

This is a Jixemetri Circle Writing Challenge #15 entry for Anna, Kate, and Dana's *Día de los Muertos* Challenge. A note about the title: Susan and I brainstormed for four straight days trying to come up with a title. Finally, the graphic had to be done and the story had to be uploaded. So we picked one. It doesn't fit the story the greatest, but oh well. It was either this or *Día de los Frayne*.

Treasure in the Ruins by Susan and Dana

Trixie Belden hated dressing up, but even the skirt and blouse she was wearing could not dampen her excitement about the evening. The Guggenheim Museum was launching an exciting new exhibit of ancient Aztec and Incan art and artifacts the following day. To celebrate the largest exhibit of Aztecs objects ever shown outside of Mexico, the museum had invited its more generous patrons to a gala event the night before the opening. Drinks and hors d'oeuvres were circulating freely among the privileged guests, among who were Matthew and Madeleine Wheeler and their own guests, the Bob-Whites of the Glen, as they enjoyed the mystique of the ancient works of art.

"This is so worth giving up trick-or-treating for!" Trixie exclaimed to her friends as her eyes wandered over the exotic animal and warrior carvings on display. A uniquely carved eagle caught her eye, and she admired it.

"It was trick-or-treating for UNICEF, though, Trix," Honey Wheeler reminded her best friend. Each year on Halloween, the group of friends collected money for UNICEF, but, when Honey's parents had invited the gang to the museum event scheduled for Halloween night, they had jumped at the chance to see the Aztec exhibit in a private setting.

"I know, but our decision to go door-to-door to sell the UNICEF Christmas cards will make up for that. As soon as your parents invited us to this, I couldn't help but remember our trip to Arizona. Di's Uncle Monty told us that the Orlandos could trace their family tree back to an Aztec noble, remember?" Trixie asked, her blue eyes shining.

"We remember, Trix," Jim Frayne, Honey's adopted brother, said with a smile for his favorite schoolgirl shamus.

"We also remember your propensity to fabricate elevated land masses out of small mounds created by burrowing mammals of the family *Talpidae*," Trixie's almost-twin Mart said. "Not to mention your propensity to volunteer your associates, known collectively as the Bob-Whites of the Glen, for a week of servitude."

Diana Lynch playfully slapped Mart. "Trixie helped a *lot* of people during that trip, including my uncle, so stop teasing her, Mart."

"Your wish is my command, my fair Lady Di," Mart said with a mischievous grin.

Dan Mangan laughed out loud at his best friend's antics. "As it has been since, what, kindergarten, Mart?"

Trixe groaned and turned her attention back to a carving of the Aztec moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui. "Can we not talk about my brother's love life?"

Honey also stood admiring the carving of Coyolxauhqui and quickly changed the subject. "Remember how the Orlandos celebrated their family's special *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead?"

Brian, Trixie's oldest brother, nodded. "They had a week-long fiesta near the birthday of Pedro Orlando, the sixteenth-century founder of the family, that commemorated his death on the last day. I always thought it was neat to celebrate your ancestors that way."

Honey nodded. "When I researched Mexican customs for my theme, I found all of the information on the official Day of the Dead fascinating."

"We don't have an official Day of the Dead in our family," Trixie said, "but Moms and Dad do take us to the cemetery to visit Grandma and Grandpa Belden's graves on each of their birthdays, on the anniversaries of their deaths, and at Christmastime."

"It is a nice tradition," Mart agreed.

Honey looked over to where Jim and Dan were standing and noticed the unhappy looks on their faces. She suddenly realized anew that both boys were orphans, and discussing family deaths and ancestors would not be a pleasant subject for them. And Dan hadn't been on the trip to Arizona, so he was probably feeling a bit left out. She opened her mouth to change the subject, but Dan spoke up just then.

"I've never told you guys this, but I travel into Brooklyn on my mom's and dad's birthdays to visit their graves."

The group sobered at this revelation, and Honey noticed the despondent look that settled across Jim's features at this statement. Honey turned to Trixie and saw that her best friend was also staring at Jim, a look of concern mixed with determination on her face. Both girls realized that Jim had not been to Rochester or Albany to visit either of his parents' graves since he had come to Sleepyside.

Trixie, at that very moment, was suddenly determined that the Bob-Whites would together make a pilgrimage with Jim to Rochester to visit Jim's father's grave. The next day was November 1, the very day of the Mexican *Día de los Muertos*. What better day to go?

As the Bob-Whites moved through the exhibits of jewelry, body ornaments, musical instruments, and household objects, the mood once again lightened. Everyone was especially impressed with the stone and turquoise mask of a human face. It was the centerpiece of the new exhibit, and everyone could see why.

After the Wheelers and their young charges had seen all of the exhibits, they left the museum and went to a lovely Italian restaurant just down the street. Although most of the group was their usual loud and boisterous selves, Trixie noticed that Jim seemed much quieter than normal. Even when he smiled, the smile did not reach his green eyes, normally sparkling with humor. Trixie's heart ached for him, and she was more determined than ever to visit Rochester the following day. She was sure she could make their parents understand the need to do this.

After dinner, as the group exited the restaurant, Trixie lightly touched Jim's arm. He turned and smiled at her, and Trixie was satisfied to note that his smile reached his eyes that time.

"Jim, all of this talk of ancestors and the Day of the Dead got me thinking. Would you be up to a Bob-White trip to Rochester tomorrow? I mean, we didn't get to celebrate Halloween, but maybe we could celebrate the Day of the Dead by honoring *your* family together tomorrow. What do you say?" At Jim's startled look, Trixie's heart sank. "I'm sorry, Jim. I'm being too pushy."

Jim looked into Trixie's blue eyes and smiled at the earnest look on her pert features. "You're not being pushy, but I don't know, Trix. It's a nice thought, a wonderful one actually, but I just don't know. I—"

At that moment, the couple noticed a commotion as a Mexican woman stood speaking to a taxi driver. Both were clearly upset. Jim and Trixie had lagged behind the rest of the group, who were now quite a ways down the sidewalk, headed back to where the Wheelers' limousine awaited them. They didn't notice the commotion, but Trixie and Jim felt compelled to see if they could help.

Jim approached the woman. "Excuse me, ma'am?" The Mexican woman looked at him, startled. "Can I help you?"

The Mexican woman started speaking in a torrent of Spanish. Jim interrupted her. "Please, ma'am, I don't speak Spanish. Do you speak English?"

"No deniro! No deniro!" the woman cried. "No money! The taxi ride! It is more than I think! I do not have money to pay the man! I live here before, go back to Mexico City, but my daughter and I return. It is more money than I remember!"

Jim immediately reached for his wallet. "How much is the cab ride?" he asked the taxi driver. Upon hearing the amount, he paid the driver the full amount plus a generous tip. The cabbie thanked him and drove away.

"Thank you! Thank you! You nice man. You both nice people." She looked at Trixie. "I told you fortune once when you helped me in airport. I knew then our paths cross again. Now they have. You are both very kind people and deserve kind things. I tell you another fortune. This one is for red-haired man. You need to listen to the girl. You have a very, very important journey to make. Make the journey; discover your treasure. Thank you for your help." With that, the little woman scurried into a nearby building, leaving Trixie and Jim standing dumbfounded on the sidewalk.

"I can't believe we ran into the same woman I helped in the airport that time!" Trixie finally said, never one to be speechless for long.

"I can't believe she seemed to know that you want me to take a trip tomorrow," Jim responded, a dazed expression on his handsome features. "Although the part about the treasure makes no sense."

Jim could see Trixie's eyes sparkling even in the dim light of the streetlamps. "Jim," she said, "you realize what this means, right? We *have* to go tomorrow. We just have to!"

Jim pulled the car back onto the interstate after their lunch in Binghamton. He'd offered to drive the last segment of their trip as he was the only one of the Bob-Whites who knew Rochester at all. And, more importantly, it would keep his mind occupied doing something other than worrying about what lay ahead.

He'd been fighting with an uneasy feeling in his stomach ever since Trixie had suggested the trip out to Rochester. And running into that strange, little woman from the airport whose bizarre fortune had immersed them in no end of trouble only made the uneasiness worse.

"Oh, the fall color is so beautiful," Honey said from the back seat with a sigh. "I just love the oranges and those deep, crimson reds. I think autumn is my very most favorite time of year."

Dan grinned, leaning across Brian to wink at her. "I thought you said that summer was your favorite season, Honey."

Mart chimed in from the seat that faced the back. "She says that about *every* season."

Brian shrugged and draped his arm across the back of the seat and smiled at Honey. "Well, that works for me. There's always something terrific going on in nature, no matter what season it is."

Honey gave Brian a brilliant smile and turned to look back out the window again.

Jim let the ebb and flow of conversation go around him as he drove. Di called out excitedly about a doe and a fawn lurking near the edge of a wooded area they passed, and Mart, of course, had to give a long discourse about the history of Cornell University when they drove by the turnoff sign for Ithaca and veered into the Finger Lakes National Forest area.

The banter, as always, was close to deafening, but Jim ignored it, looking over the beautiful countryside that he and his parents used to explore on long weekends. He felt a painful squeeze around his heart and wondered sadly if he'd really ever think of them without that horrible pang of grief and longing.

Another squeeze, this one light and comforting, jolted him back to the present. Trixie smiled hesitantly at him from her seat. She had opted to sit with him when he drove, sparking a round of teasing from Dan and Di who had made kissy-face noises before they'd relinquished the places they'd sat in earlier. Jim gave her a half-hearted smile while he scrambled to think of something...anything...to say.

"It really is beautiful up here," Trixie said tentatively, her worried blue eyes scanning his face. "I can see why your parents decided to live up here."

He furrowed his brow, trying to remember things he hadn't thought of in a long time. "I think they went to school out here. Dad never talked much about his life before Mom." A frown crossed his face at the thought.

Trixie shrugged a little and said matter-of-factly, "Well, it may just be that you were too little to remember." She laughed. "It took me years before it even occurred to me to ask how Moms and Dad met."

"Yeah, that's probably it," he said with a sigh. Jim ran a hand over the back of his neck and said, "I wish I'd asked, though. Now, there isn't anyone alive who knows."

Trixie bit her lip, and Jim was suddenly sorry he'd said anything at all. He forced a smile to his face and said, "I'm being maudlin. Don't pay any attention to me."

"I know this has got to be hard on you, Jim," Trixie said softly. "I feel like I pushed too hard. I..."

Jim shook his head. "It's a great idea that you had, Trixie. And it's been too long since I was in Rochester." He smiled a little and said, "I think you'll like the house. The one I grew up in, I mean. I hope it's still there."

"Oh, it just *has* to be," Trixie said firmly. "It sounds like a wonderful place. A lot like Crabapple Farm." She smiled at him, her blue eyes again lighting with interest and enthusiasm.

Jim felt a little of the icy feeling inside him melt away under the warmth of her smile and thought maybe the day wouldn't be as horrible as he'd thought it would be.

It seemed like forever, but they'd finally wound through the downtown of Rochester, crossing over the Genesee River. Trixie rolled her eyes dramatically as Mart shouted out tidbits from his guidebook. A smile curved Jim's lips as old, familiar terms from long-ago field trips and drives with his parents echoed in his head.

"George Eastman, who was the founder of the Eastman Kodak film company," Mart read, "had a house here on East Avenue, and there also appears to be a Frank Lloyd Wright house somewhere nearby, and Susan B. Anthony was from here as well."

"I'd love to see that Kodak museum sometime," said Brian wistfully. He leaned forward, resting his arms on the seats in front of him, and looked from Jim to Trixie. "Do you think we can stop on the way back from your house, Jim?"

Jim nodded. "I can't imagine it'd take that long to see the house," he said quietly. "We can find a place downtown to stay tonight and then spend the morning there tomorrow before we go back...if that's okay with everyone."

General murmurs of consent rumbled through the car as Jim turned off the expressway and headed out toward the edge of the city where the more urban areas spread out to the suburban ones.

A lot of the banter that had echoed through the car most of the way from Sleepside began to die down and peter off as Jim wound the car through the smaller streets, passing nice, suburban homes and schools. Trixie glanced at him a few times but didn't say anything.

An incredible tightness filled his chest as he turned onto the street where his little brick grade school stood. Jim cleared his throat and gestured at the school. "That's...uh...that's where I went to grade school."

All heads in the car immediately swiveled to look at the little school. Dan noted the peculiar playground house made from old tires near the school and joked, "Were you king of the tire house at some point, Jim?"

Jim half-smiled and said, "Well, maybe. Frankie Hall tried to best me many times."

"I'm sure he couldn't beat you," Honey said loyally.

Trixie glanced around at all the neat homes and looked at Jim with a sort of surprised curiosity in her eyes. "I thought you lived out in the country."

Jim turned another corner and shrugged a little. "We did. I guess it's really been built up since I lived here."

His hands tightened on the wheel as he turned hesitantly onto the road that used to be a half-gravel, half-dirt road that led out to the few houses on a lane somewhat like Glen Road was now. The road was now paved and littered with attractive little bungalows. A pang went through him as he looked at the neatly trimmed lawns and picket fences that had replaced the wide-open field that he'd run through as a kid to get to school.

As he turned onto the lane, he couldn't decide if he wanted the old house to be there or not. A wry smile curved the ends of his mouth.

"This is a nice area, Jim," Dan offered quietly from the back seat. "You must have loved growing up out here."

Jim glanced up in the rearview mirror at his friend, whose dark eyes met his with a sympathetic light. He smiled, one of the only genuine ones he'd had that day, and said softly, "Yeah, I did."

When he reached the end of the street, his eyes softened. The old place was still there...with its wide open field in the back, the welcoming front porch with its wooden swing that his father had made, and he even got a glimpse of the painted woodpecker door knocker his father had carved and painted as a birthday present for his mother. His throat closed painfully, and tears threatened at the back of his eyes as he pulled the car off to the side of the road and slid the gearshift into park.

"Is this it, Jim?" Honey asked softly as she slipped a slender hand forward to squeeze his shoulder.

He nodded slowly as he whispered, "It looks just the same."

Trixie reached over and grabbed one of his hands and held it tightly. The other Bob-Whites all craned their necks to look out the window at the sprawling farmhouse, its white wooden frame and dark green shutters cheery in the late afternoon sun.

"You weren't kidding when you said it looked like Crabapple Farm," Brian marveled.

Di tucked a long piece of dark hair behind her ear as she surreptitiously wiped away a few stray tears from her violet eyes. "It sure does," she said quietly. "Didn't you say one time that it had a stream in back? Maybe it's still there. It doesn't look like the property's been built up at all."

It was Mart, however, who noticed a key item, perched perkily along the border of the property. "Hey, Jim! Your house is for sale! Look! They've got an open house going on today!"

Several excited exclamations echoed through the car. Trixie tightened her grip on Jim's hand, her blue eyes sparkling. "Oh, let's go inside. Jim? Can we? Do you want to?"

Jim stared out at the old place, half-expecting his mother to come hurrying down the steps and chide him for keeping everyone outside while she had lemonade and cookies waiting inside. He swallowed painfully. More than anything, he wished that were true.

"We don't have to, Jim, if you don't want to," Dan interjected quietly.

The soft empathy in his friend's voice seemed to revitalize him in a way he really didn't quite understand but was grateful for. He shook his head. "No, let's go check the old place out." He smiled weakly. "I just wish Mom and Dad were here to introduce you to."

Honey's hazel eyes filled with tears as she leaned forward and hugged her brother from behind. "We do, too," she whispered.

Jim hugged her back before he slipped the keys from the ignition into his coat pocket, and the Bob-Whites all filed out. Trixie hurried around the car to walk with Jim, putting her hand in his as they walked up the driveway to the house where a tall, good-looking man swung open the front door and beamed a 100-watt smile at them.

"Hello, folks!" the man said, waving his hand in greeting as the Bob-Whites trailed up the stone walkway to the front of the house. "Come to check out the place?" He winked. "We get a lot of groups of teenagers wanting to see the inside of this house." He grinned at them and said, "I'm Ralph Young, the realtor." He looked from one of the Bob-Whites to the others expectantly.

Jim cleared his throat and tried to smile. "Jim Frayne," he said quietly. "My parents owned this house when I was a kid. My friends and I came out here..."

"...to see the old stomping grounds," Ralph said with a smile and a nod. "How lucky for you that it's for sale with an open house today!" He grinned. "Lucky things always happen on my birthday. And, as it happens, today *is* my birthday."

"Happy birthday," Honey said with a polite smile.

"Thank you!" he said heartily. "I'm hoping that my luck will hold, and I'll find a buyer by the end of the day." He winked at Jim. "You wouldn't have a spare two-hundred thousand on you to take this place off my hands, would you?"

Jim looked at him, startled, and said, "Well, I..."

"I know, I know," he said with a laugh. "I'm just kidding with you. What kind of teenager has that kind of money sitting in the bank?" he asked. Ralph waved them inside. "Feel free to take a look around. You obviously must know the place pretty well, but I do have sheets about the layout and the property on the coffee table in there. Feel free to take one if you like."

The Bob-Whites trooped into the house, all of them expectantly looking around. Immediately, Mart exclaimed over the huge living room with its shining wood floors and the sliding glass doors that opened to the deck behind the house.

Jim laughed a little as he gestured to the deck. "Now *that* wasn't there when I was a kid."

"I guess everyone these days needs a deck," Di teased him as she followed Mart into the living room, running her hand across the top of the dark red couch and commenting to Honey, who had followed her, about the décor.

Brian had opted for a different direction, poking his head into the old-fashioned kitchen with its round table and high-backed chairs. He grinned at his sister and said, "I half expect Moms to come out and offer us some crabapple specials. Weird how these old farmhouses look so alike, isn't it? I can't get over it."

He gestured to Dan. "You've got to see the view from the kitchen, Dan," he said, enthusiasm on his handsome face. "It's unbelievable!"

Dan stepped forward and then stopped, looking back at Jim hesitantly. Jim waved him on and, so, Dan disappeared into the kitchen with Brian, the two teenagers talking animatedly.

Trixie stood quietly with Jim, not saying much. Jim cleared his throat and said, "I...well...maybe we could go upstairs. I can show you where my room was."

"If you want to," Trixie said carefully.

Jim could tell that Trixie's inner curiosity was killing her. A small smile curved his lips. He put his arm around her and kissed the top of her curls and said quietly, "You all being with me is helping a lot, Trix. I'll be fine."

She looked up at him with a smile, one of her cheery, sunny smiles that never failed to banish the shadows around his heart. She tightened her hand around his and tugged him toward the stairs. "Show me. I want to know all about it. Did you have a favorite hiding place? Is there an old attic in this house? How about a crawl space underneath it? My grandma's place in Philadelphia had one of those."

He willingly followed her up the stairs and back into the memories of his past. He could hear his mother laughing as she folded laundry in the summer sun and the scrape of his father's chisel against a piece of wood, the shaven curls piling up around his worn workboots as he sat on the old porch swing. Trixie's enthusiastic, demanding questions about oddly-shaped closets and big, wide windows that looked out over the large expanse of backyard and whether he had

ever climbed the big oak tree in the front yard kept his mind busy, full of happy memories of two of the people he'd loved more than any others and the home they'd lived in together.

The other Bob-Whites joined them, Honey rhapsodizing about the stone fireplace and Mart describing the full workshop in the basement. Everyone was chattering, happy and excited over finding their old friend's home to be everything that they'd hoped and imagined it to be.

After a little bit, Jim slipped away from all of them to head out to the backyard. The acre of land that extended right up to the small brook that lined the property had always seemed so huge...so vast and full of possibilities when he'd been young, and a haven for him when his father was dying of the cancer that ravaged his family apart.

He slowly trod across the grass toward the shady trees near the brook bed and knelt down to run his hand through the clear, trickling water that bathed the sides of the old bed. A small wood frog hopped away from the movement of his hand in the water. He stared at the rust-colored animal, a long-forgotten memory pushing to the surface.

"Gently, Jimmy. Gently. See the little guy there just under the water? That's a tadpole. One day, he'll grow up to be a big, strong frog." Win knelt down by the brook bank and pulled Jim's small hand away from the tree shoot that hung over the edge of the water, its leaves dangling into the trickle of water that flowed there and directed his son's attention with a pointing finger to one of its leaves.

Jim crouched down at the edge of the brook and stared at the small body of the tadpole, clinging to a leaf that floated on top of the brook's water. He turned to look up at his dad with a grin on his freckled face. "Big and strong...like me?"

Win laughed, tousling his son's red hair. "Yep. He'll grow up to be a big, strong frog just like you."

Jim closed his eyes, tears filling them. The ache for his long-dead father seeped through him. *God, if I could just see him again. Talk to him. Just one more time.*

The crack of a twig under someone's foot behind him had him blinking his eyes open and hastily running a hand under them, catching a few, stray tears. Before he could get to his feet, however, he felt the warm press of soft curls against his back and the tight squeeze of a pair of strong, sturdy arms around his waist. He closed his eyes again, reveling in that comfort that only came from Trixie.

"Are you okay?" she asked him quietly.

"Yeah, no...well, okay, I guess," he said with a sigh. "I just really miss my dad right now."

"I'm sorry," she said, leaning her head against his. "Do you want to skip the cemetery? Maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I haven't been there in a long time." A shadow crossed his face. "The grave's probably a mess. Most likely, no one has done anything to it since we left for Albany." A heavy sigh escaped him. "No one to care about it but me."

"I care," Trixie said firmly. "And Honey cares. All of the other Bob-Whites care." She let go of him and sat down next to him on the grass. "We'll get some garden tools and fix it up nice. Honey suggested buying some flowers, but Di thought it might be more fun to pick some from the field back here." She gestured over to where Mart was instructing Di, Honey, Dan and Brian on the correct flowers to pick. "Although, she might end up beaming Mart with them instead."

A ghost of a smile curved Jim's lips as he said, "I think Dad would have liked that."

"Good," Trixie said. She brushed a few curls out of her eyes and gazed down at the brook in front of them. "Is this your brook you told me about?"

He nodded. "Dad and I used to come out here a lot. Lot of wood frogs back here. I'd lay down in the grass, and he'd tell me all about the wood frogs and what they ate and all of that." His eyes softened. "He knew all about the woods and everything in it."

“Just like his son,” Trixie murmured. After a second of hesitation, Trixie climbed around Jim, sat down in front of him, and pulled his arms around her. She leaned back against his chest, the autumn wind picking up her blonde curls and teasing the bottom of his chin with them. “Tell me all about the wood frogs, Jim.”

He tightened his arms around her and began to talk, his voice husky as the old lessons his dad had taught him came flooding back. As Trixie quietly listened, the heaviness around his heart lifted slightly and that sense of peace he’d always come here for again found its way into his soul.

It hadn’t been long after that when the others had joined them, making noisy plans with a ton of cheerfulness to help buoy Jim as they headed toward the cemetery. Brian, Mart and Dan had insisted they’d pay for and pick out the garden tools needed, Mart blustering about his expertise with the tools. Jim instead took the girls down to the local supermarket for Cokes and directions to the cemetery. He only vaguely remembered being there when they’d buried his father and didn’t remember streets or directions as to how to get to the little out-of-the-way country cemetery.

A while later...

Dusk was falling, scattering the horizon with a deep, dark blue as the sun hovered, waiting to disappear along the edge of the sky. Jim trudged with the others through the rows of graves in the small cemetery, peering at the tombstones. Honey or Di let out small cries if they happened upon a child’s gravestone in their searches.

The cemetery had very few recent graves, and the little house, where the operators who oversaw the cemetery during the daylight hours stayed, had been closed and dark when they had arrived.

When asked by the others for the general area of his father’s grave, Jim had had to admit that he didn’t remember. His vague recollections of that day were of pain and a gray dullness and a lot of tears. He had never really thought of *where* his father was buried, only that he was no longer with him.

So, the seven Bob-Whites separated, stretching out across the area to find the grave. Finally, after a half hour or so of looking, Trixie cried triumphantly from an area near the back of the cemetery, near the iron fence that enclosed it.

The lawn around the grave had been mowed, but the gravestone had sunk several inches into the ground, and dry, dead leaves covered the site, longer weeds encroaching around the gravestone’s edge. Jim looked at the grave in dismay, a pang of guilt shooting through him at its neglect.

“Not to worry!” Mart said as cheerfully as he could muster under the circumstances. “That’s what we bought the dirt for. We’ll make sure it’s all back to what it should be in no time at all.”

Quickly and silently, the three boys went to work. Jim wanted to help somehow, but the others waved him off. He hated to see his father resting alone in the old graveyard when he knew his mother was across the state with that hated name on her stone. Trixie stood by him, her hand wrapped tightly around his, offering what little comfort she could.

After the boys straightened the gravestone, Di knelt down, holding Jim’s pocketknife in her hand, and carefully cleaned out the letters and dates on the stone. She finally leaned back on her heels and gave the site an approving smile. “Looks better now, doesn’t it, Jim?”

He nodded, unable to speak. Honey put the wildflowers down on the grave and arranged them against the stone. She patted the grave lightly, her slender fingers rustling the

grass below it. "Thank you for giving us Jim," she whispered. "We love him so much." She rose from her knees and wiped away tears from her eyes.

Silence fell on the little group as they waited. The Bob-Whites, one by one, turned to look expectantly at Jim. "Do you want us to wait for you by the car?" Brian asked quietly.

Jim shook his head. There was something surreal about the little cemetery. The sun had vanished under the horizon, and the night had brought with it a bit of chill in the air. The last thing he wanted to do was to be left alone in the grim place with his memories haunting him. "I just wanted to see that the grave was taken care of," he said. He attempted a smile, which failed, and then said, "I appreciate the help, guys. I...let's just go."

No one said much of anything on the quick walk back to the car. Even Mart seemed unusually sober and quiet, his hands tucked in his pockets as he walked, matching his stride to Di's who kept glancing at the tall redhead leading the way out of the graveyard.

Brian and Dan exchanged glances as Jim strode over to the car and got into the front seat, prepared to drive again. Brian hesitated and then walked over to the driver's side of the car and knocked on the window. Jim unrolled it while he stuck the keys in the ignition.

"Are you sure you want to drive, Jim?" he asked. "I could take a turn..."

Jim shook his head. "I'm fine. Let's just go back to Rochester and get a hotel. It's getting late." He turned the key in the engine as Brian straightened. The car revved the engine, but did not turn over.

With a frown, Jim glanced down at the panel in front of him. Brian returned to the window with a matching frown. Jim turned the key in the ignition again. The same thing happened again.

"Damn," Jim muttered.

Brian unlocked the door and opened it. "Let me try it."

After a moment of hesitation, Jim unfolded his lanky form from the car and let Brian get into the driver's seat.

"What's wrong?" demanded Dan.

"The car won't turn over," Jim said tersely.

Honey's eyes widened, and Di looked at Jim in horror. "That's not funny, Frayne," she said, her face paling.

"It's not a joke," he replied.

Brian had tried a couple of times but had the same miserable luck that Jim did. He popped the engine hood, set the brake and got out of the car to look. All three of the other boys came to stand around him, all of them looking with worried frowns at the engine.

This led to a series of tests that Brian shouted out, having Jim sit behind the driver's seat. Nothing seemed to work. They checked the gas tank, which still had plenty of gas from Jim's earlier fill-up. Finally, the guys joined the girls where they'd seated themselves on the ground.

Brian brushed a long lock of dark hair away from his face and said grimly, "It's dead."

"So, what does that mean?" Trixie demanded.

"It means we aren't going anywhere in it," Mart retorted. "It's dead. Kaput."

"Thanks for the update, Dictionary Boy," his sister said with a roll of her eyes. "I *meant* what do we do now?"

"Who's up for a 20-mile hike?" Dan said with a half-hearted smile.

"You must be joking," Di said with a wail. "Twenty miles?"

"About that," Jim said with a sigh. "We're way out in the country here." He frowned. "I didn't even see any houses once we left town, did you, Brian?"

Brian shook his head.

Trixie gestured toward the little house inside the cemetery. "That place must have a phone, don't you think? To arrange for gravesite services and things like that?"

"It's locked up tighter than a drum, Trixie," Dan said, shaking his head. "I was over there earlier to see if there was someone who had some records of the graves here." He held up his hands and made a square about two inches wide. "They had a padlock on the door that big. And I don't know about you, but I left my lock picks in New York City."

"We're not picking any locks," Jim said with a frown.

"But what are we supposed to do?" asked Honey. "Wait around here until morning?"

"Maybe we could split up – some of us go for help and some of us stay here to work on the car?" Brian suggested reluctantly.

"No, that's crazy," Mart protested. He waved toward the meandering road they'd arrived on. "It's almost pitch black outside. That road wasn't exactly a flat Kansas kind of road. We could easily get lost or fall and twist an ankle. And then where would we be?" He shook his head.

"At least if we stay here," said Jim quietly, "we have some hope of someone showing up at some point – maybe to lock the gates for the night or, worst case scenario, showing up for work tomorrow morning." He shrugged. "Or we at least can have daylight when we walk for help."

"Tomorrow's Sunday," Trixie said doubtfully. "Do people in cemeteries work on Sundays?"

"I'd think they must," Brian said calmly. "People get buried on Sundays, don't they?"

Di moaned and leaned her head against her knees. "Don't remind me!"

"There's plenty of room to stretch out in there," Dan said, gesturing toward the cemetery. "We have a couple of blankets in the back, I think."

Honey and Di paled. "S-sleep in the cemetery?" Honey squeaked.

Brian looked from the girls to Dan, a doubtful look in his eyes. "The girls could sleep in the car."

"Sleep in the car?" Trixie scoffed, getting to her feet and wiping off the grass from her jeans. "As if." She looked down at her two friends who were gaping at her like she'd lost her mind. "It'll be like a camping trip. It'll be fun."

"A camping trip with graves," Dan said cheerily.

"We could tell ghost stories!" Mart said, a sudden enthusiasm lighting his freckled face.

Brian and Jim both groaned. "Mart," Brian warned.

"What?" Trixie demanded. "I think it's a great idea! I mean, how many teenagers across the United States get an opportunity like this?"

Jim and Brian shared a long-suffering look but got to their feet.

Trixie pulled the girls to theirs, slipping an arm through each of theirs and whispered, "Lots of free cuddling you wouldn't get at a hotel..."

Both girls looked up with a sudden gleam in their eyes, and Dan sighed as he got to his feet. "Seventh wheel in a cemetery yet." He ran a hand through his dark hair. "Maybe I'll get lucky, and there'll be a ghostly girl out there who'd be interested in some late night graveyard conversation with a boy from the 'hood."

There was a flurry of activity as they gathered blankets, snack food, and the emergency kit from the car and prepared for the long night ahead.

Honey shivered as the group re-entered the cemetery. When they first had arrived at the cemetery, Honey had felt the slightest touch of unease at entering a cemetery as the last light was fading from the sky, but the hunt for Jim's father's grave and then her concern over Jim had quickly pushed that feeling aside. Entering a cemetery in complete darkness, knowing she was going to have to spend the whole night there, made her feel positively spooked. And no amount of cuddling with Brian was going to be able to get rid of the spooky feeling that enveloped her.

Although it might help a little, Honey thought, a small grin forming on her lips.

"What are you grinning at, Honey Wheeler?" Di whispered fiercely. "I am about to die I am so creeped out right now, and you're *smiling*?"

Trixie grinned and spoke softly before Honey could answer. "Honey and Brian cuddling in a tree. A ceme-tree that is!"

Honey and Di both groaned at Trixie's attempt at wit. "What?" Trixie asked in a normal voice. "This is a great opportunity. Ever since I was a kid, I've wanted to spend the night in a cemetery."

"Why is it that every time *you* want to do something, Trixie, we *all* get sucked into it?" Di asked.

"It's her sparkling wit and charm," Dan said dryly and then moved on to more practical matters. "I think setting up near the little house would be the best bet, don't you think?"

Jim nodded his agreement. "I think that's better than a spot near the edge of the cemetery. And I certainly am not going to advocate sleeping *on* graves."

Honey shivered again, and Di let out a squeal. Trixie, however, laughed. "You're never any fun, Jim Frayne."

Jim could barely see Trixie, but he knew that her blue eyes sparkled with mischief, and he laughed. "You'll pay for that one later, Belden."

"Promise?" came the saucy reply.

Mart groaned. "I signed on for ghost stories, not this sort of drivel. Let's get settled in, and let the games begin!"

The seven teenagers managed to settle themselves in a close cluster, covering themselves with the wool blankets that they kept in the Bob-White station wagon for just such emergencies. Di settled under the slightly scratchy material and was thankful that one of the mottos the group lived by was, "Be prepared." The blankets kept them warm, even in the brisk air of an early November night in upstate New York, and there were ample provisions in their emergency kit.

Soon, the gang was sipping hot soup and crunching granola bars.

"We should have thought to keep marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate in the kit with the dry soup mix and bottled water," Mart commented. "We could have roasted the marshmallows over the Sterno cans and made S'mores."

"S'mores go great with ghost stories," Trixie agreed delightedly.

Brian spoke up. "Trix, not everyone is as excited about this adventure as you are. Can you try to contain a little bit of your enthusiasm, please?"

"Spoilsport," Trixie said under her breath.

"I thought you didn't believe in ghosts, Brian. What's the matter with Trixie's enthusiasm?" Dan wanted to know, knowing exactly what hornet's nest he was about to stir up.

"Just because I don't believe in ghosts doesn't mean that I want Honey and Diana getting any more spooked than they already are," Brian answered calmly.

Dan smiled, knowing what was coming next.

"What do you mean you don't believe in ghosts, Brian Belden?" Trixie practically bellowed. "After what happened at Lizzie Borden's house? And in Chicago? How can you not believe?"

"Yeah, Brian, how can you not believe?" Dan said, his voice full of mirth.

"Don't believe I don't know what you're doing, Mangan," Brian said. Dan couldn't see Brian's face clearly, but he could imagine the exasperated look he was being thrown. "And Trix, I am a scientist. I have a scientific mind. I need proof of things. And I just don't feel as if I've gotten enough proof."

Trixie was actually rendered speechless at his statement, and Mart rushed into the silence, stunned to find himself in the role of peacekeeper between his older brother and younger sister.

"There was a ghost detective," he began in a hushed voice. "Some said he was the best ghost detective that ever lived. If there was a mystery that involved a ghost, he was sure to be able to solve it.

"One day, a woman came into his office. 'Mr. Bones,' the old lady said."

"Bones? The guy's name was Bones?" Di squealed.

"Shylock Bones," Mart confirmed. "'Mr. Bones,' the lady said, 'I think I have a ghost living with me in my house. Can you help me?' Of course, he could help her. So, he followed the lady to her big, creepy, Victorian mansion in the spookiest part of town.

"As soon as he got inside the house, he heard a sound.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap,*" Mart intoned.

Trixie, even though she had listened many times to Mart tell this ghost story sitting in front of the fireplace at Crabapple Farm, shivered involuntarily.

"Shylock Bones was sure it was a ghost. The old lady lived in the house alone, and she had no pets. What else could it be? So, the detective searched the basement. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* The sound was very distant, so Shylock knew it wasn't down there.

"He then searched the first floor. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* It wasn't so distant, but it definitely wasn't on the first floor. So, Shylock went up the stairs, which creaked and groaned a lot.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap,*" Mart again intoned in a spooky voice. Honey snuggled closer to Brian, who put his arm protectively around her.

"He searched the bedrooms. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* He looked under the bed. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* He searched inside all of the closets. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* The sound was definitely getting louder.

"He went to the bathroom next. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* He went out into the hallway. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* It was definitely louder now. The old lady reached up to a rope that swung from the ceiling and pulled. The ladder to the attic came down.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap.* It was definitely louder. Shylock Bones *knew* it was coming from the attic. He bravely climbed the ladder to the attic.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap.* At that top of the stairs, Shylock took out his flashlight and magnifying glass. He shined the light and looked through his magnifying glass. Everything looked bigger, but that didn't help anything."

Honey let out a nervous giggle, and Trixie couldn't help but groan. Mart ignored the two girls and continued.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap.* They searched the trunks. They found nothing. They searched the boxes. Again, they found nothing. *Rap. Rap. Rap.* It was even louder. Shylock shined his light on an old chest of drawers.

"*Rap. Rap. Rap.* There was nothing in the first drawer." Mart's voice rose in volume. "*Rap. Rap. RAP.* He opened the second drawer. Nothing. *Rap. RAP. RAP.* He opened the third drawer. Nothing. *RAP. RAP. RAP.* He opened the bottom drawer and—" Mart paused for effect. "THERE IT WAS!" he yelled, eliciting stifled screams from Honey and Di, and even Trixie jumped a bit.

"A sheet of...WRAPPING PAPER," Mart said and then dissolved into laughter. It wasn't long before the whole group was laughing hysterically, knowing that the story wouldn't be nearly so funny if they hadn't felt so anxious a few minutes before.

It wasn't that the story had been particularly scary, although Mart was a master storyteller and had built the perfect amount of suspense. Their apprehension did not stem from the fact that it was pitch-black past the light of the flashlight illuminating their cozy circle. It wasn't even the waning harvest moon floating above that looked particularly eerie with the wisps of dark clouds wafting in front of it. It wasn't even the fact that, come midnight, it would be All Souls' Day, a particularly spooky-sounding day, that caused the group to feel so skittish.

It was the knowledge that, just beyond the comforting glow of the flashlight mixed with the hazy, blue light from the Sterno cans, was the final resting place of many souls. Even Trixie,

who delighted in adventures such as this, could not help but feel the awe and trepidation that being in such close proximity to so many dead people inspired.

Even knowing what the end of the story held, Trixie had felt a...tension building within her as Mart's voice cast a spell over the group, herself included.

She peered into the darkness beyond.

And let out a quick, startled scream.

"What?"

"What is it?"

"What's wrong?"

A chorus of shocked and scared voices met her involuntary exclamation. Trixie continued to stare toward the main section of the graveyard.

"Do you see that?" she finally whispered.

The others followed her gaze. "What are we looking for, Trix?" Dan asked.

"That...that wispy shape sort of swirling and moving over there."

Silence followed her statement. "I think your eyes are playing tricks on you," Brian finally said in a choked voice.

"I don't think so, Brian," Trixie said, but she didn't sound so sure. "It's very white and very swirly." She blinked. "It's gone!"

Honey and Diana shivered and moved closer to Brian and Mart.

Jim gave Trixie a meaningful look. "I think your eyes *are* playing tricks on you."

Trixie turned to the redhead, surprised at his words. She opened her mouth to respond, but, even in the dim light, she could see the earnest look on his face and suddenly understood his intentions.

"You're right, Jim. I guess being in the cemetery has me more freaked out than I thought," Trixie said. *Jim is so sweet, she thought. He knows that Honey and Di don't need anything else to worry about tonight.*

"It's not the cemetery, Trix," Mart said. "It was my story! Wrapping paper can be very frightening."

The group laughed, and Trixie's vision was soon forgotten as Dan began telling his ghost story.

"There was a young couple who were madly in love, and they happily said their wedding vows, promising to love each other 'til death do us part,' just like the vows say," Dan said, and Trixie felt a delightful chill creeping up her back. She didn't recognize this ghost story, and Dan's low voice was more captivatingly creepy than Mart's had been.

"They moved to Maine and found a house extremely cheap. After they moved in, Jenny, the wife, kept feeling an ominous presence. Soon, she felt like she was being touched during the night when it could not have been Billy, her husband. They asked around and soon heard the stories that an insane serial killer had lived in the house and had been killed there by the law. It certainly explained why the house had been so cheap. But the young couple could not afford to move, so they stuck it out.

"Jenny became so scared that Billy vowed to stay up all night to watch over her and try to see exactly who—or what—was touching her in the middle of the night. As the old grandfather clock that had come with the house began to chime midnight, Billy had the most unbelievable feeling of overwhelming thirst. He went downstairs to get a drink of water, and, while he was down there, he heard Jenny scream. He ran up as fast as he could, and, when he got there, he screamed himself. Jenny's bloody, mutilated body lay on the bed!"

Dan looked around at the wide-eyed faces of his fellow Bob-Whites and then continued his story. "A few days later, after being interrogated by the police, he was finally allowed to go home. He couldn't afford a hotel, so he was forced to spend the night in the very house where his beloved Jenny had been murdered by someone—or *something*. He finally fell asleep but was awoken at the stroke of midnight with another feeling of overwhelming thirst. He went

downstairs to get a drink of water, and, when he returned to his room, there was a lump in the bed.

“With a feeling of dread, he peeled the covers back to reveal Jenny’s mutilated body. As he watched, paralyzed, Jenny’s ghost floated off the bed and up above him, an unholy light in her eyes. The dark form of a crazed-looking man floated beside her.

“‘Didn’t you promise, Billy?’ she said, and that’s when Billy noticed that she was holding a big, gleaming knife, the biggest he had ever seen. ‘Til death do we part, Billy! You promised!’ she screamed as she floated toward Billy, who was too terrified to do anything other than watch as the silver knife came at him.”

The girls squealed in horrified delight as Dan finished his story.

“Good one, man,” Mart said. “Okay, who’s next?”

“I’ll go. And it’s a perfect story considering where we are,” Trixie said, not stopping to consider that it might be *too* perfect, and, therefore, too frightening given their locale and circumstances, but she rushed on in her usual manner.

“This is a true story that I read once. There was an old, creepy cemetery outside of town that everyone said was haunted. One night, a group of boys dared each other to visit the cemetery at midnight. The gang drove to the cemetery a little before midnight and found that the gate happened to be unlocked.”

Mart snorted. “It *happened* to be.”

Trixie glared at him, though she was not sure if he could see her expression, as she couldn’t really see him all that well. “*Anyway*, the gate was unlocked, so the group went inside, trying to find a safe spot to wait for the witching hour to arrive. As they looked at the graves, they noticed that a lot of the headstones were in disrepair. Some were toppled over, and some looked as though they had been scratched up. When they looked closer, they realized that the scratch marks on the headstones appeared to have been etched by some sort of claw, as they all had a very distinctive claw-like pattern, and all of the patterns on the headstones matched. The guys were really freaked out because only something with powerful claws could have made those marks.

“They decided that hanging out there and waiting until midnight wasn’t such a good idea after all. Then, one guy felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up and, freaking out even more, rushed ahead of the others. Just as he got to the open gate, he was pushed to the ground—hard. Of course, he thought his friends must have done it and hurried and got up and turned around. Except that *all of his friends were at least 10 feet behind him*,” Trixie said dramatically, looking around at her audience.

“Now, he was really freaked out when he realized that they couldn’t have done it. When they all got back to the car, the guy realized that his back is positively stinging. He lifted up his shirt, and his friends were horrified to see that he had horrible, bleeding claw marks on his back in the same pattern as the claw marks on the graves...”

Everyone shivered in fascinated horror, as Trixie finished retelling the story. “Boy, does my girl know how to tell a ghost story!” Jim said with a squeeze for “his girl.” Trixie glowed from his compliment.

“Again...not into watching young love blossoming,” Mart said. “Who’s next?”

“I have one that the older boys at camp used to tell around the campfire, so maybe you’ve heard it, but here goes,” said Brian. The Bob-Whites leaned forward, eager to hear the next tale.

Diana was surprised that she was enjoying the ghost stories, but they didn’t seem as scary when she was snuggled up next to Mart, who made her feel warm and safe and secure—as long as she didn’t think too hard about where she was. She leaned her head on Mart’s shoulder and listened to Brian.

“A guy was driving home late one night, and he noticed a girl standing by herself at a bus stop. It was pretty late, and he didn’t think that the buses were running, so he offered the

girl a ride. It turned out that she was heading home, and that her home was almost a 45-minute drive away. The night was very chilly, and the girl didn't have a jacket, so the guy gave her his jacket to wear and cheerfully agreed to drive her home. The two chatted amiably the entire drive to her house, and the guy found out her name was Mary. When he pulled up to her house, he offered to walk her to the door, but Mary politely refused and thanked him for the ride.

"The next day, the guy realized that Mary still had his jacket, so he drove to her house. A woman answered the door, and the guy asked for Mary. The woman looked confused and startled at the mention of the girl's name.

"No one named Mary lives here anymore," she said. The guy noticed a picture of Mary hanging on the wall of the hallway. 'That's the girl I gave the ride to,' he informed the old woman. With her voice shaking, the old woman told him that Mary, her daughter, had been dead for many years and was buried in a cemetery quite a ways away. Shocked, he got directions to the cemetery and realized that it was very close to the bus stop where he had picked up Mary.

"Something compelled him to drive to the cemetery. When he found Mary's grave, his jacket was folded neatly on top of the headstone."

This bit of information was greeted with shrieks of delight and horror, until a loud bang startled the group into silence. Suddenly, laughing in a cemetery seemed very disrespectful.

"What was that?" Di said, clearly near tears. Mart tightened his hold on her shoulders.

"Should we check it out?" Jim asked, peering into the darkness toward the direction the sound had come from.

"No way, Jim Frayne," Honey said firmly. "We're sitting right here and not moving, unless it's to run to the nearest town!"

"We've already determined that the nearest town is too far away to run to," Dan said practically. "Maybe we *should* check it out. Just to be sure."

Everyone's minds were full of ghosts and insane serial killers, thanks to the stories that had been told, and no one relished the thought of venturing out to determine the source of the noise.

"I bet it's just an old barn door or something, and the wind caught it. It has gotten a bit breezy. We just didn't notice much because we're sheltered by this little building," Brian said and then revealed that he wasn't as sure of himself as he sounded when he followed up his statement by suggesting that they go back to the car to get the shovel and other garden tools they had just bought.

"You're not suggesting that we need weapons, are you, Brian?" Trixie gulped, suddenly realizing that perhaps spending the night in the cemetery might be more than she had bargained for.

"I'm not suggesting that we need anything. Just maybe that it might be nice to have them handy," Brian stated, but nobody believed his bravado.

"Okay. It can't hurt to go get them," Jim decided.

"It can if we get killed by an insane serial killer on the way to the car!" Di said frantically.

"Don't worry, Di," Mart said, squeezing her shoulders. "That insane serial killer ghost is all the way up in Maine."

The group laughed nervously as Di smacked her boyfriend. "You're not helping," she said, but she sounded less frightened than she had a moment before.

"Four of us will go get the tools, and the rest will stay here and watch our stuff," Brian decided.

"You are out of your mind, Brian Belden!" Honey protested. "Haven't you learned *anything* from those horror movies? Don't you know that you *never* split up? That's asking for trouble!"

"We'll all go together, and we'll all hold hands. If someone lets go of your hand, yell like anything. Brian and I will go on either end and hold the flashlights," Jim took control of the

situation. The group reluctantly rose from the warmth and security of the blankets and gathered hands. With Brian and Jim lighting the way, they made their way back to the car.

It only took a few minutes to gather the tools, but now the group realized that it was impossible to continue to all hold hands and carry the new items. While they were debating what to do, there was another loud bang...this time from the opposite end of the cemetery.

"It's moving," Trixie said.

"*What's moving?*" Honey whispered. "What is it?"

"I don't know," Trixie replied, "but that negates Brian's theory that it was a barn door. Unless the barn is moving."

"Or there are two barns," Brian retorted at Trixie's obvious sarcasm.

"Maybe we should all sit in the car. We won't get any sleep, but do you honestly think we're going to be able to sleep in the cemetery?" Mart asked.

Silence met his suggestion, but Dan finally spoke up. "I say we leave it up to the girls. What do you want to do?"

The thought of snuggling up under a blanket with Brian and Mart was appealing to Honey and Di, and that wouldn't be nearly as easy to accomplish in the station wagon. Trixie, however, was thinking more practically. "Okay, let's make a wild assumption and say that there *is* something out there that wants to hurt us. If we stay in the car, he or it or whatever could smash its way into the car anyway, and we'd all be trapped. At least, if we're out in the open, we have the chance to run away and escape," she reasoned.

"Nice scenario, Trix," Brian said dryly.

"I'm not saying that's going to happen. I'm just saying that I like our chances better in an open area."

Honey and Di agreed, and the Bob-Whites soon found themselves nestled back under the blankets near the little structure.

"How about another story?" Mart asked.

Honey and Di quickly shook their heads, and Brian said, "I don't think so, Mart."

"This one's not scary. I promise," Mart said and began his tale. "There once was a country boy who decided that he wanted to see the big city. Now, he didn't have much money, but he didn't care. He was going to get out and see the world no matter how he had to do it. So, he went to the big city, and he saw the sights, and, when it was time to find a place to sleep, he decided to settle down where no one would bother him. He went to the cemetery.

"Now, being a country boy, he was used to sleeping outside, so that didn't bother him a bit. And he was a practical sort, and he knew that the only creature that could hurt him was a living one. So, he settled down for a good night's sleep. Until something woke him up in the middle of the night by bumping him on the foot. He looked up and saw a shiny mahogany coffin. He got up and moved. The coffin moved, too. He moved a little bit more. The coffin moved a little bit more. He got up and started to run. The coffin floated in the air and followed him.

"He ran out of the graveyard. The coffin followed him. He ran down the street. The coffin came, too. He ran through an alley and scared all of the bums. The coffin scared them, too. He ran through a park and knocked over a picnic table. The coffin knocked one over, too. He ran through an all-night grocery store and knocked over a Coke display. The coffin knocked over the Pepsi display. He ran out through the back door. The coffin ran out through the back door, too.

"The boy finally ran into the drug store, and that's where it all ended. He opened a box and ate some cough drops...and stopped the coughin'. Get it? It's a pun? Coffin, coughin'?" Mart chuckled at his own joke while the rest of the gang groaned.

"Hey, it's better than telling some scary story and getting us all scared out of our minds, right?" Mart defended.

"That it is," everyone agreed.

"What do you say we actually try to get some sleep?" Honey suggested. "We'll be up with the sunlight, which will still be pretty early, even at this time of year."

"And who knows how long it will take us to actually fall asleep out here?" Diana agreed. "We should start trying now."

Although Trixie didn't feel like sleeping, she didn't want to make a big deal. She had already practically twisted Honey and Di's arms into spending the night in the cemetery to begin with. So, she gave in good-naturedly. Jim, as always, seemed to know her train of thought and gave her a squeeze and a smile as everybody settled into positions comfortable for sleeping.

Dan watched as the couples settled in together and gave a small sigh. He consoled himself with the realization that, outside of the three girls there—who were clearly spoken for and like his sisters, besides—there was no girl special enough with whom he wanted to cuddle all night anyway. Thus consoled, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Sleep proved difficult as his mind wandered to the two loud bangs they had heard earlier. He was proud of himself for being aware of his surroundings, a trait left over from his gang days—and one that didn't hurt when Trixie Belden was your friend—and he hadn't noticed a barn nearby the cemetery when they arrived, let alone two. Still, he earnestly hoped that Brian's explanation was correct.

Meanwhile, Trixie, still wound up, began giggling. "Good night, John Boy," she said.

Honey laughed softly. "That is so 1970s!"

"I don't care," Trixie responded stubbornly. "Good night, Mary Ellen."

"Good night, Elizabeth," Mart chimed in. At everyone's snorts, he replied, "You *know* she was going to keep it up until someone answered her!"

"It's not that, Mart," Di said, giggling. "It's that you knew about Elizabeth Walton!"

"She was kinda cute," Mart insisted.

"So, Trixie's not the only Belden with a thing for redheads," Honey said.

"Honey Wheeler!" Trixie exclaimed. "And you're supposed to be the tactful one!"

"What? Everyone knows how you feel about my brother. Like I spilled some state secret?" Honey laughed.

"I'm going to remember that the next time you call Crabapple Farm, and Moms answers, and you chicken out and ask for me when you really want to talk to Brian," Trixie returned.

"Trixie!" Honey gasped.

"Oh, I'm sorry, was that a state secret?" Trixie giggled. Soon, the whole group was snickering and teasing each other.

As time wore on, though, the voices stilled, and the even breathing indicated that most everyone was asleep.

Everyone, except for Jim, who lay awake thinking of the events of the day. When he had agreed to this trip, he had never imagined that he actually would be able to step inside the house he had grown up in, the only house he had ever lived in with his father. It was cathartic in a way, especially since he had been able to share it with Trixie and the rest of his friends. But it also brought up painful reminders of what would never be.

Suddenly, Jim remembered what the Mexican lady had said to him. She said he would find a treasure on his journey. He knew better than to think that his father had hidden money or jewelry or anything of that nature on his old property. So, what did she mean?

You're being ridiculous, Frayne, he chided himself. *She was just rambling, that's all.* But the memory of the New York City trip appeared, unbidden, in his mind. She had been uncanny about all that had happened to them. True, you could always twist words to fit what you wanted, but that first prophecy held too many coincidences for him to ever truly believe that explanation.

"Find my treasure, find my treasure," Jim murmured aloud. Trixie shifted in her sleep just then and threw her arm over Jim's chest. And, with the comforting weight of Trixie's arm resting upon him, Jim finally succumbed to sleep, visions of his dad's smiling face and treasure swirling in his exhausted mind.

It seemed as if he'd only just fallen asleep when he heard the rustle of someone walking across the grass that lined the graves in the cemetery.

Jim's eyes flew open, and he looked around him warily, a shiver of nervous apprehension rippling down his spine. He glanced around at his friends. Dan was curled up with his arms underneath his head, his longish, dark hair falling over his face. Honey and Di were asleep, each girl with their head on their boyfriend's chests, a blanket over them. Brian shifted in his sleep, turning a little toward Honey who nestled up against him. Mart was snoring lightly, one arm flung over his eyes and the other one wrapped around Diana's waist.

Trixie was curled up next to him, her blonde curls spread out across his jacket. His gaze softened, and he leaned down to gently kiss the tangle of curls when a soft voice behind him said, "She looks a bit like your mom."

Jim jumped and looked up in wide-eyed astonishment as a tall man stepped into their makeshift campsite. The man glanced over at the others and gave Jim a reproving look. "In front of her brother, now, Jim?" He gestured at Mart, who turned and yawned, looking eerily like Trixie in the silver light of the moon.

"Who...who *are* you?" he whispered, his voice sounding harsh in the quiet stillness of the cemetery.

"Who do you think I am?" the man rejoined, leaning back against a tall monument that stood a couple feet away from where Dan was sleeping.

Jim squinted and peered closely at the man. His face was pale but laced liberally with freckles. His hair looked dark until a cloud moved past the moon, and its light shined directly on him, glinting his hair a bright red.

Jim gasped and then shut his eyes, muttering to himself. "You're dreaming, Frayne. You're hallucinating because you've been sleeping in a cemetery." Cautiously, he opened one emerald eye and looked over at the monument. No one there. He sighed in relief and leaned back. "Just a dream. That's all."

"Really?" The voice was amused this time, so close that he could feel the cold exhalation of breath against his ear.

Jim started nervously and glanced up into the face of his father. His very *dead* father.

"How...I mean...why..." He found all he could do was stammer. For, other than the fact that Jim could see right through him, his father looked pretty much as he had when he had been alive. Tall, broad-shouldered and with a smile twinkling in his emerald eyes.

"You did say you wanted to talk to me, didn't you?" Win asked, walking through the middle of their makeshift campsite to perch himself on a faded gravestone near his son.

Jim's eyes widened. "I did," he said slowly, "but not *here*. And I was by myself. How did you know about that?"

"Good news travels fast," his father said and then added, "and bad news travels faster." He didn't speak for a long time before he said, "Which is it?"

"Which is what?" Jim asked distractedly, still fascinated by the sight of his father dead, yet not.

"Good news or bad news?" Win gave him a curious glance. "It seems like a lot of trouble for you to bring your friends all the way out here to come look at a dusty, old grave."

"It wasn't...uh...well..." Jim flushed, suddenly not wanting to admit to his father that he really hadn't wanted to come in the first place.

"Not your idea?" Win asked gently.

"No," he admitted. "Trixie thought it might help me somehow, I guess. It's the Day of the Dead this weekend—and well, she thought it'd be..." He broke off and looked a little sheepish.

"Your Trixie sounds like a nice girl," Win said with a glance at the sleeping teenager.

"She's the best," Jim agreed. "She's terrific. One of the greatest things that ever happened to me."

His father smiled and leaned back against the tombstone. "Good. I'm glad to hear you've got some good things going for you." He glanced over at the other two girls and gestured at them. "Which one of them is your sister?"

A sudden apprehension filled him. He gave his father a guilty look. "How did you know about Honey?"

"Honey is her name?" He looked over at the girls again and pointed to Honey who snuggled in closer to Brian. "That's her, yes? Matt Wheeler's daughter?"

"Yeah," Jim replied. "Dad...how do you know all these things? I mean...well, you're..."

"Dead?" Win looked amused again. "Like I said, good news travels fast." He hopped off the gravestone in a lithe move that almost looked like floating, yet had a peculiar, familiar quality of his father's old way of moving. "I had to keep track of what was happening with you and Katie."

All the horrible memories of his stepfather ran through his mind, and he found that he didn't know what to say. Instead, he gingerly rolled himself up and retucked the blanket around Trixie before he said huskily, "Let's get away from here."

Win looked sharply at him but nodded and walked noiselessly across the grass to join Jim's slow walk through the cemetery.

The long streams of light from the moon only made the graveyard look creepier. The dark spires of the fence that surrounded the cemetery looked ghoulish in the night's silvery light, and the weathered tombstones with their fading names only heightened Jim's sense of unreality. He glanced often at his father, who did not seem any more inclined to talk than he did, but seemed content to walk with him through the rows of graves toward the back of the cemetery.

They reached the recently cleaned grave that the Bob-Whites had worked so hard on earlier that afternoon. Jim was a little startled to see that he had inadvertently led his father back there. He crouched down and ran his fingers over the carved out letters of his father's name on the tombstone. The stone felt cold and rough beneath his fingers. Jim sat back, struggling with the emotions surging through him, and finally said hoarsely, "You weren't old enough to die."

Win smiled at him, a little sadly, and said quietly, "Who of us ever is, Jim?"

Jim didn't look at his father but stared at the dates carved into the stone. "Mom took us away. Away from everything out here. I didn't want to leave you here all by yourself," he whispered.

"It wasn't good for you for a long while, was it, son?" Win asked.

Jim looked up at his father and saw the knowledge in his eyes...the hurting, awful knowledge that he often saw in his own when he was alone with his memories. He averted his gaze from his father's and tried to shrug it off but found that he couldn't. "No," he said flatly. "It wasn't."

"It hurts your mother, you know," Win said softly. "Knowing what she left you to."

He looked up, startled. "You've seen Mom?" he demanded.

"Of course!" Win looked affronted. "Who do you think she looked for when she died?"

"Why, I...I suppose it never occurred to me to think about it," Jim admitted. "You were both dead. What more was there to think about?"

A ghost of a smile curved Win's lips. "In terms of the afterlife, Jim, there is always more to think about."

"So, you're together, then?" Jim asked, suddenly wanting to know.

"Yes," Win said with a twinkle in his green eyes. "Just like we said we'd always be. I always knew I wanted to be with your mom. From the day I met her at the campus cafeteria in college. She was the prettiest person I'd ever spilled chocolate milk on."

Jim laughed. "You spilled chocolate milk on her?"

"I was running late for my first class of the afternoon. I ran into her—full body slam—and her milk flew out of her hands and splashed all down the front of her new sweater," Win said with a nod, gesturing to the front of his ghostly shirt.

"And yet she liked you anyway," Jim teased.

"I had that Frayne charm," Win said with a flash of his grin. "Nothing beats that."

His son's smile faded, and his face sobered then as he said quietly, "I never asked you, you know, how you and Mom met. I never asked her either. I never thought to ask you those kinds of things. And, when I finally did, it was too late to ask." A stark grief crossed his face. "I loved you both so much," he whispered. "And you left me behind. I couldn't do anything to save you, and I couldn't go with you." He lifted tear-filled eyes. "I wanted to. So many times, I wanted to."

Win's face looked weary and sad. He knelt down near Jim and looked his son in the eyes, his gaze determined. "Never wish your life away, James. Everything happens for a reason."

"I just wish you hadn't had to die. Either of you," he whispered. "It was so bad today—I wanted you to be at the house—so you could meet my friends. Meet my girl. You'd like them."

"I'm certain that I would," Win agreed. He tilted his head. "These friends of yours—are they good ones?"

"The best," Jim said firmly. "There isn't anything they wouldn't do for me. Or I for them."

"Quite a treasure you have there," he said quietly. "One you probably wouldn't have if your mother and I had lived."

Jim looked at his father, startled. "But..."

"Sometimes, we have to go through the bad things in order to get to the good things on the other side," Win said. He smiled at his son and ran a hand over his bright red hair, which felt to Jim like a quiet, calming, cool breeze against his skin. Win straightened then and said, "And, sometimes, your car breaks down in the most unlikely of places so that you can talk to your father just one more time."

Jim's jaw dropped as he looked at his father. He rose unsteadily to his feet and said, "But...how...?"

"Just remember that your mother and I love you," Win said, his smile wide and his green eyes shining suspiciously. He stepped near to his grave and laid a hand on it. His seemingly solid form started to wisp around the edges and dissolve into mist as he said with a wink, "And I like your girl."

Jim blinked his eyes open and found himself back with the others, Trixie snuggled up next to him under the scratchy, wool blanket from the car. The sun was just rising over the horizon, spreading glorious, orange rays across the gravestones. He stared unseeingly across the cemetery, replaying what seemed to be a very vivid dream in his head. His father. Here. In the cemetery. Talking to him. He shook his head. *Was it a dream?* "Or was it real?" he whispered.

"Was what real?" Trixie asked sleepily, her blue eyes still firmly closed.

"What? Uh...nothing. Just thinking out loud."

"Too early to think out loud," she murmured, snuggling more closely into him.

He brushed a hand across her curls and smiled. "You're probably right."

But the sun did its cheery work, and, slowly, the Bob-Whites all awoke, chattering and teasing each other as they worked to pack up their supplies and blankets and to clean the debris around the grassy patch in which they'd slept.

"At least it's bright and sunny," Mart said cheerfully as they headed back toward the main path that led to the gate out of the cemetery. "And it's not too warm yet, so we ought to have a good walk into town."

"A little exercise never hurt anyone," Brian agreed, running a hand through his tousled dark hair.

"Do you think we could stop for breakfast before we got help?" asked Diana plaintively. "It's been a long time since our dinner, such that it was."

"I'm sure we can find something..." Honey's voice trailed off as they reached the car.

On the old Bob-White station wagon, a small, metal object sat squarely in the center of the hood of the car.

"What's that?" demanded Dan.

Brian strode over to the car, picked up the piece and looked at it in surprise.

"I...well...it's the rotor. The one that goes under the distributor cap."

"What in the world is it doing on top of the car?" asked Honey in bewilderment.

Trixie's eyes lit with excitement, and she looked at Jim and Mart who had followed her into the clearing around the car. Their eyes had a similar gleam to them. "Don't you remember, Honey? When we were in England? That's how Miss Trask stopped McDuff's car from getting away. She took out the rotor!"

"But none of us took out the rotor, did we?" Di asked, a puzzled look on her pretty face.

Brian shook his head. "No, we didn't." He looked thoughtfully at the machined piece and said, "But we certainly wouldn't go anywhere without it."

"See if ours is missing, Brian," Mart said, gesturing toward the hood.

Within a few minutes, Brian had reinstalled the rotor, which *had* been missing, slipped behind the wheel, and the car started easily. "I can't believe it!" he exclaimed as the others shouted and cheered. "Who would have taken out the rotor? There's no one around for miles."

Jim had said very little the whole time, his face paling a little as he glanced from the car back toward the cemetery.

"And, sometimes, your car breaks down in the most unlikely of places so that you can talk to your father just one more time."

His eyes widened. *It was a dream. It wasn't real, was it?* And somehow, suddenly, he knew that it had been no dream.

A squeeze on his arm brought him back to the present. He looked down to see Trixie looking up at him, a worried look on her face.

"Are you okay, Jim?"

Jim looked back toward the cemetery one last time, a hint of a smile on his freckled face, before he leaned down and kissed Trixie long and hard, ignoring Dan and the girls' whistling and cat-calling and Brian and Mart's disgusted groans. They finally broke apart, and he grinned down at her. "I'm okay," he said. "I'm better than okay. I'm doing great."

Trixie blinked and looked at him in surprise, and an answering grin spread across her own face. "That's great, Jim."

He put his arm around her and headed for the back seat that the others had left open for them. He let her get in first and then hopped in behind her, narrowly missing Dan's cheerful slam of the door behind them.

Everyone else jumped into the car, and Brian carefully backed up and then headed down the road back toward town, everyone chattering excitedly about the strange events of the past day.

Trixie leaned into Jim, watching the cemetery disappear behind them, and asked, "What made the change, Jim? I mean, you were so distant yesterday...so unhappy. And today...it's all different."

He hugged her to him and whispered, "I figured out what my true treasure was."

Her eyes widened, and she pushed back away from him, looking at him in surprise.

"The fortune! Jim! Did you find something? What?"

Jim held a finger over her lips and smiled at her. "I realized that I found my treasure in a crumbling, dirty, ramshackle old mansion a long time ago. And finding that treasure turned my whole life around."

She looked at him, bewildered, for a moment, before realization dawned in her eyes, and her face softened. Trixie leaned against him again and asked, "So, I'm your treasure, huh?"

"Got a problem with that?" he asked, his voice teasing.

"Not one bit," she said happily.

Jim tightened his arm around her, resting his head against hers, enjoying the familiar, soft silkiness of her blonde curls under his chin and wondered how his father had ever gotten so smart.

"Quite a treasure you have there."

He looked behind him at the laughing, chattering faces of his friends and then back to Trixie and felt a tightening in his throat as he whispered softly to himself, "You have no idea."

THE END

Dana's Notes

Thanks again to my partner in crime, the lovely Susan. I can't describe how much FUN it is to write a story with her! She's so good at what she does that you can't help but be swept along. We have similar Trixie World Views, so it is so fun to brainstorm together, feeding off of each other, and giggling and gabbing. And that reminds me...

I AM SO SORRY I STOOD YOU UP THAT NIGHT, SUSAN. Okay, had to get that off my chest!
snicker

Oh, and I left the comma *in*. *g*

Let's just call the cemetery "ruins," and we'll all feel better about the title. :)

Let's see, we mentioned various Trixie Belden books in the writing of this story, and if I forget any, I am sure Susan will add them to her notes. There was the reminiscing of the Bob-White's Arizona trip from *The Mystery in Arizona*, complete with mention of the Orlandos' Aztec ancestor that set off this entire challenge. There was the fortuneteller from *The Mystery of the Blinking Eye*, added as a stroke of genius on Susan's part. And there was the mention of Miss Trask removing the rotor from underneath the distributor cap, one of my all-time favorite scenes from *The Mystery of the Queen's Necklace*. We added these scenes in homage, have no rights to their use, and made no money off of their mention.

The Aztec exhibit that the Bob-Whites attend was an actual exhibit at the Guggenheim, although our story did not occur in 2004, when it was actually on exhibit. We plead poetic license. More information about the exhibit can be found at <http://english.epochtimes.com/news/4-12-16/25030.html> and http://www.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/aztecs/press_release.html. There may or may not have been a gala event for privileged museum patrons the night before it opened. :)

A lot of the ghost stories I retold were from legend, and I have no idea whom to credit. I think Richard and Judy Dockery Young can be credited with some of the details of the Shylock Bones story and the Coughin' story. The story Trixie tells about the claw marks was emailed to the Webmaster of www.ghosts.org by "mprucha" and is, by mprucha's account, a true story.

Again, a big thank you to Susan who inspires me to be a better writer and a better friend. And, damn, she's cute! :)

Susan's Notes

Year #3!! It is a *blast* to write a story with Dana. I highly recommend it for the sheer Fun Factor. *grin* I'm so glad that Year #1 I had no idea what to write and was whining to Dana about it and Dana said, "Well, I have an idea for a story. You can share mine with me..." Every year, we have such a good time. *grin* Here's to many more, baby!

inserting note to shake her head at Dana I DON'T CARE ABOUT THAT NIGHT! *big grin*

Thanks to Dana's research and the city of Rochester's home page for the information about Rochester, New York and the surrounding area. I've never been there and know nothing about it, so if I goofed up, well, it's my own dumb fault. *grin*

I also spent a lot of time researching types of frogs you'd find in upstate New York on the internet. A lot. So, I just had to mention that here. *grin*

Coke is a trademark of the Coca-Cola Company and no profit is being made off its use here. Hmm...this makes me wonder. Is Coke mentioned in *every* story that I write? Maybe I should get paid for the advertisement!

The condition of Win's grave was inspired by my mother's issues and problems with the cemetery where my grandparents are buried. My grandfather's gravestone has sunk into the ground and my mom has had a lot of arguments with the proprietors to try to get them to raise it up. Thus, Jim had the same problem, but he was fortunate enough to have able-bodied teenagers to raise the stone higher.

The 20-mile hike is a nod to the most-fabulous Sue...who *loves* 20-mile hikes. ;)

Dana covered all the Trixie book references, so I won't repeat those here. ;)

I'd add a line about Dana being cute here (which she IS, of course), but she'd hurt me, so I won't. ;)

I'll just say instead that she's one of the treasures in my life, because she is. :)