

This is a Jixemitri Circle Writing Challenge #12 entry for Eric's Pesky Poltergeist Challenge. It also happens to be a Jixemitri CWC #8 entry for Jenni's Trix-e-Tron Challenge.

## **The Case of the Mysterious Ghost**

by Susan and Dana

"Will you look at this place?" Trixie exclaimed as the rented Cadillac mini-van, which carried all of the Bob-Whites and Miss Trask, pulled into the gated driveway of a spectacular, modern mansion on the shores of Lake Michigan.

"Daddy certainly went all out with this project," Honey agreed, her hazel eyes darting back and forth as she tried to take in the all of the details of her father's latest rental property. Her eyes fell upon expanses of manicured lawns, a panoramic view of the sparkling blue waters below, and brightly colored flowers that lined the curving macadam driveway, tastefully done in blue-gray stone.

But it was the house that was truly the showplace of the property. The two-story white mansion boasted several large windows, guaranteed to not only make the interior appear airy and spacious, but also to give the grandest possible view of the beautiful locale.

"And your dad said an old Victorian manor had been standing here before he had this built?" Brian asked Honey.

She nodded in response. "Yes, apparently it had been vacant for quite some time and had fallen into disrepair. The city condemned it as a result. Daddy realized that the discounted property was too good to pass up and decided to invest in a luxury home he could rent to Chicago tourists."

"Wow, Honey, they are going to have to be some rich tourists to afford this place!" Mart said as Miss Trask expertly maneuvered the mini-van into the unattached, three-car garage.

Trixie poked her brother, thinking his comment rather forward, but Honey just laughed.

"Daddy doesn't do anything halfway! But, with the proximity to the city, yet the more comfortable feel of the suburbs, this house will attract a lot of renters. Especially given its location on Lake Michigan and its many amenities."

As the Bob-Whites spilled from the rental vehicle and collected their duffle bags and backpacks, Jim spoke up, "Dad already has the place rented for the entire month of July to a business associate of his, and the entire month of August to one of Mother's sorority sisters whom she still keeps in touch with."

The group hurried across the stone path that led to the house, all eager to see what awaited them inside. Trixie hopped on one foot and then the other as Miss Trask found the appropriate key and unlocked the door. The side door they entered led into a short hallway, with a utility room to the left and a small powder room to the right. The hall opened up into a spacious area covered in Italian granite floors which lead to the family room and the modern, gourmet kitchen off to the right, and the impressive foyer with curved staircase straight ahead. Off to the left was a small den, complete with a mahogany desk, state-of-the-art computer, and various electronic business gadgets.

The Bob-Whites dropped their bags and began their tour. Upon seeing the business office, Trixie wrinkled her nose.

"Why would anybody want to be able to work while on vacation?" she asked no one in particular.

On the other side of the staircase was a richly furnished living room and dining room, done in a combination of mauves and golds. A door from the dining room led them full circle back into the kitchen. A nook opened off of the kitchen, entirely enclosed from floor-to-ceiling with windows. The June sun sparkled on the cerulean waters below.

"I could get used to eating my breakfast to that view!" Dan exclaimed. Di nodded her agreement.

The gang explored the great room with home theater set-up. Trixie opened a door off to

the side of the room and discovered it led to a spa complete with sauna and indoor Jacuzzi.

"This is so cool! Remember the hot springs at Mead's Mountain? This will be just as good!"

"It would have been nice to have an outdoor hot tub," Jim commented, "but I guess that's not so practical in Chicago in January!"

The group grabbed their luggage and mounted the circular staircase and found that the second floor was as luxurious as the first. Miss Trask had already laid claim to a small bedroom that had its own bath. Dan and Mart chose a blue room that shared a bathroom with the green room that Jim and Brian would share.

The girls would stay in the large master suite, where they could all three easily fit in the king size bed. The room, done in cream and gold, was breathtaking.

Di threw herself on the pillow-top mattress of the bed and sighed. "What a place to spend a week! I know your dad sent us here to ensure that there were no bugs left from the construction, but I think it's pretty safe to report that we're going to love it here!"

Honey fell down on the bed next to Di. "Isn't it wonderful? And I always love to visit Chicago! As Mother says, there's so much to see and do."

Trixie grinned. "There is a lot I want to see, but gleeps! There's so much to do *here*, too. Didn't your dad say the basement is finished, complete with a rec room *and* an exercise room?"

"Yep. Now I know how Annie felt," Honey said, referring to the famous curly-haired orphan. "I think I'm gonna like it here!"

Meanwhile, Mart looked around in approval at his room as he tossed his duffle bag in the general direction of the closet. The elegant twin beds with their cast iron headboards, royal blue bedspreads and soft plethora of pillows were the focal point of the room, until one looked toward the window.

The curtains had been tied away from the window, showcasing a breathtaking view of the sloping green lawn and a winding path that presumably led down to the private beach on the shores of Lake Michigan that Mr. Wheeler had told them about before they'd left him that morning.

"Gosh, would you get a look at this view?" the sandy-haired blond marveled as he crossed the room to get a better glimpse of the tall oak trees that bent their branches over the path that disappeared out of sight behind them.

Dan dumped his bag close to Mart's and ambled over behind his friend, glancing at the various birds that teased each other through the air, spiraling up and diving toward the ground before they'd climb upward again. His eyes widened at the flash of red that he saw peeking through one of the oak trees. "Is that a cardinal?" he demanded.

"Probably. They're Illinois' state bird. I think they have quite a few of them around here," Mart said absentmindedly, too enamored in the view to say much else.

Brian and Jim walked through the small bathroom into their friends' bedroom and grinned at each other as they noted the two other boys staring in rapt attention out the window.

"What's got you so fixated?" Brian asked. "Are they setting up lunch or something?"

Jim snorted as Dan and Mart turned to look at them. Dan merely rolled his eyes and Mart glared at his brother. "The view, lunkhead," he said, gesturing with a freckled hand. "Some of us have loftier things in mind than our baser instincts."

Before Brian could say a word in response, Jim glanced around the room, noting the royal blue bedspreads and curtains and the gold highlights in the pillows and curtain ties and carpeting. He grinned. "Yeah. Dan and you...not in touch with your baser instincts." Jim gestured with his own freckled hand. "So, tell me, Brian. Does this color scheme ring a bell with you? I'm trying to remember exactly where I've seen it before."

All three of the others looked around the room in surprise for a moment. Then, Dan chuckled while Brian's face cleared miraculously and his dark eyes started to twinkle. "Why, I believe you're correct, Jim." He tapped his finger against his cheek and attempted to look

thoughtful. "Who has this color scheme? I'm frightfully bad with decorating. And you know that Mrs. Wheeler regularly redecorates the rooms at the Manor House. Perhaps it's Celia who has this in her trailer?"

"Or maybe it was Jane Morgan's house," Dan added helpfully. "Didn't she have these colors in her Private Lab for Doing Evil?"

"Oh, no. It couldn't have been her," Jim argued, trying to keep a smile off his face. "I'm thinking it might have been Pam Watson. She probably talked her parents into it before they even knew what they were doing."

Mart scowled at the others who were all grinning at him. "For your information, the whole reason I picked this room was because of its close proximity to the stairs, and the fact that my door wasn't opening right out into the girls'."

"Close proximity to the stairs?" demanded Brian. "What? Are you planning late night gallivanting?"

Dan snorted. "He wants to be able to get down to the kitchen without having anyone notice."

Jim began to chuckle. "Well, I suppose if there are huge hunks of food missing from the refrigerator every morning, we'll know where to look, won't we?"

Mart's eyes narrowed as he looked at the two older boys. "Just remember, my fair-weathered friends, what goes around, comes around." He raised an eyebrow. "Do you think I'm going to be the only one sneaking downstairs for some sort of refreshment at two a.m.?" He gestured toward the doorway. "Especially after Trixie finds some sort of mystery and pulls Honey into it?" Mart's blue eyes blazed as he continued, "I'd say you'll be more likely to go on a search for the liquor cabinet rather than the refrigerator, because how quickly do you think those two girls are going to lead you two by the nose right into some sort of mess?"

With that parting comment, he stalked across the room, threw open the door and disappeared out into the hallway and all three communally winced as he slammed the door behind him.

"He'll get over it," Dan murmured at the chagrined look on Jim and Brian's faces. "He probably wouldn't have been so mad if I hadn't been harassing him about making up with Di in the car on the way up here."

Brian sighed. "Well, I'm not eager to start a weekend with him mad at us, but I'm more worried about what he just said than I am about him blowing off steam."

"What do you mean?" asked Dan, his face puzzled.

"You just know he's right," Jim added with a groan. He pointed to his watch. "Any bets on how long it is before Trixie finds a mystery?"

Dan laughed. "The two of you and your belly-aching." He grinned. "You know darned well that if she doesn't find one, we'll all be moping and bored out of our minds."

"I haven't recovered from the last one yet," Brian said dourly, kicking at the dust skirt around the edge of the nearest twin bed.

"Mmm...could that be because Trixie told Mart who told Di who happened to mention it to you by mistake that Honey spent that whole two weeks mooning over the son of that horse trainer up in Minnesota?"

As Brian scowled, Jim chuckled ruefully. "Made me think twice about ever skipping out on any other trips, I'd have to say," the redhead interjected. "First, it's Honey, next it'll probably be Trixie."

"Well, you both know the solution to that," Dan said practically. He gestured toward the beautiful view that he and Mart had been admiring earlier. "If they find one, better get your behinds on board P.D.Q."

A stubborn look crossed Brian's face as he protested, "We're supposed to agree with whatever harebrained scheme Trixie comes up with?" He gave Dan a disgusted look. "I don't want to go out with Trixie."

Jim let out a long breath and shook his head. "Let's not discuss *that* again, or I will be

heading for the liquor cabinet.”

“All I’m saying is that it might give you two a couple of brownie points. Brownie points, I might add,” Dan said with a twinkle in his dark eyes, “that both of you are in desperate need of.”

In the meantime, the girls were unpacking their suitcases in their spacious suite.

“So, Trix,” Honey said with a sly smile, “how long do you think it will be before you stumble across some mystery?”

Di looked up in surprise. “You don’t think Trix would find a mystery *here*, do you? In a brand new house? With all of these luxuries to keep her otherwise occupied and with no history whatsoever?”

Honey snorted. “It’s not the house’s luxuries that will keep her occupied. I think a certain red-haired guy is going to keep her occupied.”

Trixie pretended to glare at her friend. “Must you speak about me as though I’m not even here? And Jim will keep me no more occupied than Brian will keep you or Mart will keep Di!”

Honey smiled. “Guilty as charged, I’m sure.”

“But back to the possibility of finding a mystery…” Trixie began as Di groaned and Honey playfully threw a pair of socks at her sandy-haired friend.

“Trix, we’re here to make sure this house is ready to rent and to have *fun*, and fun does not *always* have to include a mystery!” Di exclaimed.

“Oh, I know,” Trixie said, tossing Honey’s socks back to her. “But this is *Chicago*. You know, city of gangsters and lawlessness and Al Capone and…”

“And the Sears Tower and Shedd’s Aquarium and the Art Institute of Chicago and The Field Museum and the Magnificent Mile,” Honey interrupted with a smile.

“Don’t forget the Museum of Science and Industry,” Di joined in. When both girls looked at her, she chuckled ruefully. “Don’t tell me you haven’t heard the boys talk about that place incessantly since they found out we were visiting Chicago?”

Trixie rolled her eyes. “Have I ever! Anyway, I know that there are a whole ton of things to see and do and keep us busy, but I read about this Gangster Tour that they have, and I was really hoping that we could find some time to do that.”

“We’re going to be here a whole week,” Honey said, hanging up her final piece of clothing in the large, walk-in closet. “I am sure we’ll have time to do just about everything that we want to do. Remember what your dad always says about visiting New York City? If you have a week, you’ll see all that you want to. It applies to Chicago as much as New York, I would expect. Have we all finished unpacking?”

“I think so,” Trixie said. “Let’s go explore the house more!”

The girls eagerly ran downstairs to give the lavish house a more thorough inspection. They turned right at the bottom of the winding staircase and found themselves in the living room staring at a painting of a severe-looking woman dressed in Victorian clothes. The rest of the room was so modern, that the painting was blatantly conspicuous.

“Why did your dad decorate with *that*, Honey?” Trixie said, staring with interest at the portrait.

“I think it’s from the Victorian mansion that originally stood here. I remember Daddy saying something about keeping it as a tribute to the original owner. I think it was his wife.” She shivered. “It gives me the creeps.”

Di agreed, moving about the room. “The eyes follow you where ever you go!”

Just then, there was a large thud from upstairs. Trixie sighed. “Those boys! Always making so much noise!” As she said this, the front door opened and all four boys entered, excitement apparent on their faces.

“Why are you all standing inside on such a gorgeous day?” Mart demanded upon seeing the girls standing in the living room. “You’ve got to see the grounds!”

Jim looked closer at the girls. “What’s wrong? You look surprised to see us.”

The three girls looked at each other and then toward upstairs. Trixie recovered first.

"We just heard a noise upstairs. We thought it was you."

"Nope, not us," Dan said. "Maybe it was Miss Trask?"

Just then, Miss Trask came out of the den on the other side of the entry hall. "Did I hear my name? And what was that loud noise upstairs? Did something fall?"

Brian spoke up. "We were outside when the girls heard the noise. I'm sure that a suitcase fell or something. Let's go check, gang."

Upon inspection, all of the suitcases were in the closets, exactly as each person had left them. No other heavy objects lay on the ground that could have possibly explained the loud noise the girls and Miss Trask heard.

"Oh, well, probably just the house settling," Miss Trask said cheerfully. "All new houses do that. Anyway, why don't you all explore the grounds while I start dinner? But please don't go too far, as I'll need your help pretty soon."

The gang agreed and headed outdoors to explore, the loud noise from upstairs momentarily forgotten.

The group filed out, laughing and chattering amongst themselves. At Mart's enthusiastic suggestion, they headed toward the path that twisted its way down toward the lake. Jim had lingered inside for a moment to help Miss Trask pull something out of a high overhead cabinet, and came outside a few seconds after the others. He let the screen door close behind him and glanced about him to determine what direction his friends had headed, when he noticed Trixie waiting for him near the point where the path disappeared into the trees. A warm smile lit his freckled face and he jogged over to where Trixie waited. "Thanks for waiting," he said. "Miss Trask couldn't reach the crock pot." His smile turned into a grin. "I guess Dad didn't figure that anyone would use the dishes. He so rarely does himself."

Trixie giggled. "Well, you can put that on your list for him. A better place to store the crock pot."

"It will be duly noted," Jim said, crossing his heart in a dramatic gesture.

"Good," she said firmly.

Jim looked at her expectantly, waiting for Trixie to head down the path toward the lake, and then noticed a small frown etching her forehead as she stared back at the house.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Trixie didn't answer him for a second or two and then turned to look at him, blinking as if she'd only now just seen him. "I...well...it's not exactly..." A rueful look crossed her face. "I was thinking about that noise we heard."

"The noise," Jim responded carefully, but leadingly, trying to keep all inflection out of his voice. Dan and Brian's conversation was too fresh in his head. *That's all I need. To go to Chicago and have to sit by and watch Trixie drool over a tour bus driver or something.*

"Do new houses really settle?" she asked, looking up at him, her blue eyes puzzled.

"Well," Jim said hesitantly, "I'm sure they do." He gave her a sheepish grin. "I haven't lived in any brand-new houses before."

Trixie rubbed a finger against her freckled nose and giggled. "Well, I haven't either. Crabapple Farm is the only place I've ever lived." She looked back at the house again with a frown. "But even at home, the noises were more like a creaking or a groaning. Not a big thud like that."

Jim glanced back at the house before he looked again at Trixie. "Do you think there's someone else in the house? An intruder or something?"

She hesitated before she shook her head. "We all went upstairs and looked. I mean...we'd have seen someone in the house if they were there, right?"

"I'd think so," he said slowly.

Trixie finally noticed the hesitation in his voice and her eyes narrowed in a familiar way. "What are you thinking?"

He gave her a rueful look. "Just that something's telling me we're going to find ourselves in a mystery again."

She looked at him in surprise before a smile began curving her lips. "Don't tell me that *you're* getting those little chills up your spine like I always do before a mystery."

Jim gazed down at Trixie, a wry comment on his lips that died away as he studied her sparkling blue eyes. Suddenly, his hands felt clammy, his heart started to race a mile a minute and his spine felt anything but chilled. He cleared his throat, trying to force out a sentence that made some kind of sense. "Uh, no," he said. *Brilliant, Frayne, just brilliant.*

He could see the flush lighting her cheeks the longer his eyes held hers. Jim's gaze followed a twisting movement she made with her hands, and a rush of pleasure shot through him as he caught the glint of his silver bracelet on her arm. "Trixie," he said roughly as he lightly, but firmly, grabbed her hand in his.

A rustle in the trees startled both of them, and they glanced up to see Dan peering around one of the thick oak trees with a grin. "What gives, you two? You've got to see this beach! It's almost like being at the ocean. There's enough sand down there to bury Mart in."

Jim's first thought was a murderous, *No, we'll bury you in it first.*

Trixie shyly tugged her hand from his as she made a broad gesture toward the house. "Jim and I were just talking about that noise we heard earlier."

Dan wrinkled his nose. "It's probably just a branch thumping against the roof or something," he said dismissively. His chocolate glance took in Trixie's flushed face and Jim's impatient glare, and a small grin curved his lips. He raised a dark eyebrow at Trixie. "Are we thinking mystery here? I could do with some excitement."

Trixie shook her head. "No tingles in my spine yet," she admitted. "I was just curious."

He chuckled. "Well, come on and do curious down at the beach. At the very least, you can give Brian a hard time about the sand castle he's been dared into making."

"Brian's making a sand castle?" Trixie giggled. "That's got to be interesting."

"All he needs are a few engineers, construction workers and a draftsman," Dan joked. "Too bad he's stuck with a bunch of quail." He winked and then ambled back down the way he came.

Jim tried not to curse his ill-fortune that yet *again* had prevented him from doing anything romantic with Trixie. It seemed as if there were some sort of god that took great pleasure in keeping he and Trixie from having any alone time together. He repressed a sigh.

He tried to put a cheerful smile on his face and he gestured toward the path Dan had disappeared down. "I suppose we can't miss the opportunity to see Brian's sand castle, can we?"

Trixie bit her lip a bit nervously and glanced up at him, her normal boisterousness dampened a bit. Finally, she straightened her shoulders and said, "I lied before."

His eyebrows rose as he looked at her in surprise. "About what?"

"The tingles in my spine," she said, her voice almost a whisper, her face a-flame.

Jim gave her a reluctant smile. "So, we're heading for another mystery?"

"I don't know," she said hesitantly. "Maybe, but that's not what I meant."

He looked at her, puzzled. "No? Then what?"

Trixie blew out a breath, blowing a wayward curl out of her blue eyes. With a resolute look, she extended her hand and wrapped it tightly around his.

Jim glanced down at their entwined hands and then looked back at her, his face softening. "Oh, you mean *those* kind of tingles."

She gave him a nervous side glance as she worried her lip again.

A grin twitched on his lips as he squeezed her hand in his and leaned down in a conspiratorial whisper, "I lied too."

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Trixie lay in bed, thinking of the kisses she and Jim had shared before heading down to the beach, which was as spectacular as Dan said it was. It was hard to believe that a lake could be so much like the ocean, but the Great Lakes were more like inland freshwater seas than your

average lake. It was easy to see why, despite the cold winters the Great Lakes area received, people were so eager to live near them.

As she lay listening to the deep, even breathing of Honey and Di, envious of their ability to fall asleep at the drop of a hat, Trixie once again started wondering about the loud noise they had heard earlier. *Why can't I get that out of my head?*

Just then, the young sleuth heard the sound of footfalls on the staircase. *Mart's raiding the fridge again! I'm going to join him*, she decided, as she silently slipped out of bed and hurried into the hall. Because of the great number of windows on the front of the house and the bright security light outside, Trixie was able to see the hall and the stairs clearly. As she reached the top of the staircase, she realized that she could still hear the footsteps, but no one was on the steps. Trixie blinked and rubbed her eyes.

There was no one there, but now she couldn't hear the footsteps. *Did I imagine that?* She wondered as Mart's door opened.

"Hi," he whispered, apparently surprised to see her. "I thought I heard someone out here."

"So did I, but there's no one here," Trixie whispered back.

"Yes, there is—you!" Mart said with a smile.

Trixie rolled her eyes. "I could have sworn I heard footsteps on the stairs, but there's no one there."

"I thought I heard footsteps on the stairs, too. That's why I was surprised to see you standing at the top. I thought someone was going to raid the fridge. I certainly wasn't about to let them do it without me!"

"Well, since we're up..." Trixie said with a grin.

"Let's go!" Mart agreed, and the two headed downstairs and into the modern kitchen. Soon, the two were pulling out leftovers out of the fridge. Trixie took down two glasses from the cupboard and set them on the counter. She turned to take the milk out of the refrigerator, but when she turned back to the glasses, they weren't there. She blinked in confusion and then looked around. The glasses were on the opposite counter, clear across the kitchen.

"Mart?" she said hoarsely. "You were standing right next to me when I pulled the glasses from the cupboard, right?"

Mart nodded and followed her gaze.

"Then how did the glasses get *over there*?"

Mart was at a loss. He had been standing next to the fridge, preparing to cut some slices of ham to make sandwiches and had seen Trixie put the glasses down on the counter next to the refrigerator. Neither of them had moved from near the appliance, and no one else was in the kitchen. And yet the glasses were ten feet away. "I don't know, Trix," Mart gulped.

Just then the bright light hanging above the table in the breakfast nook turned on. Trixie and Mart stared at the switch on the wall that controlled that light. No one was there. The almost-twins looked at each other, rooted to the spot. When the light started to flicker on and off and an icy blast of wind hit their faces, the two suddenly came to life.

The Belden siblings turned and ran as fast as they could up the stairs.

Seemingly with one mind, the two siblings headed directly for the bedroom that Jim and Brian shared. They pushed open the door and flipped on the lights, causing a chorus of groans from the twin beds across from the door.

Brian fixed his siblings with a glare. "What is your problem?"

Jim blinked sleepily and frowned, his emerald gaze resting on his girlfriend. "Trix?"

"We've got a ghost. In the house," Trixie said emphatically.

Both Brian and Jim's eyebrows crept up skeptically. Mart added his support to Trixie's. "She's not joking. I saw evidence of it too. Glasses moving by themselves. The light switch going on and off."

"Maybe there's a short in the wiring downstairs," Brian said pragmatically.

"A short in the wiring that causes the light switch to go up and down?" Trixie demanded.

"I saw it. Mart saw it." She turned toward Jim. "Jim..."

A low growl at the bathroom door had all four of them turning toward the rumpled figure who stood there. Dan glared at them. "What the hell is going on?" His face softened, his dark eyes twinkling. "And why wasn't I included?"

"Trixie and I both heard footsteps on the stairs," Mart began.

"You didn't say anything about footsteps," Jim interrupted. A frown etched his forehead as he pushed aside his blanket. "There hasn't been a break-in, has there? Have you searched the house?"

Mart snorted derisively. "Search the house for a ghost? Not likely."

Brian muttered to himself as he threw aside his own covers. "There are no such things as ghosts."

Dan grinned at Brian's grumpiness. "Well, I am not a believer in ghosts," he drawled, "but I'm willing to keep an open mind." He winked at Trixie as he tugged the t-shirt he'd been carrying in his hand over his head.

Jim scowled at Trixie's answering smile and appreciative gaze at Dan's muscled chest and stood up, stalking across the room and grabbing her hand firmly. "Let's go downstairs and look."

The feel of Jim's hand around hers steadied Trixie, and she could already feel her racing heart slowing at the prospect of the other boys' help. Even Brian, his handsome face grumpy and tired, brought a sense of normalcy to the situation. Thus relieved, anticipation spread across her face again. She glanced at Mart who seemed to have come to a similar place. They smiled at each other and then Trixie tugged on Jim's hand excitedly. "Wouldn't that be perfectly perfect if we had our very own ghost just like last year when we stayed at the Lizzie Borden house?"

"Jim-dandy," Brian muttered.

Mart's natural loquacious nature took over as the five of them headed for the stairs. "So, Trixie and I met at the top of the stairs, and we'd both heard footsteps going down them..." His voice fell to a dramatic whisper. "But there was no one there!"

"Except you and Trixie," Dan pointed out with a grin.

"Well, yes," Mart agreed with an answering grin. "But neither of us had yet descended the stairs. Thus, our quandary."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Are you ever going to grow out of the big word phase?"

Surprisingly, Trixie came to her brother's defense. Her blue eyes narrowed. "If you're that grumpy, Brian, why don't you go back to bed and let us handle this?"

"Maybe he'll chase away the ghost with his black aura!" Mart added, giving his sister a conspiratorial wink. "We really ought to have him along just as kind of a radiator of ill will."

Jim snorted as the almost twins began to chuckle. Dan was fighting to hide a grin. Brian glared at his siblings. "You think this is funny? Two o'clock in the morning and we're hovering around talking about ghosts? We're supposed to go sight seeing early, in case you've forgotten. And I remember how great you two are with mornings."

"Lighten up, my friend," Dan said, clapping Brian's shoulder. "It's not worth getting upset over." He looked meaningfully at Mart and Trixie before he continued, "Has anyone spared a thought to the other girls? All this late night prowling and searching for ghosts and we're going to let them sleep through it?"

Mart's face darkened. "Do we really need to wake them up so Di can come along and make fun of me?"

The other four stared at him in disbelief. Trixie's face softened. "She's not going to make fun of you," she said quietly.

Mart shrugged and turned to walk down the stairs toward the kitchen. After a moment of hesitation, the rest followed him.

Trixie leaned next to Jim and whispered, "What happened with those two? Di has just been acting like her normal self. I wouldn't even know there was anything wrong if Mart hadn't

been stomping around like an angry bull all day.”

Jim sighed. “You’ve got me. I have no clue.” His hand squeezed hers. “As long as we’re okay, I’m not going to worry too much about Mart and Di. Let them sort out their differences.”

Trixie frowned slightly at his words, but finally nodded. “Okay. But I still don’t like it.”

“Neither do I,” he agreed. “But they’re old enough to deal with their problems without interference from us. Capiche?”

She sighed. “Yeah, capiche.” As they entered the kitchen, she shivered and could feel the hairs on her arms stand up on end. The pleasant air-conditioned hallway seemed almost like a sauna in comparison to the frigidness of the kitchen. She glanced up at her boyfriend who was also shivering. He’d only been sleeping in boxers and had neglected to pull on a shirt as Dan had when they left the room. Her lips twitched. *Another added benefit of ghosts in the middle of the night. Jim Frayne without a shirt on.*

Jim raised an eyebrow at her long, appreciative glance, and a slow grin curved his lips. He pulled her into his arms and kissed the top of her head. “Never let it be said that Jim Frayne didn’t keep his girl warm.”

She giggled and murmured, “Looks like you’re the one that needs warming up.”

“With you around? As if,” he murmured back as he tightened his arms around her.

Brian had leaned against the refrigerator, not even trying to hide his yawns. His dark eyes were openly skeptical as he listened to his brother’s dramatic retelling of their story.

Dan walked over to the breakfast nook and flipped the switch on, illuminating the room with a soft, gentle light, and then flipped the switch off again with a shrug. “The switch seems to be working.” He glanced around the nook. “Are you sure there isn’t another switch somewhere else?”

“I *told* you,” Trixie repeated firmly. “That switch. The one you’re touching. That switch was moving up and down *by itself*. Regardless of whether or not the light was going on and off, you haven’t explained to me how that could happen.”

Mart added his comments, gesturing toward the glasses. “They were over here,” he explained, tapping the counter with a freckled hand, and then he walked across the kitchen to where the glasses now rested, and lifted one of them and waved it. “And now they’re here.” He gestured at his sister. “Trixie didn’t move from there. She was getting milk out of the fridge.” Mart walked back over to the counter and picked up a piece of ham that he’d laid on a plate there. “And I was cutting up sandwich meat.”

Dan’s dark eyes widened appreciatively. “That looks good.” He winked at Brian who rolled his eyes and said nothing. “Maybe we ought to try making sandwiches.” He grinned. “Maybe if we did what we were doing before, we could inspire the ghost to appear.”

“Because we’re definitely treading on unsteady ground...making *sandwiches* and all,” Brian said derisively.

Trixie’s blue eyes narrowed. “Why don’t you go back to bed? You’re acting like you’re a hundred-year-old man who’s had his sleep disturbed.”

“Let’s leave the ghostly stuff alone for now, shall we?” Jim said lightly, trying to break the tension between the three siblings. “Since I’m out of bed and wide awake anyway, I think a thick sandwich would hit the spot.” Reluctantly, he let his arms fall, freeing Trixie. With a brisk rub of his arms, he frowned. “I’m freezing. I’m going to run upstairs and grab a shirt and some socks.” Jim glanced at Dan. “Can you keep them from killing each other for the next thirty seconds?”

Dan saluted him sharply. “It’s a dangerous task, Captain Frayne, but I’ll tackle it with fervor.”

Trixie sucker punched Dan on her way over to help Mart with the sandwich making. Jim hid a grin and slid out into the hallway. The glitter of moonlight gave the hall an eerie glow as he headed toward the stairs, reminding him of the creepy, haunted feeling he had each night many years ago as he had tried to sleep in his uncle’s old mansion.

Shaking his head as if to clear it, he quickly ascended the stairs and headed toward his bedroom.

Prickles crept up his spine and Jim whirled about, expecting to find Trixie following him, but all he saw was the moonlight streaming through one of the downstairs windows, and all he could hear was the sound of Belden bickering interspersed with Dan's dry comments.

"Now they've got *me* doing it," Jim said with a sigh. He headed toward his bedroom and the prickling situation grew even stronger. He glanced over his shoulder nervously and then reached toward the door. "You're being ridiculous."

But the sense that something was very wrong solidified as he felt the door handle twist underneath his hand. He felt a sharp push between his shoulder blades and fell forward, the door swinging inward under his weight. Jim hit the ground with a thud and his green eyes widened as he saw the clothes he and Brian had hung up so neatly several hours before strewn about the room in wild disarray.

"Oh, my god!" he breathed.

"James Frayne! What is going on?" An urgent, whispered voice said above him. "Oh my! What happened in here?" Honey said aloud, forgetting to be quiet in her shock at the chaos in front of her. Behind her, Di gasped as she, too, saw the state the boys' room was in.

"Did you just push me?"

Honey looked at her brother like he was out of his mind. "Push you? No. Di and I heard noises, and Trixie wasn't in bed, so we got up to investigate. What happened to your room?"

"That's what I'd like to know. There's been some, er, excitement tonight."

"What kind of excitement, Jim?" Miss Trask's crisp voice sounded out in the hall. Di, Honey, and Jim turned to see the efficient woman striding toward them as she tied a loose knot in the tie on her bathrobe.

"I'll explain as soon as I've put some warmer clothes on. The rest of the gang is down in the kitchen. I'll meet you all down there." He looked at the cotton shorts and nightshirts that both girls wore. "You might want to put warmer clothes on, too."

Di and Honey looked at him doubtfully, but hurried back to their room to grab their robes.

Twenty minutes later, shivering in the absolutely icy nook, the Bob-Whites and Miss Trask were gathered around the table eating the sandwiches Mart had prepared. Trixie and Mart had just recounted their story, and Jim was telling his.

"...And someone pushed me. I stumbled forward and saw that all of the clothes in our room had been thrown everywhere."

Trixie gasped and Brian incredulously asked, "What?"

Jim nodded. "I heard Honey's voice just then, but she denies pushing me."

Trixie looked at her older brother triumphantly. "Explain that one, Brian. I don't think a shorted-out wire went and messed up your room."

For once, Brian had nothing to say. He stubbornly remained silent. *Maybe I can't think of a rational explanation—yet—but it doesn't mean that there isn't one*, he thought determinedly.

"I must confess that I don't know what to make of any of this," Miss Trask stated.

"The house is haunted, Miss Trask," Trixie declared unequivocally. "Just like the Lisgard House and the Lizzie Borden house. I must admit that I was never sure if I believed in ghosts or not, but the more I see, the more I become convinced."

Miss Trask, like Brian, looked unconvinced. "At any rate, we have a full day of sightseeing tomorrow, so I think we should get to bed. No matter what is causing these...disturbances, we can't do anything about it at three o'clock in the morning."

"I agree," Dan said. "Plus, I'd like to see if the room I'm sharing with Mart looks like a hurricane hit it."

Trixie slowly nodded. "For all we know, all of them look like they've been hit by hurricanes by now."

The group looked at each other uneasily and silently trooped upstairs. Upon further inspection, it was found that only Brian's and Jim's room had been messed up.

Trixie smiled. "The ghost is mad because you don't believe in her," she tried to joke to lighten the tense mood.

Brian tried to smile. "Yeah, that's exactly what I was thinking," he said ironically, sealing their truce.

The group tiredly said good night and tumbled into their respective beds.

\* \* \*

Despite their nocturnal activities, the Bob-Whites rose the next morning with great enthusiasm for their first day wandering about Chicago. Jim, Honey and Di had all visited the city on previous trips with their families, but were just as excited about seeing the sights as the others were.

After some friendly bickering over the brochures Miss Trask had spread out over the large dining room table, it was finally decided that they would make a tour of the easily-accessible-to-each-other museums. As previously agreed, everyone was given a chance to do his or her top-of-the-list activity. So, the Field Museum for Brian, the Shedd Aquarium for Honey, the Planetarium for Mart and the Art Institute for Diana started out their day.

And truly, all eight of them enjoyed wandering through all the exhibits. Diana had wandered for over an hour through the Monet exhibit at the Art Institute, exclaiming over the great detail and subtle differences between the paintings that looked similar on the outside. Mart and Dan had found a lot to be excited about in the armor room, checking out the gleaming metal protection of warriors of old.

Jim found very little resistance from Trixie to recreate scenes from *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*, including a stolen kiss or two in front of the beautiful Chagall stained glass windows.

At the aquarium, Honey, on the other hand, found great delight in wandering from tank to tank, enraptured by the sight of the brightly colored fish and marine animals that swam so proudly in the gently waving water. Brian, it seemed, was a lot more enraptured in the sight of Honey being enraptured and trailed behind her most of the day, talking a little, smiling a lot more, his dark head often tilted down near her golden one.

Miss Trask had declared her favorite part of the day was the dolphin show in the oceanarium. Her blue eyes had twinkled merrily as she watched the antics of the dolphins in the water. If they reminded her of a group of teenagers she knew, she never let on.

The entire group enjoyed the overhead star gazing at the Planetarium, and Di was particularly pleased with her weight on the Moon, which was considerably less than her weight on Earth.

Their last peek of the day was to see Sue, the famous Tyrannosaurus Rex that graced the main hall of the stately Field Museum. It was getting near closing time, but after a brief glimpse of the dinosaur, Brian hurried down the stairs to go check out the preserved mummies in the Egyptian exhibit, the other boys and Trixie all right behind him.

Honey and Di settled down to wait with Miss Trask on one of the benches near the exit, breathing a sigh of relief to rest their weary feet.

"Boy, I feel like I've walked the whole length of Chicago!" Di said with a deep sigh, massaging her neck. "I can't believe we covered four museums in one day!"

Miss Trask gave her an amused smile. "Well, we certainly haven't seen every exhibit. I'm sure that would take days."

"I was glad to see the *American Gothic*," Honey said with a smile. "It's amazing that such a famous painting is really here...just hanging on a wall where you can go right up to it and look at it."

"It is, isn't it?" Di agreed. "Of course, the reason they don't have any lines in front of it, I think, is because they've got it hidden in the depths of the museum."

"We managed to find it, though," Miss Trask said. "So, I suspect many others find it as well." She glanced down at her wristwatch and then up at the large clock in the hallway. "I

hope the others return soon. Our dinner reservation is coming up soon. I hate to think of what trouble we'd have if we had to wait for a table for eight."

"Trixie's probably kissing Jim in some corner somewhere," Di said with a giggle.

Honey chuckled. "She kisses him a lot." With a sigh, she brushed a long lock of golden hair from her eyes. "I suppose if I had a boyfriend, I'd kiss him a lot too."

"It will happen for you," Miss Trask said with her normal crisp briskness.

"Of course it will," Diana agreed with a sly wink. "I'm sure Brian would be more than willing to step into that gap."

A slight blush crept into Honey's cheeks. "He was awfully attentive today, wasn't he?"

"Glued to your side, I'd say," Di agreed. "And he looked rather torn when you didn't want to go look at the mummies."

Honey wrinkled her nose. "I have no desire to go see 2,000-year-old dead people."

"I agree with you on that point, Honey," Miss Trask said with a laugh. "But I suspect they're rather fascinating to Brian, what with his medical background and all."

"That sure doesn't explain the rest of them, though," Di giggled. She glanced over at the door to the Egyptian exhibits and saw the others walking through them, Brian, Mart and Dan arguing amicably amongst themselves, and Trixie and Jim looking, for the lack of a better word, well-kissed.

Honey giggled. "Well, I think we can figure out why Jim and Trixie went in there."

"It *is* rather dark in there," Di agreed.

Miss Trask rolled her eyes upward. "Remind me again why I even bother and play chaperone?"

"Because you love it," Honey said immediately, rising to her feet and squeezing Miss Trask's arm. "What would you do without the Bob-Whites to keep you in the midst of excitement all the time?"

Miss Trask squeezed her back and smiled up at her pretty young charge. "It's a question I often ask myself."

"Fortunately, you haven't found a good enough answer to leave us yet," Di said with a laugh and a quick hug. "Because we have no clue what we'd do without you!"

"Are you ladies ready for food?" Dan demanded. "Mart's stomach growled throughout the whole exhibit."

Mart neatly elbowed Dan in the side as he rolled his blue eyes. "My stomach wasn't growling any more than yours was, Mangan."

"I have a reservation at a restaurant Mr. Wheeler recommended," Miss Trask said with a smile. "It's called the Italian Village and is down in the Loop. It comes highly recommended."

"Italian food sounds marvelous," Jim said enthusiastically.

Trixie nodded her assent as Brian also gave a quick smile and agreed, "Italian food *does* sound good."

"Well, let's rescue our car and hopefully, I'll be able to find this place," Miss Trask said as she looked into her purse and pulled out her keys and a folded paper with writing on it. "Your father is normally good with directions, Honey, but he was in a bit of a hurry."

Honey giggled. "Well, if you need help deciphering Dad's writing, I'm sure I can make some sense of it."

"Excellent! A plan that involves food for me at the end is all I want to hear about!" Mart declared.

The group was heading toward the door when Mart felt a sudden tug on his hand. He glanced down and found Diana wrapping her hand in his.

"Talk later?" she murmured, looking up at him through her long, dark lashes.

All he could do was nod dumbly. He tightened his hand around hers, and the two of them followed the others out of the building, heading toward the parking lot. The rumbling sensation in his stomach quieted, immediately replaced by that nervous spiral of anticipation he always felt when he was ever alone with Di one-on-one. Amazing how that always happened.

One look into Di's violet eyes and he forgot all about food.

With Jim navigating, Honey deciphering her father's directions, and Miss Trask at the wheel, the group soon found themselves at The Italian Village. The Bob-Whites abandoned the van to the valet just as New Order's "Shellshock" came on the radio.

As they entered the charming little restaurant, Di squealed with delight. "Why, it's just like an Italian village!"

Sure enough, the restaurant was designed to look like a village, with cozy little nooks to eat in, each patterned after a building: La Taverna (the Tavern), La Banca (the Bank), and La Posta (the post office) to name a few. One wall of the restaurant had a beautiful mural, with a bright blue sky, sun-kissed buildings and the verdant green reminiscent of a romantic Italian village. Everyone was utterly entranced as they followed the host to their table.

"This is so amazing," Di breathed, looking around at the small twinkling lights strewn across the walls.

"I read in the tour book that this restaurant was founded in 1927 and is the oldest Italian restaurant in Chicago," Mart remarked, not only happy to be sitting next to Diana, but reassured now that they seemed to be back on good terms.

"It's still owned by the same family that opened it way back when, the Capitaninis," Jim put in.

"My, my," Trixie teased Jim with a twinkle in her blue eyes. "When you research a city, you don't just research cultural attractions, you get the low-down on the restaurants, too. Mart must be rubbing off on you."

Jim laughed. "Truth be told, this is one of Mother and Dad's favorite restaurants, so I'm pretty familiar with it. They took us here when we visited last autumn."

Just then, an older gentleman with distinguished gray hair approached the table. "Good evening and welcome to the Italian Village. May I take your drink order?"

Fortunately, he addressed Miss Trask because the Bob-Whites had suddenly become very involved in studying their menus so the waiter would not see them laughing. With his raspy voice and thick accent, he sounded exactly like something straight out of the *Godfather* movies.

*This is too perfect!* Trixie thought as she composed herself and ordered a Coke.

To the hungry Bob-Whites, the entire extensive menu sounded delicious, so they all agreed to order different items and share.

"Just like we did at the Purple Turnip in Groverville when we went skiing in Vermont," Trixie said happily. Jim looked over at her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes and smiled, shifting a little closer to her on the seat. She glanced up at him as he gently tugged one stray curl. Trixie closed her menu and leaned her head against his chest with a happy sigh.

Dinner was a noisy and chaotic affair as the Bob-Whites swapped food and discussed their adventures of the day. Mart hungrily ate his Pollo della Nonna while listening to Di rhapsodize about the Miniature Rooms, 68 dollhouse-sized rooms that reproduced centuries of European and American furnishings, at the Art Institute. Honey delicately chewed her portion of the Lasagne al Forno and eagerly listened as Brian described the Egyptian exhibit at the Field Museum. Dan teased Jim and Trixie about their sudden interest in stained glass art, while Miss Trask enjoyed her Veal Limone, smiling at Trixie's blush at Dan's teasing.

After absolutely decimating themselves with rich tiramisù, creamy zabaglione, and decadent Italian rum cake, the group felt rather full as they waited for the valet to retrieve their rented van.

"We should have just walked to the garage ourselves," Trixie commented.

It was quiet on the drive back to the Wheelers' property. Jim and Trixie were contentedly cuddled together, while Honey was on cloud nine when Brian gently grabbed her hand and smiled at her with his serious, chocolate-brown eyes. Mart was encouraged when Di chose to sit next to him, offering him a smile as she leaned into him. Dan sat up front and talked quietly with Miss Trask.

At the house, all of the Bob-Whites, minus Trixie and Jim, headed into the family room

and turned on the television. Trixie, thinking of the havoc that had been wreaked on Jim's room the night before, wanted to check the upstairs rooms for any sign of a visitor—ghostly or not. A quick inspection showed everything to be as they had left it. After a few stolen kisses, Jim and Trixie returned to the family room and reported that everything was fine.

Brian wore an "I told you so" expression, but wisely did not say anything.

"Is that MacGyver?" Trixie asked as she noticed what was on the large television screen.

"Sure is," Di said. "Isn't he cute?"

Trixie wrinkled her nose. "I guess..." she stated, but she didn't sound so sure.

"Maybe if he had red hair," Honey teased.

Trixie laughed and grabbed Jim's hand. "Maybe."

The gang was watching a hypnotist perform a hypnotism on MacGyver, when the power went out. The house was suddenly plunged into inky blackness. Di gave a startled cry when the television suddenly turned back on, the volume on the maximum setting. The lights remained out, however, and Trixie knew this was no ordinary power outage.

"What should we do?" Mart shouted to be heard over the noise of the television, as Dan fumbled in the dim light for the remote to turn down the volume.

"We should look at the circuit breaker and fuse box and see what the malfunction is," Brian stated unequivocally.

Trixie rolled her eyes. "Brian, if it was something like that, then the lights would have come back on when the television did. And the T.V. would not have come back on turned to the max volume."

Brian was about to argue, when a sudden blast of ice-cold wind swept over them. The Bob-White girls gasped.

"Still want to blame the circuit breaker?" Mart asked.

As Brian was trying to explain away the icy wind as poor insulation, Trixie marched to the sliding glass door that opened out onto a deck that overlooked Lake Michigan. She walked out onto the deck and felt a balmy June night, with no trace of the slightest breeze, let alone an icy cold wind. Still standing on the deck outside the doorway, she turned to state as much to Brian, when suddenly all of the lights in the family room and adjoining kitchen and nook came to blazing life.

The sliding glass door slammed shut of its own accord at the same time, causing everyone to jump, Di to emit another surprised cry, and Trixie, alone out on the deck, to feel rather scared. She immediately tried to open the door, but to no avail. It was locked.

Trixie became truly frightened and banged on the door. She was relieved to see that Jim was already hurrying over to let her in. Just as he reached the door, Trixie felt the hairs on her neck stand up and she quickly turned around. A swirling mist appeared before her eyes and then was gone so fast, she was almost sure she imagined it.

The supple red-head opened the door and Trixie stumbled in. Jim took his girlfriend into his arms. "Are you all right?" he asked. At her nod, he pulled her closer. "I'm starting to believe in your version of things, Trix. There is obviously more at work here than some faulty wiring and malfunctioning fuses."

Trixie simply nodded at her boyfriend, her thoughts in a whirl. Her eyes took in the room. Mart held Di in his arms, as he tried to comfort her. Brian had his arm around Honey, who was looking at Trixie with wide hazel eyes. Miss Trask stood near the couch, obviously at a loss for words. Dan was examining the television set. The room was still cold from the frigid blast of a few minutes before.

A thumping sound in the open kitchen off the living room suddenly commanded all of their attention. They all turned in time to see the microwave virtually leap off of the counter and come crashing to the kitchen floor.

In the shocked silence that followed, Mart suddenly found his voice. "Generally you don't see that kind of behavior in a major appliance."

Dan looked ready to respond, when suddenly the house was once again plunged into

darkness. The only good thing to be said was that the room was suddenly warm again.

The heavy silence that permeated the room was stifling. Jim felt Trixie move in his arms, and her movement seemed to give him the touch of reality he'd been stumbling for. "What in the world is going on?" he demanded hoarsely.

"If any of you is trying to scare me, you're doing a good job," Di said, her voice low and wavering.

"This isn't a joke," Dan said grimly. "At least not one that we're playing on you."

"I still say we ought to check the circuit breaker," Brian said stubbornly.

"Brian!" Trixie exclaimed in exasperation.

"Regardless of whether it's a ghost or isn't, someone's playing havoc with the electricity. We *should* check it," her brother responded matter-of-factly.

"I've seen *Scream*," Honey said with a shiver. "You can count me out for any nocturnal wanderings. You don't open doors in horror movies, and you definitely *do not* go outside in the dark looking for problems."

"And you don't split up either," Diana said firmly, pulling Mart's arm more tightly around her shoulders.

Brian let out a disgusted sigh as Miss Trask said calmly, "We'll have to do *something*. The lights are off and I wouldn't know where to begin to look for a flashlight or some candles."

"Maybe that's something we ought to put on our list," Jim said with an attempt at a smile. "An obvious place to find emergency equipment." He ran a hand down the back of his neck, cleared his throat and said, "I'll go out and check outside."

Immediately, the three girls protested, Trixie's voice louder than the others. "Not by yourself, you won't," she said firmly.

"Well, no," he said with a soft smile that only she could see in the darkness. "I thought maybe my stalwart detective would come with me."

Her blue eyes softened and she gripped his hand in hers. "Okay, I'll go."

"Trixie!" wailed Diana. "You got locked out last time. What if it happens again?"

"We'll let her in again," Mart said pragmatically. He turned to look over his shoulder at his sister's hazy form in the darkness. "We'll give you fifteen minutes and then we'll come get you. Don't make us panic."

"Yeah," Dan said with a grin. "You know this group and our tendency to panic."

Jim and Trixie both rolled their eyes and turned, as one, toward the sliding glass door, opening it and slipping outside. The night was beautiful, calm, with the slightest hint of roses in the air. Trixie sniffed and sighed in contentment. "Someone must grow roses around here."

"Probably there's a rose garden in one of the neighboring houses," Jim replied.

Carefully, he walked down the stairs to the grounds, making sure Trixie didn't trip as she followed behind him. Jim began to circle the perimeter of the house, looking for any signs of trouble around the property.

Trixie walked along beside him, her hand tightly gripped in his, the only sounds were the slight lapping of the waves against the beach nearby and the swish of their shoes through the dew-dampened grass. She looked up at her boyfriend's profile, noting the grimly determined focus in his green eyes. She followed his gaze, but saw nothing more than the shadows around the darkness of the house. As they neared the back of the property, an all-too-familiar shiver tingled down her spine and her lips began to curve into a smile in spite of the sliver of fear that accompanied it.

Sensing something, Jim looked down at her and was startled to see her smile. "What?" he whispered.

"A mystery," she whispered back. "We've got ourselves a full-blown mystery."

He looked at her for a long moment before he sighed in resignation. "Now it's *those* kind of tingles, is it?"

She nodded, but before she said another word, she wrapped her arm more firmly around his. "Not that that means I don't have the other kind too."

Jim flashed her a grin. "Good to know."

As they neared the end of the sloping back yard, Trixie couldn't help but notice again the strong scent of roses. With a frown, she peered around her into the darkness, trying to find the source of the now-cloying scent of the fragrant flowers.

Jim turned to go back up the hill, but came to a sudden halt as Trixie stubbornly refused to move from the spot she was standing in. With a worried look on his face, he took the few steps back to join her where she stood. "What's wrong?" he asked quietly.

"Can't you smell the roses?" she demanded.

He looked at her strangely, but obligingly took a deep scent of the night air before shaking his head. "No more so than before. And it's really just a flowery kind of scent, not particularly roses."

"I can smell roses," she said flatly. "So strongly that I can barely stand it."

Jim frowned and peered around him in the darkness. "Well, I don't see any rose bushes here. And besides, this wouldn't be a good place for them to grow, right here near the beach."

"Exactly!" she said firmly. "I shouldn't be able to smell them, but I do." Trixie looked around her thoughtfully. "What do you want to bet that the old house had a rose garden around here somewhere?"

An icy chill shot up Jim's spine and he tightened his hand on hers. "I don't want to think about that possibility, Trixie, I..." his voice trailed off as the lights in the house suddenly flickered on. With an almost palpable sigh of relief, he tugged on her hand toward the house. "Come on, Trix. Let's go inside. It's been a long day and my nerves are shot from all this ghost hunting."

Trixie allowed herself to be pulled up the hill, but her blue eyes kept straying to the green spot in the corner of the lawn. A tranquil place with the distinct smell of roses in the air. As they got closer to the house, Trixie shivered a little, wondering exactly what it all meant. Turbulent agitation, throwing things around the house, flower scents permeating the air...

Her shiver grew stronger. Not to mention the faintly formed mist that had appeared out of nowhere on the deck. Something was trying to get a message across. But what exactly was the message?

Trixie bit back a groan. *And why am I the lucky receiver of the message?*

\* \* \*

No further mysterious events occurred that night, and the next morning found the Bob-Whites eager to continue their tour of the Windy City. The first stop of the morning was going to be the Museum of Science and Industry, followed by a trip to the Skydeck of the Sears Tower. To round out the day, Trixie was finally going to get to go on her Gangster Tour of Chicago.

Miss Trask navigated her way down the busy Chicago streets and easily found parking in the museum's underground parking lot.

"I always forget how spoiled we are to have several trains that run from Sleepyside right into New York City," Trixie commented as the group made their way toward the impressive museum building.

"Not to mention a pretty extensive subway system," Mart added.

Once inside the museum, Honey and Di immediately decided that they must visit the Fairy Castle, an elaborate miniature fairy castle built from 1928 to 1935 at the whim of a popular Hollywood actress at the time. With over 700 professionals and craftsman helping with the design and execution of the nearly nine foot tall structure, the enchanted castle of the actress's dreams cost a total of \$500,000.

"She spent *that much* during the Great Depression on a *dollhouse*?" Dan asked disgustedly. Having known what it was like to live in poverty, he was quite taken aback at this reckless display of wealth.

Honey shrugged. "It perhaps isn't the smartest thing to spend that much money on, but apparently, her father encouraged it. Anyway, since it *is* built, I think it would be fascinating to see."

"Well, I for one can't wait to hit the coal mine. Imagine being able to tour a reproduction

of a coal mine!" Mart said enthusiastically.

Jim and Dan quickly agreed. Jim and Honey both turned to Trixie. "Which tour do you want to see, Trixie?"

"Honestly, I'd rather tour the coal mine, but if you and Di want me to, I'll go with you guys. I also want to tour the German U-boat that we captured during World War II," Trixie stated.

"I think we all want to do that," Honey said. "That's a solid piece of history that we should all see." Everyone agreed.

"I really have my heart set on seeing the human body exhibit," doctor-to-be Brian spoke up. "The fairy castle and the human body exhibit combined will take about the same amount of time as the coal mine tour. Can I tag along with you girls and then you could accompany me to the human body exhibit?" Brian addressed both girls, but his eyes were firmly fixed on Honey.

With a shy smile, Honey assured him that would be fine. Di was grinning widely as she also agreed to the plan.

"Okay, then, we'll split up and then all meet up again for the submarine tour?" Jim said, naming a convenient time. At everyone's nods, he turned to Trixie. "Coal mine or fairy castle, Trix?"

Trixie looked at her two girlfriends, who were openly smiling at her with cat-that-swallowed-the-canary grins. She smiled back at them and took Jim's hand. "To the coal mine, James!"

Mart groaned, Brian rolled his eyes, and Dan snickered, but all Trixie saw was the smile that lit up Jim's face when she agreed to tour the coal mine. Miss Trask held back a smile as she decided to accompany the group touring the fairy castle and the human body exhibit.

Their time in the museum passed quickly, and soon it was time to head across town to the Sears Tower.

"When is lunch on our schedule?" Mart wondered from the backseat as Miss Trask once again expertly navigated the Chicago streets.

"Well, we catch the Gangster Tour at the Rock n' Roll McDonald's," Trixie explained. "I thought it would be fun to eat there before the tour. Can you hold off until after the Sears Tower?"

Mart's stomach rumbled in response and everybody laughed. But, Mart was so entranced with the incredible views from 1,353 feet up from Lake Michigan, that his hunger was soon forgotten.

"Wow!" Trixie breathed. "You can see four states from here! Amazing!" she exclaimed as she looked at the incredible blue lake below and the tiny buildings stretching out to either side.

"We're 300 feet higher than we are when we're on the observation deck of the Empire State Building," Jim chimed in.

"303 feet to be exact, my dear James," Mart said with a grin.

Trixie rolled her eyes and gave him a push. "Smarty pants."

The Bob-Whites wandered around the Skydeck, admiring the spectacular view and enjoying the interactive exhibits, until they realized they needed to hurry if they were to eat before their Gangster Tour started.

On the way out of the Sears Tower, Trixie spotted a photo booth and decided that she, Di, and Honey *had* to have their pictures taken together. There was much laughing and jocularly while the picture was being snapped, and the resulting photo was a scream. Trixie very proudly held it up for the boys and Miss Trask to see.

Mart snickered. "We saw it already!" he said as he pointed to a television screen above the booth that now displayed the girls' picture. The girls shrieked good-naturedly in embarrassment.

"Okay, you've had your fun," Dan grinned. "Now let's go eat. Mart's not the only one that's starved!"

The Rock N' Roll McDonald's was not that far from the Sears Tower, so the Bob-Whites set off on a brisk one mile walk.

The Rock N' Roll McDonald's was quite a fascinating place for all the Bob-Whites, especially the musically inclined Belden brothers. After exploring around the two-level restaurant, admiring the various rock and roll paraphernalia, several Elvis Presley gold records and the life-sized plaster replicas of the four Beatles, the group ordered lunch and got directions from the helpful McDonald's employees as to where exactly the Gangster Tour arrived. Miss Trask and the Bob-Whites ate a quickly scarfed lunch of Big Macs, large fries and Cokes before they filed out to a waiting area where a big black bus had just pulled up.

Trixie had tugged Jim to the front of the line, followed quickly by Mart and Dan. Brian lingered a bit, waiting for the girls and Miss Trask before they ambled over to where two men in fedoras leaned against the bus in threatening poses.

Trixie's eyes brightened and she looked over her shoulder at Honey, who smiled back at her.

"Listen up!" one of the men called out, waving a clipboard. "Your name bettah be on this list. If it's not, you ain't goin'. Tell us your name, if it's here, get on the bus, find a seat, sit down and be quiet. If it's not, go back in and have a hamburger."

He glanced at Trixie whose curls almost quivered with excitement and interest. He wasn't a great deal taller than Trixie, but he straightened and tipped his fedora as he walked up to her. "Hey, Blondie!"

She gave him a wide smile. "Hey!"

Dan and Mart snickered behind her.

The man glanced over his shoulder at the other man who lounged near the bus, holding an imitation Tommy gun and a deliberately bored expression on his face. "Hey, Southside. We got a live wire here." He slanted a glance back at Trixie. "Are those curls of yours electrified or what, cutie?" He reached out and tugged one lightly with a grin. "What's your name?"

Trixie felt Jim stiffen next to her and glanced up to see a scowl on his freckled face. She tucked her hand around Jim's and gave the other man a sweet smile. "Well, see, sugar, my name's Trixie. Trixie Belden. But I often go by Moll Dick."

She didn't raise her eyes to meet her boyfriend's gaze, but she felt an answering squeeze on her fingers. Trixie merely cocked her head and raised a sandy eyebrow.

"Hmm..." the other man said, running his finger down the list. "I'm not seeing Belden on this list."

Miss Trask leaned around Mart and Dan and said in a crisp, firm voice, "It should be under Wheeler. There are eight of us."

With another check of the list, the man nodded and jerked his head toward the bus. "Go on. Get on."

Trixie and Jim climbed into the bus, avoiding the other man who gave them a menacing growl as they got on and were followed by the other Bob-Whites and Miss Trask. Jim found a seat near the back and slid in, Trixie immediately sitting next to him. Honey and Brian sat behind them, and Dan, Di, Mart and Miss Trask filled in seats across the aisle. Honey leaned forward and tapped Trixie on the shoulder.

"What was that all about?" Honey whispered.

Before Trixie could answer, Jim muttered, "He thought she was cute. Everyone thinks Trixie's cute."

Brian snorted from behind him. "Everyone including you, Frayne."

Honey giggled and sat back against her seat. Trixie leaned into him and whispered, "Well, I didn't think *he* was cute. I prefer redheads."

Jim gave her a slow smile and leaned down and kissed her. Mart rolled his eyes and scooched closer to Dan, crowding him into the window.

"Hey!" Dan protested. "What's your problem?"

"Getting away from the lovebirds," Mart said in a long-suffering tone. "They're kissing

again.”

Dan leaned over Mart and hissed at Jim and Trixie, “Get a room, won’t you?”

His comment immediately got glares from both Brian and Mart. Diana leaned over the seat and slapped Dan across the back of the head. He merely grinned and moved over a bit toward the window.

“I’ll just sit over here on the windowsill. How’s that?” he asked.

Trixie giggled, and Miss Trask sighed and leaned against her own window. “I keep thinking I can’t possibly find any more gray hairs on this head of mine,” the older woman said with a sigh.

Honey leaned across the aisle and smiled warmly. “We’ll keep them in line, Miss Trask. Don’t worry!”

The bus soon filled up with people of varying ages and, as was discovered later, places in the world. The two men in front introduced themselves as “Louie” and “Southside”. One of the men started up the bus and the other one launched immediately into the tour, talking about the exploits of famous gangsters like Al Capone, John Dillinger and Bugsy Moran.

The bus ambled through different neighborhoods and stopped at different places where the men gave out information about the gangster wars, bloodbaths and chilling betrayals of the men who fought to be in control of the 1920s underworld of Chicago.

After they had left the site of the infamous St. Valentine’s Day Massacre, where seven of Bugsy Moran’s gangsters had been gunned down by two other men pretending to be police officers, Louie, the overly-friendly man who had earlier talked to Trixie, began another new story as Southside turned the bus toward the south side of Chicago.

“All our old friends...just lookin’ for the good life,” Louie said, heaving a dramatic sigh. “Like my old buddy, Alphonse the Hammer. One of the baddest, meanest gangsters in all of the city.” He walked slowly through the bus, weaving his tale, enjoying his very captive audience. “Old Alphonse had a whole slew of distilleries. He had clubs on the North Side, on the South Side and even on the West Side.” He gestured with his hands. “Nobody topped old Alphonse. He had a team of bodyguards that would fight for him until the death.” He winked at Trixie. “And there was a lot of death. He wasn’t called Alphonse the Hammer for nothin’!”

Louie walked closer to the back of the bus and stood right over where Trixie was sitting, enthralled, next to Jim. The redhead could barely keep a scowl off his face as Louie continued, “But Alphonse was always one for the ladies.” He slanted a glance at Trixie and said, “And the female of the species is deadlier than the male. Isn’t that right Southside?”

“Deadlier than the male! Definitely!” came the cued boom of approval from the driver’s seat.

“So, Alphonse married the lovely Rosa. Dark hair, curvaceous body.” He straightened and winked at another man sitting a few rows away. “You know the kind I mean.”

The man laughed and nodded, and Louie turned back to Trixie who shifted a little closer to Jim, feeling uncomfortable under the continual scrutiny of the gangster’s focused gaze.

“But Al, my old buddy, he couldn’t just keep his attention focused on one woman. Oh, no. A man’s got priorities. You marry an Italian wife...and you have a Swedish mistress.”

Chuckles and titters echoed through the bus. “And oh, what a mistress she was. A goddess of mistresses.” He gestured toward Trixie. “Long, golden, curly hair, big blue eyes...” his voice trailed off leadingly, and Jim, in a tried-and-true male aggression maneuver, dropped his arm across Trixie’s shoulders and scooted her closer to him. The other man’s eyes glinted and then he gave them a slow wink before he straightened. “And if her Swedish was only skin deep...well, old Al never noticed.”

Louie walked back toward the front of the bus. “So, Al set up his girlfriend in a beautiful house on the lake. One of those old, vintage Victorian houses...he bought it just for her.” He gestured grandly. “And one night, after Al and Magdalene had made beautiful, passionate love, there was a thunderous crash.”

The sound of a door crashing open blared through the speakers on the bus. Several

people jumped. Southside looked up in the rearview mirror and grinned.

“Rosa was there with a Tommy gun. One of Al’s specials. She shouted a lot of things in Italian. Alphonse shouted back and made some gestures...also in Italian.”

“Dishes were thrown,” Southside interjected helpfully.

“Yeah, dishes were thrown,” Louie agreed. “Although why they had dishes in their bedroom, I’ll never know.”

The group laughed.

“And Alphonse got out of bed, naked as the day he was born, to try to get the gun away from Rosa.” Louie raised an eyebrow and shook his head. “But Alphonse the Hammer never had a chance.” He raised his arms as if he were holding a gun. “Rosa raised her gun and let ‘em have it.”

The sound of rapidly firing bullets filled the bus, again causing several people to jump and a few others to duck. Louie took off his fedora and held it over his heart. “But justice is always swift in the Windy City. Alphonse’s bodyguards heard the gunfire, came running, and gunned Rosa down.”

He bowed his head for a moment before he slipped the fedora back on his head and said with a sad look on his face, “After that, no one wanted that old house on the lake. It was said that beautiful Magdalene still haunted the old place.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe she’s found a better place to haunt now.” He gestured vaguely toward the north side of the bus. “The old place ain’t around any more. It’s been torn down, and now there’s a new, beautiful house there instead. Built by some wealthy New York business magnate.” He sighed dramatically. “All them good old days and sacred places...taken over by those New York business types.”

All seven Bob-Whites’ eyebrows rose at this, and Trixie glanced over her shoulder at Honey, whose wide hazel eyes met Trixie’s wide blue ones. Trixie whispered, “I think he’s talking about *our* house!”

Honey nodded slowly, her face showing her nervousness. Brian sighed, and Jim sunk into his seat a little lower, a rather dismayed look on his face.

Trixie, however, had a thoughtful look on her face, remembering the way Louie had fingered her blonde curls. *I wonder if that ghost is Magdalene and what it is she’s trying to tell me?*

After the Gangster Tour was over, Trixie continued to think of the tragic story that Louie had told. Although he was kind of creeping her out with all of his suggestive leering, she was thankful that he had possibly given them a very big clue as to what might be going on at the house.

She had thought of the problem all through dinner at the Weber Grill and had noticed Jim’s green eyes anxiously appraise her throughout the meal. She had tried to contribute to the lively conversation to assuage some of his worries, but she knew that she had not fooled the one who knew her so well for an instant. It wasn’t hard to enjoy the delicious food, though. Everyone raved over the perfectly grilled, succulent chicken and steaks and the sides of baked potatoes stuffed to the gills with butter and sour cream, grilled asparagus, and heavenly fire-roasted corn on the cob. Even Mart agreed that he was too full for dessert.

Back at the luxurious house, everybody but Trixie and Honey decided to sit on the beach and relax and watch the sun set over Lake Michigan.

“We’ll be there in a bit,” Trixie promised in response to Jim’s questioning look. He nodded reluctantly, but accepted Trixie’s decision, knowing she was dying to talk to her partner alone about Louie’s revelations. He might not completely accept the concept of ghosts himself, but he trusted Trixie’s instincts.

Mart, however, was not so kind. “Methinks a impetuous convention of the organization known as the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency, also known as Schoolgirl Shamuses, Incorporated, is about to commence. Criminals and ghosts beware!”

Surprisingly, Trixie did not take the bait. “Yep, and the sooner you let us have it, the

sooner we can join you on the beach!"

With that, Trixie and Honey settled in the living room of the modern house, while the rest of the group trooped down to the beach. Trixie settled down on the sofa beneath the eerie Victorian painting of the original owner's wife, while Honey sat in the recliner facing Trixie.

She glanced up at the picture and shivered again. "That picture gives me the creeps!"

Trixie turned and looked up at the portrait hanging above her. "Maybe we should tell your dad that it *is* a bit much."

Honey nodded. "Anyway, let's talk about this case. After what happened at the Lisgard House and last year at Lizzie Borden's house, you don't have to convince me that paranormal phenomenon exists. And no matter how hard Brian tries to explain it all away, the things that have been happening around here are *weird*."

"I absolutely agree." Trixie nodded her head emphatically, causing her curls to vigorously shake. "What we've experienced here has certainly fit what Louie described. Your father, who certainly qualifies as a New York business magnate, bought a run-down, empty Victorian mansion and put up a new house in its spot. A ghost was said to be in residence at the original mansion. I'd say that ghost has stayed in residence in this *new* house, too."

"I agree. Maybe we can call Daddy and see if he had heard rumors about a ghost when he bought the house," Honey suggested.

"Maybe, but we should use that as a last resort. We don't want him and your mother to worry while they're out west on their business trip," Trixie said. "The boys will kill us, but property records *are* a matter of public record. We could probably visit the City Clerk's office and find out if Alphonse the Hammer owned this property at one point."

Honey giggled. "I wonder if it would say 'Alphonse the Hammer' on the title."

Trixie joined in her laughter, but quickly sobered up. "There has to be some way to prove our ghost is Magdalene."

Just then, Honey let out a horrified scream.

"What? Honey, what?" Trixie said, rising to go over to her friend. Honey was pale and shaking. She didn't seem able to speak, only pointed to the portrait on the wall. Trixie turned, but didn't see anything unusual about the portrait.

Miss Trask poked her head in the room just then. "Honey? What's wrong?"

Upon hearing Miss Trask's calm voice, Honey regained her speech. "Nothing, Miss Trask," Honey said lamely, "I thought I saw...a mouse." Trixie had used that same trick with Faye Franklin at Lisgard House. Honey prayed that explanation would play with Miss Trask.

However, Miss Trask looked very skeptical. "A mouse?"

At Honey's sheepish nod, Miss Trask turned to Trixie. "Did you see anything, Trixie?"

"No, ma'am," the blonde stated honestly. "Honey and I were just sitting and talking. Suddenly, Honey screamed and pointed."

Miss Trask didn't seem convinced, but, ever the good sport, she relented. "Okay, if you're sure it's nothing serious. I'll put a call to the exterminator on my list of things to do to prepare for your father's paying renters."

"Thanks, Miss Trask," Honey said weakly as the older woman left the room.

"What did you *really* see, Honey?" Trixie asked eagerly as Miss Trask's footsteps receded.

"That picture, Trixie. I know this sounds strange but...it *changed*," Honey said with a sharp intake of breath as she remembered the vision she had seen.

"It changed?" Trixie was confused.

Honey nodded. "One second, it was the creepy Victorian woman, and the next, it was a beautiful woman with flowing curly blonde hair. She seemed to hover above you in the painting for a moment and then disappeared when I screamed."

"Magdalene!" Trixie breathed.

"Oh, Trix, do you think so?"

"Well," Trixie said slowly, thinking, "she appeared right after I said her name. An awfully

big coincidence, don't you think?"

"It *does* seem awfully convenient," Honey agreed.

"I think she's trying to tell us something," Trixie said abruptly.

"Like what?" Honey wanted to know.

Trixie ruefully shook her head. "I don't know. I guess she could be just haunting the place of her very violent death, but the other night, I could have sworn I smelled roses where there were none. The scent was so cloying I thought I was going to gag. Jim was with me and didn't really smell it. I wonder..."

Honey leaned forward, eager to hear Trixie's latest deduction.

"Do you think there's something buried out there where I smelled roses? Maybe the scent was a clue?"

"I don't know, Trixie. But, you know what, maybe we can do a quick search and try to get some information. I know that Daddy has access to a property database that lists past and present owners and property taxes and selling prices of houses, as well as a lot of other stuff. He pays for a yearly subscription to have access to this information at his fingertips instead of having his staff make lengthy trips down to the City Clerk. He let me use it once for a project I was doing, so I know his password. We could do a quick look-up."

"It would *have* to be quick. I'm sure Jim and Brian are wondering what happened to us already," Trixie, torn with indecision, said with a glance at her watch. The insatiably curious side of her wanted to investigate as soon as possible, but the reasonable side of her knew it wasn't fair to keep the other Bob-Whites waiting. Then she realized that not as much time had passed as she thought it had. The excitement surrounding Honey's ghost sighting seemed to have lasted several minutes, but in reality, it been much less time than that. "On the other hand," she giggled. "Let's go!"

The two hurried into the den and turned on the computer. Trixie had wondered just a few short days before why anyone would want to use a computer on their vacation, and here she was eager to see what information she could glean using the sophisticated equipment Matthew Wheeler had supplied for his guests.

As soon as the machine was fired up, Honey opened a browser window and tried to remember the website address of the database. Once she was there, she hurriedly typed in her father's username and password and instantly had access to the database. She then typed in the address of the house where they were staying and waited as the information began to appear on the screen.

"Oh my goodness!" Trixie said. "Look at this—all of the past property owners listed by date. Quick, scroll down to the 1920s."

Honey did as Trixie asked, and both girls were gratified to see the name "Alphonse Salvatore" as the owner from 1926 until the house was sold from his estate in 1931. A footnote indicated that he was listed as deceased in 1928, but it took three years for the estate to clear and the house to be sold.

The two girls looked at each other and smiled. "This is it!" they both said together.

Honey quickly turned off the computer, and Trixie led the way back out to the beach where the other Bob-Whites and Miss Trask lounged, watching the sunset.

"It's about time you two got here," Mart exclaimed as Trixie and Honey appeared at the end of the path from the house. "Were you solving all the mysteries of the world?"

Trixie patted her brother's head as she walked past him to join Jim on the blanket he'd spread out. "Just give us time, brother dear," she said in a lofty voice.

"So, what did you decide to do?" Diana asked, turning over on her stomach to look at the two other girls. "How will we find out if this house belonged to that awful Alphonse person?"

"It does!" Trixie said triumphantly as she scooted up into Jim's arms. "Or it did, rather." She gestured toward Honey. "Honey thought of how to find that out."

Honey gave her a matching cat-that-ate-the-canary smile and quickly explained what she and Trixie had done and learned. She finished by saying, "So, Trixie was wondering if

maybe Magdalene had something here on the property somewhere that was important for some reason.”

“Why would you think that?” Brian asked, raising an eyebrow at his sister. “And even if she hid something in the house, it’s gone now. The house was torn down.”

Trixie shook her head. “When Jim and I were outside looking around the house after the lights went out, I smelled roses where there weren’t any around.”

“Roses. Roses. Roses will put them to sleep,” Mart cackled in his best Wicked Witch of the West impression.

Dan snorted and Diana giggled. Trixie glared at Mart and gestured toward the back part of the lawn, not too far from where Brian and Honey were sitting. “Even Jim smelled the roses, smarty pants,” she said hotly. “It was just a stronger scent for me.”

Before Mart could open his mouth again, Miss Trask quickly said, “Well, I must admit, there certainly have been a lot of strange things going on around here.”

Jim gently rubbed a thumb across the part of Trixie’s wrist where his bracelet hung and said quietly, “Well, there is one way to find out if Trixie’s theory is true.”

Seven pairs of eyes turned to Jim. Honey’s lips curved into a smile. Trixie’s face lit up in a familiar way, and Dan chuckled as he got to his feet and brushed the sand off of his jeans. “So, where does a guy find a shovel around these parts?”

\* \* \*

The Bob-Whites and Miss Trask made a search of the most logical places on the property to find a shovel, but the only digging implements they found were shiny new snow shovels stored in the garage. After much joking around about the possibility of digging with the unwieldy snow shovels, Dan and Mart volunteered to drive into Evanston and find a hardware store to get a shovel to donate to the cause.

A short time later, they returned, each carrying a shovel and a wide grin.

“Model T shovels,” Mart proclaimed, brandishing the shovel. “T for ‘treasure’.”

Diana giggled before she turned to Trixie arching a delicately shaped eyebrow. “So, where to, Detective Belden?” She gestured broadly at Mart and Dan who continued to clown around and who were now imitating pirates. “I mean, we want to stop them as soon as possible, right?”

Mart snaked an arm around Di’s waist and pulled her up against him. She let out a squeal as he said in his best pirate’s voice, “That’s enough out of you, wench. Don’t be wantin’ to walk the plank now, do you?”

With Mart sufficiently distracted, Jim grabbed his shovel and then his girlfriend’s hand. “If we wait for them to get done clowning, it might be midnight before it’s all over.”

With a sigh, Brian wrested the other shovel away from Dan who was making Honey laugh as he hovered around making promises of rum, treasure and pirate’s booty. “You’re not kidding.”

Miss Trask shook her head, but Trixie swore later that she saw the older woman’s lips twitch in a suspicious fashion.

Trixie herself was radiating energy—her face was as animated as her hands as she gestured toward the edge of the sloping lawn. “Jim and I were walking along here and I could smell that really strong scent of roses.”

“How do you even know how roses smell?” Mart asked with a teasing glint in his eyes. “Frayne seems to be stuck on orchids.”

An angry flush crept up Jim’s cheeks, but before he could respond, Trixie waved her hand dismissively at her brother. “I happen to *like* orchids, thank you very much.” She stood on tiptoe and kissed her boyfriend quickly before she continued walking toward the corner of hedges that stood near the end of the property. “And besides, it was distinctive and overpowering. I couldn’t help but notice it.”

They all reached the end of the lawn and everyone looked at Trixie expectantly. She wrinkled her nose, trying to smell the cloying scent she had previously, but all she could smell was the slightly fishy smell from the water behind her and the vague scent of Diana's recently reapplied perfume. With a sigh, she shook her head. "I don't smell it now."

Honey and Di's faces both fell. Surprisingly enough, it was Brian who cleared his throat and pointed to the grass at their feet. "Well, you said you could smell the roses here last time. Stands to reason that since you already knew where to go, that you wouldn't have the scent again." A smile curved his handsome lips. "Why overwhelm you twice?"

Trixie flashed Brian a grateful smile. "That makes a lot of sense."

"So, what should we do?" Jim asked. "Start digging?"

Honey frowned slightly and gestured toward the ground. "What if it's something small?" She knelt down on the grass and patted slowly in a circle from where she was kneeling. "Do you remember that archeological dig we worked on?"

Mart snorted and shook his head. "That wasn't even a real dig, Honey."

"Well, no," the golden-haired girl said slowly, "but the principles he talked about are probably pretty accurate." She sat back on her haunches and looked up at the others. "If we're not careful with those shovels and the item we're looking for is small, we might break it or damage it."

Dan knelt down next to Honey and said in a thoughtful voice, "That makes sense, Honey, but anything that Magdalene woman put here was buried over seventy years ago. It's probably pretty unlikely that it's in decent shape to begin with."

"What do you suppose she buried?" Miss Trask asked quietly. "Some sort of papers? Money?"

"Love letters?" Diana said with a sigh. "That would be awfully romantic."

Trixie brushed back curls from her forehead and frowned. "Alphonse the Hammer doesn't strike me as someone who really thought about the romance part of things." She shook her head. "And why would she be so desperate for us to unearth them?"

"I guess there's one way to find out exactly what she did or didn't bury," Brian said firmly. He positioned the shovel and dug into the grass, stopping only when he heard a metallic clink.

Eight pairs of eager eyes looked at each other. Trixie's eyes, visibly blue in the glow of the property's security light, sparkled with excitement. "Well, don't stop now, Brian," she cried. "Keep digging!"

Brian managed a smile at his sister's characteristic eagerness and carefully moved the dirt from the metallic object. When it looked like enough dirt had been cleared, he moved to the side and leaned on the shovel. "You should have the honors, Trix."

Trixie shot him a grateful smile and leaned down to retrieve what appeared to be a metal box, rusted and worn with time. Jim helped her maneuver the object out of the ground.

"Let's open this inside where we can see better," Trixie said eagerly and was already hurrying toward the house, impatient to see what was inside the box.

The Bob-Whites and Miss Trask smiled at Trixie's characteristic enthusiasm and quickly followed her into the house. Jim grabbed a stack of local newspapers they had bought and spread them out on the kitchen floor. "No need to make a mess of the new carpet," he explained.

Trixie gingerly set the box down on the newspapers and paused to take a look around. Not only were her friends and family holding their breaths, waiting to see what the mysterious box held, but Trixie suddenly had the sensation that the house itself was holding its breath. She inhaled deeply and was sure she smelled the faint scent of roses.

She carefully opened the lid on the box, easily done since the ancient hinge was broken, and looked inside. A few yellowed papers, a small jewelry case, and a single dried rose were the only contents. The rose disintegrated upon contact, despite Trixie's care in handling it. The young sleuth gently pulled out the fragile documents, brittle with age, and looked at them.

"One is a letter," she breathed. She quickly turned the parchment over and checked the

signature. "It's signed, 'Magdalene'."

"What's that other paper, Trix?" Mart asked.

Trixie inspected the other paper contained in the box. "It's a birth certificate! The child is Letitia Annika Eriksson, born to Alphonse Nuncio Salvatore and Magdalene Annika Eriksson on August 19, 1928."

There was a moment of stunned silence. "Alphonse and Magdalene had a baby," Diana finally said.

"No wonder Rosa went ballistic," Dan whistled.

"And the property database said that Alphonse died in 1928. Couldn't have been too long after his daughter was born," Honey reasoned.

"I wonder what happened to the baby," Miss Trask said, as enchanted by this mystery as her young charges.

"Maybe the letter says. Read it, Trix," Jim said.

"Dear *Letitia*," Trixie began.

*"This is the hardest letter I have ever written, my dear little one. You are but three days old and I will be seeing you for what may be the last time in a matter of hours. I wish that there was another way, but I know that I cannot keep you. As much as it tears my heart out to place you in the arms of another woman, a woman you will know as 'Mother,' I know that to keep you safe is the most important consideration there is.*

*"I know in my heart that Mildred and Bryant Collins will love you as much as I do and keep you far safer than I ever could. They are good people and I could not ask for better parents to raise my little girl.*

*"Please understand that I do this out of the most profound love—the sacred love of a mother for her child. I did not want to give you up; I truly have to. I am trying so hard to be strong and do the right thing for you.*

*"Part of my strength comes from the arrangements I have made with your new parents. When you are eighteen, God willing, I shall be reunited with you. I am already dreaming of the day when I meet the lovely girl you are sure to be, and place this necklace on your neck. The necklace has been worn by the women in our family for over two centuries, passed from each mother to daughter on the occasion of her eighteenth birthday.*

*"Until then, I shall place this in a safe place on the grounds of the house you were born.*

*"With all my love, Magdalene"*

Trixie finished reading and looked up. Honey's large hazel eyes glistened, while tears shamelessly rolled down Diana's smooth cheeks. Even the boys and Miss Trask appeared affected by the letter.

In the silence, Trixie opened the jewel case to find a necklace of gold filigree in the most intricate and delicate pattern.

"Well, I think we know what Magdalene was trying to tell us," Trixie said. "She obviously died before she ever had a chance to give this to her child. So, I guess we know what we have to do next."

Jim suddenly looked resigned, while Brian looked downright mutinous. Mart and Di exchanged knowing glances and tried to hide their grins at what was sure to unfold next between the eldest Belden sibling and his younger sister.

"Just what is it you think we're going to do?" Brian asked.

"Find Letitia, of course," Trixie said promptly, staring defiantly at her older brother.

Honey smiled gently and shyly took Brian's hand. "We should really at least try to find her and give her her birthright, Brian."

At the feel of Honey's delicate hand in his, Brian faltered. His chocolate brown eyes met her hazel ones, and he knew he was doomed. Jim, Dan, and Mart also seemed to know this, as evidenced by the wide grins they did not even bother to hide. Di looked at Trixie and winked.

"It's settled then," Trixie said brightly. "Tomorrow, we go to the City Clerk's office and

track down Letitia Eriksson, most likely raised as Letitia Collins.”

“Trixie, you make it sound so easy, but it may be difficult. Letitia may have moved away or she may not be around anymore. She would be awfully old if she was born in 1928,” Jim said.

“I know, but like Honey said, we have to *try*. Plus, I think if it was a hopeless mission, Magdalene wouldn’t have been so insistent in leading us to the letter and the necklace.”

Sure enough, the next morning found the Bob-Whites at the City Clerk’s office as soon as it opened. They quickly found the office marked “Health and Human Services—Birth and Death Certificates” and greeted the plump clerk that sat behind the counter.

“May I help you?” she responded in a bored tone of voice.

“We were hoping we could get some information about a child born in 1928. We have her birth certificate here.”

“Are you a family member of the child?”

Trixie shook her head. “No.”

“Legal representative of the child?”

“No,” Trixie said, dismayed. What if they weren’t allowed the information they needed? What would they do?

“Are you a representative of a federal, state, or municipal government?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Well, then I’m afraid that I cannot give you any information about the child,” the clerk stated definitively.

Trixie looked crestfallen, and Miss Trask quickly jumped in. “If we can prove a legitimate interest in the child, what provisions are there?”

“If you can prove you have a financial interest, some documents can be released,” the woman said.

Trixie handed the clerk the letter, hoping to sway the woman with the contents. “We found this letter and this necklace on Honey’s father’s property here in town,” she began, indicating her friend as she spoke, “and we would really like to give the necklace to the rightful owner.”

The clerk took the letter. By the time she finished, she too had tears in her eyes. “Oh, this is so sad. You’re not staying out at Alphonse the Hammer’s old place, by any chance?”

“Yes, we are,” Honey said excitedly.

“I know the story. Even after all of this time, the legend of Alphonse, Rosa, and Magdalene is still common knowledge, since it did happen right here in town and not in Chicago proper. I’ve heard rumors of a child, but no one has ever been able to confirm that as fact. It looks like you people have.” The redheaded woman looked again at Magdalene’s letter. “Amazing. Well, I’d say that returning property to its rightful owner gives you a legitimate interest. I’ll see what I can find in the computer. We’ve been doing a lot of data entry since we upgraded to the computerized system a few years ago, so records from the 1920s should be available.”

The Bob-Whites anxiously waited as the now-friendly woman began clacking away at her computer keyboard. Mart muttered something to Di about Trixie being able to work her magic on redheads. Di giggled and agreed.

After a few moments, the clerk smiled, and Trixie felt her heart soar.

“You’re in luck. Letitia Collins was extremely easy to trace through the years. She was raised by Bryant and Mildred Collins in the Lincoln Park section of Chicago, married Nathaniel Greene and moved to Hinsdale and has lived in the same house ever since. Older generations had such a strong feeling of roots, didn’t they?” The clerk opined as she wrote down the address of Letitia Greene née Collins née Eriksson.

Suddenly, the pleasant woman seemed to have a thought and was quickly typing away again. She soon found what she was looking for and wrote another notation on the sheet that contained the address.

"Now, before I can release this information, I will need to see identification from at least one of you and there is a \$10 fee for a records check."

Miss Trask immediately stepped up and gave the woman her driver's license and a crisp ten-dollar bill. The clerk took the money and recorded the information from the license.

"Thank you very much. As someone born and raised in this area, this is very exciting. And, just in case you wanted the information, I also looked up where Magdalene Eriksson is buried. She's in the Alta Vista Cemetery, not too far from here."

Trixie and the rest of the Bob-Whites enthusiastically thanked their benefactor and were soon on their way to visit Magdalene's daughter.

The steel skyscrapers and the busy metropolis faded behind them as Miss Trask maneuvered the rental van out toward the suburbs, Jim navigating with his large Chicago metro map.

Trixie could barely contain her excitement as she saw the elegant wood sign proclaiming, "Hinsdale". Almost immediately, it seemed as if they had stepped back in time. Old, beautiful houses lined the streets, with the graceful branches of the thick elms and oaks in their yards making almost a canopy to drive under as Jim quietly gave Miss Trask directions.

Letitia's house lay in the center of town, on one of the oldest streets in the quiet village. The red brick house was simple, understated, and well cared for. It was just as Trixie had somehow expected it to be.

As Miss Trask pulled into the driveway, Trixie already had her hand on the door of the van to open it and jump out. Surprisingly enough, it was Mart who gently placed his hand over hers and murmured, "Patience, Trix. This will come as a shock to her. We don't want to frighten her, you know?"

Reluctantly, Trixie nodded, wondering then, exactly, what she was going to say. She looked at her best friend and partner and then said, "Maybe just a couple of us should go up?"

Miss Trask nodded firmly. "Why don't you two girls go up and see if she's home? The rest of us can wait here."

Diana sighed and sat back in her seat. "You'll have to tell us every detail, Trixie. Don't leave out anything."

Trixie smiled and nodded and with a deep breath, got out of the car, followed immediately by Honey.

Mart closed the car door behind them and Trixie felt nervous and shivery as she walked alongside Honey toward the front door.

"What do you think she'll say?" Trixie whispered. "What if she doesn't know she's adopted? What if the Collinses never told her?"

Honey gave Trixie a look of dismay. "But they promised Magdalene they would!"

"But that was before she was murdered," Trixie said, looking down at the box in her hands, gently rubbing her thumb across the rusted spots. "Maybe they thought that it was better she didn't know."

"Well, maybe we can mention where we are staying and see if she recognizes it. If she gives us some kind of blank look...then, well..." Honey looked uncertainly at Trixie.

Before Trixie could answer, the door swung open and a tall, stately woman stood at the door. Even though they knew her actual age, Letitia Greene didn't look a day over sixty. Her salt and pepper hair spoke of her Italian heritage, but her build and the way she carried herself was just as Trixie had imagined Magdalene to look.

"Can I help you girls?" Letitia asked with a smile. "I'm sorry if I startled you. I heard the car drive up, and I thought I'd see who it was. I was expecting my daughter."

Honey and Trixie exchanged glances before Honey cleared her throat and said, "My name's Honey Wheeler. My father just bought a property up in Evanston on Lake Avenue..."

"Near Lake Michigan," Letitia finished. Her dark eyes gleamed with interest. "Alphonse the Hammer's place?"

Trixie and Honey let out a collective sigh of relief. "Yes," Trixie replied.

"I had heard that it was sold recently," she said with a wistful smile. "Every now and again, I get an idea in my head that I'm going to buy it, but Nate talks me out of it." Her eyes suddenly lit on the box in Trixie's hands. "Did you find something there?"

Trixie gently offered the box to Letitia with a nod, saying quietly, "We think Magdalene led us to it."

Letitia's eyebrows rose in surprise as she took the box from Trixie. She hesitated and then gestured toward her house. "Come in for a minute, won't you?"

The girls walked in, waiting uncomfortably in the beautiful, elegant living room, filled with Victorian era furniture. Letitia walked around them and sat on one of the mahogany backed couches and gestured toward a matching one. "Please have a seat."

The girls sat down and watched as Letitia opened the box, fingering briefly the withered birth certificate and then as she read the letter from Magdalene. When she had finished, her dark eyes had filled with tears and she opened the old jewelry case, fingering the delicate necklace.

The girls sat in silence, both their eyes suspiciously bright as they watched Letitia. Finally, the older woman looked up with a tremulous smile. "My parents told me, you know, about Magdalene and Alphonse." Almost as if she couldn't help herself, she ran a finger over the necklace. "They were people who kept their promises. And they really had liked Magdalene, even if she was involved with such a notorious gangster."

Her eyes sparkled as she continued, "I always wondered what they had been like. I was sure Alphonse was stunningly handsome and Magdalene the irresistible beauty he fell for that made it worth it to him to give up everything." A rueful look crossed her face. "It makes for a good story, anyway."

Trixie couldn't help but chime in at that point, saying, "I really believe she loved you."

Letitia smiled, the smile lighting her face, showing the beauty there that was still evident even now. "I know she did." She took the necklace gently out of the case and carefully slipped it on over her head. "My parents told me she wanted to meet me when I was eighteen." Her eyes grew wistful. "I knew she had died, but something in me wanted to still meet her." She glanced at the two girls across from her and said softly, "And now, thanks to you two, I feel like I have."

During the ride back to Evanston, Trixie looked outside the window, her mind turning over and over the thought of Magdalene's hard decision...a decision that probably ended up saving the little girl's life. The woman seemed to have been happy...her house was cluttered with pictures of a large family...she'd had everything that Magdalene would have wanted for her. But it still seemed so unfair that while Letitia had everything Magdalene could have dreamed of for her, Magdalene was never able to keep that appointment she'd made so many years ago.

Trixie's blue eyes filled with tears as the van traveled back to the house, and the Bob-Whites and Miss Trask filed out, heading back into the house. Jim waited, noticing Trixie's slower than usual pace, and held out his hand to her with a concerned look on his freckled face. "Are you all right?"

"It seems so unfair," Trixie whispered as she grabbed his hand.

"She would have been happy, though, Trix," he said quietly. "Happy that her daughter didn't grow up in the kind of life she and Alphonse lived."

Trixie nodded slowly and then glanced down as she heard the jingle of keys in Jim's free hand. With a surprised look on her face, she looked up at him.

He smiled a half-smile and gestured toward the van. "Miss Trask thought maybe you'd like a ride to the Alta Vista Cemetery."

An answering smile spread across Trixie's face. "Oh, Jim! I think that would be perfectly perfect."

With a stop at a flower shop for a small bouquet of roses, the two Bob-Whites made their way to the cemetery and found the gravesite with relative ease, due to the famous notoriety of

Magdalene and Alphonse. The stone was plain, but the gravesite was well cared for. Trixie knelt down and placed the roses on the grave and waited a moment, feeling the warm breeze caress her cheek. The speckles of fading sunlight through the overhead trees almost made the place one of serenity rather than of death, ghosts and hauntings. She ran a hand lightly over the weathered letters of Magdalene's name on the tombstone and whispered, "She loved the necklace. She wished you had been able to keep that meeting with her."

Trixie sighed and rose to her feet and suddenly almost felt as if an echo of that wistful sigh had whispered in the breeze through the trees. A feeling of warm contentment settled over her as she backed away slowly from the gravesite.

Jim drove back to the house on the lake, stealing glances at his girlfriend who remained quiet and thoughtful. "A penny for your thoughts," he said finally.

Trixie smiled a little sadly. "I was just thinking about Letitia and Magdalene. How different it might have been if she'd lived and was able to keep her daughter."

"Having your parents die is always a horrible thing," Jim said slowly.

Trixie's eyes widened and she said, "Oh, Jim...I didn't mean..."

He held up a hand as he turned into the driveway of the house and shut off the engine. Jim turned to look at Trixie and continued, "But you can't go back. You can't change how things happened." A small smile curved his lips. "And I can speak from experience that being adopted isn't the worst thing in the world."

A return smile tugged at Trixie's lips. "That's true."

"And you never know. Maybe Letitia would never have met her Nathaniel if she hadn't been adopted. And that big happy family you told us about would never have existed." He shook his head. "Don't wish for something different for her. She's had a very happy life."

"And you?" Trixie couldn't help but ask. "Do you wish it would have been different for you?"

Jim hesitated a long time before he replied, "Do I wish my parents hadn't died or that my mom had never married Jonesy? Sure, I do." His face softened then as he took a deep breath and said, "But if they hadn't, I'd never have met you." He reached over and tugged lightly on a golden curl. "And my life would never have been right."

Trixie leaned across the seat and kissed him, a slow lingering kiss that put a sparkle into her blue eyes. Jim reluctantly broke off the kiss and said, "We ought to get back inside. They'll be wondering what happened to us." Then the two of them got out of the van and walked hand-in-hand back toward the house.

Trixie felt again that warm contentment she'd felt at the cemetery...as if the coldness that surrounded Magdalene's agitated spirit had vanished. As Jim released her hand to unlock the door, she turned and looked back down the yard and could almost for a moment see a kneeling Magdalene, burying her little box amongst her beloved roses. A lump rose in her throat as she whispered, "Rest in peace, Magdalene."

Just before she turned to enter the house, Trixie felt a gentle caress on her cheek and smelled the slight fragrance of roses, and somehow, she knew that she had been heard.

## The End

Dana's notes: Thanks again to my partner in crime, Susan, for agreeing to write another joint story with me. Apparently, I didn't scare her off after last year! ☺ Writing with Susan is a dream and always so much fun! Thanks, sweetie, for writing with me, editing for me, and being my friend! You ROCK!

The name Alphonse the Hammer was generated by the Mafia Name Generator ([http://gangstaname.com/mafia\\_name.php](http://gangstaname.com/mafia_name.php)) by entering the name "Susan Carlisle."

Susan and I used Evanston, Illinois as our model city. The city's official website at <http://www.cityofevanston.org> was an invaluable help in researching properties and laws regarding what information can be released and to whom. The Birth and Death Certificates section does fall under the Health and Human Services Division in Evanston, and it

does cost \$10 to do a records look-up. We may have used a *little* license in the ease with which they received the information about the birth certificate, but “proving financial interest” was a valid reason for requiring information.

The Rock-N-Roll McDonalds was a way cool place—but now it is closed and undergoing massively extensive renovations/rebuilding. I just hope that they put all that cool memorabilia back when they’re done! ☺

Mart’s comment about the behavior of the microwave is quoted, without permission, from *Ghostbusters*, and served as our carryover item from last year’s Sarah Sligo Challenge.

\* \* \*

Susan’s notes: Ha! More likely it was Dana who’d be scared off by ME! ☺ Thanks for another brilliant collaboration project, sweetie! What you said goes double for me! It’s definitely always an honor and a pleasure to write with you! Thanks for your help and support, sweetie!!

We used a lot of book references in this story: Jane Morgan from the Mystery of the Velvet Gown, Pam Watson, the yakkety-yak girl that cornered Mart, from The Happy Valley Mystery, Honey’s crush on Pat, the horse trainer’s son from Minnesota, can be found in the Mystery of the Galloping Ghost, Jim’s reminiscences about his uncle’s house, his parents and Jonesy are, of course, from the Secret of the Mansion, “Moll Dick”, the name Jim called Trixie in one of the earlier versions of Mysterious Code, the references to the Lisgard House from the Whispering Witch and the Bob-Whites’ (save Jim) archeological dig experience is from the Mystery of the Indian Burial Ground.

All places mentioned in the story are real places in the Chicagoland area, save Alphonse the Hammer’s house and the Alta Vista Cemetery. Alphonse, Rosa, Letitia and Magdalene are not real persons nor was their story based on the events in a real person’s life. Any resemblance to people living or dead are purely coincidental.

*Ferris Bueller’s Day Off* featured a scene in front of the Chagall windows of Ferris and his girlfriend...uh...canoodling. ;) *Scream* made the famous claims Honey talks about. Mart’s quote about roses is an adaptation of the Wicked Witch of the West’s comments about poppies from the movie, *The Wizard Of Oz*. All movies are copyrighted by their respective studios, and no money is being made off their use here.

The Gangster Tour is as described and the “names” of the actors who run the tour are actual “names” used by the tour. Although we never had the kind of trouble from the guys that Trixie did. ;) The tour is pretty much how it’s described. A lot of fun. ☺ You can find information about the tour at <http://www.gangstertour.com>.

The “cover” for our story is from Jenni’s Trix-e-tron.

The references to the mystery from “last year” and the Lizzie Borden house refer to Dana’s and my Fright Night story from last year, 92 Second Street, which you can find on Dana’s non-universe fanfic page or my Victoria’s Secret universe fanfic page.

And, as always, these characters are the property of Random House Publishing. No money is being made from their use.