pulling nasty tricks on each other... mischievousness.

Still, it doesn't pay to mess with the dead. I turned around just in time to duck away from a flying spatula. A long grilling fork zipped past me.

Delan screamed and leapt for the French door. I heard a solid smack and a ripping sound before the door slammed.

I flattened and rolled. More grill tools flew after me, and more shot toward the door. Delan

stood inside yelling at me until something broke the window.

“Get back!” I shouted, jumping away from the wall and running for the oak trees. A patio cushion smacked me from behind, almost knocking me flat. The pool was the safest bet since the ghosts wouldn’t be able to follow me through water, but I really didn’t want to slink out, wet and cowardly, in front of Delan.

I put an oak tree between me and the patio and watched. Every loose object available flew at the French doors, taking out more glass. Before long, there wasn’t a shard left.

When the clatter finally stopped, I waited a couple of minutes before stepping out into the open. When nothing came hurling my way, I hurried across the patio.

“I’m working on it!” I told the wall. “Just give me some time.”

Stepping inside the house, I shouted, “Tell me where your friend was buried!” It was my only clue. Delan’s friend had to be angry. Otherwise, why had the ghosts awoken in the middle of the day when we spoke his name? It still didn’t make sense unless the body had been there, but... “Did the wife bring Peter’s ashes along?”

I kept one eye on the patio in case the name brought the ghosts out again. The other I kept on Delan. He was crouched behind a massive leather couch with some sort of blanket draped over his body.

He froze in the act of standing up. “He’s buried. He was never here.”

“Fine.” Rather than stand there and argue with Delan, I headed out.

It took me two tries to find the right cemetery since I mistakenly went to Fairview first. I ended up calling into my computer to access the obituary and then driving back towards Austin.

Cemeteries are largely the same no matter where you go, so I don’t know why I hadn’t figured out the limestone clue a whole lot sooner. I stood there staring at the evidence. “The elves would have guessed,” I muttered, looking across gravestones and mausoleums. “Ghosts belong in graveyards.”

I didn’t bother to pay my respects at Peter Holm’s grave, nor did I check with the proprietor. I knew where Delan had gotten his stones.

I drove back to the lake house and rang at the gate.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Delan complained. “I’ll meet you out back on the patio unless those things are having a fit.”

I parked near the front steps and went around the side. I handed Delan the gold coin for the afternoon part of the job.

“You’ve no choice but to take the stones back,” I told him. “They’re stolen goods. Not only that, the ghosts aren’t going to go back to the cemetery without them. Maybe they took a liking to the guy who was supposed to have these stones built into a mausoleum.”

Delan glowered at me before staring off at the lake. “These stones didn’t belong to anyone. They were going to be used to build a dividing wall.” He threw his shoulders back. “I checked. After the funeral, I talked to the guys out there.”

“What guys?” I asked.

He took his time answering. “The guys there. Doing some work on the gravesites. Those stones were piled up. There were tons of them, too many for the short wall that was going in. Besides, no one was in a hurry; there were weeds growing in the stack!”

“You have all kinds of money and you stole stones from a graveyard.” I shook my head. “Unbelievable.”

“They’re *stones!* Dirt. No one was using them.”

“Oh, but someone *was.*” When Delan opened his mouth to protest again, I pointed at the wall. “The ghosts.” I nodded. “Yup, and they aren’t going to leave their stones. You had best call Juan and have him take the stones back.”

Delan looked startled. “Juan?”

“The guy who delivered them. I imagine he works at the cemetery?” Delan grunted, not about to admit anything else. I shrugged. “It had to be someone who could get in and out of there in the daytime. Only a fool would try to steal from a graveyard at night, especially haunted stones.” I thought a half-second before adding, “Only a damned idiot would try to steal from a graveyard period.”

“They were just sitting there!”

I smiled. “They don’t belong to you. They belong to the ghosts, and they want their stones put back where you found them.”

I started towards the gate.

“Wait!” Delan said. “You didn’t get rid of the ghosts.”

I stopped. “I’ve solved your haunting problem. All you have to do now is put the ghosts back where they belong. Hire Juan. I hear he delivers.”

At the last minute, I remembered the small piece of limestone brick I had taken. I took it from my pocket and set it on top of the wall.

Maria Schneider grew up in rural New Mexico, where the desolate desert environment required that she embellish the landscape with her imagination. After working in the computer industry for twelve years, she decided technology moved too slowly and again put her imagination to work, creating messes and then inventing characters to handle all the cleanup. She currently resides in Austin, Texas.