

Grace and the Grave Robber  
By Leslea Wahl

Austin knocks on his grandma's front door. He shuffles back and forth in the outdoor walkway of the condo as he waits for her to answer. A breeze swirls crunchy dead leaves around his worn sneakers.

Soon, the door opens to reveal Grandma's smiling face.

"Austin! I'm so glad you're here." She stands aside for him to enter. "Did you just come from working out?"

"No. Why?" He follows her gaze to his athletic shorts and bare legs, suddenly understanding her question. Nearly all the boys at his middle school dressed like this even in this cold weather, despite the complaints from their parents.

With a little grin, she shakes her head. "Your mom said you'd be stopping by after school, so I made some brownies. Do you have time for a snack?"

Austin shrugs out of his sweatshirt and flings it across one of Grandma's living room chairs. "Absolutely." He follows her and the incredible smell around the corner to her kitchen and hoists himself onto one of the stools that line the kitchen island.

He plops a thick manila envelope with the boring non-fiction book on the counter. "Here. This is from Dad."

Grandma glances at the package. "Thanks for bringing it. Your mom thought I'd enjoy the book. Although I could have gotten it another day, saving you the trip."

He shrugs. "That's okay. Changing up the routine's always a good thing." He doesn't bother to add that he was happy for the excuse to come by. Grandma is pretty good at giving advice.

She opens the fridge and pulls out a jug of milk. Austin fiddles with the corner of the envelope as she pours two glasses.

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She slides one toward him. “Something on your mind?”

He raises his eyebrows as he looks at her. How does she always know when he or his siblings are distracted about something?

He takes a swig of the cold milk and then wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, ignoring the napkin she offers him.

“I’m just trying to figure out my plans for the weekend,” he explains.

“Oh, yes. The triduum of Allhallowtide.”

His face scrunches. “Huh?” He shakes his head, his mop of brown hair sliding across his forehead. “No, I mean Halloween.”

She flashes that knowing smile of hers. “Exactly.”

He stares at her for a moment, confused, then continues talking. “I got invited to two different parties and don’t know which one to go to.”

Her eyes light up. “That sounds like a good problem to have. Tell me about these parties. Maybe talking about it will help you decide.”

He flips his hair off his face. “Well, the church is having something for the middle school youth group, and I kinda signed up to go to it. But today, I got invited to this scary-movie party.”

The timer dings and the conversation pauses as Grandma removes the brownies from the oven. She places them on the cooling rack and then turns back to Austin.

“Since you already ‘kinda’ signed up for the church event, wouldn’t it make sense to attend that one?”

He squirms in his seat. “Yeah, but the thing is, *everyone* who is anyone is going to the movie party.” He picks at the envelope again. “I don’t get invited to the cool parties very often. And getting scared is what Halloween’s all about, right?”

Using a spatula, Grandma cuts into the soft, chocolatey snack. “Did you know All Hallows’ Eve, All Souls’ Day, and All Saints’ Day are related? They are actually important days in the Catholic Church and form what is known as a triduum.”

His mouth waters as he watches her work. “Oh, like at Easter? With Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday?”

“Yes, exactly.” She opens the cupboard and pulls out two plates.

“Wait. Are you saying Halloween is a Catholic holiday?”

She slides a large brownie onto each plate.

“Indeed.”

“Weird. So, you think I should go to the church event.” Was there any doubt that she would have chosen that one? Maybe he should have asked someone else for advice.

She carries the plates to the table. He grabs the glasses of milk and follows her.

She slides into her chair. “Watching movies with your friends does sound like fun, but that’s not what All Hallows’ Eve is about.”

He settles into his seat, eyeing the brownie. “So, what kinds of things did you do to celebrate Halloween? You know, back in the day?”

She smiles. “My brother Harry and I did go trick-or-treating. But my most memorable All Hallows’ Eve was spent with my family on one of my dad’s excursions.”

Unable to wait any longer, Austin picks up his brownie. “One of his archaeological digs?” As his teeth sink into the homemade delicacy, his eyes close, savoring the treat.

“It wasn’t an excavation, but he was on the job. But maybe you don’t have time to hear the story right now.”

Austin swallows his bite, anxious to hear more. Her stories about her archaeologist father always fascinate him.

“No, please. I’d like to hear it.”

“Oh, good. Because the story of the grave robber is quite interesting.”

Austin’s eyes widen.

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“Gra-ace!” Daddy calls, exasperation adding an extra syllable to my name.

“Coming!” I holler back. Even though we’ll only be gone for the weekend, I have no idea what to pack. We’re staying at a church, going to Mass, and attending some kind of fall festival. Wanting to be prepared, I may have overpacked. I latch up my suitcase then lug it out the door to our big family car. The Chevy is large, but the trunk is already full of all of Mama’s art supplies.

Daddy takes one look at my suitcase and lets out a huge sigh. “Are you turning into your mother, having to bring everything you own?”

Mama pats his arm. “Hon, I believe that when you were persuading me to come with you this weekend, you said I could bring my painting supplies along.” She reaches into the trunk and taps the brown case he always takes on his archeological assignments. “Maybe you could leave some of your items at home.”

Daddy pulls her close and kisses her cheek. “You’re right, darling. Your passion is just as important as mine.” He lets her go and points a finger at me. “Thank goodness your journaling requires only a pencil and a pad of paper. Otherwise, we might need to get a larger car.”

I give him my most mischievous grin. “Actually, I was thinking of taking up a musical instrument. Maybe the tuba?”

He playfully groans.

I wrap my arms around my suitcase and hold it against my chest. “Don’t worry. This can sit on the back seat between Harry and me. It can be my desk as I write in my journal.”

“It better not cross the line to my half!” Harry yells from the back seat. “I need to save room for any treasures I find.”

My older brother has recently begun collecting things he finds. So far most of it has been junk, but he’s always hoping to discover something valuable.

Before long, we’re heading down the road, off on another family adventure.

I pull out my journal, careful not to push my suitcase too close to Harry. I don’t want to get on his bad side right away. A grumpy Harry always makes for a long car ride.

I date the top of a clean page. “So, where did you say we were going?”

Daddy turns his head slightly to talk over his shoulder. “We’re headed across the river to Illinois.”

I write down this information. “And why are we going there?”

“A church there has some items they want me to identify. The priest invited you because this weekend is their big All Hallows’ Eve celebration.”

That part, I remembered—part of the reason for the larger-than-usual piece of luggage.

I jot a few notes, then close my journal and watch out the window as the barren fields blur past, ready for another adventure.

“Turn here,” Mama directs as she studies the map and Daddy’s handwritten directions.

Daddy slows the car and turns right onto a dirt road. I sit up, awed by the towering trees that line both sides of the road. The dark trunks and bare branches intersect,

creating a web above the road, dimming the midday, overcast light even further.

“Creepy,” Harry murmurs.

Mama’s eyes widen in amazement. “Think how beautiful this must be in the spring and summer when you’re driving through a canopy of green.”

We continue down the long drive, and finally, the trees thin out enough that the tall dark spires of a church come into view.

The land to the left of the church might be pretty in the summer when it’s all green and lush, but now, at the end of October, various shades of brown alternate with evergreens, which appear dark gray against the cloudy sky. Tall brown grasses are interspersed with the brown sticks—all that remain of the numerous bushes, flowerbeds with dead flowers, pathways covered in crunchy leaves, and expansive lawns with straw-colored grass. The benches, gazebo, and picnic tables, which are probably inviting in

the spring, are also darkened by shadows from the spindly trees.

To the right of the church is a brick two-story building. The wooden front door swings as we open our car doors. A man in a long black cassock shuffles our way.

Daddy strides toward him and clasps his hand in greeting. “Father O’Malley?”

“Yes, thank you so much for coming, Professor Turner.”

“Call me Mac,” Daddy says.

The jovial man with small, rounded glasses, and a shock of white hair, smiles at us. His Irish accent adds a hint of whimsy to his words like he’s telling a tall tale. “I’m so glad you all could come. You will love our annual parish All Hallows’ Eve celebration.”

Mama smiles. “Thank you for inviting us.”

The priest claps his hands. “Well, come, come. Let’s get you settled. You will stay in the main house. My

housekeeper, Mary, was thrilled to finally have a reason to make up some of the rooms we rarely use.”

We gather our bags and follow him into the building. Mama oohs and aahs over all the dark wood, but I’m transfixed by all the life-size statues that fill the place.

Mary, the housekeeper, with a mass of gray hair piled on top of her head, appears out of nowhere and beckons us to follow her up the stairs to where we’ll be staying.

She’s busy chatting with Daddy and Mama, while I lag behind, staring at all the religious paintings and statues of various saints that also reside on this level.

Mary stops. Her bony hand gestures into one room. “Professor and Mrs. Turner, you can stay here.”

I peek in at the large four-posted bed and the antique lamp on the nightstand.

“When I heard we’d be staying at the rectory, I was not expecting something so fancy,” Mama says, reading my mind.

Mary smiles. “Oh, yes, that’s what most guests say. When this place was built in the late 1800s, the church’s generous benefactors, Mr. and Mrs. Dupree, insisted on furnishing the rooms. The priests thought it was inappropriate to live in such luxury but they eventually compromised. Their rooms are very sparse.”

“Dupree, the family we are here about?” Daddy asks.

Mary nods. “The one and only. I’m sure Father O’Malley is anxious to tell you all about it.” Mary sharply turns and crosses the hall in two quick steps. “Your room is here, Harry, and yours there, Grace. Why don’t you get settled and then come down for lunch.”

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As I step into my room, my breath catches. It takes all my willpower not to take a flying leap and jump onto the tall, inviting bed full of fluffy pillows. Who cares about unpacking? I just want to take in every detail, from the floral wallpaper to the red velvet curtains. This room makes me feel like a princess.

Pulling the heavy curtain aside, I peer out the window. It overlooks a garden. Most of it is clear, but a few pumpkins add a small burst of color to the palette of brown.

I am still not unpacked when Mama announces it's time to go down for lunch. I skip down the hall toward the stairs where Mama and Daddy are waiting. As I pass one of the towering statues that line the hall, something jumps out at me.

“AHH!” Harry yells.

I screech in response, my hand resting on my racing heart.

“Harry!” Daddy scolds in that tone that makes us immediately stand at attention. “We are invited guests in Father O’Malley’s home.”

“Sorry,” Harry says, lowering his voice. “I just couldn’t resist. This place is so crazy with all these statues.” His eyes light up with an idea. “Would it be okay for Grace and me to play hide and seek here?”

“No!” Mama and Daddy say in unison.

Harry frowns.

I try to make him feel better. “I bet there are just as many interesting places outside to play.”

By the time we enter the dining room, Harry is no longer pouting. But the idea of heading outside vanishes from my mind as I take in the beautiful paintings and dark wood. This place has to be as pretty as any castle in England.

Father O'Malley sits on one side of the long table. Bowls of soup and a platter of sandwiches await us, which causes my stomach to rumble.

I wait patiently during Father O'Malley's prayer before reaching for one of the sandwiches.

As we eat, Daddy and Father O'Malley discuss the reason we are here.

"So," Daddy says in that serious professor tone of his. "Mary told us that Mr. and Mrs. Dupree were the ones who left all the fine furnishings for this rectory."

Father O'Malley glances around. "Yes, a bit extravagant, isn't it? But the space works well for holding meetings and for hosting visiting priests and other guests."

"And that is the same family you told me about?"

"Yes, yes," Father O'Malley answers. "They were a very wealthy family. As I told you on the phone, when each of the various family members passed away, some of their favorite items were placed in the family vault in a specially

designed space in front of their caskets. Glass kept them safe from the elements, making the crypt a bit of a museum.”

Harry and I glance at each other, our curiosity on high alert.

“Several weeks ago, our groundskeeper heard strange sounds out in the cemetery and went to explore. We found him unconscious in the crypt. The thief must have hit him on the head, knocking him out. We surmise the thief was worried about getting caught, and so he left in a hurry, taking only some of the valuables. The rest were found in a pile in the center of the crypt.”

“Oh, the poor man,” Mama says.

“Yes, he still hasn’t regained consciousness. We are praying that he survives.” We all follow Father O’Malley’s lead as he makes the sign of the cross.

“What is it that you think I can help with?” Daddy asks.

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“I’m not sure we’ll ever recover the stolen items, but we can take care of the remaining pieces. In our records, we have the descriptions of which valuables belonged to which family member. But many of the items’ descriptions are so similar that I’ve been unable to match the items to their descriptions. A friend told me some of the work you’ve done for the Church, and I thought you might be able to help.”

Daddy slowly nods. “I will certainly try. It doesn’t sound like the project will be too difficult.”

“Wonderful.” Father O’Malley looks over at Harry and me. “While your father works on that, maybe you could help us prepare for the party?”

“Sure!” we say in unison.

“First, let me tell you about our annual event. I’ve missed some of the traditions from my youth back in Ireland, so when I started at this parish, I decided to implement a few of them. The community has been kind to

this sentimental old man and embraced my somewhat odd ideas.”

Harry and I lean forward, hoping to catch every heavily accented word.

“Unlike many parishes, we celebrate every day of the Allhallowtide triduum. It begins this afternoon with families knocking on their neighbors’ doors.”

“To go trick-or-treating?” I ask.

His eyes twinkle behind his little round glasses. “I bet you didn’t know *that* modern tradition came from a Catholic event called souling.”

Harry and I look at each other and shake our heads.

“I don’t know exactly when it began, but souling became a tradition when poor people visited the homes of wealthier families. They promised to pray for the souls of relatives who had passed away in exchange for a little round pastry called a soul cake.”

My eyes widen. “Really?”

Father O'Malley nods. "Yes. So, each parish family now visits a neighbor and asks if they have a deceased relative they would like the Church to pray for. They bring the names to the parish in the evening for a prayer service, where we write those names in a book for our All Souls' Day Mass. Then we enjoy our party with lots of food and games."

"That's so neat," Harry says.

The elderly priest nods in agreement. "Everyone also brings food for the feast. And Mary always makes two of my favorites, barmbrack and colcannon." He closes his eyes and smiles, as if remembering their taste.

"Those sound like Irish delicacies," Mama says.

"Oh yes, barmbrack is a fruit bread with a special hidden charm inside."

"Like a king cake for Mardi Gras?" Daddy asks.

"Exactly. And don't miss the colcannon. Mary makes the best cabbage and boiled potatoes."

I'm not sure either of those sound like my cup of tea, but I'm willing to give them a try.

"How can we help you get ready?" Harry asks.

"Late in the evening, we have a large bonfire, and people enjoy putting candles in their carved containers to carry along."

"Oh," I say. "I saw the garden from my window. Do you want us to go gather the pumpkins?"

He grins. "You can get the pumpkins for decoration, but turnips are what we carve."

My face scrunches in confusion. "Turnips?"

"Oh, yes. It's another ancient tradition. You'll find a wheelbarrow full of them in the greenhouse."

I'm still trying to figure out how one goes about carving a turnip, when Harry pushes away from the table.

"No problem," Harry says. "Grace and I can get those. Do you mind if we wander around the property?"

"Of course not. Enjoy the mild afternoon."

Harry and I grab our jackets and exit the building.

I point toward the right. “I noticed the greenhouse that way.”

He waves me off and starts walking in the opposite direction, to the other side of the church. “This property is huge. It’s perfect for hide-and-seek.”

We wander into the park, or maybe it’s more of a massive garden, that I’d seen as we drove in. As we walk, I’m on the lookout for great hiding spots, but when I notice a few little houses on the far end of the property, another idea begins to take shape.

“Harry, look.” I point toward the cottages. “What do you think about trying our hand at souling? It would be nice to have a name to add to the prayer book tonight.”

His eyes narrow as he peers in the direction I’m pointing, then his face breaks into a smile. “Good idea. But don’t think this gets you out of hide-and-seek.”

Our shoes crunch through the fallen leaves as we trek to the homes. Harry stops a few times to pick up items which he shoves in his pocket: a lost hair clip, a shiny gold button, and a small empty jar.

Our initial excitement turns to discouragement when no one answers the door at either of the first two homes. But on our third attempt, the door is opened by a thin woman in a worn housedress. Her hair is pulled back, making it hard to tell how old she is. I guess she's maybe a little younger than Mama.

“Can I help you kids?” she asks.

Her sad eyes make me suddenly unsure how to explain our mission, but Harry has no such problem and tells the woman all about souling. I don't know what I expected, but it wasn't the tears that suddenly stream down her face. I glance at Harry, who's looking as shocked as I am.

The woman swipes at her tears and offers us a small smile. “Oh, this is so wonderful. Thank you. You are truly a blessing. You see, my brother passed away just last week. He was in a car accident.” She begins weeping again.

Harry shuffles from one foot to the other. “We are happy to pray for his soul.”

“God listens to prayers,” I add, not knowing what else to say.

“Please wait.” She disappears into the house. When she returns, she hands Harry two pieces of paper. The top square of paper has a name written on it. “His name is RJ.”

Harry turns to leave, but an idea stops me from joining him.

“You should come join the party at the church this evening, then you can join in the prayers.”

The woman’s gaze flicks over our shoulders to the church behind us. “I’ve never been much of a church-going person.”

“Well, a party is a good time to start,” I add cheerfully.

“Or you could attend the All Souls’ Day Mass,” Harry adds.

She bites her lower lip. “I’ll think about it.”

After she closes the door, Harry and I start back toward the Church property.

“How amazing is that? For us to find someone who really needed prayers for their loved one,” Harry says as he stuffs the papers in his pocket.

“God definitely led us to the right house.”

Harry nudges me with his shoulder. “Maybe if you’re lucky, He’ll lead you to me. You’re the first seeker.” Before I can answer, he sprints away.

“Fine,” I sigh and sit on the cool ground on a blanket of leaves. With my eyes squeezed shut, I start counting to fifty. I try to listen to the sound of snapping branches or the sound of crisp crumbling leaves to get a

sense of which direction he headed, but he's as stealthily quiet as usual.

When I'm finished counting, I peel my eyes open. I remain sitting for a moment, looking and listening for any clue as to where Harry is hiding. Nothing. With so many large trees, the hiding places are endless. I let out another sigh and push myself off the ground.

My search continues until I'm no longer in the park area but have reached the cemetery that lies behind the church. Given my father's line of work and my mother's preoccupation with anything that might be deemed artistic, I've been around my share of graveyards. The stone monuments and ornate headstones usually aren't creepy to me but are symbols of untold stories.

Forgetting about my brother, I wander through the rows, looking at the names and dates. Each headstone is unique: impressive-looking obelisks, stone angels, and benches in various shades of gray. Some are so old the

stones are crumbling or are too weathered to read. While they are all fascinating, one particular structure catches my eye and draws me toward it.

In the middle of the graveyard is what looks like a little stone house. As I get closer, I notice an open doorway on the back of the structure. A web of ropes blocks my entrance. Carved into the stone at the top of the doorway is the word Dupree.

Oh! The crypt that was broken into. I step closer and peer in. The deep shadows make it hard to see much, but I can make out the rectangular holes in the wall in front of me. A shiver runs down my spine when I realize caskets must be in that wall.

“Boo!”

I jump at least a foot off the ground, my heart hammering inside my chest. I spin around and glare at Harry. Why do I keep falling for his nonsense?

He laughs. “You deserve that one. Were you ever going to come find me?”

“I got side-tracked. Look, this must be the crypt that was robbed.”

He peers up at the name. “Yeah, I guess so. Hey, I saw a car pull up to the church. I think people are starting to arrive. We’d better go get those turnips.”

With one last look at the Dupree crypt, I follow him toward the greenhouse.

By the time we change clothes and leave the rectory, quite a few families have arrived for the evening’s festivities. As we make the short walk to the church, Daddy tells us about his afternoon and how he was able to help Father O’Malley match the items with the descriptions in the burial information.

“It wasn’t difficult. I’m actually a little surprised no one tried to steal the items before. They were quite

valuable. The church is raising money to purchase thicker glass so people can still admire the pieces. Too bad half the items are probably gone forever.”

When we reach the sanctuary, Mama and I are both so transfixed by the gorgeous stained-glass windows that Daddy has to physically guide us to an open pew.

Father O’Malley begins the prayer service by thanking everyone for participating in the souling activity. Everyone is then invited to come forward and write the names they collected in the book of the deceased. Harry and I walk up, and since I have better penmanship, he lets me write the name from the paper, RJ Tubbs, in the book.

Father O’Malley leads us in reciting a few psalms and then a prayer for the repose of the souls written in the book.

Our family follows the rest of the congregation to the fellowship hall for the party. Harry immediately makes a beeline to the back wall where long tables overflow with

all kinds of yummy-looking foods. I take a moment to check out the activity tables. Our turnips are at one station. A woman demonstrates how to carve the turnip so it will hold a candle, turning the vegetable into a little lantern. I move on to watch a blindfolded boy try to take a bite out of an apple that is dangling from a string. His friends cheer him on.

“Well, what do you think of our celebration?”

I glance up to see Father O’Malley standing next to me.

“I love it. This has been such a wonderful day.”

His eyes sparkle with delight. “Well, I’m so glad you could join us. I’d like to give you this.” He hands me a little doll made out of a corn husk.

“Oh! It’s so sweet! Did you make this?”

“Indeed, I did.” He holds up a basket full of cornhusk creations. “It’s a little hobby of mine. May the doll always remind you of this special night.”

“Thank you. I will treasure it always.” I already know the perfect place of honor on my bedroom bookshelf.

He smiles and then turns to hand another homemade item to a little boy.

I make my way to find my family.

After we eat, play a few games, and carve our turnip lanterns, Father O’Malley announces it is time for the ceremonial walk to the bonfire. Once all the little candles are lit, we follow the elderly Irish priest in a single file out the door toward the cemetery.

The flickering lights of the candles against the darkening night sky are so pretty as we weave through the cemetery. I can’t help but think of all the people buried here who are now up in heaven, thankful for the prayers we’ve offered up this evening. Our parade ends at a large bonfire. We toss our turnips into the dancing flames.

Someone starts singing “Amazing Grace,” and every voice joins in. Harry grins at me, and I stifle a giggle,

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remembering the time he convinced me the song was written about me. My gaze drops to the cornhusk cross he is holding, another of Father O'Malley's creations. I pat my pocket for my cornhusk doll, but my pocket is empty.

Oh, no! It's missing! I must have dropped it during our walk through the cemetery.

I lean toward Harry and tell him I'll be back in a few minutes, then I retrace my steps. The sky continues to darken, and the further I get from the fire, the harder it is to see, but the cream-colored doll on the dark stone path should be easy to spot. While most people are gathered around the fire, I'm not alone in the cemetery; a few folks continue their walk through the graveyard, looking at the various headstones.

I'm concentrating so much on the task at hand that I don't notice the person sitting on a bench next to the path until he speaks. I let out another little shriek, this one sounding a bit like a wounded animal.

“I’m sorry,” says a deep voice. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

I look at the person sitting on the bench. He’s holding one of the turnip candles, which makes shadows dance across his face. In the dim light, it’s hard to tell how old he is, but it would be safe to say he’s somewhere between Harry’s and Daddy’s ages. Of course, that doesn’t narrow it down much.

“Are you going to join the bonfire?” I ask.

He turns to look at the glowing fire, which highlights the side of his face. That’s when I notice all the freckles that color his cheeks.

“I’m not sure,” he replies. “I hoped to talk to Father O’Malley, but he seems pretty busy.”

I nod. “Yeah, it’s a pretty big night for him. Maybe he’ll have more time tomorrow.”

The corners of his mouth pull his expression into a frown.

“My family is staying at the rectory tonight. I could give him a message if you’d like,” I offer.

“I’d appreciate that. You can tell him that Finley will return to work soon. And, if it’s not too much to ask, my family needs help, but they are too proud to ask.”

In my mind, I repeat the message so that I won’t forget. “Got it.”

“Are you looking for something?” he asks.

“Yeah. I lost a little cornhusk doll that Father O’Malley made for me.”

“Well, since I’m unable to talk with him, I’ll help you look.” He pushes off the bench, and soon his long, lanky body is towering over me. His clothes are worn and tattered. He wasn’t kidding about his family’s need.

“Thanks. By the way, I’m Grace.”

He smiles. “I’m Bobby.”

We follow the path all the way back to the church without finding the doll. Disappointment wells inside me.

“Oh, well. Thanks for helping me look. Maybe someone saw it and picked it up.”

Bobby’s head tilts to the side. “You said it was made of cornhusk?”

I nod.

“Maybe a critter picked it up. The squirrels here are notorious for gathering all kinds of things.”

“Just like my brother.” I look up, picturing my delicate treasure up in the branches of one of the trees.

“And I know where they like to store all their treasures.” He turns and starts walking back the way we came.

I scurry after him. His long legs make it challenging to keep up. “I guess it’s worth a look.”

When the path splits in two, he takes the path that veers away from the bonfire and heads toward the shadowy Dupree crypt. Before we make it there, Bobby stops at a short rock wall.

He moves his candle along the top of the wall, and I see the structure used to be taller, but collapsed at some point, leaving behind a mound of stones. “If you’re brave enough to search, you’ll find all kinds of treasures there.”

It does look like a good hiding spot—for raccoons. Maybe Harry can help me look tomorrow. I turn to tell him thanks but no thanks, when something catches my eye. My doll is on the ground next to the decaying wall.

“Hey, look!” I bend to pick it up. I brush a bit of dirt off it, then turn to my companion. “Thanks!”

“Just returning the favor for relaying my message to Father O’Malley.”

“I promise I won’t forget. But I’d better get back to my family. It was nice to meet you.”

He nods, then turns and slowly walks away. I watch him for a moment, then skip back to the bonfire before my parents start to worry about me.

The next day, I'm sitting next to Mama on the side porch as she captures the majestic church and picturesque cemetery on her canvas. I'm writing all about yesterday's adventures before I forget.

The peaceful quiet is interrupted when Father O'Malley, Daddy, and Harry return from their walk around the property.

Mama sets down her paintbrush when they join us. "How was your walk?"

"It was great!" Harry exclaims as he plops down next to me on the wicker bench. "I found a super cool rock, a rusty toy car, and part of a gold chain." He pulls his treasures from his pockets and lays them on the table for us to admire. Among the items he's collected over the last two days is the cornhusk cross from Father O'Malley.

"Oh! Father O'Malley, I nearly forgot," I say. "Last night, someone asked me to give you a message." I scrunch

my face trying to remember Bobby's exact words. "He told me his family needed assistance."

Father O'Malley smiles. "Well, we certainly can try to help with that. But I may need a little more information to go on. There are a lot of people in our community that are in need."

"He said his name was Bobby."

Father O'Malley's brow furrows. "Hmm. . . not much to go on. Hopefully he will come by again."

"He also wanted to let you know that Finley will be returning to work soon," I say.

All color seems to drain from Father O'Malley's face and he sinks into one of the chairs. "Someone told you that last night?"

"What's wrong?" Daddy's concerned face turns toward the elderly priest.

"Finley is our groundskeeper. The police wanted to keep his condition quiet so as not to alarm the town. I told

you about him, but no one else beside the police and Mary knew his identity, not even the hospital staff. He was admitted as a John Doe. He wasn't expected to live, but right before we left for our walk, the detective called to tell me Finley opened his eyes this morning. A true miracle."

All eyes turn to me.

"Grace." Daddy's eyes narrow. "Who did you speak to?"

I picture Bobby and his shabby clothes. "I don't know. He was just a guy helping me search for the cornhusk doll I dropped."

Father O'Malley's eyes widen. "There is one other person who would know Finley was hurt. The one who injured him."

I lean back, stunned. *Bobby? Could Bobby be the grave robber? He seemed so nice.*

"Grace, do you remember what the man looked like?" Mama asks in a whisper.

## Grace and the Grave Robber

I look down at the table, trying to concentrate on Bobby's features when I'm suddenly staring right at his face. I reach into the pile of items from Harry's pocket and pull out a faded photograph of a young man with a face full of freckles. "This is him." I look up at Harry. "Where'd you find a picture of Bobby?"

Harry's eyes narrow. "I didn't find it. Yesterday, that woman gave me this photo along with her brother's name. That is a picture of her brother that died, RJ."

I turn the photo over and read the handwritten words scrawled across the back. "Thank you for praying for my deceased brother, Robert James—Bobby."

## Present Day

"*What?*" Austin yells, interrupting the story. "You were talking to a ghost?"

Grandma raises her shoulders in a slight shrug. “I like to think that maybe it was poor Bobby’s guardian angel helping him make things right.”

“Whoa!”

Grandma smiles and leans back in her chair. “We found out later that Bobby had lost his job and was so worried about making ends meet that he decided to steal the valuables from the vault and sell them. When the groundskeeper, Mr. Finley, surprised him, he threw one of the items at the elderly man, which caused him to lose his balance and fall, hitting his head on the stone.

“Bobby was scared that he’d killed the man, so he ran off with some of the treasure. He was afraid to try and sell the items, so he hid them. Eventually, the guilt got to him, and he told his sister. She convinced him to take the valuables back to the church. Before he had a chance, he died.”

“Oh, geez,” Austin says. “That’s so sad. Did they ever find the rest of the valuables?”

Grandma grins. “As a matter of fact, they did. I remembered the hiding spot Bobby had shown me. And what do you know? The missing items were hidden in that pile of rubble.”

“What happened to Bobby’s sister?”

“Father O’Malley asked her to work at the church, helping Mary.”

Austin leans back in his chair. “Do you think all that was uncovered because you and Harry prayed for his soul?”

“Possibly. It certainly didn’t hurt. But ever since then, Halloween has held a different meaning for me. I realized how important it is to pray for those who have died because they can no longer pray for themselves.”

“Man, that’s an amazing story. I can’t wait to tell my youth group about it.”

“Does that mean you’ll be spending Halloween at church?”

Austin nods, his shaggy hair sliding over his eyes. “Souling was one of the activities listed on the flyer. I didn’t know what it was. But that sounds way cooler than some dumb movie marathon. Who knows who we might be able to help?”

Grandma smiles as she reaches for another brownie. “Indeed. God works wonders through our prayers.” She glances at the package Austin had brought with him. “You know, that’s exactly what the book your mom sent is about, the miraculous power of prayers.” She looks at her youngest grandson. “Perhaps you’d like to borrow it when I’m finished?”

Austin grins. “Yeah, I’d like that. That actually sounds really cool.”

## Grace and the Grave Robber

The characters in this story are featured in the short story *Grace Among Gangsters* in the CTB anthology, *Treasures: Visible & Invisible*. You can also look for them in an upcoming teen novel, *A Summer to Treasure*, by the author.