

Confession Is Good for the Soul

by Susan and Dana

Trixie followed her quarry down the crowded New York City sidewalk. She was walking at a far enough distance behind him that she was reasonably confident that she hadn't been seen, nor would she be. Her defensive reflexes were ready. Should she even get an inkling that he might turn around, she was prepared to duck behind the tall, stout man whom she had selected to trail behind just in case she needed to hide. But her target never turned around. He walked confidently down the street, obviously familiar with his surroundings. He looked straight ahead, never wavering, and only stopped when waiting for traffic to clear before crossing the street.

Trixie, however, was not as familiar with the area, and her eyes often strayed from her mark to note the buildings that surrounded her. It was not one of the better parts of New York, to be sure, but it wasn't absolutely awful, either. The buildings were old, rundown, but not in disrepair. They looked more tired than dilapidated. The people on the sidewalks didn't wear the designer clothes seen on the Upper West Side where Honey's parents had their penthouse apartment, and although the clothes people wore looked worn, they were well taken care of. Trixie didn't feel unsafe as she strode down the sidewalk in pursuit of her quarry.

She had been following him for nearly half-an-hour. The subway ride had been tricky, but Trixie had managed to slide into the car behind the one that he had chosen, and she had not been seen. Fortunately, the trip from the Upper West Side to Midtown hadn't required a train change. Since exiting the subway, Trixie had counted that they had traveled five blocks so far, and she wondered exactly where he might be going.

Suddenly, the young man left the sidewalk and hurried up the steps to a church. Trixie, afraid that maybe he had seen her after all, approached the church warily, checking to make sure that he was not hiding behind one of the large columns of the ornate building or just inside the doors. Her caution was for nothing though, as he was not waiting to pounce on her as she peered around a corner guardedly. Trixie stepped inside the church, pausing a moment to allow her eyes to adjust to the dimness. She was about to head to the main part of the church when she noticed a small room off to the side. She cautiously approached it and peeked inside. He was there. He was standing underneath a large painting of the Virgin Mary. In front of him was a large display of candles, and it was obvious that he had just lit one. His head was bowed, and suddenly an uncharacteristic wave of guilt crashed over Trixie as she realized what an invasion of privacy her actions had led her to.

At the time she had started following him, her impulsivity allowed her to rationalize that he was her friend, and she was worried about him. The others, she was sure, would never notice that she had even left. As usual, the impetuous blonde had barely spared a thought for any potential consequences before setting in motion her spontaneous plan to follow him. She was brought back from her guilty thoughts when she saw him abruptly raise his head. Knowing he would be leaving the little room shortly, her blue eyes darted around for a convenient hiding place. In desperation, she ducked into the nave, whose rows of pews were thankfully empty. Several large palms stood at the back of the large room, and Trixie quickly ducked behind one. Her plan had been to stay there for a few moments and then exit the church and head back to the penthouse, as she assumed that that was where he would return after lighting the candle. She was just about to step out from behind the plant when she saw a lean figure with dark hair striding up the aisle. Trixie stifled a gasp and crouched down, praying he didn't turn around.

Appropriate place for it, her brain chided her silently as she held her crouched position.

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Again, she was in luck, and he did not turn around. She watched as he left the aisle to enter a small booth off to the side, which she correctly assumed was a confessional.

Now what? she wondered.

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Dan entered the church that he had attended with his parents when he was a young child. The church was in the neighborhood that he had lived in with his mother and father before Tim Mangan had died, and they had walked to church each Sunday as well as on Good Friday, Easter, Christmas Eve, Christmas, and all of the other religious holidays on which good Catholics attended Mass. After his father died and he and his mother had been forced to leave their small but cozy apartment for an even smaller and not-cozy-at-all apartment in a tenement in Hell's Kitchen, one thing that Dan had missed was coming to this church each week. His mother had tried to bring him back as much as she could, but often her job got in the way, and later on, she had just been too weak to consider making the trip on the subway and then walking several blocks. As conscientiously Catholic as the Mangans had been, his mother had never found a new church in their new neighborhood. At the time, Dan had not thought anything of it, but now that he was older, he wondered about the significance of this. Had his mother given up on God after she had lost her husband and her health?

As he stepped inside the gothic structure, he was flooded with memories. Memories of holding his mother's and father's hands as they entered the church. The kindly priest, who always had a smile for his parishioners. Mrs. O'Reilly, who always had a loaf of bread or fresh-baked cookies for the Mangans. His father's funeral service, held in this very church. He blinked his eyes, fighting back the dampness that threatened. He turned to his left and headed toward the candle room, which held all of the candles that for a donation to the church you could light for a loved one. Dan dropped a couple of crumpled bills into the wooden box and picked up a match. He lit the match, almost reverently, and then lit a candle.

"I miss you, Dad," he whispered.

Dan lit the next candle.

"I miss you, Ma."

Dan extinguished the match, set it down, and bowed his head. He spoke to his parents, briefly telling them about his current trip to New York City, apologizing for not visiting the church more often, giving them an update about his Uncle Bill, and telling them anecdotes about his friends. He straightened his head, blinked his eyes once again, and turned to leave. As he crossed the small room, planning on exiting the church and heading back to the Wheelers' penthouse, he stopped suddenly when he reached the narthex. An overwhelming feeling washed over him, and he felt absolutely compelled to visit the confessional. One thing that Dan had not liked about being Catholic was the confessional. Even when he was younger and loved attending church, he had not liked that aspect of his religion. After he had joined the Cowhands, he had liked it even less. There were a lot of things that he had done that he was not proud of, and he wondered if he could ever truly atone for them. Just imagining his parents' disappointment depressed him.

And, yet...he couldn't resist. His feet moved of their own volition, carrying him into the nave and toward that small booth that he hated. He almost felt as though he was in a trance as he made the sign of the cross as he walked past the quiet rows of pews, feeling the reverent silence that surrounded him.

Then, there it was. Dan took a deep breath and entered the confined space, wondering what exactly he was going to say. *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been years and years since my last confession. I was in a gang, and I did things I still have trouble talking about...*

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He shut the door behind him, completely unprepared for what happened next. Instead of hearing the priest's voice in the compartment next to him, he heard whispering. The voices swirled around him, none of them clear. He heard snippets of phrases, unable to make out one clear message. Some sounded like old men, others sounded like young women, voices of all kinds whispered, and Dan wondered if he was losing his mind.

"Forgive me, Father..."

"It has been two weeks since my last confession..."

"I have sinned..."

"It has been a month since my last confession..."

"I took the Lord's name in vain eight times..."

"I cheated on my husband..."

"I coveted my brother's wife..."

"I kissed my best friend's boyfriend..."

"I did not honor the Sabbath..."

"It has been three days since my last confession..."

"I disrespected my mother..."

"I...I'm ashamed, but I touched my wife in anger..."

Dan sat in the tiny space, barely able to breathe as an icy cold wave washed over him and the voices continued to swirl around him. He felt blackness closing in on him as his vision dimmed, and he wondered if he was going to pass out. He remained conscious, however, even though everything around him now seemed so very far away. He wanted to leave the confessional—to get out of the claustrophobic little room—but something stopped him. It was almost as if he was being physically restrained. Moving his arm even the tiniest little bit took more effort than he could manage, and he found himself completely unable to reach for the door. Just as something had compelled him across the church to this room, something was compelling him to stay.

The whispers carried on, a cacophony berating him to his very core, and finally, through the screen, Dan became aware of someone entering the side of the confessional booth reserved for the priest. He gasped in relief and was about to call out for help when the whispers suddenly stopped and a voice, loud and clear, spoke.

"Forgive me, Father, for I just killed a man."

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Meanwhile, Trixie still stood in the church hardly daring to believe what she had just seen. After she had watched Dan enter the confessional, she had begun to move toward the center of the church, planning on leaving before her friend exited the little room. She had watched a priest move toward the door next to the one that Dan had used, and she had assumed that he had been watching, seen Dan enter, and planned on hearing his confession. There was nothing extraordinary about that.

But as Trixie had watched, the man of cloth had entered the little room in the most unusual manner.

He had walked right through the closed door.

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The young girl had stopped in her tracks and stared. At first, she had tried to convince herself that her brain was playing tricks on her, but deep down in her gut, she had known this was not the case. As she continued to stare at the confessional, shocked, all she could think was, *Not again!*

Her dismay at witnessing yet another supernatural event was forgotten a moment later, however, as she watched Dan practically stagger out of the small booth. His face was white, and his dark eyes stood out large in their sockets, and Trixie wondered if her own face mirrored the panic and shock that she saw registered on her friend's. She knew it was trite, but all she could think was, *He looks as though he's seen a ghost!*

Dan noticed her at that moment. Trixie watched him blink rapidly, as if he didn't believe his eyes, and then he asked in a ragged voice, "Trixie?"

The trance-like feeling that had held her in its grip dissipated somewhat and she found she was able to nod in response to her friend's hoarse question. She hurried over to him and clutched his arm. Although feeling the solidness of his body calmed her, she was still concerned about him. "Are you okay?"

Dan shook his head, almost sagging into her, which worried Trixie even more than his appearance. *What on earth had happened in there?*

"Dan?" she asked, her voice sharpening as her worry increased. The color had not yet returned to his face, and although his eyes looked a little less haunted, his jagged breathing remained.

"I don't know, Trix," he said. "Let's just get out of here, okay?"

"Of course," Trixie agreed, more than happy to leave the church after what she had just witnessed. She still felt as though her rapidly beating heart could be heard echoing throughout the silent church. The silence had seemed peaceful and reverent when she had entered, and now it was eerie and somewhat sinister. How could a place of sanctuary turn into a place of fear so rapidly?

The two friends supported each other as they left the church and headed out into the New York sunshine.

Outside, Dan almost felt as if the hot summer sun was melting him. The icy, clammy feeling that had taken him over as soon as he entered the confessional began to dissipate with the warm rays of the sun. Reality came back to him in a slow spiral. He became aware, first, of the sun, but the thud of the concrete under his worn sneakers, the strong, spicy smell of the local taco dive across the street and the tight grip of small, sturdy fingers intertwined with his brought him firmly back into the present.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Trixie's voice was almost a whisper, definitely different from her normal boisterous, cheerful tones—the ones that always put him into the paradox of enjoying the pure happiness of her voice and wanting to shush her for being too loud.

"Better," he said in a voice pitched low to match hers. "Better now that I'm..." His voice trailed off as it suddenly hit him that she was *there*—that'd she'd been suspicious enough to follow him all the way from the Wheelers' apartment to his old stomping grounds. His eyes narrowed.

"Don't start." Trixie's terse words interrupted him before he even had a chance to speak. Honey and Di were much more sensitive and paid more attention to other people's non-verbal language than Trixie ever did. But there was one area in which Trixie was hyper-vigilant. Years of being confronted by a barrage of angry, irritated people put her immediately on the defensive when she'd been caught in what she called "investigating" and Mart more accurately termed "snooping".

"Don't start?" He came to an abrupt halt, dropped her hand, and scowled at her. "Damn it, Trixie. Is there anything private you won't dig into?"

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A guilty flush flooded Trixie's face. She shoved her dropped hand into her jeans pocket and brushed nervously at her tousled curls with the other.

"Does it ever occur to you—" Dan's gaze took in his friend's downcast eyes and the lip she worried with her teeth—a sure sign that she was struggling to keep tears at bay—and he sighed. "Trixie, you know I'm not big about people digging into my past."

"I know," she said in a low voice. "You and Jim are both that way. It drives me crazy."

"Don't you think there might be a reason for Jim and me being that way?" Before Trixie could protest, Dan held up a hand to stall her. "Forget it. Just forget it." He took a deep breath, trying to push the irritation away, before grabbing Trixie's elbow to steer her into the subway station.

The sheer wall of humanity that faced them as they descended the stairs to the trains gave him the time he needed to restore his equilibrium. Trixie hadn't said much more than normal New York subway lingo as they made their way down the steps, pushed through the turnstiles and found a couple of empty seats near the back of the subway train. Dan wondered, not for the first time, how Jim dealt with what had to be a constant battering against his privacy. He loved Trixie as a friend, but he knew he'd go crazy were he to have her as a girlfriend.

"Are you mad at me?" Trixie's voice was still small, definitely unhappy, and so unlike her, that Dan felt a guilty pang himself.

He sighed again, put his arm around her and gave her a tight one-armed hug. At the contact, Dan felt Trixie finally relax. He let the actions speak louder than his words—his usual preference—and then leaned his head back against the wall of the train car behind him.

The clackety-clack of the train almost lulled him into a doze. Other than the few crumpled bills that he'd stuffed in his pocket, he didn't have anything valuable on him to steal. But his gang training had left him with the inability to be completely relaxed anywhere in the city. He contented himself with leaving his eyes at half-mast, closed enough to unwind somewhat, but open enough to see an attack coming.

That left his mind open to wondering about the unearthly attack that had come earlier. The desperate, sad voices that had filled the confessional and the one that had been so definitely, scarily clear.

"Did you see him?"

Trixie's voice startled him out of his half doze. His eyes opened and he looked around the train car, full of a wide variety of people—from the gaggle of dark-skinned teenagers near the front of the car laughing and talking to the elderly quartet of Italian grandmothers who gossiped and kibitzed to the pockets of construction workers loudly conversing in Spanish on their way to work as the train kept moving forward. "See who?"

"The priest!" she hissed.

Dan felt the same chill come over him again, thinking about his earlier experience. He shook his head. "I didn't talk to a priest. I—" He stopped talking, a frown etching his face.

"You didn't talk to him?" Trixie demanded. She straightened and looked at him in surprise. "Didn't you see him?"

"I..." Dan didn't know how to describe the clamor of voices he'd heard. He knew that the Bob-Whites had experienced a variety of paranormal "visitations", for lack of a better word, but he'd never personally had a ghost direct its energies at him. "I don't think the priest was on the other side when I went in. And besides, Trix, the confessional's not set up that way. You don't really 'see' the priest when

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you're sitting in there." He spoke slowly, his brain scrambling for a way to describe what he'd experienced.

"The priest wasn't inside when you went in," Trixie said. "I saw him go in after you did."

"You did?" Dan suddenly felt a surge of anger go through him. *Were the voices some new trick they'd developed to force people to confess to sins? Pipe in recorded confessions to get people good and scared about God's wrath coming down on them?*

"I did," Trixie said, affirming her words with a nod. But then her small freckled face grew particularly intense. She grabbed Dan's forearm, tightening her fingers around it. "He went into the priest's side of the confessional. He went through the door. *Through* the door, Dan. He never opened it at all."

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Trixie had always felt as if she had, no pun intended, ended up with the short end of the stick because she was so much shorter than the other Bob-Whites. She felt her lack of height acutely that afternoon as Dan practically dragged her off the train at the stop near Honey's parents' apartment and ushered her up the stairs to the street level at a pace that nearly left her winded. When they'd finally reached the street, Dan grabbed her and pulled her closer to him as he strode.

Finally, she stopped short, yanking her arm out of his grasp and glared at him. "Dan Mangan, could you possibly, for just a *minute*, let a girl breathe? My legs are *still* about half a foot shorter than yours are."

Dan came to a halt a couple feet away from her and then stared at her for a moment before giving her an upward quirk of his lips. "Sorry, Trix. I keep forgetting you're Strawberry Shortcake."

Trixie pursed her lips at him. "Keep it up, Mangan. I may be short, but I can level the playing field pretty quickly if you're flat on your ass on the ground."

It was as if he hadn't heard her at all. It was obvious his thoughts had already departed from their conversation. He closed the space between them and took hold of her arm to thread it through his. Dan then resumed his walk toward Honey's parents' apartment, but at a much more leisurely pace. "I just wanted to get us out of close quarters with other people before I told you what I heard."

Trixie's ire was completely forgotten as she stared up at him eagerly, her curiosity plainly evident on her heart-shaped face. "What you *heard*? You didn't see the priest, then, but you heard him?"

"No." Dan pulled Trixie more closely toward him as he stepped around a very slowly moving woman yakking on a cell phone. He resumed his earlier pace and leaned his head down to say in a low voice, "I heard people confessing. Lots of them."

"Confessing?" she demanded. "Confessing to what?"

"Everything." Dan's voice was grim and had that unpleasant, gravelly sound it took on when he was speaking of his time in the gang. The timbre of it shook Trixie a little, and her heart began to pound. "Pick any sin you want. I'm sure I heard someone confess to it."

Trixie frowned. "I wonder why." She looked up at him. "Was there anything in particular that you noticed about the confessions?"

He hesitated before replying, and the hesitation was palpable. When Dan finally spoke again, his voice was rough. "It was mostly little broken phrases that were hard to make out. Like a radio station you can't quite tune in all the way. 'Father, bless me, for I have sinned. I took the Lord's name in vain.' That sort of thing." His voice continued, dripping with reluctance. "But then, all of the sudden, there was one voice that was crystal clear."

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“What did the person say?”

Dan pulled up to a stop in front of Honey’s building and dug into his pocket for his keycard to the elevators before entering through the door. As they headed toward the gilded elevator doors near the back of the lobby, he said, “It was the last thing I heard before I got out of there. Someone—a man—confessed that he had just killed someone else.”

Trixie’s eyes widened. “What?”

Dan’s lips tightened as he nodded. He pressed the call button for the elevator and fiddled with the key card, thumping against his other hand impatiently as he waited for the elevator to reach their level.

“When you came out, you’d acted like you’d seen a ghost.” The well-familiar tingle that indicated a mystery was afoot started from her fingers and spread up her arms until her whole body was ablaze in sensation. Her eyes began to sparkle and she grabbed Dan’s arm in her excitement. “When? When did you hear that man confess to murdering someone?”

Dan’s face was closed and shuttered. The more emotion Dan was feeling, the blunter his face got. Honey had one time surmised that it was a defense mechanism he’d learned in the gang. It might have served him well in the gang, but for the Bob-Whites, it was a signal as clear as a bell that something was very wrong.

“I told you,” he said, impatience etching his voice. “Right before I came out of the confessional.”

The elevator doors opened just then, and Dan pulled his arm out of Trixie’s to stride into the elevator. She quickly followed him and watched only a moment as he inserted the key card into the slot, pressed the button for the floor, and the elevator doors closed.

“Don’t you see?” she demanded. “It all makes perfect sense.”

“What makes perfect sense?” he snapped. “Nothing about any of this makes sense.”

“The priest I saw—or rather, the *ghostly* priest I saw—went into the confessional just a minute or so before you came out of the other side. He was the one you heard!” Trixie shifted from one foot to the other, her whole body radiating excitement.

Dan shook his head. “No. No. It wasn’t the priest. The voice was confessing to a priest. He mentioned the word ‘Father’ in his confession.”

“Okay, fine. But I think the priest is the one that sharpened the voices. He was the antenna that made the radio signal come in clearly, so to speak,” Trixie said. Her brows came together as she thought hard, concentrating on what she’d seen. Then a thought struck her, and she drew in a startled breath. “Oh! Maybe the priest was the one who *heard* the confession? Maybe the killer came back and murdered him, too! And that’s why he’s a ghost! He wants us to help bring the killer to justice!”

The elevator glided to a stop and the doors slid open. They exited the elevator and walked down the hall toward the Wheelers’ penthouse.

Dan still hadn’t replied. Instead, he kept his face in that careful stoic expression and remained very stubbornly, stonily silent. For a tiny, irritated moment, Trixie wished Mart were the one walking alongside her rather than Dan. Mart, at least, would have immediately responded with some sort of sarcastic comment. Dan’s silences were enough to make her want to climb the wall or throttle him. Or both. Unable to help herself, Trixie persisted. “I know the priest had something to do with it. He’s got to have. I’m sure he wants us to find out who was killed and why. Why else would he appear like that?”

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They had reached the door to the apartment and Dan was pulling out his keys. “Dan,” she snapped, her voice filled with exasperation.

Dan stopped, his gaze lowered to his hand, where he worried the set of keys in his hand much like a good Catholic would a rosary. After a minute, he looked up at her and said in a low voice, “I’m not disagreeing with you, Trixie.” He breathed in a heavy, noisy breath and then exhaled. Then, he tilted his head toward the door. “We’re going to have to go over all of this with them, you know. And I’d rather just do it once.”

Trixie felt her irritation vanish as if it had never been. Dan’s lips were tight and his shoulders were hunched in the defensive way he had when he was truly upset. It couldn’t have been easy for him to go down and visit that old church in the first place, and then, hearing one sinner’s confession after another...

Trixie impulsively grabbed the hand that was worrying the keys and closed her fingers around it. “Okay,” she said softly.

He didn’t manage a smile, but the pinched look around his eyes lessened slightly. She let go of his hand, and he reached to unlock the door. But before he could, the door swung open, and Di stood there, her blue-black hair sweeping against her shoulders in its normal elegant manner. She arched a dark eyebrow at them and said, “And what have you two been up to?”

Jim’s freckled face appeared in the doorway behind Di’s. “Trying to steal my best girl, Mangan?” The mischief glittering in Jim’s friendly green eyes and his easygoing, joking tone indicated the confidence he had that that was, in fact, *not* the case, nor would it ever be.

Then, his expression changed to one of concern as he really looked at his two friends. No one on Earth knew Trixie better than Jim did, and he recognized a lingering fright in those blue eyes of hers—as well as that expression that told him they were about to be embroiled in a mystery. Trixie smiled at his joke as she and Dan entered the apartment, but Jim noticed that it was a rather forced smile, almost sickly. Dan’s face looked taut, and he didn’t even bother to react to Jim’s teasing.

Jim knew that look of Dan’s, and he knew that it wasn’t good.

Dan continued into the apartment while Trixie stopped in the entryway and squeezed Jim’s hand. He raised a ginger eyebrow at her, while Di shut the door behind them and came up on the other side of Trixie, staring after Dan’s retreating back.

“Trix?” Di asked. “Everything okay?”

The curly-haired blonde sighed deeply. “Unfortunately, no. Dan and I had an...experience today of the variety we seem to attract.”

Jim’s eyebrows shot up while Di’s violet eyes grew wide. “An experience?” she practically squeaked. “Like an *other-worldly* experience?”

Trixie nodded gravely as Jim wrapped a protective arm around her. She allowed herself to revel in the comfort of his embrace only briefly before she said, “Let’s head inside and tell the others. I’m sure Dan has already corralled them all to tell them.”

As the trio of Bob-Whites entered the spacious living room, they saw that Trixie’s words proved correct. Dan was standing near the fireplace, his face grim. Brian and Honey were sitting next to each other on the sofa looking concerned, Brian’s hand clasping Honey’s. Di joined them, taking the open seat on the other side of Honey. Mart was entering from the kitchen, a thick sandwich in one hand and a plate in the other.

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“What’s so important that we need a meeting?” he asked as he sat down in a nearby wing chair, balancing the plate on his lap and still concentrating more on his sandwich than on his friends. When he finally looked up and saw six serious faces staring at him, he realized that maybe the situation, whatever it was, did call for a Bob-White meeting.

“Did something happen?” Mart asked, his sandwich momentarily forgotten.

Brian gestured toward Dan, while Di simultaneously gestured toward Trixie.

“Ask Dan,” Brian said, while Di said, “Ask Trixie.”

Brian and Di’s unintentional synchrony caused the tension in the room to ease, like the air being released from a balloon. Trixie chuckled, and even Dan’s face relaxed a bit as he allowed himself a small, but genuine, smile.

Mart grinned, eager to help ease more of the tension, and shot a look at his sister. “If we get to declare a preferred choice, I would like to express my preference for my compadre, rather than my female sibling, to elucidate the reason for our gathering, lest the narrative become exaggerated beyond all recognition.”

Trixie stuck her tongue out at her brother. “That’s fine, smarty pants,” she retorted, not caring that she sounded several years younger than her actual age. “Most of it is Dan’s story to tell, anyway.”

Honey broke in then, partly motivated by curiosity, but also used to making peace between the almost twins. “Do you mind telling us, Dan?” she asked with her usual amount of tact, as it was obvious that Dan was reluctant to begin the story, but he also wore a resigned look, as if he knew that he had no other choice.

A thought suddenly occurred to Brian. “You weren’t mugged, were you?”

Dan and Trixie vehemently shook their heads, hurriedly trying to reassure their friends. “It wasn’t *that* kind of experience,” Trixie added.

“Was it an attempted kidnapping then?” Brian asked, a horrified expression crossing his normally staid features.

Once again, Dan and Trixie shook their heads in denial, but before either of them could say anything, Mart said, “Don’t tell me you saw the Spanish woman again! You don’t happen to be carrying a rhyming prophecy, do you?”

Trixie gave him a withering glance. “No.”

“Well, then, *what* kind of experience was it?” Mart’s exasperation was becoming apparent. Trixie looked at him pointedly, and as understanding dawned, he threw up one hand, the other still clutching his sandwich. His action was so forceful that his entire body moved in concert with his arm, threatening to upset the plate balanced precariously on his lap. Mart didn’t even notice.

“Oh, no!” he protested, his blue eyes wide.

“Oh, yes,” Trixie contradicted him.

Brian was starting to realize the implications of Trixie’s words, and his dark eyes narrowed. “Trixie, you can’t possibly mean that the...the...unexplained has visited us. *Again?*”

Trixie’s blonde curls bounced up and down with her head, emphasizing her words. “That’s exactly what I mean. But before you get all upset, let Dan tell you what happened, okay?” She rolled her eyes. “He’s only been trying to for ages.”

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Brian and Mart wisely refrained from commenting on her barb as all eyes turned toward Dan, which seemed to make the young man self-conscious, even though he was surrounded by his best friends and had been the center of attention many times before. But this was different. He'd been along on many a paranormal adventure at this point, but this was the first time it had been focused on him. And in such a personal place...

He took a deep breath to fortify himself and began to tell his story. Trixie, who had decided to stand at the back of the room instead of taking a seat, remained silent as Dan spoke, a slight shiver running up her spine as he got to the part about the voices surrounding him in the little booth. Jim, who had chosen to stand next to her, noticed the shiver and rubbed her back protectively. The chaos inside Trixie stilled at Jim's touch, as it always did. No one could calm her nerves when they were frayed like her husky redhead. She smiled up at him, gratitude and love shining in her ocean eyes.

When it was Trixie's turn to speak, after Dan recounted sensing a presence entering the priest's side of the confessional, Jim's strong, freckled hand stilled and stayed at the nape of her neck, giving her inner strength.

Her voice was a mixture of astonishment and excitement as she described the priest she had seen, not surprising anyone with the amount of details that she had been able to provide about his appearance, and when she stated that he had walked right through the confessional door, several of the Bob-Whites gasped, and she felt Jim's hand tense.

"But that's not all!" she blurted in response to their reactions.

"There's more?" Honey asked, horrified.

Trixie nodded. "Dan will tell you."

Once more, heads swiveled in Dan's direction, and each of the Bob-Whites watched him swallow hard. If it had been difficult for him to explain what he had heard up to this point, it was clear that this was an even bigger challenge for him. The room was silent for a moment, and even Trixie respected his need to gather his nerve before continuing, and, uncharacteristically, she didn't blurt out an explanation.

Dan finally spoke in a voice so quiet that his friends almost had to strain to hear him. "And then the voices stilled, and a single confession became very clear." He raised his eyes to his friends. "A man confessed that he had just killed another man."

Once again, Dan's words were met with shocked silence until Di jumped in. "That's freaky!" Her exclamation served to get all of the Bob-Whites talking at once, save Dan, who stood as still as a statue by the fireplace, a look of misery on his face.

Finally, Mart could be heard above the din. "From Trixie's expression, I gather she has a theory and a plan of action."

Trixie smirked at her brother as her friends ceased their conversations and looked at her expectantly. "I do," she confirmed.

"Elucidate, squaw!"

Trixie purposely didn't rise to Mart's bait, mentally congratulating herself on her maturity, and explained her theory that the priest wanted Dan to hear that particular confession because he had sought him out and the voices had become clear only after the priest entered the confessional. She also speculated that the confessor may have murdered the priest, too. He looked so young that it was hard for Trixie to believe that he had died of natural causes. "Therefore," Trixie concluded, "he must want us to solve the mystery so that justice can be served. And he must think it's solvable!"

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Brian looked at her skeptically. "We have no idea how old this mystery is, Trix," he stated reasonably. "And no way of knowing who the priest is."

"As for how old the mystery is, Dan said that the man said 'just' when he admitted to killing someone. If we can figure out who the priest is, maybe we can figure out when he was at the church, and we can narrow it down that way." Trixie looked at Dan. "Did you recognize my description of the priest?"

Dan shook his head. "No, it definitely wasn't Father O'Leary. He was older and had very little hair."

"This guy definitely had a full head of dark hair," Trixie stated. "No worries, though! All we have to do is go down to the church..." Trixie didn't notice Dan's face pale considerably at her suggestion, but Jim saw the change in his friend's demeanor. Unaware of Dan's discomfort, she continued, "We'll describe the priest, and hopefully, someone will be able to tell us who he is."

"And if they don't?" Brian asked, his voice almost challenging.

"There's sure to be records or pictures or something we can look through." Trixie airily waved a hand in Dan's direction. "We can say Dan's an old member of the church who wants to reminisce or something."

Jim spoke up, sending Dan a silent look of reassurance. "Maybe more of the 'or something' variety, Trix."

Confused, the blonde looked up at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, maybe Dan doesn't exactly feel like going back to the church," Jim explained.

Dan's solemn face didn't change its expression, but his dark eyes conveyed their gratitude to Jim. He could always count on Jim to understand what he was feeling, even when the other Bob-Whites didn't. It was a quiet bond that the two orphans shared, but it was a strong one. "I really don't, Trix," he said apologetically.

Trixie, realizing that she had been tactless again in pursuit of a mystery, sighed, and internally berated herself. "Of course, Dan doesn't have to go," she said contritely. She looked at her friend, her blue eyes clearly seeking forgiveness. "I'm sorry I assumed."

Dan smiled, genuinely, which the others were relieved to see. "No worries, Shortcake," he said, the use of his jocular nickname for her indicating that there were no hard feelings. Trixie's eyes narrowed in mock anger, but the upward quirk of her lips belied any antagonism she might have felt.

"Excellent," she said haughtily. "You can stay here and cook dinner for all of us while we sleuth!"

Dan groaned. "You would!" Then he smiled his own haughty smile. "Fine! But I'm not guaranteeing you'll end up with anything edible."

Di grinned. "I'll sacrifice the trip down to the haunted church," she said dramatically, "so that we have something edible to eat later."

Honey laughed. "A real sacrifice, huh, Di?" she joked.

"Of course." Di's violet eyes twinkled. "Because visiting a haunted church is something I really look forward to doing, especially after our trip to Ireland!"

The Bob-Whites laughed, relieved that the fear and tension that had permeated the penthouse apartment had completely dissipated. In the end, it was decided that Trixie, Jim, Mart, and Honey would travel to the church to see what information that they could glean on the priest or, although unlikely, the confessed killer, and Brian, Dan, and Di would remain at the apartment and cook dinner. Dan was glad for an excuse to hang around home and keep busy. His cooking skills were not as bad as he had

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claimed, and cooking for his friends would keep his mind busy so that he didn't keep reliving the terrifying event he had experienced at the church he had once considered a place of peace and comfort. That peace had been shattered, and Dan wondered if he could ever regain it within the old church—or anywhere—again.

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Thankfully, the quartet found someone in the church office to whom they could speak. Trixie, drawing on what she had learned from Honey's tactfulness and Di's acting skills, calmly explained to the church secretary, whose nameplate indicated her to be "Mrs. Callahan" and who looked as though she might have worked there a very long time, that they were working on a class project on the history of several Catholic churches in Midtown Manhattan and were wondering if the church had any old scrapbooks or other historical information that they could see.

The woman, who had snow white hair and a wrinkled, expressive face, smiled delightedly. "How wonderful for young people to be so interested in religious history!"

Each of the four Bob-Whites felt a pang of guilt for deceiving the old woman, even if it was for the greater good.

The woman stood and led them to a room off of her office that was filled with books and other church memorabilia, and Trixie's heart skipped a beat. That tingle that told her that they were close to finding a valuable clue was spreading throughout her body. *Surely, the answer to who the priest is, and possibly the killer, is in here!*

Chattering away, Mrs. Callahan pulled out some large volumes and laid them on a table that sat in the center of the room. "These should get you started," she told them. "If you need more or have any questions, please let me know. I've been a member of this church since I was a little girl, almost 70 years now, and there's not much I don't know about the history of the place! My body may be going, but my mind is still sharp as a tack!"

The four young people smiled and thanked her before each of them began to study the book in front of them. "Remember," Trixie said, "you're looking for a young priest, maybe in his thirties or forties, with a thick head of black hair."

Mart sighed. "We know, Trixie."

Trixie made a face at him, but didn't otherwise react as she turned her focus to the task at hand. Throughout the next half-hour, Jim, Honey, and Mart showed Trixie a picture of someone they thought might be the mysterious, ghostly priest, but Trixie shook her head each time. As she looked at her watch, she was starting to get discouraged, as she realized it was almost five o'clock and probably nearing the time for the secretary to leave, and they had not found a solitary clue.

She looked up without much hope when Honey pushed a scrapbook toward her. "How about this guy, Trix?"

Trixie looked at the picture that Honey indicated and caught her breath. "That's him, Honey!" she breathed.

Jim and Mart's heads shot up, and they leaned over to examine the picture. The priest in question was standing next to Mrs. Callahan, who looked much the same as she did currently, and smiling at the camera. Even in the photograph, it was obvious that the smile didn't reach his eyes, and the priest's face was strained. The caption underneath read, "Mrs. Margaret Callahan and Father Patrick Quinn" and gave a date 10 years prior.

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Trixie was half out of her chair to race to Mrs. Callahan and interrogate her about the priest when she remembered her earlier insensitivity toward Dan. Honey had found the clue, and Honey was the epitome of tact and was probably the better person to talk to Mrs. Callahan anyway. She swallowed hard and moved the book back toward Honey. "Honey, you found him, and I'm too excited to be composed enough to speak to Mrs. Callahan. Would you ask her about him?"

Honey smiled. "Of course, Trix," she said as Jim grinned his approval at Trixie and reached out and tugged on his favorite curl.

Honey took the book to Mrs. Callahan to ask her about the priest as Trixie tried to control her patience. Her fidgeting gave her away, however, after she realized that even straining, she wasn't able to make out the conversation between her honey-haired friend and the church secretary. When Jim's strong hand enveloped itself around her small one, however, Trixie felt her body still to a level that, if not calm, was at least not as agitated. She smiled up at him and glowed when she saw the love and admiration in Jim's handsome face.

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It had been Dan's turn to shop that week, and he had gone for simple, easy and comforting foods. Thus, when the three Bob-Whites opened the refrigerator and stood staring into it, the majority of the food was stuffed into the stainless steel freezer—several frozen pizzas, a few packages of rock-solid chicken and two pounds of frost-covered ground beef.

"Well," Brian said after a protracted silence.

"Well, indeed," Di said, a giggle in her voice. "Did Mart dictate the grocery list to you over the phone or what?"

Dan let out a short laugh and shook his head. "If Mart had dictated the list, we'd be having hamburgers with a whole slew of gourmet vegetables to cut up to put on top."

Brian squatted down to look through the vegetable drawers in the main part of the refrigerator. "We do have a few veggies." He tilted his head to look up at Dan and Di, who were still standing over him.

"Maybe we can beef up the frozen pizzas with some extra vegetables?"

"Sounds good," Di agreed. She reached into the freezer to pull out the pizzas. "I think some comfort foods would be good for dinner tonight." She shivered. "I don't envy you going through what you did today, Dan. I'm still shaky over what happened to me in Ireland."

"I lost my share of sleep with that Jack the Ripper copycat, too," Brian said sympathetically as he pulled out a couple of peppers, an onion and a container of mushrooms to hand to Dan. "And you know me. I've never been big on all of this paranormal stuff to begin with." He straightened and closed the refrigerator before following Dan over to the large kitchen table.

Di had grabbed several paring knives and handed one to the other two Bob-Whites before she, too, took one and began slicing and dicing vegetables. "It makes me wonder sometimes. I mean, why are we always picked? It seems like all of us get a turn to confront some ghost." She shook her head and concentrated on making vicious swipes through a green pepper. "Trixie and Honey are the ones who like all these mysteries. Not me."

Dan sighed. "I suppose we're sympathetic or something. Isn't that the word? Sympathetic?" He gave them a wry look. "But I'm Catholic. Are we even supposed to believe in ghosts at all?"

"I don't know," Di said. "All I know is that I'd prefer not to have had any experiences with ghosts at all. They scare me."

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"Me, too," Brian said quietly. He set his paring knife down to grab another onion. "That couldn't have been fun this afternoon, Dan, hearing all those private confessions."

"It wasn't," Dan replied. "And I think that's probably the worst thing." He turned his attention to spreading some of his cut-up mushrooms on one of the pizzas Di had laid out. "I don't know how the priests do it. Hearing all that stuff and getting to know all the bad things your parishioners do. I'm surprised any of them stay in the ministry."

"It's obvious that one priest was pretty unhappy about that confession he heard," Di said. "He's haunting the place." She shivered. "I wonder if the person who confessed to that murder killed him, too. Didn't Trixie say that the guy looked young? Makes you wonder how he died."

"Maybe the people at the church will know," Brian said, glancing at Dan before he sprinkled diced onion pieces on the pizza in front of him.

"Leave it to me to come up with two deaths to solve." Dan tried to smile, but the smile fell miserably short.

Di reached across the table and squeezed his hand, which had clenched into a fist. "We'll find out what happened, Dan, and try to help the guy get some peace. Trixie won't let us do anything less."

"And we'll all help, too. You know that," Brian assured him.

Both Brian and Di's comforting words helped ease a little of the anxiety Dan felt and when he smiled this time, it was a real smile. "I do know that—and appreciate it."

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While Dan's anxiety was being calmed, Trixie's was only rising to a fevered pitch. She glanced over her shoulder at Honey, who was still chatting with Mrs. Callahan, and whispered in a short, fierce tone to Jim and Mart, "Oh, why is she taking so long?"

"Chill out, Trix," Mart said as he began closing the other books and putting what they'd taken out away. "She'll be back soon enough."

Mart's words seemed to be prophetic as Honey just then smiled and turned back toward the Bob-Whites. When she reached the table, Trixie nearly pounced on her. "Well?" she hissed.

"Not now," Honey murmured in a low voice. "Mrs. Callahan needs to get home to make supper. Let's get these things put away, and I'll tell you about it on the train ride home."

The Bob-Whites quickly cleaned up the table and thanked the elderly lady as they left the church office. Behind them, Mrs. Callahan turned off the light and closed the door to the office, stopping to talk with another parishioner.

"Where's the confessional?" Mart asked in a low tone as the four Bob-Whites headed out into the narthex. "I'd like to see it."

"In there," Trixie waved her hand toward the double doors leading into the nave. "And I'll stay out here, thank you very much. One ghost sighting a day is plenty for me."

Mart rolled his eyes at her before he turned to look at the others in inquiry. "Anyone else want to go with me?"

"No, thank you," Honey said with a shiver.

Jim hesitated before shaking his head. "I'll stay here with the girls. Hurry up, though. The others will have dinner ready soon."

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Mart nodded before he pushed open one of the doors to head down the main aisle of the church. Trixie immediately turned to Honey, a plaintive look on her face. “Do we really need to wait for Mart to get back? Did she tell you anything we can use?”

“Not very much, I’m afraid,” Honey said ruefully. “He did work for the parish about ten years ago, but...”

She was interrupted by Mrs. Callahan passing them. The older woman gave them all a big smile. “I hope the records were of help to you.”

“Oh, they were,” Jim said with a warm smile. “We really appreciate you taking the time out to help us.”

“My pleasure,” she said. With a little wave, she headed out of the church. By the time the door had closed behind her, Mart was exiting the one from the nave.

“I’m all set.” A look of chagrin crossed his face. “Let’s get out of here, shall we?”

Trixie looked at Mart suspiciously as they exited the church, heading down the stone steps to the street. “What happened?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary—or well, the *extraordinary*,” Mart said with a sheepish look on his face. “I was peering into the confessional, and a priest walked over to enter on the confessional side—a *live* priest—and I beat it out of there. I’m not Catholic, and I don’t have anything I want to confess.”

“I can think of about twenty things you *should* confess,” Trixie retorted as she walked with short, quick steps to keep up with the others’ longer strides along the cement sidewalk.

“Likewise for you,” he shot back. “And I don’t see you heading into the booth to get things off your chest.”

“Guys,” Honey begged, “seriously.”

Jim took Trixie’s hand and wrapped his own around it before he said in a determinedly positive voice, “I don’t know about you, but I’d like to hear about what Honey learned from Mrs. Callahan.”

Immediately, the almost twins’ attention was diverted to Honey, whose hazel eyes took on an amused twinkle as they continued down the street, passing another church that was sandwiched between an electronics shop and one that sold lingerie.

“What did she say?” Mart demanded.

“I’m just *dying* to know,” Trixie added.

“Like I started to tell you, Father Quinn worked for the parish about ten years ago. She went on about what a wonderful young man he was and how concerned he was about the gang activity in the area. He spent a lot of time trying to organize activities at the church for the pre-teens to keep them off the street.”

“Working with troubled kids, huh?” Jim nodded approvingly. “Sounds like a great guy.”

“Apparently, he was.” Honey sidestepped a mother with a rather imposing baby carriage, who wasn’t paying attention as she tried to keep an eye on both the baby and the young boy at her side.

“Too bad he wasn’t around when Dan was,” Mart mused. “Maybe he could have been a resource for Dan back in the day.”

Honey turned to descend the stairs into the subway. At Jim’s faint nod, Mart hurried his steps to walk next to Honey, while Jim kept his hand in Trixie’s. Trixie leaned into Jim as they climbed down the stairs and murmured, “Subtle, Frayne.”

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"We keep an eye on our three favorite girls. So sue us," Jim said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Besides..." He raised an eyebrow at her. "You can't tell me we haven't had cause to worry, can you?"

Trixie contented herself with sticking out her tongue at him. Although she would never admit it to her brothers, or perhaps, even to Di or Honey, there was some little tiny part of her that reveled in Jim's care and concern for her well-being. She squeezed his hand before she let go of it to walk through the turnstiles, and he squeezed hers once he'd joined her on the other side and didn't let go again.

Once they were all seated in one of the subway cars, Honey continued her story. "Mrs. Callahan had really been struck by him, I guess, in order to remember him so clearly after all these years. He wasn't at the parish for very long. About six months was her guess."

"Only six months?" Trixie looked at her in surprise. "Did he transfer somewhere else?"

"No," she said. "He died."

"I *knew* it!" Trixie's crow of triumph seemed out of place, considering the topic, and Mart gave her a scowl.

"Nice, Trix. Nice. You're excited that he was murdered, too?"

"No," Trixie protested hotly. "I'm not excited about that. Just that..."

"Wait, wait, wait." Honey shook her head. "He wasn't murdered."

"No?" A look of confusion was mirrored on both Mart and Trixie's faces.

"He'd been stressed out for a while—a long while, apparently. Mrs. Callahan said something must have happened to him, because he went from being Mr. Friendly to being really withdrawn and stressed out about two months after he came to the parish. And then, one day, he was found dead in his office in the church. A heart attack is what she said it was."

"He heard that confession and the stress of having to keep it a secret killed him!" Trixie said.

Jim sighed. "Trixie, there are any number of reasons for having a heart attack. Just ask Brian. He'll tell you."

"Yes, that's true. But stress is one of them. If he already had problems—whether it was a weak heart or too much cholesterol or whatever, and then he added the stress of keeping that kind of secret, well?" Trixie threw her hands up in the air.

"She does have a point," Honey noted. "I mean—why else would he be haunting the confessional?" She sighed and leaned back against the seat. "It seems to make the most sense."

Jim gazed down at his and Trixie's entwined hands as he expelled a long breath. "It's going to be like a needle in a haystack—finding out who this other person is." He lifted his eyes. "Consider how many people visit a church on a regular basis. And that's just people who are members. It could have been anyone off the street who felt the urge to get that crime off their chest."

"Hmmm..." Mart leaned back with a thoughtful look on his face. "If I were going to confess to a murder..."

Trixie glared at him. "The only murder that would happen with you around is your own. And I'd be the guilty one."

Mart's eyes narrowed. "I was just going to say that if I were going to confess something like that to a priest and not to the police, which would indicate that I wasn't planning on turning myself in, I'd go to some church where the priest didn't know me."

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“But if you were feeling guilty enough to confess to a priest—or to God, I guess—don’t you think your conscience would lead you to go to the police, too?” Honey wondered.

“Well, I don’t think this person has,” Trixie said. “Otherwise, why would that priest still be tormented over it ten years later?”

“Good point,” Jim said quietly.

“We’ve got a window of time to work with. He was only there six months ten years ago, so...”

“So...what?” Mart demanded. “Priests don’t keep record of confessors and who confessed what. The whole point of the confessional is privacy. How are we going to trace one guy from a whispered confession?”

“We come at it from the other end.” Trixie’s eyes gleamed. “We find the murder victim.”

Mart eyed Trixie doubtfully, but she ignored the look, being so used to what she considered to be her almost-twin’s obnoxious insistence that he question everything she said or did.

It was Honey who voiced the reasonable question. “How?”

“We check out old newspapers!” Trixie said, leaving off the “Of course!” she would have added had it been her brother asking the question. She looked around, as if expecting a newspaper office or a library to appear before her instantly just because she wished it.

Jim caught the glance with amusement but didn’t say anything. Mart, on the other hand, was not so kind.

“You act as though you expect some newspaper archive to magically appear before you so you can investigate *right now*,” he hooted.

Trixie felt her face go red, much to her annoyance. Before she could start quibbling with Mart, however, Honey interrupted.

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting to solve the mystery and put the priest to rest as soon as possible so that we can enjoy the rest of our time in New York,” she said as she glanced at Mart. Her sweet gaze, though it showed no disapproval, had its desired effect, and Mart’s face turned the same shade of red as his sister’s. Having made her point, she continued, “But most newspaper offices, and many of the library branches, are bound to be closing soon, and I’m sure Brian, Di, and Dan have prepared us a delicious meal,” she continued with no trace of irony, “so we should head back to the apartment.”

Jim squeezed Trixie’s hand, knowing that not only would it ease some of her disappointment but also remind her not to be too impatient. Trixie squeezed his hand back and seemed accepting, if not enthusiastic, about waiting to begin their quest the following day.

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If Trixie held her patience the evening before while the Bob-Whites enjoyed the impromptu pizzas, she was not able to hold it the next morning. As a result, all seven of the club members were at the nearest branch of the New York Public Library before it opened the next morning. Trixie paced in front of the door while her friends looked on in amusement.

Di had wisely brought her big canvas bag with her sketch pad and pencils and was happily sketching a curly-haired blonde girl who looked uncannily like Trixie. Brian and Honey had each thought to bring books with them. Honey’s was a light-hearted romance, while Brian’s was a much more serious looking medical tome. They both kept glancing up at Trixie frequently during their reading. Dan and Jim were both able to pass the time without external entertainment and divided their time watching Trixie and

the passersby as they presumably hurried to their jobs. Mart, who was just as impatient as Trixie, had known that he'd be too keyed up, although he'd never have admitted it, to occupy his time with a book, so he sat next to Di, his tapping foot belying the calm he was trying so hard to project.

Finally, a library employee unlocked the front doors, and Trixie hurried inside, getting her bearings and then heading straight for the reference desk once she had determined where it was located. She received instructions on how to access back copies of several different New York papers and assigned a different newspaper to each of the Bob-Whites. Trixie had decided that everyone should examine newspapers for mysterious deaths around the time that Mrs. Callahan had indicated that Father Quinn's demeanor had changed. Although the others, Brian and Mart in particular, had asked her more than once how to narrow down the many deaths that were sure to be reported in the New York papers, even during that relatively small window of time, Trixie had stuck to her guns that they would "just know."

She held the firm belief that there would be some sort of indicator...and half expected that it might even be supernatural in nature. The blonde reasoned that the paranormal had helped them solve more than one mystery with clues that were less than conventional, and she had faith that Father Quinn would help them identify the correct clue now that he had pointed them toward the mysterious death. Brian and Mart had been vocal in their skepticism, while Dan and Di had not been thrilled with the idea of additional possible encounters with the supernatural. Honey was always willing to keep an open mind, and when Jim had also defended Trixie, Mart had reminded him that he would believe Trixie if she said she saw a dinosaur head into the bushes.

Regardless, all seven of the Bob-Whites were ensconced in the library searching through back issues of newspapers either devoted to one the five boroughs or the city as a whole. It was no accident that Trixie had assigned the newspaper devoted to Manhattan to Dan. Mart had suggested that the confessor—whoever he was—hadn't been a member of the church. Trixie still thought it was most likely that he lived in Manhattan, near the church, even if he wasn't a member. She found it difficult to believe that he would travel from one of the other boroughs to confess when there were plenty of Catholic churches from which to choose. Therefore, she figured that the death would most likely be reported more fully in the Manhattan paper—and since Dan had been the conduit before, she thought that maybe he would receive another message if he stumbled on the right article.

As logical as Trixie's theories were, though, in the end, she was wrong.

The group of friends had been scrutinizing the newspapers for about two hours without a break when suddenly Honey gasped and clutched her head. Brian was immediately by her side, and the others looked on with concern.

"What happened? Are you all right?" Brian asked in a low voice when Honey's raspy breathing calmed somewhat, and she no longer clutched her head.

Honey nodded, but her eyes were still clenched shut, and the pallor of her face reflected her emotional distress. "Just give me a minute," she finally managed to gasp. Within a few minutes, some color had returned to her face, and she was able to breathe normally.

"Can we go outside?" she asked.

"Of course," Brian said, and he immediately helped her to stand, solicitously brushing her bangs away from her eyes.

Honey seemed grateful for Brian's attention and gestured to the article she had been reading. "The answer's in there. Let's get a copy of that."

"I'll take care of that," Jim said. "Brian, get Honey outside so she can get some fresh air."

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By the time that Jim joined the group outside, a printout in his hand, Honey's countenance had completely returned to normal.

"You look much better," her full-blooded adopted brother stated. "Are you okay?"

Honey nodded. "I'm sorry I freaked out and scared you guys." She looked at Dan. "I sure understand how you felt yesterday, though."

Trixie had been concerned enough about her best friend to suppress her curiosity, but now that Honey had obviously recovered, her impatience returned full force. "What happened, Honey?"

Honey pointed to the article contained in Jim's freckled hands. "I was reading that and then it was a lot like what Dan said happened to him yesterday. There were all of these whispered voices. It was like they were surrounded me and yet inside my head at the same time. It was awful." Despite the warm sunshine, Honey shivered as she remembered. "Then I heard a voice say, loud and clear, 'Please. Please kill me.'"

"Please kill me?" Trixie echoed.

It was Di's turn to shiver then, and Mart wrapped a protective arm around her, even as he stared at Honey with concerned eyes.

Brian, who had already had his arm around Honey's shoulders, wrapped his other arm around her and pulled her close to him. He turned serious eyes to the rest of them. "I really want to know why we keep getting targeted with this...this *stuff*. I'm sick of people I care about having the bejeezus scared out of them!"

Honey smiled up at Brian. "I don't know why, sweetie, other than the fact that we decided long ago to help other people, and these paranormal adventures *have* helped us help people. Even if some of them were helped from beyond the grave."

"But what does it mean?" Trixie burst in. "The person *wanted* to be killed by the confessor? *Why?*"

"Your redheaded brethren could in all probability enlighten our bevy by reciting the contents of the commentary that he possesses in the extremity of his superior limb," Mart stated with a wry grin.

Trixie whirled on Jim. "I forgot all about the article. What's it say?"

Jim smiled indulgently at the fiery young woman and then glanced over at Honey. "Are you up to me reading this?"

Honey nodded. "Yes. If anything happens, you're all right here for me."

Brian gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Of course we are," he said with a disapproving look at his younger sister.

Once again, Trixie flushed, and she looked guiltily at Honey. "I'm sorry, Hon."

Honey reached out a hand and grasped Trixie's. "It's okay, Trix. I know that you care about me, and I also know how eager you are to solve this mystery and help someone."

"Thanks, Honey," Trixie said, giving Honey's hand a return squeeze before letting it go and turning back toward Jim. "So, what's it say?"

When her friends laughed at her comment, she was only momentarily confused before she realized that she had done it again, and she joined in the laughter. "Okay, okay. I'll never learn. But you guys still love me, right?"

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Jim leaned down and kissed Trixie on the forehead. "Of course."

Trixie grinned up at him. "Good! *Now what does it say?*"

After the laughter had died down, Jim obediently read the article. "'Cobble Hill, Brooklyn—A long-time Cobble Hill resident was found dead yesterday in his brownstone apartment on Clinton Street. Samuel Braverman, 45, had been battling a rare form of blood cancer called chronic myelomonocytic leukemia. The disease is considered treatable, but not curable, and death from the disease generally occurs within two years of diagnosis.'

"'Braverman's caretaker, Noah O'Brien, found the body. He reported to the police that Braverman had asked him to run some errands, and when he returned, his patient was unconscious. Paramedics arrived on the scene shortly after, and Braverman was pronounced dead on arrival at Brooklyn Hospital Center. Although the specific cause of death had not been identified at press time, it appears that Braverman succumbed to the fatal disease that he had been fighting for nearly two years.'"

Jim looked up. "The rest is about funeral services."

"Do you think the caretaker was the man who confessed? That it was a mercy killing at the request of his patient?" Di asked, tears welling in her violet eyes.

"It would certainly make sense," Brian said. "He had a difficult decision to make, and in the end, he couldn't stand to see the man suffer, but he also felt guilty about taking a life. So he confessed."

"How awful," Honey said, her hazel eyes also filling.

"Do you think he told the priest the whole story?" Trixie wondered. "Or do you think the priest had to live with the secret, just knowing someone was killed?"

"I don't know, Trix," Dan said. "My guess is that he didn't know the whole story, but it's just a guess."

"It would explain why the man didn't confess to the police," Mart put in. "Why should he wreck his life when he was doing what he was asked?"

Trixie stared at him in shock. "He broke a law, Mart. And not just an earthly law—he broke one of the Ten Commandments."

"I know, Trixie. I'm just saying that maybe the ends justified the means. If the man was suffering and was going to die anyway..."

"It's definitely a complex issue," Jim agreed.

"Maybe we should find some way to corroborate this," Trixie said. "Maybe there was a follow-up story in the newspaper after the autopsy was performed."

Sure enough, when the Bob-Whites headed back inside and examined more issues of the Brooklyn newspaper, they found that there was at least one more story. This time, it was Trixie who read it aloud for the others.

"'Cobble Hill, Brooklyn—Samuel Braverman, 45, found dead in his Clinton Street apartment nearly two weeks ago, did not die of natural causes as originally believed. The medical examiner found a small puncture wound and traces of pentobarbital sodium, commonly known as Nembutal. The barbiturate is known to be lethal above certain doses.'

"'Police have called Noah O'Brien, Braverman's caretaker, a person of interest in the case. O'Brien, a nurse formerly employed in the New York-Presbyterian Healthcare System, quit his job and began taking on private clients approximately three years ago. His former employer reported that O'Brien had never

received any disciplinary actions and had an unremarkable employment record. His supervisors and colleagues described him as conscientious and hard-working.'

"O'Brien found the body and initially told police that he had been running errands for his patient when he returned to find Braverman unconscious. Braverman was pronounced dead not long after. Police are looking for O'Brien, but he appears to have moved from his Midtown Manhattan apartment and has left no forwarding address. Anyone who has any information regarding O'Brien or this case should contact Brooklyn's 78th Precinct."

There was silence after Trixie finished reading, and Mart couldn't help but try to lighten the mood. "There's a number to call at the end," he noted, reading over Trixie's shoulder. "Should we call and tell them that we have a lead?"

Brian groaned. "If you're going to joke about this..."

Mart threw his hands up in defense. "I'm just trying to keep things light."

"I know, Mart, but even if it was a mercy killing at the request of the sick guy, it's still murder," Brian pointed out.

It was a sober group that continued to look through back newspaper issues to determine whether there were anymore articles on the crime. The Bob-Whites found none, however, leading them to believe that the case was still open, if not active.

After leaving the library, they traveled across the street to a friendly diner, where even hamburgers, fries, and malts weren't able to brighten the somber mood. Although no one discussed the case as if by some unspoken agreement, it hung within their minds, and there was very little small talk during the meal.

It was Trixie who finally took the bull by the horns. "Well, the priest obviously wants us to do something about this. So, what are we going to do?"

"It's hard to know what *to* do, Trixie," Diana said as she poked her straw at the remnants of her malt. "I know we want to help the priest, but I really don't like the idea of having this nurse going to jail either." She sighed.

"And what kind of proof do we have?" Mart asked. "They'd laugh us out of the police station if we came to them and told them how we know for certain who helped Samuel Braverman to his death."

"Maybe we're concentrating on the wrong thing," Dan said quietly.

"What do you mean?" Trixie immediately demanded.

"Well, if we're considering what we're trying to do—give a ghost some relief from *his* torment—perhaps our only job is to relieve his torment. Not to determine what justice should or shouldn't be for the nurse who helped that guy die." Dan shrugged a shoulder before taking a final bite of his hamburger.

"But how can we relieve his torment without solving that crime?" Trixie demanded. She leaned forward, a frown on her freckled face.

"The police weren't able to find the guy with all their resources, Trixie," Brian reminded her gently. "And we don't have the time or wherewithal to do it for them. And then there's the problem of whether we'd even want to find the guy for the police to prosecute."

"So, what do we do?" Honey asked. "How do we solve the priest's dilemma?"

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“Tell him what really happened to Samuel Braverman and who did the confessing in his confessional all those years ago,” Jim said.

“Confess the truth?” Trixie asked, a speculative look in her eyes.

“That’s what a confessional *is* for,” Mart quipped. He had ordered a second malt and was already half-way through it, but still had managed to pay avid attention to what the others had said.

Trixie punched him without real heat behind it before she turned to focus her gaze on Dan. “Are you sure you want to go talk with the priest, Dan? Perhaps one of the rest of us could—”

Dan cut her off with a shake of his head. “I need to do it. My church. My faith. My ghost.”

Brian gave him an upward quirk of his lips. “That sounds like a slogan for a bumper sticker.”

Dan returned the smile but did not respond further.

“When do you want to do this?” Di asked softly, putting a slender hand on Dan’s arm. “It’s only Saturday. We could wait until...”

“Let’s get it over with. I’d rather not ruin what’s left of our weekend by spending it stressing out over it.” Dan pulled out his wallet and tossed a few bills on the table. “I just hope it works.”

The other Bob-Whites quickly followed suit, sending crumpled bills and coins to the table to cover their tab. And then, all of them headed for the door and the subway to Midtown.

Very little was said between the friends as they made the trip to Dan’s old neighborhood. Di and Brian looked around them with slightly more interest than the others, having not made the trip before, but didn’t ask Dan any questions, respecting his need for silence.

The seven Bob-Whites climbed the stone stairs up to the front door of the church and entered the narthex. An older man standing near the doorway to the nave smiled upon seeing them. “Welcome,” he said. “Our Saturday evening Mass starts in about an hour. I know the times listed in the paper were wrong this week. We are offering a small gathering downstairs for people to socialize beforehand.” Upon seeing their faces at his suggestion, he gestured toward the interior of the church. “Or you’re welcome to wait and pray inside.”

“Thank you,” Honey said with a warm smile. The others nodded and smiled as they entered the narthex. Upon entering, both Dan and Di made the sign of the cross, while the others followed them, looking slightly uncomfortable as they made their way into the church.

“What now?” Di asked in a low tone.

“The confessional is over there.” Dan pointed to the small booth on the far wall. He hesitated, looking at the others. “There are plenty of pews here to wait in.” He gave them a rueful look. “Or you could go downstairs and join the socializing.”

“We’ll stay here with you,” Trixie said decisively. The others nodded, adding their agreement.

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” Honey asked, her hazel eyes exuding sympathy. She placed a hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to.”

“Yeah, I do,” Dan said. He squared his shoulders and cut across the church, making his way between two pews, being careful of the raised kneeler. He could feel the gazes of his friends focused on him, but he did not turn around.

With a deep breath, he peered into the priest’s side of the confessional. No one inside. Drawing on all his willpower, Dan pulled open the other door, entered and closed the door behind him.

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Gingerly, he sat down on the wooden seat's faded cushion and waited. For several moments, all he could hear was the still quiet of the church as he sat rigidly on the edge of the small bench. The silence was the one he was long familiar with—the comforting sense of peace and reverence.

It was only gradually that Dan became aware of the chill in the small room. It started as a sense of stepping into chilly water, starting with his toes and spreading up his calves to his thighs. And then the whispers began again.

"Father, forgive me..."

"I've tried, Father, so many times to stop..."

"How sinful is it, Father, to lie? It was just a small, white lie..."

"Please help me, Father, I don't know what else to do..."

The voices this time were desperate, guilty ones. Voices choked with despair and misery. A helpless despondency stole over him listening to the voices. *How can they bear it? What does it cost to listen to such terrible unhappiness every day?*

The voices were still whispering—pieces and fragments of the past. Dan gripped the edge of his seat and cleared his throat, adding his voice to the others. "Father?"

That deep, icy crawling feeling began to overtake him, and he started to shiver. "F-father," he got out.

"I just killed a man," the voice came again, pushing the other voices into silence.

Dan swallowed, trying hard to fight the natural terror that whirled through him, making it almost impossible to think. "Father, please. Listen to me. I..."

He felt almost frozen, his fingers curled so tight around the edge of the seat that he thought they might break off if he tried to move them. *How do I get through to him? How can I get him to hear me?*

A whirlwind of images blew through his mind—of his parents, of his life as it was now, of the ghostly priest he'd never seen, and finally, of the terrible things he'd had to do in the gang. His mind lingered there, shame stealing over him afresh.

And then, his eyes widened and the words came to him in a flow he didn't know how to stop. Dan knew then exactly what to say.

He bowed his head and let his eyes close against the hot tears that gathered behind them. "Bless me, Father," his voice came out in a hoarse whisper, "for I have sinned."

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The other Bob-Whites had determined that being seated in a pew was a far less conspicuous thing to do than to stand milling around the confessional. Diana, particularly, was adamant about it, as she didn't want anyone to get the impression they were eavesdropping on someone's confession.

Trixie had seated herself at the end of the pew closest to the confessional and couldn't contain herself from darting a glance at the confessional every few seconds. Jim, who was seated next to her, finally put a calming hand on her arm.

"He'll be fine," he murmured.

"But I haven't seen the priest yet," she fretted. "And who knows what's going on in there? He's been in there for such a long time."

"Give him time. Be patient."

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Trixie hated waiting more than anything else in the world. And her anxiety for Dan, her excitement about the supernatural events occurring and her natural in-born curiosity were making it almost impossible to sit, let alone be patient.

But she made the effort to do it, letting Jim entwine his hand with hers, and trying to focus on something other than the confessional. Her gaze slid down the pew, looking at each of her friends before settling on Diana.

Her friend's head was bowed, and she'd pulled the kneeler down to sink upon it. The other Bob-Whites had shifted their legs, allowing the movement. The simple act of Diana's prayer settled some of the anxiety in Trixie, and she forced herself to relax further, closing her eyes and resting her head against Jim's shoulder.

*Please*, she said quietly to herself. *Please*.

\*\*~\*\*~\*\*~\*\*~\*\*

His body heating up was the first thing he noticed. Again, the temperature change started in his toes and made its way up his legs and from there, throughout his whole body.

His confession had been a lengthy one—as it truly had been a long time since he'd seen the inside of a confessional—but he had felt, strangely enough, that his past and the things that he'd been through had drawn the ghostly priest's attention. Dan had forgotten that the priest's primary interest had been young gang members like himself, and it was a humbling realization that the best thing he had to attract the priest's focus was that which he so often tried to hide from everyone else. And after he'd finished his broken, stumbling confession, Dan had known—truly known—that the priest had listened.

In a way in which he'd never been honest with anyone about his past, Dan had unburdened himself to the priest. And at the end of his confession, he had said in a rough voice, "I know what my penance is." He had swallowed and continued, "To tell you what really happened to that man who was killed."

And in a few brief sentences, he had told the priest what had happened to Samuel Braveman and who the sinful confessor was.

And then...the warmth had returned.

Dan leaned his head back against the wall of the confessional, reveling in the warmth. The sense of deep peace he'd been craving suddenly was there. No fanfare or hype, just a simple, yet unfathomable peace.

And for the first time since he'd been a child, Dan felt safe enough in the city to completely close his eyes.

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Later, after Dan had exited the confessional, and the Bob-Whites had banded together to exit the church, Trixie grabbed Dan's arm. "Tell us. What *happened*?"

The corner of his mouth twisted up and he gave an expressive shrug. "There isn't much to tell, Trix. I confessed the truth, he listened, and then he disappeared."

"I can't believe it worked!" Mart said, shaking his head. "After all these huge, dramatic things we had to do to get other ghosts to listen to us." His hands waved in large, sweeping gestures. "Seances! Articles in the newspaper! Catching murderers and nearly getting buried alive to rescue hidden treasure!"

"And all this guy wanted was the truth," Brian marveled. "Incredible."

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"Well, I just hope that he's satisfied and that he'll go on to...well, wherever ghosts go once they're not tormented anymore," Honey said. "It's terrible to think that such a nice man would spend eternity having to haunt the church where he'd been doing God's work."

"If Dan says he's gone, I'll believe him," Jim said lightly.

Di nodded firmly in agreement.

"What say you all to food and games back at the apartment?" Brian asked, glancing around at the others. "I could use a little lighthearted fun."

"I'm in!" Mart immediately jumped on his brother's suggestion. "We could play..."

"No *Trivial Pursuit*," Diana interrupted.

Mart gave her a wounded look. "Hey! I wasn't..."

"And no *Monopoly*," Honey immediately added. "The last time we played that, it never ended. You and Trixie spent three hours trying to beggar each other."

"And I'm not playing *Trivial Pursuit* with Encyclopedia Belden," Brian said dryly.

"How about *Clue*?" Jim said, his green eyes twinkling.

"Don't start!" Mart clapped his hands over his eyes and groaned. "Don't we get enough *Clue* in real life?"

The five Bob-Whites continued their jocular banter as they headed down the stairs into the subway station. Dan and Trixie walked at a slower pace behind them. Dan glanced down at Trixie's face, which held a thoughtful, pensive expression.

"A penny for your thoughts, Shortcake," he said, a teasing note in his voice.

She looked up at him almost unseeing for a moment before she smiled. "I don't know that they're worth a penny."

"I'm interested to hear them anyway," Dan said.

He let her go through the turnstile before him and then he joined her on the other side as they followed the others to the train. "I was just thinking," she said softly.

"Yes?"

"That you looked different. More...I don't know. Peaceful? Content?" Trixie studied him for a moment and then gave a little laugh. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that your experience with that priest did something good for you."

"Confession's good for the soul," he said simply.

"That *is* what they say," she murmured.

The focused, almost knowing look in Trixie's blue eyes reminded him anew of why she had so successfully solved so many mysteries.

He gave her an impulsive, one-armed hug before he tousled her blond curls. "What's good for me is having a friend like you."

Trixie gave him a probing look, but then let him get away with his non-answer answer. She wrapped an arm around his waist and hugged him back.

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As they neared the train doors, Brian gave them a conspiratorial smile and said in a low voice as they entered, “We’ve got Mart talked into *Scrabble*. I say double points for the first person who catches him misspelling a word.”

“You’re on,” Trixie said, her blue eyes gleaming.

Dan laughed as he released Trixie, who hurried over to where Jim was, smiling over at her and saving her a seat, and plopped down next to Mart, who was already waxing eloquent.

“And did you know about the word oxazepam? If it’s properly placed on the *Scrabble* board, it will get the player who places it 392 points.”

“Yeah, but I’d like to see you use it in a sentence.”

“I just did,” Mart crowed triumphantly.

Dan rolled his eyes dramatically over at Diana and Honey, who giggled.

“It’s a drug.” Brian leaned forward to rest his arms on their seat back. “It helps with insomnia.”

“We don’t need that,” Trixie said wryly. “We have Mart.”

That, of course, immediately garnered a protest from Mart, and the war of words continued. Dan let the banter surround him like a well-loved blanket. It was rare, this feeling of peace. In attempting to help the priest end his torment, he’d found an end to some of his own.

*Perhaps there’s more to this paranormal stuff than we realize. We help them...and sometimes, they help us.*

The train began to slowly move forward out of the station, and Dan glanced idly out the window. He’d almost thought that the brief, shadowy glimmer was a trick of his imagination, until he done a double-take and then noticed Trixie’s eyes wide as she, too, stared out the window of the train.

A young man in a priest’s collar stood near the turnstiles, a smile on his pale face. He inclined his head, waved and then vanished.

“Confession is good for the soul, indeed,” Trixie whispered.

All Dan could do was echo her words. “Indeed.”

*The End*

**Dana’s notes:** Susan and I got to brainstorm our story together in person this year with help from Sue (our go-to Catholic, lol!) and Mary, and it was soooooo much fun. The downside? The brainstorming occurred on October 16, giving us very little time to coordinate and write this story together by Halloween. But...Susan and I can be terriers, so we actually managed to get it done. \*whew\*

\*insert broken record\* Susan’s the best person with whom to collaborate—our differences in punctuation use aside (\*snicker\*), it’s so nice to write with someone who loves the characters as much as I do and who sees them in much the same way. Our back-and-forth edits may debate the merits of comma placement—or *un*placement—but we never question each other’s motivations for the characters (although her Brian has a better sense of humor than my Brian, and I’m jealous, lol!). Even when I was in a hurry to write my section and get it off to her and left off certain explanations for certain behaviors, Susan knew the motivation behind them, because she herself would have written with the same motivation. It always nice when someone “gets” your writing.

There wasn’t a lot of time for research with this one, but we did some (Susan and I can’t *not* do research!). The church is fictional, an amalgam of three Midtown Manhattan churches I found—one even with columns out front. Many NYC and other cities’ churches don’t have columns, but as someone who

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frequented the Washington National Cathedral relatively often, I wanted Dan's church to have columns, and I searched until I found a Midtown Manhattan church that had them, just to prove it was possible!

Susan and I also aren't experts on the layout of Catholic churches, but we did consult our memories and, among other resources, a blog post about Catholic church architecture that referenced the book *Sacred Catholic Architecture for Dummies*. Most churches' candle rooms are placed off of the nave (the main part of the church), but in Dan's church, it is off the narthex (the entryway into the church), because that worked better for the story. I recently visited a historic Catholic church in Arizona near the Mexican border, and there was a candle room off of the narthex, so again, because it was a definite possibility that it could be off the narthex, I went with it.

I hope you've enjoyed reading the story as much as Susan and I enjoyed writing it. The wonderful comments we receive about this universe just floors both of us, and we're so thrilled with the feedback. Thank you so much!

Until next year, Hoppy Holloweenie! \*g\*

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**Susan's notes:** I can't believe it's another Halloween already! It seems like each year goes by faster (and Dana and I have less and less time to prepare for these stories. \*snort\*).

It was great fun to brainstorm in person this year (not to mention with Sue and Mary as well!) and to get the full effect of facial expressions and voice tones when saying, "Oooh! I like that!" and "YES!" Heh. Typing doesn't quite ever do that justice. ;)

I spent some time on Wikipedia and doing Google searches on church structure, but Dana, as usual, did way more research than I did.

All the games are trademarked, of course, by their manufacturers, and Encyclopedia Belden is a bit of a take-off on Encyclopedia Brown, of course. ;)

And I did use this page: [http://www.answerbag.com/q\\_view/358545](http://www.answerbag.com/q_view/358545) to find out what the word is that will get you the most points in Scrabble. And I used dictionary.com to find out what in the world it meant. \*grin\*

It's always a pleasure to do these stories with Dana. It's become such a really fun, rich tradition for both of us. And I echo her words in that it's so awesome to write with someone who really *gets* what you think about the characters, their motivations and how they would act. We are definitely simpatico.

And we really are humbled and thankful that you guys like these stories so well. We are thrilled that so many of you look forward to them every Halloween. Does our little hearts (and egos!) good! \*hugs\* and thanks!!!

Happy Halloween!!

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