



## THE MYSTERY OF THE MARDI GRAS MASK

By: The Reluctant Monkey

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## Chapter One: "We're going to New Orleans!"

"Hurry up, Trixie," fourteen-year-old Honey Wheeler commanded, with a rare display of impatience with her best friend. "I'm sure all the other Bob-Whites are up at the house by now!"

"Gleeps, Honey!" Trixie Belden replied, puffing along behind her. "You know whatever your Mom's big announcement is, she won't make it until we're there, or at least until you're there, anyway!"

Honey shrugged one shoulder. "Probably. But maybe they'll drag it out of her anyway. Jim can be awfully persuasive when he wants to be."

"True. But he'd never do that to you. He's too nice. Unlike my goony brothers."

Honey couldn't help but grin. "Trixie, you always say things like that, even though you know your brothers are all wonderful."

"Hmphh! Brian is okay. But then there's Drive Me Crazy Mart and Try My Patience Bobby."

"Uh, oh, what have they done now?" Honey asked.

"Well, just this morning, Mart got me up at six-thirty! On a Saturday! All because he wanted waffles for breakfast and he couldn't remember where Moms keeps the waffle iron! And then there's Bobby. You remember how he made me coordinate all his clothes for him, shirts and pants and socks together, so he wouldn't get confused? Well, he pulled them all out of his drawers again because he couldn't find his lucky rock! Ugh!"

While Honey sympathized with her friend, she also felt a small pang of jealousy. As much work as six-year-old Bobby Belden could be, Honey sometimes wished she had a younger brother or sister to care for, too. Still, at least she wasn't a lonely only child anymore! Just the year before, the Wheelers had removed Honey from a dreadful boarding school, purchased the Manor House and surrounding preserve, and given her the real home she had craved. The luxurious estate was just up the hill from Crabapple Farm, the Beldens' more modest homestead, and soon after moving in, Honey met Trixie and found herself, for the first time ever, with a true best friend. Shortly after, the Wheelers adopted runaway Jim Frayne, and Honey had never been happier, finally having a brother of her own. When Honey and Jim, along Trixie and her two older brothers Brian and Mart, then decided to form a semi-secret club, the Bob-Whites of the Glen, Honey was sure every dream she had ever had had come true. It wasn't much later that the Bob-Whites added two more members, Diana Lynch, another nearby neighbor, and Dan Mangan, nephew of Bill Regan, the Wheeler's hard working groom. The purpose of the club, to have fun and help others, was very dear to Honey's heart, as was the club itself and its members as well. Not a day went by that she didn't pause to reflect on how lucky she was!

Now the two girls hurried up the trail toward Honey's home, weaving around small patches of melting snow. After spending most of the morning helping Trixie's mother prepare food baskets to be dropped at the town shelter, they had been released from duty just in time to be summoned by Honey's parents for "important news."

"Maybe Mother and Daddy found a place to hold our food drive," Honey speculated. "I know Mother mentioned she thought some lady from her hair salon owns a warehouse north of here."

The girls, along with the rest of the Bob-Whites, were working hard to organize a day where anyone could donate canned goods and other non-perishable items to be given out to local families. The winter had been especially cold and long, and while spring seemed to finally be making an appearance, the Bob-Whites knew there were many people who needed help.

Trixie waved one gloved hand dismissively. "Pooh. If that was all, I'm sure Miss Trask would have told us on the phone. This is something more. Something that requires immediate attention, and something so big your mom felt the news should be delivered in person. Something like that must be, well, just enormous, and momentous, and- "

Honey glanced at her friend, a decided sparkle in her eye. "And maybe even... mysterious?"

"Exactly!" Trixie exclaimed, before she realized she was being teased. She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue, sending both girls into a fit of giggles. It was no secret that Trixie loved anything connected to a mystery. In fact, someday she planned, along with Honey, to officially open the doors of the Belden-Wheeler Detective Agency. In the meantime, the girls had quite an impressive history of solving puzzles and crimes that had often left the professionals stumped, all while operating at the "amateur" level. They worked well together; Trixie's stubborn impulsiveness and daring leaps into the unknown were well-tempered by Honey's more quiet and thoughtful approach to a situation. Still, when Trixie's curiosity and imagination took flight, Honey wasn't always able to resist the urge to poke gentle fun at her friend. In truth, she was just as eager as Trixie to find out what her mother had to say, though she wasn't as certain it would be quite as stupendous as Trixie seemed to think.

When they arrived at the Manor House, they stopped only long enough to remove their snow gear, then rushed down the wide foyer to the den, where, they had been informed, the others were waiting. They found all eyes upon them as they burst through the door and stumbled to a stop.

"At last our dilatory siblings have the impudicity to join the more punctilious members of our renowned circle."

Trixie glared at her brother. "Isn't it funny how I don't even have to identify your voice to know you're speaking? Now do you suppose it's the vocabulary or the smirk that's so easy to peg?"

Mart Belden opened his mouth to fire off a retort, but whatever he had intended to say was lost as Honey quickly jumped in. "Oh, don't be mad at us, Mart! We finished ten food baskets for your Mom. Now she won't have to work on them all afternoon!"

Mart had the grace to look chagrined. "Sorry," he mumbled.

Trixie's momentary anger faded. While she and Mart, her "almost twin" only eleven months her senior, fought with the typical rivalry associated with brothers and sisters close in age, they were also enough alike to understand one another's feelings. Trixie knew Mart's caustic comment was nothing more than his anxious anticipation to discover why Mrs. Wheeler had assembled them all together.

"Well, now that we've taken care of our usual meeting opener, shall we get down to business?" seventeen-year-old Brian Belden suggested dryly, very accustomed to observing the bickering.

Trixie flushed guiltily, suddenly thankful Honey had interceded before another one of the infamous Mart-Trixie wars had fully broken out. Resolving yet again to quit losing her temper, especially where Mart was concerned, she perched on the arm of the sofa and looked expectantly toward Honey's mother.

Mrs. Wheeler smiled warmly at the Bob-Whites. Unperturbed by her daughter's lateness or the small scene with her friends, she had merely waited until they were all seated and ready to listen. "Well, rather than drag this out any further, I'll come right to the point. How would you all like to spend Spring Break in New Orleans?"

The room erupted with many excited voices. Honey leaned closer to her mother. "New Orleans? Really?"

Mrs. Wheeler held her hand up and waited for the Bob-Whites to settle down again. "A very dear friend of mine from college, Angelique de Villemont, has invited you all to spend the week with her. She has an old house just outside of town with plenty of room."

Trixie looked down, biting her lip. "It sounds wonderful," she said, unable to keep a forlorn note from her voice. "But I don't know if Moms and Dad would let us go. We're always traveling at your expense."

Mrs. Wheeler nodded. "I know, dear, but I think we can talk your parents around. After all, I know my own children won't enjoy the trip much at all if you don't go along. And

Angelique is actually looking forward to meeting you. I've told her about many of your exciting adventures."

Trixie sent Brian a hopeful look. He grinned affectionately at his sister. "It couldn't hurt to ask," he said.

"I'm going to go call my mother right now," Diana announced, hurrying from the room. "I think she'll agree. She usually does."

"Brian, will you ask Moms? Please?" Trixie begged. "If she says 'yes' to anyone, it'll be you."

"Why don't I call for you?" Mrs. Wheeler suggested gently. "Then I can answer any questions your mother may have."

Trixie beamed at her. "Would you? Oh, you're the best!"

Laughing, Mrs. Wheeler rose from her seat. "Thank you! Oh, and Dan, don't even think about saying 'no.' Regan and Mr. Maypenny can manage one week without you. You've worked very hard, and you've earned a vacation."

Dan Mangan flushed slightly and nodded his head. The newest member of the Bob-Whites, he'd been brought to Sleepyside by his Uncle Regan after falling into trouble with a New York City gang.

Orphaned and lonely, Dan had faced some problems at first adjusting to his new life. But those troubles hadn't lasted long, and now he was a quiet but valuable member of the small club. He lived in the middle of the vast Wheeler game preserve along with Mr. Maypenny, the gamekeeper, and spent much of his time helping with patrolling the woods, maintaining the feed stations, and keeping the many paths and trails cleared of debris.

Mrs. Wheeler is right, Trixie reflected silently. He *had* been working very hard. If any of the Bob-Whites deserved some fun time, it was Dan.

As if sensing her eyes on him, Dan glanced at Trixie and offered her a brief grin. Trixie smiled back. Oh, Moms just has to say 'yes,' she thought. For once maybe all of the Bob-Whites could go on a trip together!

Di bounded back into the room, her pretty face glowing. "It's all set for me!" she cried happily. "In fact, Mom was thrilled. She says now she and Daddy can take the twins to do little kid things without worrying about me getting bored!"

Diana's family, almost as wealthy as the Wheelers, lived in a grand home just a little bit further down the road from the Manor House. They had moved in not very long before, after Mr. Lynch made a surprising overnight fortune, taking his family from a cramped apartment in town to a spacious estate nestled among the trees. The Lynches were a large, energetic family with not one, but two sets of young twins. Di, as eldest, often helped baby-sit her younger siblings, and though she loved them dearly, she looked forward to time away from her rambunctious brothers and sisters.

"That just leaves us, then," Trixie said. "Cross your fingers."

Mrs. Wheeler laughed lightly. "I'll go call your mother right now, Trixie. And don't worry. I'm sure she'll agree. I won't let her off the phone until she does!"

As soon as Honey's mother left the room, Trixie shot to her feet. "Oh, do you think so? Do you think we'll really be spending Spring Break in New Orleans?"

"I think you could probably consider it a done deal," Jim said, his green eyes twinkling merrily. "Mother never takes 'no' for an answer."

"Gleeps!" Trixie exclaimed. "New Orleans! Imagine!"

"I am imagining," Mart informed her loftily. "Unbeatable cuisine. Gumbos and jambalayas. Crawfish Etouffee and crisp beignets! And, let us not disremember the dish that made that charming metropolis renowned the world over - red beans and rice!"

The other Bob-Whites burst into laughter. Mart's fondness for large words was surpassed only by his great love of food.

Less than ten minutes later, Mrs. Wheeler was back, her wide smile letting the Beldens know the answer before she even spoke.

"Yippeee!" Trixie shouted, unable to control her excitement. "We're going to New

Orleans!" Then a thought occurred to her, causing her shoulders to slump.

"What is it, Trix?" Honey asked, alarmed by her friend's sudden change in mood.

"Oh, whoa," Trixie moaned, dropping down on an ottoman. "How on earth am I supposed to make it through the next two weeks of school?"

## Chapter Two: Rosehill Plantation

"Jeepers!" Honey exclaimed, pushing her bangs back from her forehead. "It's just as hot as Mrs. de Villemont warned."

"It sure is," Diana agreed. "My hair is going to look a fright!" The prettiest of the three girls, with long blue-black hair and remarkable violet eyes, Di was more conscious of her looks than her friends. Frowning, she fanned herself with one hand and looked around. "Do you see our ride yet?"

The Bob-Whites stood together by the curb just outside the baggage claim area of the New Orleans International Airport. A small cluster of suitcases and garment bags was piled at their feet.

"Mrs. de Villemont said she'd be sending a white van for us," Jim said, leaning out slightly to see over the heads of the others. "Say, look at all these cars! Maybe our driver is waiting in line somewhere way back there."

"Well, I'm just dying of thirst," Trixie declared. "Since it looks like we have a few minutes, I'm going to go back in and buy a soda. Does anyone else want anything?"

"I could use something," Brian admitted. "It's been awhile since we had our refreshments on the plane. Why don't you girls go find something for all of us? We'll stay here and watch the luggage, and if our ride shows up soon, we can load the van while we wait for you to get back."

Trixie flashed her always practical big brother a warm smile. "I don't even mind playing errand girl, since it will get me out of this heat for awhile," she told him.

Inside, the airport was almost as crowded as it was outside. Travelers rushed to and fro, hurrying to meet their planes or collect their baggage. Honey, Trixie, and Di strolled quickly to a set of escalators and rode the moving staircase up to the main floor of the large building.

"If I remember right, I think we came from that direction," Honey said, pointing to her right. "And I know we passed a little snack stand."

"Are you sure?" Trixie asked, her brow furrowed. "I thought we came from that direction." She waved her hand to the left.

The two girls stared at one another for a moment before dissolving into giggles. Di laughed with them, too, shaking her head in mock exasperation. "You two could get lost in a paper bag! Honey's right this time, Trix. This way. See? There's that cute little gift shop we passed. Boy, you'd think we hadn't been here in years and it's been only about half an hour!"

"We'd better not dawdle," Honey warned. "If the van has arrived, we don't want to make our driver wait too long, and besides, the boys are probably melting out there."

They bought eight colas at the small stand, Honey reminding Trixie to purchase one for the driver, grabbed a few napkins and straws, and hurried back toward the baggage claim area.

"Oh!" Trixie exclaimed. "Look at that poster! The Mardi Gras Museum. Maybe we'll have time to visit it. I know Mart was disappointed that we missed the Mardi Gras celebrations by a few weeks."

"You *should* take time to visit it, ma chere."

Startled, Trixie turned at the sound of the voice. An older gentleman with a friendly smile nodded to her. Dressed in a white suit and light blue shirt, Trixie thought he looked cool and comfortable. "The Mardi Gras Museum, it is small, but it is well worth the time, especially for the non-locals such as yourself."

Trixie grinned at him. "Do you live here in New Orleans?" she asked politely.

"Ah, no, but nearby. I am here to fetch my daughter and her children. They are coming for a visit. I live out off old River Road."

"River Road!" Honey exclaimed. "That's where we're going to stay. Have you ever heard of Rosehill Plantation?"

The man's eyes widened considerably. "Of course! Rosehill Plantation is a very old, well-known home. It has belonged to the same family since before the Civil War."

Honey nodded. "Yes. We are guests of Mrs. Angelique de Villemont. She and my mother are dear friends."

The gentleman regarded them soberly for a moment. "I hope you do enjoy your visit, mes enfants. I hope the ghost of Andre du Pree does not disturb you!"

"Ghost!" all three girls exclaimed at once; Trixie with amazement, Honey with notable disbelief, and Di with a touch of fear.

The stranger sighed elaborately. "Yes. It is a sad tale, but one I am afraid I do not have time to share with you. I am sure you will learn all about it very soon, in any case. Do not be afraid, ma petite," he added, looking directly at Diana. "Andre du Pree's spirit is known to make a nuisance of himself, but he has not hurt anyone that I have ever heard."

"Well!" Honey exclaimed as the man rushed off. "How... provoking!"

Di glanced about her and shivered. "Do you really think that the Rosehill Plantation is haunted?"

"Oh, probably not," Trixie said reassuringly, seeing her friend's distress. "You know how it is with really old houses. There's always some kind of legend about them. Why, I'll bet in another hundred years, people will be saying the Manor House has its own resident spook."

Honey sent Trixie an approving look as she chuckled at her joke. She knew very well that Trixie's mind was racing and she was probably about to burst with excitement. She was proud of her best friend for at least momentarily setting that aside for Di's sake. "We'd better really hurry now! I think the ice is all about melted in these drinks."

The girls quickly made their way back out of the airport where they found the boys standing near a large, white van.

"What happened to you three?" Jim demanded. "We were about to send a search and rescue party!"

"I presume the distaff portion of our distinguished association was delayed by the customary predicament," Mart said smugly. "They were lost."

Trixie's china blue eyes narrowed. She handed Dan one of the three drinks she was carrying, then passed the others to Jim and Brian. "We were not lost! It just so happens we-

"Stopped for a moment to read an advertisement about the Mardi Gras Museum," Honey cut in quickly, hoping to avoid further distressing Diana with more talk of ghosts. "It looks like it would be a great place to visit!"

"But then we ran into this creepy man," Di added, bringing up the subject herself.

"A creepy man?" Brian echoed, frowning. "What do you mean? Was someone hassling you?"

"No! No, he wasn't bothering us at all," Trixie replied hastily.

"Speak for yourself, Trixie," Di said quietly. "He gave me the willies! All that talk about a ghost!"

There was a moment's pause, then Brian looked over at Jim. "You win. I owe you five dollars. They've found a mystery and we haven't even left the airport."

"It's probably nothing," Trixie demurred, not quite meeting anyone's eyes. "Just some story about Rosehill Plantation being haunted."

"That's what they say," a tall, skinny man said, speaking for the first time.

All seven Bob-Whites turned their attention to him.

"This is Henry," Jim explained to the girls. "He works for Mrs. de Villemont. Henry, this is my sister, Honey Wheeler, and this is Diana Lynch, and Trixie Belden."

"We've brought you a soda, Henry," Honey said, holding out the paper cup.

"That's very nice of you, miss. Now, if you'll climb in the van we'll be off. It's about an hour's drive to Rosehill, and I can tell you about the ghost on the way."

It took only moments for the Bob-Whites to find their seats and buckle themselves

in. Henry expertly drove the van through the traffic and a few minutes later they were on a freeway heading away from the city.

"Why, we're driving over swamps already!" Honey exclaimed, looking out the window.

Henry chuckled. "These are more waterways than swamps, miss. When we turn off at River Road, you'll get a better glimpse of the famous bayous."

"Tell us more about the ghost, Henry," Trixie pleaded, sending Di an apologetic look.

Henry nodded. "It's an unhappy story," he cautioned. "Rosehill Plantation is supposed to be haunted by the ghost of Andre du Pree. Once upon a time he was a suitor for one of the de Villemont daughters, Claire, but old Jacques de Villemont wouldn't hear of it. The du Pree family was well respected but had fallen on hard times, and Jacques considered Andre nothing more than a fortune hunter. He sent the boy off without even considering his proposal. Andre set himself to the task of making his own riches, planning to return at a later date and claim his bride."

"What happened?" Di asked, unable to resist the romantic tale despite her earlier apprehension.

Henry shrugged. "Andre eventually did return a wealthy man. Though it was never confirmed, many said he made his fortune working with the pirates who sailed the Louisiana coast at that time. In any case, he arrived one night and asked Jacques for Claire's hand. Despite his new-found wealth, Jacques turned him away again, this time because he'd already arranged a marriage between his daughter and the son of a prominent Creole family in town. Andre was furious. He shouted some angry threats, so Jacques ordered him from the plantation. But late that night, Andre stole back into the house, hoping to convince Claire to elope with him. One of the servants heard him. He chased Andre through the main hall and out the front door. Andre leapt on the back of his horse and raced off into the night, but Jacques sent his servants to follow him. They pursued the unfortunate suitor all the way deep into the bayou, but eventually they lost him. Tragically, Andre was lost himself. He was never seen alive again."

Di gasped, covering her mouth with one hand.

"How sad," Honey remarked softly.

Henry nodded. "A very sad story."

"But how does the ghost come in to it?" Trixie wanted to know.

"Well, now. Some people claim they've seen Andre's ghost wandering the plantation grounds and calling for his love."

"Have you seen him?" Trixie asked, eyes rounding.

"Not once. And I've worked for the de Villemont family for almost twenty years." Henry suddenly smiled, dispelling the gloomy mood. "It's just a story folks like to tell. People take great interest in that sort of thing, but mark my words. It's nothing more than a fable."

Not long later, Henry guided the van off the freeway and onto an older highway that was in need of repaving. The Bob-Whites marveled at the majestic oaks that ran along both sides of the road, ancient trees dripping with layers of Spanish moss. Late afternoon sun broke through the branches to cast shadowy patterns on the ground below. A lone heron lifted in flight, its long white wings flapping in slow, graceful motion.

Soon, they made another turn. "Highway 48," Honey murmured, reading the small sign. "When will we reach River Road, Henry?"

Henry lifted one hand from the steering wheel. "This is the River Road. Highway 48 is its official name, but no one ever actually calls it that."

"We have roads like that back home," Trixie said. "The state sticks them with some boring number, but the people who live near them call them by the same names they've always known."

"I think that's the way it is all over," Henry remarked. "Who would want to say they live on Highway 48, when River Road has such history and meaning?"

For awhile the Bob-Whites fell silent, each watching the passing scenery, so different from home, with an appreciative eye.

"We're almost there, kids," Henry announced cheerfully, about fifteen minutes later. "And we've made good time. You should have plenty of time to settle in before dinner. I believe there's quite a feast planned in your honor."

"That's good," Dan said, grinning. "If I have to hear one more of Mart's raves about Louisiana food, I may just get back on a plane and go home."

Mart lifted his chin to look down his nose at his friend. "Once you get your inaugural taste of our evening's repast, you will most certainly be lavishing commensurate praise upon the native sustenance."

Henry glanced over his shoulder. "Does he always talk like that?"

"Mart swallowed a dictionary when he was a baby," Trixie replied tartly. "This is the terrible consequence."

Everyone laughed. For a moment, Mart looked angry, but then he relented and smiled good-naturedly.

Trixie winked at him to let him know she'd only been teasing. While they fought often, the truth was there was a very deep affection between the two, and neither one truly ever wished to hurt the other.

The first sight of Rosehill Plantation brought loud exclamations from the Bob-Whites.

"It's darling!" Honey declared.

"Like something out of *Gone with the Wind*," Di proclaimed dreamily.

"It certainly looks just like you'd expect a southern plantation to look," Brian agreed.

Rosehill Plantation sat at the end of a long, tree-lined drive. Tall, graceful columns ran the length of the house, fronting a wide porch and second story balcony. Black iron railings framed wide stone steps leading up to the massive double doors that served as the main entryway into the grand old home.

As Henry pulled the van up close, the doors were opened and a slender, lovely, dark-haired woman came out to meet them. Her welcoming smile turned into a delighted gasp as soon as Honey clambered from the van. "Why, if you don't look just like your mother did the day I met her!"

Honey flushed slightly. "People say I resemble her."

"You're a carbon copy, my dear! But come, come all of you. Let's go inside and introductions can be made there."

Mrs. de Villemont turned back toward the house after slipping her arm through Honey's.

"I like her," Di whispered to Trixie as the boys went to the back of the van to help Henry unload the luggage. "She's very beautiful and she seems very nice."

Trixie giggled. "Any woman who would be willing invite all seven of us to stay in her home for an entire week *must* be nice."

Suddenly there was a shout from somewhere behind the house. Startled, Di and Trixie froze just as they stepped onto the wide porch.

Henry quickly set down the bag he'd pulled from the van and hurried away, followed by first Mart, then Jim, Brian, and Dan.

"Di, go inside and tell Mrs. de Villemont there might be a problem out back," Trixie said quickly. "I'm going after the boys." She bounded down the steps and raced away, before Di could think of anything to say in reply. Di hesitated only a moment before rushing into the house, calling urgently to their hostess.

Trixie found the others gathered near the open door of a large garage. Henry and another man were inspecting a late-model luxury sedan parked inside.

"What's happened?" Trixie asked curiously, looking to her brothers for an answer.

"We're not sure," Brian replied in a low voice. "But it looks like someone might have vandalized that car. See? There's a dent and a long scratch in the paint. Not only that, but look there, on the side wall. From what I understand that hole wasn't there earlier today."

"Oh, no! Why would someone want to do a thing like that?"

"I don't know," Brian murmured. He frowned worriedly. "And I don't like it. As soon as Henry saw the damage, he threw up his hands and said, 'Not again!'"

Trixie blinked in surprise. Not again? So maybe someone had vandalized the car or the garage before, she thought pensively, or maybe both! She shook her head. A ghost and a vandal. Could they be one and the same? They hadn't been in Louisiana for more than an afternoon and already she was faced with a zinger of a mystery. She couldn't wait to get Honey alone so they could discuss it. Trixie had a suspicion that their vacation in New Orleans would prove to be one exciting adventure!

### Chapter 3: The Old Mask

"Henry!" Angelique de Villemont called, hurrying up with Honey and Di directly behind her. "What is it now?"

Frowning, Henry stepped back so his boss could see.

A startled gasp escaped her lips. "But when could this have happened?"

"Sometime while I was out picking up the kids," Henry guessed. "I washed this car shortly before I left and everything was certainly fine then!"

"How awful," Honey murmured, surveying the damage.

"Well! Henry, you be sure to call Sheriff Donnelly immediately. Certainly he'll want to know. Meanwhile, why don't we all go inside?" Mrs. de Villemont smiled weakly at the Bob-Whites. "There's no reason to let this spoil our evening."

The Bob-Whites consented immediately, not wanting to further upset their hostess. They followed Mrs. de Villemont back around the house. "There's a service entrance by the garage," she explained, "but I think it's always best to enter Rosehill through the front door for the first time."

"It's absolutely gorgeous inside," Di whispered to Trixie as they rounded the corner. "Wait until you see the two staircases!"

The interior of Rosehill Plantation was cool and dark, a welcome relief from the hot, glaring sun. Mahogany wainscoting lined the walls and matched the wood steps and banisters of the two sweeping staircases that rose up in wide curves on either side of the room. Flowering tropical plants stood in colorful pots on both sides of the doorway and a long, low table ran along one wall. A polished silver tray, two thick off-white candles, and a vase of blooming roses topped the table. The Bob-Whites took the time to introduce themselves to their hostess and thank her for her gracious invitation.

Mrs. de Villemont then led them through a pair of glass French doors into a large room that ran the entire length of the ground floor. "This is our ballroom. Entertaining is, of course, a big part of life here in Louisiana. We host two annual costume balls here at Rosehill, plus various other parties."

"A costume ball!" Di exclaimed excitedly. "What fun!"

"Our Mardi Gras ball was held here just two weeks ago. I'm sorry you all missed it." Mrs. de Villemont smiled at Di's crestfallen expression. "But, don't look so sad. I wouldn't bring you all the way here and not give you a true taste of New Orleans hospitality! We're having a special ball here on Saturday night. I've invited young people from the families living nearby and I've made arrangements for you all to borrow costumes from my sister."

"Really?" Honey's hazel eyes sparkled. "A real New Orleans costumed ball?"

Mrs. de Villemont laughed lightly. "Indeed."

"And your sister has costumes for all of us?" Trixie asked, wide-eyed with disbelief. "Does she sew a lot?"

The question brought smiles to the other Bob-Whites' lips. It was well-known to all that Trixie very much disliked anything to do with needles and thread.

"Catherine does sew, but she also collects costumes whenever she finds them at rummage sales, estate sales, or in old antique shops," Mrs. de Villemont explained. "She's also in charge of our family's collection of costumes. It's grown quite large through the years. I believe at last count we had over a hundred! And Catherine's maid, Julie, is quite the seamstress, so she can make any alterations we need. We'll be visiting Catherine the day after tomorrow, and that will give me a chance to show off the home I grew up in. I'm a de Villemont by marriage, but an Allen by birth. Five Oaks is just up the road a bit."

"Oh, I can't wait! I hope I can dress as a Southern Belle," Di cried, then blushed at her outburst.

"We have many gowns you can choose from, my dear," Mrs. de Villemont assured her. "And with your coloring, you'll look just like a nineteenth century Creole lady."

"What is a Creole, exactly," Brian asked politely. "I've heard the term many times, but I'm not sure I understand the difference between it and 'Cajun'."

"It can be confusing. Especially nowadays when people do tend to use the words interchangeably. Essentially, the Creoles are people of French and Spanish descent who settled here in Louisiana. When they first came, they built beautiful homes and cathedrals and maintained quite an expensive, aristocratic lifestyle, with parties and galas and balls. The Cajuns are the descendants of the Acadians who settled here after being forced out of Canada. They're a hearty, hardworking folk who live along the bayous and waterways. They always stayed away from the glitter and pomp of their Creole neighbors. Of course, now most people simply consider themselves Louisianan, and we all celebrate the varied history of our state. The only time that we really refer to something as Creole or Cajun anymore is when we're talking about food."

At the mention of food, Mart's eyes lit up. "Ah, yes, the sumptuous, culinary delicacies of this most epicurean of states. Gumbo and blackened redfish and--"

"Good grief. There he goes again," Dan muttered. "Somebody feed him."

Mart shot his friend an affronted look. "I'm telling you, as soon as you taste the food here, you'll be just as enthusiastic as I am!"

Mrs. de Villemont laughed. "Never fear; we'll make sure you get a chance to sample every dish we're famous for, Mart. And for New Orleans, that's saying something! Cook has been hard at work for most of the day preparing tonight's feast, and we're planning a crawfish boil for Wednesday night."

Mart patted his stomach with a grin. "A gastronomic delight of which I am fervently anticipating."

"Mrs. de Villemont? Who is that lovely lady in that portrait?" Honey asked, indicating to a painting hanging above the massive fireplace at the far end of the ballroom.

"That, my dear, is Claire de Villemont. She was Claire Gateau after her marriage to a local Creole gentleman."

"Is she the Claire de Villemont that Andre du Pree wanted to marry?" Trixie asked, studying the portrait.

Mrs. de Villemont smiled. "I see Henry has been telling you about the de Villemont family history, hmmm? Yes, that is the very lady who won the unfortunate Monsieur du Pree's heart." She crossed the room with the Bob-Whites following. "She was a great beauty, but she was also known for her kindness. She was one of the few women of her generation to speak out against the evils of slavery."

"That must not have gone over very well," Jim commented. "Not way back then. I don't guess that gained her many friends."

"None at all. In fact, the stories say her husband was so furious with her he kept her locked up in a small room in his townhome for many months. She was only released upon his death from cholera."

"Oh! The poor thing!" Honey exclaimed sympathetically. "How dreadful."

"What's that she's holding?" Di asked. "It looks like some kind of mask."

"This painting was done in honor of Claire's nineteenth birthday. It was just weeks before her marriage to Monsieur Gateau, and she's holding the mask she became famous for," Mrs. de Villemont said. "She always wore the same mask to every ball she held or attended. It was considered quite a curiosity."

"Wasn't the point of costumed balls to be anonymous?" Brian asked. "If she always wore the same mask, wouldn't everyone identify her immediately?"

"Therein lies the curiousness of her choice. To the best of my knowledge, she never explained her actions, and it simply became another part of the legend of Claire de Villemont."

"I think I would've liked to have met her," Trixie said quietly. "She sounds like a very remarkable person."

Mrs. de Villemont smiled. "I agree, Trixie. And while we unfortunately can't meet her

in person, there is something very special I can show you. About fifty years ago, Claire's great-grandson Robert Gateau gave my father-in-law Claire's famous mask. The mask had been handed down in his family, but because Robert was an only child without any children or heirs, he felt it was only appropriate to return it to us."

"How thoughtful of him!" Honey declared.

"We keep the mask on display right over here," Mrs. de Villemont continued, leading the others to a tall, narrow wooden table. The table's top was glass, and the mask rested on a black velvet cloth beneath.

It was clearly very old. Colorful green, yellow, and purple feathers radiated outward from the center, many of them faded and bent, a few even torn or shredded. The edge of the mask was lined in tarnished gold colored sequins, and thin, fraying ribbons fanned out around it. Despite its worn, fragile look, the mask was still very beautiful and the Bob-Whites spent several moments admiring it.

"May we wear masks to the ball, ma'am?" Di asked pleadingly. "If we could get some time, I'd love to buy one so that I can keep it as a souvenir of this trip."

"But of course you'll be wearing masks!" Mrs. de Villemont declared. "What's a Mardi Gras ball without a mask? Even one being held three weeks late." She chuckled merrily. "But you won't be needing to purchase any. Wait until you see Catherine's collection. And I know my sister well enough to know she'll insist you keep whichever mask you choose. Mardi Gras masks are her true love; she's always making new ones and then bemoaning the fact she doesn't have any room to store them because of all her previous creations."

"Excuse me, Mrs. de Villemont," a maid called quietly. "I beg your pardon for the interruption, but Cook asked if you would like dinner set back?"

"Set back?" Mrs. de Villemont glanced at her watch. "Goodness! Is it that late already? No, please tell Cook we'll be in momentarily." She turned to the Bob-Whites. "Your bags have already been carried to your rooms. If you'd like, I can show you where you'll be sleeping and then you can take a few minutes to wash up before we eat."

In the momentary silence that followed this suggestion, Mart stomach rumbled loudly. "Did someone mention dinner?" he asked innocently as the others burst into laughter.

## Chapter 4: More Vandalism

The Rosehill Plantation dining room was on the ground floor, to the back of the large home. The massive table could comfortably seat up to twenty, and Mrs. de Villemont assured the Bob-Whites that it could be expanded further to hold even more.

"These roses are lovely!" Honey exclaimed as she took her seat.

A large bouquet of soft pink roses in a shiny silver vase sat upon a delicate lace doily in the center of the table. Their sweet scent lightly filled the air, a pleasant but not overpowering aroma.

"They're straight from the garden," Mrs. de Villemont said. "I brought them in not thirty minutes before you arrived."

"Are there lots of roses in your garden?" Trixie asked. "Is that how Rosehill Plantation got its name?"

"Yes, it is. Apparently Noelette de Villemont, the wife of Gervais de Villemont, adored all types of roses. When Gervais built the plantation, he made sure to reserve a large plot of land for his wife's passion. The rose gardens have been carefully cultivated and maintained ever since. Because the gardens are just slightly above the north side of the house and can be seen first by any approaching in that direction, Gervais gave the home its name. I think it's beautiful both as a name and a tribute to his love for his wife."

The swinging door at the far end of the room opened and a young maid in a black dress and white apron pushed a heavy rolling cart through.

"Oh! Our first course has arrived." Mrs. de Villemont beckoned the maid forward. "We're starting tonight with a sausage and shrimp gumbo. I think that should be to your liking, Mart, yes?"

Mart nodded, grinning. "Yes, ma'am."

The maid circled the table, ladling the soupy rice dish into the wide white china bowls at each seat.

"Now, let me caution you," Mrs. de Villemont said as the Bob-Whites lifted their spoons. "I instructed Cook to cut back on the spices, but this may still be stronger than you're accustomed to. She's usually very liberal with the pepper sauce. We like our food hot here in the deep south."

Trixie stared at the murky brown gumbo uncertainly. It didn't look very appetizing. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but a stew the color of dirty dish water hadn't been in her mind at all.

She glanced at Jim. He was watching her with a knowing look. Smiling encouragingly, he dipped his own spoon into his bowl and leaned forward slightly for his first taste.

Taking a deep breath, Trixie followed suit. She cautiously lifted a small bite to her lips. After sipping carefully, she paused to consider the taste. It was definitely spicy! If this was what Cook came up with as the pared down version, the regular recipe must have been like biting into fire! She swallowed her first bite.

It wasn't bad, she reflected after a moment. Not bad at all! The others clearly agreed. They were digging into their gumbos with relish, especially Mart. Trixie had to stifle a giggle. Her brother actually had a trail of gravy on his chin. He didn't even seem to notice.

The dinner continued with Mrs. de Villemont telling the Bob-Whites more stories about the various de Villemont ancestors. The maid returned with course after course, a chunky ham jambalaya, roasted onions and potatoes, fried oysters, and cooked greens.

Trixie noted with amusement how often everyone reached for one of the pitchers of ice water to refill their glasses. She herself had finished two and was on her third by the time dessert was brought in.

The maid set small bowls of plain vanilla ice cream before each diner. She then picked up a silver plate with caramel colored chunks of candy. "Would you like some topping?" she asked Dan.

Dan's eyes widened. "Uh... would I?"

Laughing, Mrs. de Villemont nodded. "Certainly, you must try it. Cook's pralines are famous throughout the state."

Dan nodded. The maid sprinkled a spoonful onto his ice cream, then moved on to Di. All of the Bob-Whites agreed to have the broken bits of the sugary pecan candy scooped onto their desserts.

"Well, Mart," Mrs. de Villemont said finally, as everyone finished eating. "What do you say? Did tonight's meal live up to your expectations?"

"Absolutely! Magnificent! Scrumptious! Delectable! My felicitations to your most esteemed chef!"

"It was very good," Honey agreed. "Do you think your cook would be willing to share some of her recipes?"

"Better than that, I'll make sure each of you girls gets a copy of *River Road Recipes*. It's a local cookbook that every young lady gets upon her marriage."

"Don't worry, Mart," Brian said with a grin. "I'm sure Trixie will promptly hand hers over to Moms, so you'll still be able to enjoy all of this fabulous food."

Trixie tried to muster up an offended look to Brian's comment, but she was too full and happy. It had been a wonderful meal and she felt too in charity with everything and everyone to truly get mad.

The door swung open again and the maid returned. She stopped next to Mrs. de Villemont and whispered something the others could not hear. Mrs. de Villemont frowned for a moment then nodded.

As the maid hurried away, Mrs. de Villemont rose from her seat. "My cousin Cambry is here. I wasn't expecting her to visit tonight so I think it's best I go see what she needs. If you'd like, take some time to wander about and see the house. We didn't really have time earlier for a full tour."

"Goodness," Diana murmured after Mrs. de Villemont left the room. "I'd feel kind of strange, roaming around her home without her."

"Well, it's still pretty light out," Trixie pointed out. "What if we went outside to see the rose gardens?"

"Rose gardens?" Dan echoed doubtfully.

"We don't have to just look at flowers," Trixie assured him. "From what we saw of the grounds earlier, I'm sure there's lots to see."

As the Bob-Whites left the house through the front door, Honey put out a hand to slow Trixie down. "Are you up to what I think you're up to?" she whispered as soon as the others were out of earshot.

"What do you mean?" Trixie asked with exaggerated nonchalance.

"Are you hoping to go look in the garage again?"

Trixie shrugged. "I would like to know what's going on, and why Henry said, 'not again.' And did you see Mrs. de Villemont's face when the maid told her her cousin is here? She didn't look happy at the news."

"Oh, Trixie! What on earth could Mrs. de Villemont's cousin have to do with the damage to the car and garage?"

"I don't know," Trixie admitted. "I just think there's something going on here. Something Mrs. de Villemont hasn't told us."

"And she might not have told us because it might not be any of our business," Honey said quietly. "Trixie, I love a good mystery as much as you do, but we can't go prying into Mrs. de Villemont's affairs just because we think something is going on."

"And what could you two possibly have to discuss so secretly?"

Trixie and Honey jumped guiltily at the question. Jim was watching them with slightly narrowed eyes.

"Nothing!" Trixie said hurriedly.

"Nothing, huh? And here I thought you might be all concerned with the incident in

the garage."

Trixie flushed a faint pink.

"Come on, Trix," Jim said, his tone sympathetic. "Let's go see the famous rose gardens, okay? We have no business checking out the garage, no matter how much you might want to."

Trixie glared at both her friends. "Mrs. de Villemont might be in trouble! She might need our help!"

"Yes," Jim agreed slowly, taking Trixie's hand and tugging her in the direction the other Bob-Whites had followed. "And if she wants it, I'm sure she'll ask for it."

Trixie wanted to argue further, but she realized she had no convincing proof to offer to change Jim or Honey's minds. She allowed Jim to pull her along, her own mind racing with half-formed thoughts and theories.

They found Di and Mart in a corner of the large rose gardens, standing before a tall row of American Beauties.

"My mother loves roses," Di said. "She'd be thrilled to see all this."

"Moms would be in flower heaven, too," Trixie said, glancing around. "Especially if she saw those climbers over there. She's always saying how nice they'd look at Crabapple Farm."

"Where are Brian and Dan?" Honey asked, not seeing either boy anywhere.

Di rolled her violet eyes and puffed out a breath. "Dan wouldn't even set foot through the garden gate so they've gone off to look at some pier or something."

"Well, Trix," Jim said, smiling warmly. "What would you like to see? Roses or the pier?"

Trixie knew it was a peace offering and she decided to accept it as such. "What would you like to do?"

"What do you say we go find Brian and Dan?"

Trixie grinned. "Okay."

"I think I'll stay here," Honey said. "I'd like to see what's through that little gate over there. Doesn't it remind you of *The Secret Garden*?"

Just as Trixie and Jim walked out through the main garden gate, they heard a car door slam and an engine turn over.

"Maybe that's Mrs. de Villemont's cousin," Trixie speculated. "I wonder what her story is."

Jim shook his head and laughed. "Does everyone have to have a story, Trix? Maybe she was just here for a visit."

"Maybe," Trixie agreed doubtfully. "But I just can't stop thinking of Mrs. de Villemont's face tonight. She really didn't look happy to hear her cousin had stopped by."

They walked along a slate stone path that circled the outside of the rose gardens. The sun was setting, dropping closer to the horizon, and casting a reddish glow to the surroundings. Jim suddenly halted, putting a finger to his lips and pointing.

Trixie stood perfectly still. Fifteen feet away, under the shadows of an ancient oak tree draped with gray Spanish moss, a strange looking animal prowled through the underbrush.

"What is that?" Trixie whispered.

"I think it's a nutria."

"A what?"

"A nutria. They're members of the rodent family."

Trixie grimaced. "You mean it's a giant rat?"

Jim nodded. "A relative of the rat, anyway. They can't tolerate extreme cold, so we'll never see one back home."

The nutria lifted its head. Its nose twitched as it sniffed something in the air. Trixie suspected it was picking up their scent. "It's awfully ugly," she said slowly. "Ugh. I'm glad Honey decided not to come with us!"

Jim grinned his agreement. "Let's see if we can get around the little fellow without disrupting his dinner forage."

"Wow," Trixie murmured as they carefully approached. "Look what he did to that tree!"

The old oak had several deep gouges near its exposed roots and the ground around it was freshly disturbed.

Jim's brow furrowed. "That doesn't look like animal damage. It looks to me like someone has been digging."

Trixie's eyes widened into round circles. "A person did this? Maybe the same person who scratched up the car?"

"Maybe," Jim replied evenly. "Or maybe a gardener or someone had reason to be digging over here."

"And cut into the tree like that?" Trixie scoffed. "I think we should report this to Henry right away."

Jim ran a freckled hand through his red hair and sighed. "Yes. I guess we should."

Trixie turned toward the house abruptly and the noise startled the small nutria enough to send it scampering into the cover of some low bushes. "Henry might still be having dinner in the kitchen with the other servants. Why don't we check there first?"

As it turned out, they encountered Henry just as they were approaching the service entrance to the plantation house. Mrs. de Villemont's driver was on his way to the apartment he kept over the plantation garage. Jim explained to him what they'd discovered and led the older man back to damaged oak.

Henry's expression was all Trixie needed to confirm her dark suspicions. More vandalism! Something wasn't right at Rosehill Plantation, and like a bulldog with a bone, Trixie knew she wouldn't be able to let this mystery go until she had some answers.

## Chapter 5: Lumière des Morts

"I'll admit it does sound a little strange, Trix," Honey said as she brushed out her long golden blond hair. "Why would someone be digging around an old tree? Maybe something *is* going on."

It was almost ten o'clock and the girls were readying for bed. Mrs. de Villemont had promised the Bob-Whites an authentic New Orleans breakfast at the world famous Cafe du Monde, but had cautioned them that it meant rising very early. They had agreed then to turn in for the night. It had been many long hours since they'd boarded their flight in the New York that morning!

Dressed in a thick purple robe and matching slippers, Di padded into the room Honey and Trixie shared. "The bathroom is free now," she announced. "And as far as digging goes, you know Mart was telling me about the pirate Jean Lafitte tonight. Did you know his treasure was never found? People are still looking for it to this day!"

Trixie rose from her perch on the end of one of the two twin beds and crossed to the large window that looked out over the back of the Rosehill Plantation grounds. "I don't think anyone would be looking for Jean Lafitte's missing gold here, but what about Andre du Pree?"

"What about Andre du Pree?" Honey asked.

"Well, remember what Henry said? Andre disappeared for a few years to build his wealth and he came back with a fortune rumored to be ill-gotten pirate loot."

Honey's hazel eyes twinkled in merriment. "Oh, Trix! He didn't put it quite like that. He just said some people thought maybe Andre had teamed up with some pirates."

Trixie shrugged one shoulder. She reached out and drew back one of the heavy forest green drapes that covered the window. "But what if he did, and what if his treasure is somewhere here at Rosehill?"

"Why would Andre leave his fortune here?" Honey asked. "How would that do him any good?"

"Well, Henry did say that Andre came to Rosehill to see Claire and was run off by some servants *and* that he was lost in the bayous that night, never to be seen again. What if he'd left his loot behind?"

Di sat down at the small writing table across from the beds. "I don't know, Trix. If he'd just left it laying around, well, someone would have found it by now. And if he buried it or hid it, why would he have done that here? Why not somewhere safer, like his own home?"

Trixie peered out the window. It was dark and she really couldn't see much but her own reflection in the glass. "I don't know. But I think someone *thinks* there's something valuable to find here at Rosehill and I think they're going to great lengths to find it."

"Well, I say we get some sleep," Honey announced, setting her brush down on the antique dresser. "We have-"

She was cut off by Trixie's startled gasp. "Come quick! Come quick! I think I see someone!"

Honey and Di rushed to the window. Trixie let go of the curtain and hurried over to the bedside table to snap off the light, then rejoined her friends in the darkness. "Do you see it?" she demanded. "Do you see that light? Off in the distance. A white light."

Though it was faint, the pale, cold light was unmistakable in the pitch black night. "I think it's moving," Di whispered.

"Someone is out there," Trixie murmured. "Walking around."

"Yes," Honey agreed slowly. "But it could just be one of Mrs. de Villemont's servants. I think she must have at least half a dozen people working for her."

"Isn't that about where you and Jim saw the rat, Trix?" Di asked.

"It's hard to tell from here, but I think it is really close to the carved up tree," Trixie replied. "Maybe someone's back to finish the job!"

"Well," Honey said practically. "We can't very well go out there at this time of night so I suggest-" she broke off as the light suddenly winked out.

Di put her hand to her mouth. "Do you think- was that maybe the ghost of Andre du Pree?" she asked, her voice muffled by her fingers.

Trixie frowned. "No. I don't think so. A ghost would be, you know, more *ghostly*, don't you think? That was someone with a flashlight. I'm sure of it."

"Then where did it go?" Di asked. "Would someone really roam that close to the bayou with no light?"

"I don't know. But first thing tomorrow morning, I want to go out there and check for footprints!" Trixie declared firmly. "At least it would be something to show Henry."

Honey held up her hand to cover a yawn. "You'll have to get up really early, Trix," she warned. "Mrs. de Villemont wants to leave here by seven, I think."

"That's all right. It never takes me long to get ready in the morning. I'll just slip out there and see what I can find."

They watched for several minutes more, but the light failed to reappear. Finally, Honey convinced them to retire.

Di wished her friends a good night and started out the room.

"Di," Honey said. "Do you want to trade with me?"

"Trade?"

Honey nodded seriously. "If you're a little nervous about sleeping alone, I don't mind trading rooms."

Di hesitated for a moment, then smiled. "No. I lost the coin toss. And I'm sure Trixie's right. That wasn't a ghost out there."

As she left the room and closed the door behind her, Honey pulled back the covers of her bed. "That was really brave of her, don't you think?"

Trixie kicked off her slippers and nodded. "And really brave of you, too."

"Of me?" Honey echoed, puzzled.

Trixie walked over to her friend and gave her a quick hug. "Yes, and thoughtful, too. It didn't even cross my mind that Di might be afraid to be alone." She shrugged both shoulders and grinned ruefully.

"Oh, Trixie!" Honey exclaimed. "You're a very thoughtful person, too! I know you love mysteries, but I also know that you always want to solve them to help the people involved, not to gain any kind of fame or praise."

Honey's compliment brought a warm blush to Trixie's freckled cheeks. She smiled gratefully at her best friend and climbed into her own bed. She appreciated Honey's kind words, but she also knew she really could do better in being more sympathetic to others' feelings.

Although she was tired, Trixie found it difficult to sleep. She lay in bed, staring at the darkened ceiling as her mind wandered over the events of the day. It was hard to believe so much had happened in such a short amount of time. She could still picture Bobby's glum face as he hugged his brothers and sister good-bye that morning. Trixie promised herself she would find an extra special souvenir to take home to him.

She could hear the faint ticking of the little French mantel clock on the dresser. There were other sounds, too. She heard water running through pipes, probably one of the boys washing up. There were the typical groans, creaks, and pops of an old home as Rosehill Plantation "settled for the night."

Trixie grinned to herself. Really, it all sounded a lot like home.

She got up once to check for the mysterious light again, but it was dark and still outside. Finally, long after Honey had drifted off into a quiet slumber, Trixie fluffed her pillow, closed her eyes and let sleep claim her.

She was awoken sometime later from a strange dream in which she was being chased by an enormous nutria with a shovel while the ghost of Andre du Pree kept exhorting her to "not let that ugly creature get my gold."

Honey was standing over her, gently shaking her shoulder. "Trixie, if you still want to check for footprints, you really need to get up now."

Trixie rubbed her eyes and sat up. "What time is it?" she asked, ending with a broad yawn.

"It's about a quarter after six."

Trixie blinked. Already? She glanced at Honey. "You're already dressed."

"Well, you didn't think I'd be letting you meander around in the fog all by yourself, did you?"

"Fog?" Trixie pushed back her covers and clambered out of the bed. A peek out the window showed that the plantation grounds were indeed shadowed by a thick, clinging mist. The rising sun was a pale, sickly yellow just above the tree line.

Honey stepped up behind her. "If you ask me, that's even creepier than the light last night."

Trixie nodded her agreement. The old oaks were faintly visible, their branches twisting out like crooked arms reaching toward the sky. Suddenly her idea of searching for clues didn't seem so bright, but then she thought of Mrs. de Villemont and frowned. If someone was up to something that could hurt their kind, generous hostess, Trixie intended to do her best to put a stop to it!

She dressed quickly in a yellow tee-shirt and light green shorts. She sighed as she took in her reflection in the mirror. While Honey looked perfectly rested and groomed, she herself was wrinkled and rumpled, with visible shadows beneath her eyes. How was it no matter how carefully she packed, her clothes always came out looking as if she'd twisted them into a ball and then sat on them for good measure?

She dragged her comb through her tousled curls and slipped off to the bathroom to splash water on her face and brush her teeth.

As they walked down the stairs to the main foyer, they passed a maid carrying a thick stack of white towels. "Good morning," the young woman trilled brightly as she stepped to the side. "You're a little early, girls, but you can wait in the parlor for your friends."

Honey and Trixie thanked the maid politely and continued down. They paused to glance in the parlor and were relieved to find it empty.

"It would've been just my luck that Mart had spent the whole night in there dressed and ready to go."

Honey clamped her lips shut to stifle a giggle. "Why would he do that? Do you think he somehow guessed you'd want to sneak out this morning?"

Trixie shook her head and snickered. "No. I thought maybe he'd just be sitting here all ready to go because he wants to get those ben-, those ben- those French donuts we're supposed to have for breakfast."

This time Honey wasn't able to hold back her laughter. She shot her friend an apologetic look as Trixie shook her arms in a frantic "keep it down" motion.

They hurried to the main door and let themselves out onto the wide porch. The mist was still strong, drifting lazily around the main house, the outbuildings, and the surrounding grounds. As they stepped on to the path, they seemed to be swallowed up in it. Not even the gate to the rose gardens was visible.

Honey reached out and took Trixie's hand. "Maybe this isn't such a good idea," she suggested slowly. "We could get lost out here and wander off into the bayous never to be seen again, just like poor Andre du Pree."

"No, we won't. All we need to do is stick with the slate stones. Jim and I were walking on them when we saw the nutria."

Honey swallowed nervously. "I'm not worried about running into a ghost, but I have to admit I'd really rather not encounter your little rat friend."

"If he was even around, I'm sure he's long gone by now," Trixie said reassuringly. "He took off like a skitterish rabbit last night as soon as he heard us."

They followed the path for several minutes. Soon enough they could make out the dark trunks of the trees that grew out beyond the gardens.

"Trixie, I can barely see my own feet," Honey pointed out. "How are we going to find footprints?"

"Shh!" Trixie whispered, pulling them to a halt. "Did you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Honey whispered back, straining her ears.

"Listen. I think I heard digging."

Both girls fell silent.

As Honey, too, heard the dull sound of a shovel connecting with hard earth, she squeezed Trixie's hand. "We should go back, Trix," she urged. "We don't know who is out there."

"But don't you want to find out who it is?" Trixie asked quietly.

"No. Not really. We don't know if it's someone who works here or someone else. It could be someone dangerous!"

There was a crunch on the walk behind them, and both girls twirled about with breathless shrieks.

"Who's there?" a voice called. A moment later, Henry appeared, seeming to just materialize before their eyes as he moved through the heavy fog. "Goodness! What are you two doing out here? Are you lost?"

Honey nodded her head while at the same time Trixie shook hers.

"We're looking for tracks," Trixie explained. "We saw a light out here last night and just now we heard digging. If we hurry, we should be able to catch-"

"Whoa. Slow down. I'm not following you at all. Start at the beginning."

Trixie took a deep breath and started over, forcing herself to talk in as calm a manner as possible. By the time she was through, Henry was eying her doubtfully.

"I can't imagine anyone out here in this fog," he said. "Folks in these parts don't go wandering about when it's as thick as Grandma's Gumbo like it is this morning. You could get lost. Or have a run in with an angry gator. You probably just heard some animal looking for his breakfast."

Trixie wanted to protest his theory, but she just managed to stop herself. Henry clearly wasn't ready to be convinced.

"And," he continued, "as far as the light you saw last night, well, that was most likely just the *Lumière des Morts*."

Honey's lips parted in a small gasp.

"The looney whats?" Trixie demanded.

"No, Trix. Not looney. He said 'the *Lumière des Morts*.' The death lights," Honey translated. "Or at least I think that's what it means." Honey had once taken French at her previous school, and though she hardly ever used it, she was relatively sure she'd interpreted Henry's words correctly.

"The death lights?" Trixie repeated. "What on earth are they?"

Henry waved a hand about. "They go by many names, I suppose. Corpse Candles. Fool's Light. Will o' the Wisp."

"Will o' the Wisp? You mean swamp gas?" Trixie guessed.

Henry nodded. "Many a person has met his death in the bayous by following the *Lumière des Morts*. They get confused and think they're seeing the lights of a nearby house or another person. Instead it's just a fluke of nature, gasses mixing in the night air and giving off a glow."

"Oh." Trixie bit down on her lip.

"Now, girls, we'd better head back to the house. It's almost time for us to leave for the city."

Trixie nodded meekly. She waited for Honey to follow Henry back up the path and fell into step behind her. She didn't believe Henry's explanations for a minute. That digging she and Honey had heard wasn't any local wildlife. And that light they'd seen the night before

was not swamp gas!

She glanced longingly over her shoulder. If only they'd been able to even catch a glimpse of the person she was sure was lurking out there under the broad canopy of trees! Then maybe Henry wouldn't have been so disbelieving.

It was then that she paused to wonder just what it was Henry had been doing out in the fog himself.

## Chapter 6: The French Quarter

The Cafe du Monde was located in the heart of the French Quarter at the tip of the Farmers' Market and across from the St. Louis Cathedral. By the time they arrived shortly after eight o' clock, they found the little outdoor restaurant crammed full of people. There were businessmen reading the morning paper while they dined, young people crowded around the small tables laughing and joking, and tourists getting an early start on the day.

"We'll never find a table large enough for all of us in here," Mrs. de Villemont predicted, "but we can get our orders to go and go sit on the benches in Jackson Square. It's not too hot out yet, I think."

The line to the counter stretched out to the sidewalk. Honey stepped up to her brother and slipped her arm through his. "Jim, we shouldn't make Mrs. de Villemont stand here with us. This could take a long time."

Jim nodded seriously. "I agree. Why don't you girls take her and go find the benches? We'll order the donuts and bring them on out."

Honey smiled at Jim and turned to repeat his suggestion to the others.

"That sounds like a good idea," Mrs. de Villemont decided. "It's already so crowded, we'll only make it worse if we all stand in line. Each order comes with three beignets. I've never been able to finish them all. I think three orders will cover the girls and me. I'm not sure how much you boys can handle, though I'm quite certain Mart at least needs an order of his own!"

"It smells so good in here, I think I could probably finish an entire order, too," Brian said. "So don't expect me to share."

Laughing, Jim and Dan agreed to place their own orders as well.

"So that will be seven orders of beignets. They serve a wonderful chicory coffee here, but I suppose you're all too young to be coffee drinkers. I'll have one myself, black, please." Mrs. de Villemont pointed to a chalkboard menu. "And they serve milk and juice here as well. Take your pick."

Jim listened carefully as each of the girls made their drink requests. "Hopefully, we won't be too long," he said, eying the line.

"We'll be across the street, near the statue of Andrew Jackson," Mrs. de Villemont said. "We'll watch for you." She beckoned to the girls and they followed her to the street corner.

"Will we have time to visit the St. Louis Cathedral?" Honey asked. "I understand it's one of the oldest in the country."

"Yes. It was actually destroyed and rebuilt not once, but twice. The first time was due to a hurricane and the second, a fire. This building as you see it now has been standing since 1794."

"Gleeps!" Trixie said, impressed. "It looks great for its age."

Mrs. de Villemont smiled. "Many people work very hard to take care of the church and all of the buildings here in Jackson Square. We'll tour a bit of this area after we eat. I'm sure you all would like to see some of the local shops as well. You'll be able to find some gifts to take home to your families if you like."

Remembering her promise of the night before, Trixie nodded briskly. "I have to find something for Bobby. He was so disappointed when we told him he was too young to come on this trip."

"Oh, and I want to find something for the twins, too," Di put in.

"And we mustn't forget our moms and dads," Honey added. "Oh, and Miss Trask and Regan and Mr. Maypenny and-"

"Jeepers, Honey!" Trixie exclaimed, laughing. "We'll have to buy another suitcase just to get everything home!"

"I suppose we could always ship things if we needed to," Mrs. de Villemont suggested. "Otherwise, Trixie might be right."

"Oh, look!" Di cried, pointing. "Isn't that a steamboat?"

They could just see the top of the boat over the tall levy that protected the French Quarter from the occasional flooding of the Mississippi River.

"It's *The Delta Queen*," Mrs. de Villemont said. "She's been in service now since 1947. I'm sorry we won't have time to take a cruise, but I do have plans for us to go out on airboats later this week."

"Airboats?" Trixie echoed. "You mean those boats with the big fans in back?"

"Yes. We're going for a little tour of the bayous behind Rosehill. Henry and his brother Jesse are both experienced airboat pilots, and Jesse runs a service that allows tourists to rent his boats."

When the boys arrived with several brown bags full of piping hot beignets, they found the girls discussing the upcoming expedition.

"Will we really see alligators?" Di asked, not hiding her shudder. "Aren't they dangerous?"

"They can be," Mrs. de Villemont replied. "But only if you don't take certain sensible precautions."

The beignets, small square puffed donuts dusted with powdered sugar, were universally declared delicious. As they finished their breakfast, Mrs. de Villemont recommended a walk down some of the famous French Quarter streets.

"It will only get hotter as the day goes on, so why don't we do our shopping first, then we can visit the church later."

"Shopping? We're going shopping?" Mart shook his head in disgust. "This is what we get for leaving the women to plan our day!"

Mrs. de Villemont laughed merrily. "This isn't your typical shopping, Mart. Wait until you see the voodoo shops and the street artists."

They dumped their trash in a can on the sidewalk then joined the throngs of pedestrians making their way down the narrow city streets. Almost immediately they stopped to take in a display of pastel drawings set up on a busy corner. The artist, a young man with coal black hair and dark eyes, flashed them a wide grin as Di and Honey exclaimed over his work.

"I love this one of the cathedral and Jackson Square," Di said. "Wouldn't it look lovely in our morning room? It has just the right colors."

"And it's not too large to carry onto the plane," Honey pointed out.

The artist introduced himself and quoted a price that raised several eyebrows.

Mrs. de Villemont immediately fired back with a dollar amount much lower. A quick round of haggling ensued. Finally, Mrs. de Villemont nodded. "I think that's a fair price. What do you say, Diana? Would you like to purchase Paul's drawing?"

"Yes. I just know my mother will adore it." She opened her purse and removed the wallet inside. As she was counting out the bills, a small figure darted between the Bob-Whites, knocking down several pictures, including the one Di had chosen. "Oh, no!" she cried. A young boy of about eight was sprawled on the ground, the drawings spread out around him.

"Are you all right?" Honey asked in concern.

"He's fine," Paul said with a long sigh. "But he's ruined several of my best drawings." He held out his hand. "Come on, Teddy. Now that you've lost me a sale, the least you can do is get up and apologize to these good people." Paul turned to the Bob-Whites. "This is Theodore, my little brother."

"I'm sorry, Paul," Teddy wailed. "I didn't mean to do it! Honest!"

Paul smiled a little. "I know, kid. I just wish you'd slow down and watch where you're going sometimes. Does Mother know you're here?"

Teddy nodded quickly. "She said to tell you to keep an eye on me this morning and she'll come by later with lunch at eleven thirty."

Di bent down and lifted the picture of the cathedral off the ground. The pastels were

smear and a distinct hand-print marred the top portion. Frowning apologetically, she handed it back to Paul. "I'm really sorry," she said quietly, "but I-

"No. Please. Of course I don't expect you to buy it now."

Trixie who was studying first Teddy, then Paul, looked over at the remaining drawings that hadn't been damaged. "Di? Do you see anything over there that you like?"

"Well," Di said slowly. "I did sort of have my heart set on this one, but that drawing of the plantation is very pretty and it looks a lot like Rosehill."

"Are you willing to let that one go for the same price?" Mrs. de Villemont asked.

"Absolutely!" Paul replied. "And I'll even wrap it up now before Teddy manages to destroy it, too."

Five minutes later, the transaction concluded, the Bob-Whites and Mrs. de Villemont continued on their way.

"I'm glad Di took the other drawing," Trixie murmured to Honey a few minutes later. "I think Paul and Teddy could really use the money."

"I was thinking the same thing," Honey said. "I noticed Paul's shirt was frayed at the cuffs and Teddy's clothing looked a bit too small."

"I don't think it will be that way much longer," Mrs. de Villemont said, having overheard Honey's remark. "That young man is quite talented. All it will take is getting him noticed by the right people."

"Oh! Do you really think so?" Honey asked. "I was sort of wondering, since you got him to drop his price so much if maybe you thought he wasn't very good."

"Oh, he's quite good. He never expected to actually get the full amount he first quoted. Street artists always quote high first then wait to hear what the buyer is really willing to pay."

"Mrs. de Villemont? Do you know the right people for Paul?" Trixie wanted to know.

Their hostess smiled slightly. "I might just drop a word in the ear of a friend of mine. He owns a very popular gallery on Dauphine Street."

Honey and Trixie exchanged grins. They knew her "might" was really a "would."

"Isn't she absolutely wonderful?" Honey whispered as Mrs. de Villemont walked ahead to direct the others to turn at the next street corner.

"I like her a lot," Trixie agreed. "She's really very nice, but do you get the impression she's sort of sad a lot?"

"I have wondered if maybe she's a little lonely," Honey answered. "You know her husband died several years ago. They have a son, but Mother told me he's an up-and-coming lawyer out in San Francisco and she doesn't get to see him very often."

"How did her husband die? He must have been pretty young. I didn't want to ask her and upset her."

"It was cancer. Mother said it developed very quickly and by the time he was diagnosed, it was already too late to do anything about it."

"And now she's all alone in that great big house," Trixie concluded. "I'll bet she really is lonely."

Dan had dropped back from the group and he waited for Trixie and Honey to catch up with him. "Mart is just burning to see the Marie Laveau House of Voodoo. What do you two say?"

"A house of voodoo," Trixie repeated doubtfully. "What's that?"

"Some sort of voodoo store. It's apparently about a five minute walk from here. Mrs. de Villemont says Marie Laveau was New Orleans' most notorious voodoo priestess. She was once called the 'Queen of Voodoo' and apparently most of the town was scared to death of her."

Honey shook her head. "It sounds positively gruesome."

"Well, we boys are going to give it a look, but if you'd rather not, Mrs. de Villemont has offered to take Di to an antiques store over on the next street. We're supposed to meet up later."

Trixie bit her lip, glancing uncertainly at where Jim, Brian and Mart stood waiting.

"Oh, go on, Trix!" Honey said with a laugh. "I know you want to!"

"I am a little curious," Trixie admitted.

"Well, just don't come back and tell me any scary stories, all right? I don't want to have nightmares tonight."

As Honey, Di, and Mrs. de Villemont turned down Royal Street, Trixie followed the boys as they continued to the next block. The House of Voodoo proved to be a small, rather rundown looking building. They stepped inside and found themselves in a dimly lit shop full of both every day and unusual looking items. A middle-aged woman stood behind a counter conversing with another customer. Brian and Jim stopped to study a shelf full of dried herbs while Mart and Dan wandered over to a display of knives.

Trixie wrinkled her nose at the strong, sweet odor that permeated the room. Her gaze was caught by a glass tank and as she approached it she was surprised to see a long snake curled up inside.

"Are you looking for anything in particular, my dear, or just browsing?"

Trixie jumped, startled. The shopkeeper was standing a few feet away, a pleasant smile on her round face. "I- I'm just looking. I really don't know anything about voodoo or Marie Laveau."

The woman chuckled quietly. "No, child. I wouldn't imagine you do. You aren't a local."

It was a statement, not a question, but Trixie replied anyway. "We're from New York."

"Welcome to N'awlins, chere. Would you like to know a little more about the 'Queen of Voodoo?'"

Trixie nodded, stepping back a little from the glass cage as she saw the snake's head lift.

"Marie Laveau once ruled this city many years ago. She was what they called a 'Free Person of Color,' a black woman who wasn't a slave because her father was a white man. She worked as a hairdresser to the wealthy Creole women and her clients were soon relying on her for her advice as much as her hairdressing skills. By the 1830s, she had become the most acknowledged and powerful voodoo priestess ever, and to this day no one has rivaled her fame or notoriety."

"And did she- I mean could she really do stuff? Like make things happen?"

"Well now, that depends on who you ask. There are some who say Marie could command the Loa to do as she wished, and those who say she was a complete fraud."

"The Loa?" Trixie echoed, confused.

"The Loa are spirits who connect people with the Creator. They help people achieve a balance within the universe."

"Oh." Trixie nodded, not knowing what else to say.

"Marie's predictions very often came true, which brought her much admiration, but also much scorn. There are many people who believe she was nothing more than a charlatan. She was said to have maintained connections with several unsavory types who would go out and *cause* things to happen. If Marie said you would be trampled by a horse, her henchmen would see to it that it happened."

A small black cat leaped up onto the counter. It wobbled slightly and for a moment, Trixie thought it might fall, then she noticed it was missing a back leg. It hobbled a few steps until the shopkeeper scooped it up with both hands. "Now, Clyde," she murmured. "You know you don't belong up here." She set the cat down on the floor and patted him on his head.

"Do you think Marie Laveau was fake, ma'am?" Trixie asked.

The woman shrugged. "It's hard to say. Legends have a way of so distorting the truth you can't tell reality from fiction. I have practiced Voudon, the voodoo religion, since I learned it at my grandmother's knee. Whether or not Marie was a genuine priestess, I

cannot tell."

Trixie thought that was a strange statement for a person who worked in Marie Laveau's House of Voodoo, but she forebore asking any more questions.

"Are you staying here in the French Quarter for your visit, dear?"

"No. We're staying out on River Road, at Rosehill Plantation."

"Rosehill!" the woman exclaimed. "Then you're staying in the home of another famous voodoo priestess!"

Trixie's eyes rounded. "I really don't think Mrs. de Villemont practices voodoo."

The shopkeeper shook her head. "I'm referring to Amilie de Villemont. She lived many, many years ago and was considered a disgrace by her own family. But outside her family, there were those on River Road who claimed she was quite powerful and not to be crossed. Most voodoo priests and priestesses want only to achieve spiritual peace and balance, but they say Amilie used her powers to do very bad things; make people sick, maim them for life, and sometimes even have them killed."

Trixie couldn't hold back a shiver. Just then Jim tapped her on the shoulder and it was all she could do not to shriek out loud.

"We're ready to go, Trix," he said quietly. "We're don't want to be late meeting up with the others."

"Oh! Yes. All right." Trixie drew in a deep breath and looked back at the shopkeeper. "I have to go now, but thanks for talking with me."

"You enjoy the rest of your visit, chere," the woman replied with another friendly smile.

Trixie and the boys left the shop and found themselves blinking in the bright glare of the sun.

"Well, that was certainly interesting," Trixie commented after a few moments.

"What on earth was she saying to you?" Brian asked. "I think your hair was actually standing up on end!"

Trixie self-consciously ran her fingers through her curls. "She was just telling me about Marie Laveau," she explained. "But then when I told her where we're staying, she mentioned someone named Amilie de Villemont who was supposed to be a voodoo priestess with some rather nasty practices."

"Oh, Trixie, she was probably just trying to scare you a little," Brian said with a shake of his head. "You shouldn't believe that kind of talk."

Jim pointed to a store across the street. "Look. They sell postcards. Why don't we pick out a few to send back home."

"Don't we have to go meet Honey and Di and Mrs. de Villemont now?" Trixie asked.

"Not for another fifteen minutes. We just thought it was time to get you out of there," Jim replied lightly. "Don't worry about that woman and her stories, Trix. That's all they were. Stories."

As the boys looked over the selection of postcards, Trixie forced herself to take Jim's advice. Whoever Amilie de Villemont had been, if indeed she'd existed at all, she was long gone now and Trixie doubted she'd ever even hear the name again. There was no reason to spare her another thought.

## Chapter 7: Plantation Woes

After spending most of the day wandering the French Quarter and seeing the sites, the Bob-Whites and Mrs. de Villemont returned to Rosehill Plantation in time for an early supper served out on the lawn just below the rose gardens, shaded by several old oaks.

They were in the middle of the main course, a delicious Shrimp Creole, when a woman came out onto the back porch, raised her arm and called a loud, "Yoo-hoo!"

Mrs. de Villemont set down her napkin. "Oh, my. It's Cambry again."

The woman hurried down the porch steps and crossed to where they were seated around two card tables covered with white linen cloths.

"Hello, Cambry. You should have phoned that you were stopping by and we would have had a place set out for you," Mrs. de Villemont said.

"Oh, well that's all right, Angie. I've already eaten."

Trixie didn't miss the way Mrs. de Villemont winced as her cousin spoke. I don't think she likes that nickname very much, she thought.

Mrs. de Villemont rose from her seat. "Cambry, these are my guests from New York. This is Jim Frayne, Honey Wheeler, Brian, Mart and Trixie Belden, and this is Dan Mangan and Diana Lynch. Everyone, please meet my cousin-in-law, Cambry de Villemont."

The Bob-Whites politely greeted the other woman.

"Do you live nearby?" Honey asked courteously.

"Unfortunately, I'm not too close," Cambry said with a dramatic sigh. "I have a little house in Mandeville, on the north side of the lake."

"She's referring to Lake Ponchartrain," Mrs. de Villemont explained. "It's the large lake just above New Orleans. It's the biggest lake in the state and it boasts the world's longest bridge."

"Oh, Angie! Don't *bore* the children," Cambry muttered. "I'm sure they find talk like that terribly dull."

For a moment no one said anything. Then, seeing their kind hostess's obvious distress, Honey spoke again, hoping to tactfully change the subject. "And you're a de Villemont, too, ma'am?" she asked.

Cambry's answering smile didn't reach her eyes. "All my life. I didn't have to marry into the family. I was *born* a de Villemont."

There was something in her voice that none of the Bob-Whites particularly liked. Trixie could see that Jim found Cambry's tone and comments as offensive as she did herself.

"Cambry," Mrs. de Villemont said coolly, "was there something in particular you needed tonight?"

"Not really, Angie, dear. I just thought I'd drop in on my favorite cousin since I had to go into town today and run a few errands."

"Well, you know how much I look forward to your visits, but I'm afraid you really haven't come at the best time."

Cambry smoothed back her long ash blond hair. "Yes, well, I can take a hint. I'll be running along then. But listen, cousin, I wanted to let you know I ran into Darren Leopold today. He says his offer to buy Rosehill is still standing. I hope you aren't *really* considering selling, dear. Imagine Rosehill being owned by someone other than a de Villemont!"

With that parting shot, Cambry de Villemont waved one manicured hand in the general direction of the Bob-Whites and strolled off, leaving behind a strong scent of magnolia perfume.

As her cousin walked away, Mrs. de Villemont cleared her throat. "I- I suppose I should explain," she began.

"You don't have to say anything, ma'am," Honey was quick to reply.

Mrs. de Villemont shook her head. "No, really. I want to. You see in the past few years it's become harder and harder to properly care for Rosehill. Maintaining a plantation

that doesn't actually earn an income is very expensive and only getting more so each day. A few months ago the de Villemont family lawyer, Mr. Darren Leopold, approached me with an offer to purchase the land and house. I told him I would consider it. It's not that I really want to sell, but I'm afraid sometime soon I might be forced to do it." She sighed wearily. "It would be a shame to have Rosehill pass out of the de Villemont family, but there aren't many of us left in any case. My son is in California pursuing his law career. There's Cambry of course, but she has no more money than I and wouldn't fare any better."

She stopped for a moment to sip her water. "I have a little confession to make," she said quietly a few moments later. "I didn't invite you all here solely out of generosity or kindness. You see, I had an idea that I wanted to test. What I would really like to do is turn Rosehill into a Bed and Breakfast, a little inn that would take in boarders. I was talking on the phone with your mother, Honey, and she told me about you and your friends. I thought maybe I would have you down, sort of as a test run, to see how well we handled so many guests at once. Of course, as soon as Cambry gets wind of this, she'll really fly up into the boughs. I think she might even prefer I sell to the idea of turning Rosehill into a business."

Honey jumped up from her seat and hurried to their hostess's side. "Well, I think it's a perfectly perfect idea!" she exclaimed, giving Mrs. de Villemont a quick hug. "Your house is simply beautiful and I know people would love to have the chance to stay here!"

The other Bob-Whites chimed in with their agreement.

Mrs. de Villemont smiled softly. "Thank you. Thank you all. I'm glad you think so. Of course, I have other hurdles to face if I'm going to make this a reality. There would need to be some extensive remodeling. The kitchen would need to be upgraded to a commercial level. And I would need to add a few bathrooms, I think. Plus there are permits and zoning issues to be dealt with. I'm afraid even this idea might prove to be too costly in the end."

"Oh, don't give up hope yet, ma'am," Trixie said encouragingly. "It might not be as difficult as you think and Rosehill would make a grand inn!"

Mrs. de Villemont smiled again. "I haven't given up yet, Trixie. I promise. I-" She cut herself off and frowned. Henry was running toward them from the front side of the house. He hurried up and, with a glance at the others, bent down to whisper something to his employer.

Mrs. de Villemont's face paled considerably. "Oh, Henry," she said faintly. "Not the graveyard!"

Henry nodded.

"Have you called the sheriff?"

"He should be here in about twenty minutes."

Mrs. de Villemont nodded. She looked at the Bob-Whites and they were dismayed to see tears in her eyes. "Someone has apparently dug up the old slaves' graveyard. What a dreadful thing to do!" She pushed back her chair and rose. "I- I'd better go assess the damages."

Honey took the older woman's arm. "We're coming with you," she said firmly. "Is it close by?"

"It's just past the line of oak trees," Mrs. de Villemont replied.

As they walked along the slate stone path, Trixie's mind was racing. She was startled out of her thoughts as Henry fell into step beside her.

"I guess I owe you an apology," he said softly. "I should have listened to you this morning,"

Trixie offered him a small smile. "That's all right. It did sound kind of crazy."

"It is crazy! We've got someone digging up the whole property! I can't figure out who and I can't figure out why!"

The slaves' graveyard was a small patch of land circled by a metal fence. Inside two rows of plain gray markers ran from one end to the other. There were several large holes in the ground, with freshly turned earth piled next to them.

"What could someone possibly hope to find here?" Mrs. de Villemont demanded.

"Henry, we have to put a stop to this!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you think someone was grave robbing?" Brian asked. "Maybe they thought they would find something valuable?"

Mrs. de Villemont shook her head. "Slaves didn't have anything of value to be buried with. In fact, they weren't buried at all. We can't bury people underground in this part of the country. Being at sea level, the graves would simply flood. That's why our cemeteries are all above ground. We use crypts." She opened the gate and walked inside. "The slaves' bodies were always cremated. This graveyard was given to them simply so they could have a place to honor and remember their dead. Really, it's quite unusual. Unfortunately not many slave owners allowed them even this much."

She bent down and touched the ground with one long finger. "My husband's father was the one to put up this fence. The graveyard had been sorely neglected for many years but he felt it was disrespectful not to care for it. He had the fence erected and the stones all cleaned and we've been tending it ever since." She glanced at Henry. "This dirt isn't totally dry. This didn't happen very long ago."

Henry nodded soberly. "We think it happened at about six thirty his morning."

"We?"

Henry coughed slightly and shrugged. "The girls heard digging this morning when they were out for a walk. They did tell me about it, but I'm afraid I dismissed it as a foraging animal."

"You didn't say anything to us about it!" Jim exclaimed, frowning. "What were you girls doing out here that early this morning?"

Trixie and Honey exchanged guilty looks.

"Why don't you tell them?" Honey suggested.

Trixie took a deep breath and launched into her explanation, telling the others about the light they'd seen from their window the night before and the sounds they'd heard while walking through the fog that morning.

Mrs. de Villemont pursed her lips. "Girls, I don't mean to criticize you, but please, please don't do anything like that again. It really is dangerous in the swamps here, especially when you can't see where you're going."

"We're sorry," Trixie said meekly and Honey added her own apology as well.

Dusting off her hands, Mrs. de Villemont looked up toward the house. "Henry, I'm sure the sheriff will be here any minute. Please escort him back down here and go ahead and show him what we discovered in the garage yesterday as well. And then you might suggest to him that having a patrol car pass by regularly would be greatly appreciated."

She drew herself up and forced a smile to her face. "Why don't we return to the house now? It's going to be dark soon. I don't want you all to worry about this, all right? The police will handle it. I'm sure it's just some silly treasure hunter. There are always rumors of lost gold and pirate bounty in this area and some people are foolish enough to think that if they just keep looking they'll eventually find it. And as for the light you girls saw last night, it probably was just the *Lumière des Morts*, as Henry believes. It's a strange phenomenon that has baffled many people for centuries."

When they reached the front porch and were shaking the mud from their shoes, Mrs. de Villemont suggested they complete their tour of her home. "You haven't seen the gallery yet, or the library. We have quite a collection of literature that de Villemonts have been adding to for over a century."

The gallery proved to be a long narrow hallway with portraits lining both walls. Mrs. de Villemont stopped to point out her husband, a handsome man with bright eyes and a merry smile.

They continued on, pausing before another, older painting.

"Now, here we have an interesting character," Mrs. de Villemont said. "This young woman was Claire's younger sister, Amilie."

"The voodoo priestess?" Trixie exclaimed. "She was Claire's sister?"

"My goodness, Trixie! How did you know that? Yes, Amilie was reputed to be a voodoo practitioner. Family legends say she wasn't as well-liked as her older sister and that she became very bitter, even at a young age. By the time Claire had married and moved to town, Amilie was said to have immersed herself in the darker aspects of the Voudon religion."

Trixie nodded. "The lady in the House of Voodoo told me about Amilie. She said people claimed Amilie made them sick and even caused some people to die."

Di stepped back from the portrait. "Ugh. She sounds like the very opposite of Claire!"

"Well, I don't know that her practices ever did anything more than get her ostracized from the family. They completely cut her off. As a matter of fact, we wouldn't even have this painting of her if it weren't for the fact that my husband's mother found it in an art gallery in Baton Rouge. We don't even know when it was painted, though we do believe it to be genuine. She's standing before the same backdrop used in Claire's portrait. What you see behind them both is the fireplace in the library."

"You don't find it kind of creepy to have her picture here?" Di asked doubtfully.

Mrs. de Villemont suddenly smiled. "No. For better or for worse, Amilie de Villemont is part of the family history. She belongs here in the gallery as much as all the rest of the de Villemonts."

As Trixie and Honey prepared for bed that night, Trixie couldn't stop herself from walking to the window to look out and check for more lights. "What do you think the sheriff found?" she asked.

"I don't know. I did see several footprints around the grave sites, but they could have been made by Henry himself when he found the holes," Honey replied as she removed her watch and set it in a small ceramic dish on the dresser. "And then Mrs. de Villemont walked around in there, too."

"Do you think maybe Henry is actually the one who's responsible?"

Honey made a face. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"Well, I am wondering what he was doing out in the fog this morning, for one thing, and then what was he doing out in the slaves' graveyard this evening when he says he discovered the digging."

"But if Henry dug the holes, why would he call attention to them?"

"Maybe he figured it was better to do that than wait for one of us to come across it. Maybe he got worried when we told him what we knew that we'd also tell someone else."

Honey frowned, thinking. "Well, if he is involved somehow, he must have an accomplice. He came up *behind* us when we were listening to the digging in *front* of us."

Trixie crossed the room and plopped down on her bed. "That's right. I didn't even think about that!" She clutched her head with both hands. "Boy, this is turning into a real brain buster!"

Honey laughed and pulled back her covers to climb into bed. "Trixie, we might not really have a mystery here at all, you know. Mrs. de Villemont could be right. It might very well be some nutty treasure hunter who's sneaking on to the property late at night hoping to find a long lost fortune."

Trixie shrugged one shoulder and reached over to turn off the bedside lamp. Maybe it was a "nutty treasure hunter," but for some reason, deep down, Trixie wholeheartedly believed it was more than that.

## Chapter 8: A Visit to Five Oaks

The next morning dawned bright and clear in contrast with the day before. Breakfast was served in the dining room and then the Bob-Whites gathered in the front drive, waiting for Henry to bring the white van around.

"We'll be lunching with my sister," Mrs. de Villemont explained as they all clambered into the vehicle and took their seats. "So Henry will be dropping us off and coming back for us later."

The drive to Five Oaks was a pleasant one, along the winding River Road. Mrs. de Villemont entertained the Bob-Whites with stories about her childhood and her rambunctious sister, Catherine.

"Catherine was always the daring one," Mrs. de Villemont said with a fond, reminiscing smile. "She even once took a flat boat out into the bayous all by herself because we'd been told a witch lived in an old cabin somewhere on the waterways and Catherine wanted to see her for herself."

Grinning, Brian leaned forward to tousle Trixie's curls. "Sounds like someone we know."

Five Oaks turned out to be a smaller home than Rosehill, but still quite impressive and lovely. Mrs. de Villemont's sister was standing on the front verandah with a dark haired man by her side as they pulled up the long drive. She was slightly plumper than Mrs. de Villemont herself, with the same pretty features and welcoming smile.

As they climbed out of the van, the couple hurried forward to greet them. Mrs. de Villemont embraced them both warmly then turned to the Bob-Whites. "This is my sister, Mrs. Catherine Dane and her husband, Troy."

Mr. and Mrs. Dane shook hands with each of the Bob-Whites in turn, then led them up and into the house. They all gasped as they stepped through the front door.

Chuckling, Mrs. de Villemont waved one arm in a wide arc. "Didn't I tell you Catherine loves to make Mardi Gras masks? They've totally taken over the entire house."

There were bright, colorful masks along the walls and covering a bookcase near the staircase. There were more hanging from hooks in the ceiling.

Mr. Dane grinned. "It always looks as if we're having a party here, eh?"

They were made of many kinds of materials; cloth, feathers, beads, ribbons and more. Some were small and plain while others were quite grand and elaborate.

"I'm so excited you're here!" Mrs. Dane exclaimed, clapping her hands together. "We have so much to do. We'll need to find your costumes and then of course the perfect masks, and we'll be having lunch in the sun room, and, oh! Angelique, I heard from Toby. He'll be able to make it back in time for your ball and he's promised to bring Caroline with him!"

"Wonderful!" Mrs. de Villemont said.

"Toby and Caroline are our children," Mrs. Dane explained to the Bob-Whites. "Toby is attending the University of Louisiana in Baton Rouge and our daughter goes to Nicholls State. I'm so glad you'll have a chance to meet them."

"We look forward to it," Jim said sincerely.

"Well, I need to go in to work now," Mr. Dane said with a regretful smile. "You all have a fun time today and don't hesitate to take some of Catherine's masks with you when you go." He made a comical face. "Please! Take one for all of your friends, too. And your neighbors. Say, I'll bet we could outfit your entire town!"

Laughing, Mrs. Dane shooed her husband out the door. "You're terrible! Why do I put up with you?"

Mr. Dane's raised his eyebrows and glanced around the room. "Because you'd be hard pressed to find someone else who'd let you turn their home into a total mask museum?"

Mrs. Dane leaned in to give her husband a quick kiss on the cheek. "You're wonderful and I'm afraid you know it all too well. Please don't forget to check on Mrs. Robeson tonight

on your way home."

"Mrs. Robeson was our babysitter when we were children," Mrs. de Villemont told the Bob-Whites. "She's retired now and living in a little cottage near the city. Troy drops in on her once a week just to make sure she's doing well."

"Now, everyone, the fun can begin! Let's start with the closet!"

"Will you all excuse me for a few moments?" Mrs. de Villemont asked. "Catherine, I was hoping to speak with your cook. She's promised to provide some of the food for the Crawfish Boil and I'd just like to confirm things up with her."

"Of course, of course! Betty is in the kitchen right now working on our lunch. She's just in the chopping and peeling stage, I think, so she should have time to talk with you."

As Mrs. de Villemont headed for the back of the house, Mrs. Dane beckoned toward the staircase. "Shall we visit the closet now?"

The "closet", the Bob-Whites soon discovered, was actually an unused bedroom that had been converted into storage for the many costumes Mrs. Dane kept. There were heavy wooden rods that ran the full length of the room with dozens of garment bags hanging from each one. In addition there were several cedar lined trunks and one enormous old armoire.

Mrs. Dane brought out one costume after the next. She had everything from elegant gowns to droll clowns.

"It's going to be so hard to choose," Honey said, looking around. "They're all so lovely!"

"Take your time! Take your time!" Mrs. Dane said. "Girls, there's a room across the hall for you to try things on. Boys, you may use Toby's bedroom. It's the second door on the right. I'm just going to go fetch Julie so she can begin getting your measurements. Anything we need altered, Julie can have it done in a flash. I've never seen anyone so talented with a needle!"

"I have an idea," Trixie said, grinning. "Why don't we girls leave for awhile and let the boys pick their costumes, then they can leave while we choose ours. Then it will be a surprise the night of the ball."

Brian cocked his head and thought. "It sounds like fun, Trix."

The girls slipped out of the room and encountered Mrs. Dane as she was returning, her maid in tow. Trixie quickly explained her plan and Mrs. Dane's eyes twinkled merrily. "What a clever girl you are! While we wait, how would you three like to start looking at the masks? I'm sure we can find ones with your favorite colors, no matter what they might be!"

They returned to the ground floor and Mrs. Dane showed them to a pretty sitting room at the back of the house. Decorated in soft greens, yellows and rose, the room was warm and inviting. In the center was a long wood table.

"This is where I do all my work," Mrs. Dane said. "I like this room because it gets the morning sun."

The table was covered with Mrs. Dane's mask making supplies. She walked over and lifted a section of material. "Can you girls keep a secret?"

Wide-eyed, they all nodded.

Mrs. Dane held up a mask they recognized immediately.

"Why, that looks just like Claire de Villemont's famous mask," Honey exclaimed.

Mrs. Dane nodded. "I've been working on it for over a month. Troy sneaked into Angelique's ballroom and took several pictures of Claire's portrait and the original mask for me to work from. I'm going to give it to her for her birthday next month."

"I'm sure she'll love it," Di said confidently. "It's perfectly perfect, as Honey would say."

Mrs. Dane hid the mask away again. "I hope so! Sometimes it's very hard to pick a present for my sister. She's so selfless you can never get her to tell you anything she wants! Now, let's see about getting you your own masks."

She reached under the table and pulled out a drawer. "I have several in here, and of course, there are the ones you see all over the house as well. You are free to take any that

strikes your fancy. I just love making these masks but I can never seem to find enough people to wear them!"

They were interrupted by the jangling of a ringing telephone. A moment later a young maid came to the doorway. "Mrs. Dane, there's a Mr. Leopold on the phone to speak with you."

Honey, Trixie and Di traded startled looks.

"Gracious!" Mrs. Dane muttered. "What could that man possibly want with me? Will you excuse me for a moment, girls?"

"Do you think it could be the same Mr. Leopold?" Honey wondered as Mrs. Dane hurried from the room. "The one who wants to buy Rosehill?"

"I think it's a good bet," Trixie replied. "I hope he's not going to start hassling Mrs. Dane to sell her home, too!"

Mrs. Dane returned not too many minutes later, a scowl marring her pretty features. "The nerve of some people! Do you know that horrible man actually tried to tell me my very own sister is crazy?"

"Crazy!" Trixie repeated with a gasp.

"Crazy! He says she's been calling the police every day to report phantom prowlers. He says I should convince her to sell Rosehill and move out to California with her son where she can get 'some much needed rest.' Imagine!" Mrs. Dane waved both her arms in an agitated manner. "I can't for the life of me think why Darren Leopold is so anxious to get his hands on Rosehill. He doesn't even like being out here on the bayous!"

At that moment, Mrs. de Villemont entered the room. "Catherine? Is something the matter? You look upset."

As Mrs. Dane explained Mr. Leopold's phone call to her sister, Mrs. de Villemont pressed her lips together in a thin, angry line. "I have *not* been calling the police about the ghost of Andre du Pree!" she declared firmly as Mrs. Dane finished speaking. "We've had a very real, very live person digging holes on Rosehill grounds. He also did some damage to the garage and my car."

"Angelique! And you never said a word to me or Troy about it? Why ever not?"

Mrs. de Villemont exhaled slowly and sank into a high back chair. "I didn't think it was anything to worry you about. We've been finding evidence of a trespasser for about four weeks now. I thought for sure he would have moved on by now or that Sheriff Donnelly would have captured him otherwise."

"And he's been digging holes around Rosehill? Are you thinking it's some sort of treasure hunter?"

"Precisely. You know how some people can get. They're like prospectors looking for gold. They just can't seem to give up the idea that there's a real pirate fortune just waiting to be found."

"Well, you should have said something sooner. You're going to take John and Earl back with you to Rosehill this very afternoon. They'll keep an eye on things and catch whoever is doing this! In fact, I'm going to go get them this instant!" Mrs. Dane scurried from the room.

"Have you girls found your masks, yet?" Mrs. de Villemont asked, mustering up a smile.

Conscious of her sister's surprise hidden only beneath some fabric on the table, Honey immediately spoke up. "I was hoping we could go look at the ones in the foyer again. I saw one near the front door I thought was particularly darling."

"Who are John and Earl?" Trixie asked curiously as they trooped back into the hall.

"They're two of my sister's servants. John is her driver and Earl tends the gardens. I don't know if I'd feel right about taking them away from their work here. Catherine and Troy used to live in town. Troy still works there as an importer of French antiques. When my mother passed away, Five Oaks was left without any residents, so Catherine and Troy moved out here to take care of it. If we take John and Earl to Rosehill, even for just a few

days, that's putting a lot of work on Troy's shoulders."

"I don't think he'd mind for a moment," Honey said reassuringly. "He seems to be like a wonderful man who would do anything for his family."

"Oh, he is. He is. I still just hate to place such a burden on him."

The boys appeared then, laughing and joking. Honey pulled Jim aside to explain to him about the call from Mr. Leopold and Mrs. Dane's decision to send her servants to Rosehill.

"It sounds like a good idea to me," Jim said sensibly. "Why don't you girls hurry and pick out your costumes, then we can sit down to lunch. Maybe a good meal will help take some of the worry off Mrs. de Villemont's mind."

"Golly, with all that's happened in the last twenty minutes, you know we haven't even chosen our masks?"

Jim smiled warmly at his sister. "Pick your costume first. That will give you a better idea of what to look for in a mask anyway."

Trixie followed Honey and Di up the stairs. They returned to the "closet" and Honey and Di immediately began searching through the numerous gowns. Julie was there with her tape measure and pins, ready to assist them.

Trixie found she simply couldn't concentrate on the parade of costumes whisked before her eyes. Her mind was occupied with thoughts of Rosehill instead, and she blindly pointed to an old fashioned gown with yards of lace and ribbons.

Di started to question her dubious choice but Honey shushed her with a shake of her head.

"It's no use," Honey murmured. "She's just not going to be any help. It's up to us to make sure we find her something she won't absolutely loathe."

Trixie was so lost in her own thoughts, she didn't even hear her best friend speak.

## Chapter 9: Darren Leopold

It was late afternoon by the time Henry steered the large white van onto the drive leading to Rosehill Plantation. The Bob-Whites each held a carefully wrapped package in their laps, their masks for Saturday's ball, and a few other things Mrs. Dane had added as well to help her sister decorate the ballroom for the upcoming festivities.

"Do you know what we haven't done, yet?" Honey asked with a mischievous grin. "Named our vehicle! We've had the Tan Van and the Maroon Saloon. What are we going to call this?"

"Oh, boy," Jim said. "That's going to be a tough one this time! What are some words that rhyme with white?"

"Might. Spite. Tight. Kite. Fight. Bright," Mart answered promptly. "Sight. Light. Night. Height. Bite. Trite."

"I don't know about coming up with a rhyming name," Dan spoke up from the back, "but how about the Cajun Cruiser?"

The Bob-Whites burst into laughter.

"Where did you come up with that?" Trixie demanded.

"We could call it the Mighty White, since it can haul all of us and them some," Di suggested.

Giggling, Honey nodded. "I think I like that better. I'd have a hard time saying 'Cajun Cruiser' with a straight face!"

"Hey!" Dan protested. "I'm trying here!"

Henry pulled up in front of the house and braked. "I sort of like Cajun Cruiser myself," he said with a grin. "Has a nice ring to it."

"Um, I think we'll go with Mighty White," Trixie said quickly. "It stays more with our theme." She opened her door and slid from her seat. Raising one hand, she tapped the van's roof and said, "I christen thee, The Mighty White."

As the others piled out of the vehicle, a small red sports car raced up the drive behind them.

Mrs. de Villemont's shoulders sagged. "Not now."

At first Trixie thought it might be Cambry de Villemont dropping in unannounced yet again, but when the door popped open, a short man in a flashy suit hopped from the driver's seat. "Angelique, my dear!"

"Good afternoon, Darren," Mrs. de Villemont said coolly.

"Just thought I'd come by and see how you're doing. I heard you've been having some trouble with a prowler! I've been concerned about your safety."

"That's funny. That's not what you told my sister. You left her with the impression you think I've been telling stories."

Darren Leopold's cheeks took on a decidedly pink hue, but he forged ahead in his conversation. "And who are these young children?"

From the corner of her eye, Trixie noticed Brian straightening up. She suspected, being seventeen, he didn't particularly like being referred to as a "young child." She didn't like it much either.

"These *young adults* are my guests, Darren," Mrs. de Villemont replied. "They're spending the week here at Rosehill."

"Oh, yes. Yes. I believe Cambry did mention that when we spoke the other day. Did she tell you we bumped into each other by any chance?"

"She told me. Darren, I want to inform you that I've considered your offer and decided I do not want to sell Rosehill. Not to you, nor anyone else."

Trixie traded a secret smile with Honey and forced herself not to jump up and down and cheer.

"Now, Angelique. Have you really considered what you'll do? Your property taxes are expected to rise again this year and I just don't think you'll be able to fully cover the

increase. If you sell to me now-

"I'm going to make Rosehill over into a Bed and Breakfast," Mrs. de Villemont announced. "The extra income that generates should more than adequately cover my increased taxes."

"A Bed and Breakfast!" Darren Leopold exclaimed. "You couldn't possibly!"

Mrs. de Villemont raised her chin. "I could and I will. And furthermore, while I know you've worked for the de Villemonts for many years, I don't believe I'm in need of your services any longer. You really don't seem to have my best interests at heart. You, Mr. Leopold, are fired!" With that she turned on her heel and marched up the steps to her porch.

Henry crossed his arms and cleared his throat. "I believe that means you may go now."

Darren Leopold's face turned an angry red. "She's making a mistake! A huge mistake! This crazy plan of hers will fail and I'll be able to pick up this property for a song!" He stomped over to his car and yanked open the door.

Mrs. de Villemont had turned around and she watched as her former lawyer backed his car over a low row of crabgrass and shot off down the drive, his tires spewing gravel and dirt in his wake. "That's the second time today that man has labeled me 'crazy.' I can't say I'm sorry to see him go." She smiled crookedly. "Of course, now I've really done it. Word of my plans will be all over River Road by nightfall and I'm not even totally sure it can be done."

Honey hurried up the steps to join her. "Let's not worry about it right now, ma'am. I think you did the right thing, sending that dreadful man on his way."

"Between the dreadful lawyer and the dreadful cousin, I don't know how she remains so cool and collected," Trixie muttered to her brother. "I think I would've really let loose on both of them by now."

Mart nodded his agreement. "I know. It's like that saying, 'With friends like these....'"

"Well, you know what?" Trixie said stoutly. "She does have friends. The *good* kind. She has us! Let's do something tonight to take her mind off all her troubles. Do you have any suggestions?"

Mart considered his sister's question for a moment. "I did see some old jazz records on a shelf in the parlor," he said slowly. "They say Louisianans love to have parties. We could strike up some music, maybe even do a little dancing...."

Trixie grinned. "Maybe we could even play some games. Charades, you think?"

"Indubitably your most preeminent proposition of the day, dear sister!"

Trixie rolled her eyes and tugged on his sleeve. "If you're saying that's a good idea, then let's go pass it on to everyone else."

At that moment another vehicle turned on to Rosehill's main drive.

"Now what," Henry muttered.

Trixie could feel Mart tense up beside her, but as the green sedan slowed to a stop behind the Mighty White and they could make out the vehicle's occupants, both brother and sister relaxed.

John and Earl, the Danes' two servants, climbed out of the car. "Sorry we're a little late," John called. "I had to finish a tune-up on Mrs. Dane's car first." He grinned at Trixie, his white teeth gleaming against his dark chestnut skin. "I'm sorry. I know we just met a few hours ago, but I can't remember which one you are."

Trixie grinned back. "I'm Trixie, and this is my brother Mart."

John nodded. "Right. Trixie and brother Mart. And one of those other fellows was another brother, right?"

"Brian. He's the one with the brown hair. Uh, the taller one with the brown hair."

John puffed out a breath. "Whew. Well, we'll see if I can keep that straight for more than twenty minutes! I've always been terrible with names!"

Henry stepped forward. "I'm glad you're here," he said to the two men. "Why don't we get you settled, and then I'll take you on a little tour."

"Come on, Trix," Mart said under his breath. "Let's get inside. Let them do their job, and we'll do ours."

Trixie nodded firmly. "For once, I'm in total agreement with you. Let Operation Cheer Up begin!"

## Chapter 10: Airboats and Alligators!

"Now, the first thing you must absolutely remember," Henry said as the Bob-Whites lined up along the wooden dock the next morning, "is to not go sticking your hands in the water. You might find yourself going back to New York missing a limb."

Di's violet eyes widened. "Maybe I could stay here and help with the preparations for the Crawfish Boil?"

Mrs. de Villemont smiled encouragingly. "You don't want to miss this, Diana. Once we're out on the waterways, you'll be glad you came along."

Trixie grinned at Di's unconvinced expression. "Don't worry, Di. I saw Jesse putting shotguns under the pilot seats. They'll take care of any mean gators."

"Really?" Honey asked. "You aren't making that up?"

"No, ma'am, she's not," Jesse confirmed. "Though we don't typically shoot the gators. Just every so often we have to fire off a warning round; get the critters to understand we aren't part o' their menu."

Honey swallowed heavily. "Okay, I'm starting to think maybe I'd like to stay behind, too."

"Let's see," Henry said, surveying the group. "I'll take Mrs. de Villemont, Honey, Jim and Dan. Jesse, you take those rascally Belden kids and Diana." He grinned at Trixie and her brothers as he said it.

"If y'all will just go over to that crate there and find a life preserver that fits, we'll be shoving off as soon as we can," Jesse said.

"Oh, we're all really good swimmers, sir," Trixie said. "Do we really need them?"

"You do if you plan to get on one of my boats, ma chere. Don't nobody ride on Jesse's boats without a jacket. Not even ole' Jesse himself."

The Bob-Whites hurried to comply. As they dug through the trunk removing the dark green preservers, they discovered they were one short.

"Mr. Jesse, sir?" Honey called politely. "There are ten of us total, but only nine jackets in here."

Jesse scratched his head. "Well, now. How did that happen?" He stepped across the dock and looked in the bin. "Henry?"

Henry shrugged. "I didn't take any of them."

Jesse frowned for a moment then snapped his fingers. "I think I've still got that little girl one in the back of my boat! I'll bet one of these girls could fit in it." He nodded to Honey. "You're just a little bit. It should fit you fine."

Honey glanced at Trixie and raised her brows. "Little bit?" she mouthed.

As Jesse hopped onto the front airboat, Mrs. de Villemont gave Honey a small hug. "Don't take it wrong, dear. He wasn't trying to insult you."

"I know, ma'am. It's just I don't think I've ever been called a 'little bit' before!"

Jesse returned holding a bright pink life preserver with large yellow flowers and blue and purple straps. Though Trixie tried to keep a neutral face as he helped Honey slide it over her shoulders, she couldn't stop herself from laughing aloud.

Jesse paused in the act of snapping the buckles. "Hmmm. This seems to be more wide than long." He glanced up. "You," he said, pointing to Trixie. "Let's try this on you."

It was Honey's turn to laugh as Trixie was snapped in. The other Bob-Whites pulled on their jackets and waited for Mrs. de Villemont to slip on hers.

"Wait," Mart said suddenly as they were about to climb into the boats.

"Yes?" Mrs. de Villemont asked.

"Let us just linger momentarily to feast our orbs upon the sartorial magnificence that is my little sister."

Trixie glared at her brother. "Cute. Very cute."

"Oh, I don't know," Jim said with a grin. "I think you do kind of look cute in that, Trix."

Mart rolled his eyes. "You *would* say that."

Ten minutes later, as the two airboats zipped through the boggy swamps, Trixie completely forgot about her life preserver and how she looked in it. She was too busy trying to look in all directions at once.

Tall cypress trees reached up toward sky, balanced on thick knobby roots that grew out of the trunks several feet above the water level. Trixie saw many beautiful birds. There were warblers and woodpeckers, a snowy white egret, and a large blue heron she guessed was close to four feet tall.

Jesse leaned forward to tap her on the shoulder. He pointed off to the right and slowed the boat.

There, less than two yards away on a mossy bank, a large alligator was resting in the sun. It seemed completely unperturbed by the passing airboats.

"That's just a young'un," Jesse explained, talking loudly to be heard. "His mama is somewhere nearby, probably looking for breakfast."

"That's a baby?" Trixie called back. "He's huge!"

Jesse grinned widely. "These are Swamp Gators, chere. They can get to be as big as sixteen feet."

Trixie lips parted in a silent 'O'. She couldn't really imagine a sixteen foot alligator and she was fairly sure she didn't want to.

A short while later they passed out of the wooded area of swamp and into a wide, flat bayou. Jesse applied the speed and soon they were racing along, the other airboat not far behind. Several times their boat seemed to bounce right off the water and Trixie grabbed her seat with both hands, clinging tightly as she enjoyed the thrilling ride. At last, Jesse turned them around in a wide curve and headed back toward their starting point.

When they finally reached the dock and disembarked, even Di's face was glowing with exhilaration. "That was amazing!" she crowed.

Mrs. de Villemont laughed merrily. "I'm so glad to hear you say so! Now we can head back to the house for our lunch. These boat rides always make me feel famished! Jesse, I hope you'll be joining us?"

Jesse suddenly looked uncomfortable. "Well, now. That's very nice of you—"

"He'll be joining us," Henry said firmly.

Jesse shrugged his broad shoulders. "I guess I'll be joining you," he mumbled as he tossed his life preserver back into the crate on the dock.

Henry winked at the Bob-Whites. "Jesse is at home on his boats, but take him out of the water and he's as shy as a baby rabbit."

Jesse accompanied the others for the half mile walk to Rosehill.

"Have you always been an airboat pilot?" Honey asked, trying to draw him into the conversation.

Jesse nodded. "Since I was just sixteen. All I ever wanted to do. I've got a house on the water and I don't much go anywhere I can't get to by walking or by boating."

"Did you and Henry grow up near here?" Trixie wanted to know.

"Just a stone's throw," Jesse replied with a smile. "I know these bayous and waterways like you know the back of your hand."

"So I guess there's no chance of you getting lost like poor Andre du Pree," Trixie said. "It was very beautiful and I'm so glad we had a chance to go out on your boats, but I'm absolutely certain I wouldn't want to ever be lost out there! Not with sixteen foot alligators to worry about."

Jesse ran a hand through his dark hair. "Andre du Pree, huh? Henry been telling you them ghost stories?"

"Well, he told us the story of Andre du Pree and Claire de Villemont, and that some people have claimed to see Andre's ghost, but he also said in all the time he's worked for Mrs. de Villemont he's never seen any ghosts. I don't really believe in them anyway," Trixie finished dismissively.

"Humph. I do. And I'll tell you what, I think I've seen old Andre myself a few times."

Trixie and Honey both turned to stare at Jesse, wondering if he was simply teasing them. His expression was sober, his mouth pulled into a slight frown.

"Really?" Trixie asked skeptically. "You really saw Andre's ghost?"

"You live out in the bayous; you see some strange things."

"We saw a light the other night," Trixie said, "but Henry said it was just the Lumie-the looms, uh, the Death Lights. He said it was swamp gas."

"And it might've been. When the conditions are right it can look like a whole host of gators is throwing themselves a great big party. But not all lights are swamp gas. I've seen a person out there in the bayous where no person should be. And if he didn't get swallowed up by some gator, I'm thinking it was because he was already dead, no?"

Honey crossed her arms and shuddered.

"Oh, Jesse!" Henry exclaimed. "Quit scaring the poor girls. There is no ghost!"

Jesse's brows drew downward. "I'll tell you what, little brother, just about a week ago I saw a man walking right through Bandit's Alley and he disappeared before my very eyes!"

By now all the Bob-Whites were listening to Jesse speak. "What's Bandit's Alley?" Trixie asked, intrigued.

Henry sighed, shooting his brother a dark look. "Jesse, you probably just saw some old fisherman. And he probably didn't disappear, he just passed out of your sight." He turned to Trixie. "Bandit's Alley is the name for the main waterway that leads from Rosehill to the next plantation about two miles from here. Some people used to say it was used by privateers, and at some point it got stuck with that name."

"Oh." Trixie glanced at Brian. "What's a privateer?" she whispered in a loud aside.

"Basically, a privateer is a pirate," Brian explained. "But they didn't call themselves pirates because they only looted enemy ships."

"Weren't all ships considered enemy ships to pirates?"

"Not exactly. Jean Lafitte was a privateer. He didn't mind looting and sinking foreign vessels, but he left the American ships alone."

"And privateers used these waterways?" Trixie asked, pointing to her right.

"So they say," Jesse replied.

"Gleeps! Maybe that's how Andre made his fortune! Maybe he really did come here with a pirate bounty and it got left behind when he was chased into the bayou!" Trixie exclaimed excitedly.

"And maybe you're starting to get a bit of gold fever yourself, Trix," Brian said, not unkindly.

"But Brian! What if that's what our mysterious digger is trying to find?"

"That probably *is* what our mysterious digger is trying to find," Brian answered. "But that doesn't mean there actually is a treasure out there; just that someone believes there is."

The path broadened out as they grew closer to their destination. Trixie walked along in silence for several minutes, trailing behind the others. No, it didn't mean there was a treasure to be found. But what if there was? Oh, what if there really was!

## Chapter 11: The Crawfish Boil

The back lawn of Rosehill was set up with four long tables covered in newspapers. Servants were carrying out massive two handled pots and buckets and there were already several guests for the Crawfish Boil by the time the Bob-Whites, Henry, Jesse and Mrs. de Villemont made it back to the house.

"Why don't you all run inside and wash up a bit," Mrs. de Villemont suggested. "Then I'll introduce you around."

It didn't take long before the BWGs were assembled on the back porch, and they walked down to the gathering together.

Mrs. de Villemont had invited several of her neighbors. There were two young families with their small children, a middle-aged bachelor, and an elderly couple who were long-standing friends of the de Villemont family. After giving everyone several minutes to meet, Mrs. de Villemont encouraged all of her guests to choose a place to sit.

"Have you ever been to a Crawfish Boil?" Mrs. Lewis asked as her husband helped her into her chair.

"No ma'am," Honey replied. "To be perfectly honest, I'm not even certain I know what a crawfish is."

Laughing, Mrs. Lewis reached out and gave Honey's hand a friendly pat. "Don't worry, dear," she said. "You're in for a treat. I've lived in Louisiana all seventy-six of my years, and this has always been my favorite way of dining alfresco."

"A crawfish is what I believe you northern folk refer to as a crayfish," Mr. Lewis added. "They look a little like lobsters, but they live in the ground in dirt mounds, which is why we call 'em 'mud bugs,' too."

Honey glanced at Trixie and Di and saw her own uncertain expression mirrored back at her.

Seeing their faces, Mrs. Lewis laughed again. "That doesn't sound too encouraging, does it? But I promise you, they're quite delicious."

Henry stopped at their table and plopped a large dented bucket down in the middle. He set a roll of paper towels and a bottle of hot pepper sauce down next to it.

"Hello, Henry," said Mrs. Lewis. "How's your mama, dear?"

"She's well, thank you. The doctors say her hip is healing just fine."

"I'm glad to hear it. It's always hard for us old folks when we slip and fall!"

As Henry moved on, Trixie reached out and tipped the bucket toward her, curious to see what was inside. It was empty.

"That's where we'll throw the shells," Mr. Lewis explained.

"Oh."

One of Mrs. de Villemont's young maids approached then with a stack of paper plates and plastic utensils. As she handed them around another maid walked up with a large stock pot balanced on her hip. To the girls' amazement, she tipped the pot and dumped an enormous pile of the crawfish directly onto the table. They slid across the newspaper covering, a few nearly falling to the ground.

"Potatoes?"

Startled, Trixie looked up. A woman was standing behind her, a black pan in her hand. She flashed Trixie a friendly smile and lowered the pan so Trixie could see the cooked new potatoes inside.

"Oh! Yes, please. I'd like some potatoes," Trixie said. The woman scooped out a large portion and dropped it onto her plate.

"Don't forget to have the corn-on-the-cob when it comes around, too," Mr. Lewis said as he reached out and plucked a crawfish from the pile in front of him. "Now, girls, if you'll watch me, I'll demonstrate how one goes about eating a mud bug."

He slowly twisted the crawfish until the head and tail separated. He set down the

head, then carefully peeled the shell from around the white tail meat and popped it in his mouth.

Trixie glanced at her friends. "I will if you will."

Honey shrugged one shoulder and gamely selected a crawfish from the pile.

Following her lead, Trixie and Di did the same.

It was harder than it had looked to pull the head and tail apart, but finally, with some work, all three girls accomplished the task.

"Here goes," Trixie murmured as she took her first bite. Her eyes widened immediately and she swallowed quickly. "Oh, golly! That's hot!" She looked around for something to drink. Fortunately, the same maid who'd brought them their plates was now setting down paper cups of lemonade.

The others at the table laughed as she downed her beverage.

"Well, go on," she said to Honey and Di, wiping at the tears in her eyes.

"I'm afraid to now!" Honey exclaimed.

Trixie found herself grinning. "It's really not that bad. Honest! I just wish I hadn't eaten so much at once."

Hesitantly, Honey broke off a small piece of meat and put it in her mouth. She chewed slowly and then swallowed. Chuckling, she fanned at her mouth. "It's certainly got a strong bite to it!"

Mr. Lewis grinned at them. "That's what makes it so good!"

"Oh, Remy, look. David Donnelly is here." Mrs. Lewis pointed toward the back verandah.

"Donnelly?" Trixie said. "As in Sheriff Donnelly?"

"The one and the same," Mrs. Lewis confirmed. "I'm so glad he's here. Everyone in the parish knows how sweet he is on Angelique. If only he'd work up the nerve to say something!"

Trixie turned to look. Sheriff Donnelly was a tall man with a handsome face and wavy black hair only starting to gray at the temples. He was dressed in a plain white shirt and creased tan slacks. As she watched, Mrs. de Villemont hurried up to greet him. Even from where she was sitting it was easy to see that the lawman was indeed "sweet" on their kind hostess.

Trixie traded smiles with Honey and Di. For a moment she had worried the sheriff's presence meant another incident somewhere on the Rosehill property, but it seemed his visit was purely of a social nature.

"How are you enjoying your vacation so far?" Mrs. Lewis asked courteously.

"We've already seen and done so many things," Honey replied. "It's been very fun. But sometimes it feels almost as if we're visiting a foreign country, rather than another part of the United States! It's so different here from back home."

Mrs. Lewis nodded. "Our Spanish and French influences are still strong here in Louisiana, even to this day. Why, even our laws are still based on the Napoleonic Code, and I'm sure you've already noticed, but we don't have 'counties' like all the other states. We're divided up into parishes instead."

Trixie glanced over to where the boys were sitting with Henry and Jesse. There seemed to be a lively conversation going on, and all eyes were on Mart. "Uh, oh. Now what do you suppose he's up to?"

"Who, dear?" Mrs. Lewis asked.

"My brother. Mart. The one with the blond hair sitting over there."

Even as she spoke, Mart suddenly pushed away from his table, jumped to his feet and began hopping around, waving both arms frantically.

"Goodness!" Mrs. Lewis exclaimed. "He looks like he's trying to fly!"

The others at Mart's table were laughing heartily.

"Brian!" Trixie called. "What *is* our crazy brother doing?"

Brian turned in his seat. "He poured a whole lot of the hot sauce on a crawfish and

took a huge bite," he called back, holding up his hands in a helpless shrug.

A maid rushed over to Mart, holding out a tall glass of water. He drank it quickly, then seeing his audience, proceeded to bow dramatically.

"What a ham!" Trixie mumbled, but she couldn't keep the amused smile from tilting up the corners of her mouth.

"My, my, it looks like we're having a party!"

Trixie knew who was speaking without needing to look to confirm it. Not only did she recognize the voice, but the strong, heavy scent of magnolias had assaulted her nose the same moment the woman had spoken.

Cambry de Villemont stood a few feet away. She was surveying the assemblage with narrowed eyes. "What are we celebrating?"

Mrs. de Villemont hurried up. "Good afternoon, Cambry," she said, her tone pleasant though not warm.

"Always having parties, aren't we, Angie? One would almost think you had money to burn the way you keep up! Oh, I know. Maybe you've already turned Rosehill into some common inn. These children aren't your guests. They're paying customers! Why, maybe they've paid to have a Crawfish Boil, too!" Cambry's trilling laughter was strident and forced.

Mrs. de Villemont's cheeks took on a decided pink hue. "Cambry, they are indeed my guests," she said quietly, with a slight tremble to her voice. "And no, of course they aren't paying for the Crawfish Boil. I am hosting it as a treat for my special friends."

"Well, then, Cousin, I guess my invitation got lost in the mail, eh?"

Before Mrs. de Villemont could respond, another voice spoke up.

"No, Cambry Lynn de Villemont, your invitation did not get lost in the mail!" Mrs. Lewis rose from her seat and stalked over to the younger woman. "And I know your dear mama raised you better than to turn up in a place where you don't belong! I'll not stand here and let you abuse your sweet cousin with your barbed comments and nasty ways. You can just march back to that flashy car of yours and go home, missy, and wait until you actually *are* invited to Rosehill before you show your face around here again! Though if Angelique knows what's good for her, that invitation won't ever come!"

Trixie, Honey and Di exchanged wide-eyed looks.

There was a moment where no one moved or said anything, then with an angry glare, Cambry whirled around and stomped off.

"Don't worry, Angelique, dear," Mrs. Lewis said, putting a supportive arm around Mrs. de Villemont's shoulders. "Unfortunately, there's one in every family! Now, if I'm not mistaken I saw a band arriving not ten minutes ago. So what say we strike up the music and show these young New Yorkers what dancing is really all about!"

The band, as Mr. Lewis explained a short while later to the Bob-Whites, played a style of music known as Zydeco, a local music of Creole origins. It was rousing and fun, played on instruments that ranged from everything from an accordion to a saxophone to something that looked suspiciously like an old fashioned wash board.

Some of the guests gathered on the lawn to perform dance steps that vaguely reminded Trixie of barn dancing, while others stayed at their tables and simply clapped their hands or tapped their feet to the strong beat.

Nearly two hours later, as the party was winding down, Trixie was surprised to realize how tired she was. When Mrs. de Villemont suggested an early night, she was quick to agree.

The sun had barely set when the girls gathered in Honey and Trixie's room to discuss the day and take their turns with the shower. As she had each previous night, Trixie took the time to look out the window just before going to bed, but again she saw nothing but the dark night sky and black shadowed plantation grounds.

Maybe it really was swamp gas, she thought wearily. Or maybe it had been a figment of her overactive imagination. She was really too tired to think any more about it. She

crawled under her covers, mumbled a good-night to Honey, and was asleep almost instantly.

## Chapter 12: A Suspicious Meeting

At shortly after six the next morning, Trixie rose from her bed, finally accepting that she wouldn't be able to return to sleep. She wished an early night to bed didn't always seem to mean an early morning to rise. She crossed to the window and looked out. There wasn't any mist or fog or even a cloud to be seen, and the sun was rising in a clear, deep blue sky. While the grounds were still cast in heavy shadows, she knew they wouldn't remain that way much longer and without a disorienting fog to worry about, she decided a walk in the rose gardens wouldn't bring censure down upon her head.

The air was already thick and hot by the time she let herself out the front door, and Trixie knew the day would reach scorching levels. It was hard to imagine that back home there would still be the last bits of snow on the ground.

She wandered the rose gardens, pausing often to sniff at some of the larger blooms. She tried the gate to Honey's "secret garden" and discovered a mundane vegetable garden tucked away behind thick stone walls she guessed were there to help keep out invading wildlife.

There was an old iron bench in the center along the back wall, and Trixie sat down on it, using the toe of her shoe to trace patterns in the wet earth at her feet.

She sighed wistfully. So far, she really hadn't done anything to solve the mystery of the trespassing digger, and there were only two days before the Bob-Whites were due to leave Rosehill and Louisiana and fly back to New York.

She was still lost in her morose thoughts when the sound of a car door slamming caught her attention. Curious, she rose from her seat and walked quietly back through the gardens to the front entrance.

At first she didn't see anything, but as she let her gaze drift across the landscape she caught sight of the back end of a small, red vehicle parked beside the garage.

Frowning, she took a few steps forward. If she wasn't mistaken, that car belonged to Darren Leopold!

She was suddenly aware of voices and she froze in her tracks.

There were people talking, and they were approaching from the left. Trixie hurriedly scooted back into the cover of the rose gardens, ducking to avoid being seen.

She couldn't make out any words, just the low rumble of two men talking. Cautiously, she rose up to peek over the gate.

It was Darren Leopold!

Trixie smothered a gasp. Darren was deep in conversation with Henry and neither man seemed to be aware that they were being observed. Although she desperately wanted to know what they were saying, Trixie didn't dare try to get any closer. Instead she waited with bated breath until Darren and Henry separated. Darren walked immediately to his parked car and Henry disappeared into the garage beyond.

When she was sure the coast was clear, Trixie darted back to the house and burst in the front door. Mart was just coming down the stairs and he halted mid-step, staring at her with an astounded expression. "Where did you come from?" he demanded.

"I was out in the rose gardens," Trixie replied hurriedly. "But listen, that doesn't matter right now. You'll never believe who I just saw. Darren Leopold was just here and he was talking with Henry!"

Mart frowned. "I don't like the sound of that. What could Henry want with that character?"

"I don't know! But you have to admit it's awfully suspicious! Mrs. de Villemont fired him. He has no business being back out here!"

Mart continued down the stairs. "Did you ask Henry about it?"

Trixie eyes rounded. "Of course not. They didn't see me and I waited until they were gone before I came back inside."

"That's probably for the best. Until you have solid proof, you don't want to be

leveling any serious accusations."

"But you do agree with me?" Trixie pressed. "You do think there's something fishy going on?"

Mart shrugged. "I don't know about your wacky theory about Andre du Pree's long lost pirate loot, but I do know that someone is tearing up the Rosehill grounds, and I don't like it that Henry seems to have some kind of connection with Darren Leopold. I don't think that lawyer can be trusted at all."

Trixie exhaled heavily. "I hope we're wrong, though, Mart. I know Mrs. de Villemont would be just crushed if it turned out Henry had something to do with the treasure hunter!"

Trixie and Mart walked down the narrow hall to the dining room to find a maid already setting out dishes. The young woman wished them a good morning and promised that their breakfast would be brought forth shortly before she slipped quietly from the room.

"I've been thinking," Trixie announced when she and her brother were alone again.

"Ordinarily a precarious enterprise for you to embark upon," Mart put in.

Trixie rolled her eyes. "I've been thinking," she began again. "What if the 'ghost' that Jesse saw was really our treasure hunter. And what if the light Honey, Di and I saw was the same?"

Mart considered this for a moment. "It's certainly possible," he said slowly.

"Well, remember what Jesse said? He said he knew these bayous around here really well, because he grew up nearby, right? And he's Henry's brother, so that means Henry knows the area just as well. He's really the only person who *could* be out there at night and not get lost!"

"Unless it's Jesse himself," Mart pointed out. "Maybe he lied about seeing a 'ghost.'"

"Or maybe they're working together!" Trixie exclaimed. "Maybe Henry told Jesse we'd seen that light, so Jesse told us his ghost story to throw off suspicion! Jesse could have been the one digging in the morning when Henry found Honey and me on the path."

"Then how does Darren Leopold fit in to this?"

"I'm not sure. He wants to buy Rosehill; that's for certain. Maybe he's hired Henry and Jesse to scare Mrs. de Villemont into selling?"

Mart gave Trixie a skeptical look. "Why would he do that? And what's that got to do with the holes in the ground that keep turning up?"

Trixie groaned. "I wish I knew! I think the only way we're going to figure this all out for sure is to catch our digger in the act!"

"And how do you propose doing that, exactly?"

"We'd have to set a trap."

"Look, Trixie. I don't like this situation any more than you do, but you must know a trap is out of the question!" Mart shook his head. "Our mystery treasure seeker seems to only come out at night or the wee hours of the morning. We can't be wandering the plantation grounds at those times. It really is too dangerous."

Trixie stubbornly stuck out her chin. "We have to do something, Mart! We have to!"

"Well, what if we talked to Earl and John?" Mart suggested. "I think it's a safe bet they don't have anything to do with this. We could tell them your suspicions and ask them to keep an eye on Henry."

Trixie pursed her lips and thought. "I guess so," she said finally. "But I don't know if they'll believe us. Most grown-ups never seem to take us seriously when it comes to stuff like this."

Mart nodded. "I know, but it can't hurt to try. The one thing we want to be sure of though, is that none of this gets back to Mrs. de Villemont. She's got enough worries as it is."

"Agreed," Trixie said. She sent Mart a grateful smile. He could be a pain sometimes and his teasing could be relentless, but, as always, when she really needed someone to talk with, he'd come through once again. In that department, Mart had never in her life let her down.

## Chapter 13: Trailing the Ghost

Despite Trixie's best intentions, most of the day passed before she had a chance to seek out either John or Earl. She also couldn't seem to find a chance to tell Honey about the meeting she'd witnessed. From the moment the others had arrived for breakfast, the day had been a busy one.

Julie arrived shortly after nine with their costumes for the ball, asking to conduct a final fitting. Following that, Mrs. de Villemont proposed a day trip to Avery Island. The Bob-Whites boarded the Mighty White and Henry drove them to the small island and bird sanctuary where they toured the Tabasco Pepper Sauce plant, learning how the hot pepper sauce was produced.

In the gift shop, Di purchased a bottle of the sauce, asking Honey and Trixie to keep it secret. "I'm going to give it to Mart," she whispered with a quiet giggle, "to help him remember this trip."

Trixie found a set of wooden toy animals native to Louisiana, including an alligator and a pelican. "Look at this," she said to Brian. "Don't you think Bobby would like this?"

Brian nodded his agreement. "And here's a pretty ceramic bowl I thought Moms would like."

The Bob-Whites finished their shopping and Mrs. de Villemont led them to a small restaurant at the back of the building. "I thought maybe we'd have our dinner here," she said. "Since it's a long ride home, I'm sure no one wants to wait that long. There are some picnic tables under the trees and you all haven't had a chance to try any famous Louisiana po-boys yet."

They dined on the po-boys, sandwiches of French bread filled with fried shrimp, in the shade of giant oak trees. Mrs. de Villemont talked about the upcoming ball and told them a little more about the history of Tabasco sauce and Avery Island.

Finally, shortly after five-thirty, they all climbed back into the Mighty White for the trip back to Rosehill.

"Well," Mrs. de Villemont said as they were under way. "I've been telling you all about New Orleans all week. Now, if you don't mind, I'd love to hear some stories about your home. I've only had the good fortune of visiting New York twice, and both times it was just to the city. I've never even seen the Hudson River valley."

Trixie, Honey and Mart all started talking at once. They cut themselves off, hesitated, then tried again. Laughing, Trixie nodded to Honey. "Mart and I will be quiet now. You go first."

The drive passed quickly as they took turns telling Mrs. de Villemont about Sleepyside and some of their adventures. "My goodness!" she exclaimed as Mart concluded his description of their trip to Vermont. "Honey, I have to admit, I thought maybe your mother was embellishing things a bit when we spoke on the phone, but it seems, if anything, she left some details out!"

It was dark by the time the Mighty White pulled onto Rosehill's main drive. As the Bob-Whites clambered from the van, Trixie suddenly remembered Mart's earlier suggestion and she cast an eye about for either of Mrs. Dane's servants.

"What's up?" Honey whispered.

Trixie glanced at her best friend. "Plenty. I just didn't have a chance to tell you yet. I need to find either Earl or John. Can you help me find a way to excuse myself without Henry or Mrs. de Villemont noticing?"

Honey gave Trixie a puzzled look. "Sure. Let's just say we're going to bed. That will give you a chance to explain things to me anyway."

Trixie nodded. She waited as the others started up the steps to the front porch and put a hand out to get Mart's attention. "We're going to tell Mrs. de Villemont we're tired and want to go to bed and then we're going to go look for Earl and John, all right? Will you tell the others as soon as you can?"

Mart's answering nod was barely perceptible. Inside the foyer, Mrs. de Villemont asked the Bob-Whites if they would like to play billiards in the game room.

"I'd like to," Dan said, "if someone will join me."

"Sure," Jim replied agreeably.

Brian ran a hand through his dark hair. "I've never been very good at it," he admitted, "but I'm game."

Mart and Trixie exchanged a look. "Honey and I were just saying how tired we are, so if you all don't mind, we'll just go to bed," Trixie announced.

"Me, too," Di said. "I'm not really much of a billiards player anyway."

The Bob-Whites all mounted one of the grand staircases and then separated at the top landing, the boys heading off in the direction of the game room, the girls for their rooms down the hall.

As soon as they reached their doors, Trixie grabbed Honey and Di's hands and pulled them into her room.

"Okay," Honey said as she closed the door. "Spill it. What's going on?"

Trixie told them about the meeting between Henry and Darren Leopold and the plan she and Mart had agreed upon to ask John and Earl for help.

Honey frowned and sat down on the chair by the antique writing desk. "Gee, Trix," she said slowly. "I don't know. I don't like the idea that Henry has something to do with Darren, either, but I just find it so hard to believe he could be involved in something so shady. He seems like such a nice man, and I think he really cares about Rosehill and Mrs. de Villemont."

"Then what was he doing with Darren this morning? It was obviously supposed to be a secret. Darren even tried to hide his car behind the garage!"

Honey looked over at Di. "What do you think?"

Di puffed out a breath that fluffed up her bangs. "Well, honestly, most of the time I never know what's going on until the very end. You two are so much more clever than I am."

Honey slipped from her seat and crossed the room to perch on the end of her bed at Di's side. "That's not at all true, Diana Lynch, and I don't ever want to hear you say something like that again! Why, if I believed that for even a moment, you don't think I would've asked for your opinion, now would I?"

Di smiled warmly at her friend. "Well," she said almost shyly. "I was only going to say that Trixie usually seems to be right about things like this and it probably couldn't hurt to at least go talk to Earl and John. We don't have to openly accuse Henry of any wrongdoing. Why don't we just explain what we saw the other night and ask them if they think maybe Henry was out and about for some reason and if they think he could've been responsible for the light we saw."

Honey gave Di a quick hug. "See? That makes perfectly perfect sense! I say we do it."

"Well, the first thing we have to do then, is get out of here without alerting Mrs. de Villemont," Trixie said. "Mart and I both think it would be a bad idea to add another burden to her worries."

Honey and Di both nodded.

"Did either of you see where she went when we came upstairs?"

"I think she said something about conferring with Cook about the ball," Di replied, "so if we hurry, we should be able to get out front while she's still in the back of the house in the kitchen."

"Do we even know where we're going?" Honey wanted to know.

Trixie walked to the window and peeked out. "Well, I'm assuming now that it's dark, John and Earl will be outside keeping an eye on things. Hopefully we'll be able to find at least one of them without too much trouble."

The three girls crept down the stairs and slipped out of the house through the front

door.

"Let's try the area around the rose gardens first," Trixie suggested softly.

They hurried around to the side of the house. It was much darker there, without the porch lights to illuminate their surroundings. They paused for a moment, listening.

"I don't hear or see anyone," Honey whispered after a few moments. "Should we try the garage? I think they're staying in the spare room there."

Trixie shook her head. "That's where Henry lives, too. We don't want to risk running into him. Come on. Let's go down the path a little. Maybe John or Earl is keeping watch near the band of oak trees."

As they moved down the slate stone path, Di wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. "It's spooky enough out here in the dark. I don't know how you two managed to wander around in a fog! I'm ready to go back for the boys."

Trixie glanced back at her. "No. If we're all out here, someone is bound to notice. But don't worry, Mart should be filling the others in on everything right now."

Honey suddenly ground to a halt. "Shhh," she hissed urgently as she raised one hand.

Di and Trixie stopped, too, and looked to where Honey was pointing. Ahead in the darkness they could make out a figure moving through the trees. "Do you think that's Earl or John?" Honey whispered.

"It could be," Trixie replied under her breath, "or it could be Henry himself. Let's follow him for a minute and see where he goes."

They trailed after the figure for several minutes, going deeper into the wooded area on the bayou's edge.

"Trixie, maybe we should turn back," Di urged. "We're getting too far from the house."

"We can't now, Di," Trixie replied earnestly. "This might be our chance to catch our phantom digger in the act!"

"Wait," Honey said. "Stop. I don't see him anymore. Do either of you?"

They all stood still, straining their eyes and ears.

"Over there!" Trixie suddenly announced. They could all see a flash of light. Trixie rushed quickly in its direction.

"No, Trixie," Honey called softly. "Wait!"

Trixie only waved her hand in a beckoning motion. With Di following reluctantly behind, Honey hurried after her friend.

The light moved away from them at a steady pace. A few minutes later they found themselves outside the old slaves' graveyard. The pale light was now moving through another row of ancient oaks.

"Hurry," Trixie whispered. "I don't think this is John or Earl."

They passed under a canopy of moss covered branches, and felt the ground squish beneath their feet.

"We're closer to the water now," Honey murmured. "We can't go much further. Trixie, we need to stop. I think-"

"He's still ahead of us," Trixie cut in. "We've got to catch up."

They continued walking, trying to muffle their steps. It was very dark under the cover of the trees, and more than once one of the girls stumbled over a tree root or rock.

Suddenly, without warning, the light winked out.

"Where'd it go?" Trixie demanded, turning in a full circle.

Di put her hand to her mouth. "Oh! Oh!" she murmured through her fingers. "We've been trailing the ghost and now we're lost!"

Trixie shook her head. "No. That was no ghost, Di. I'm sure of it."

Honey exhaled heavily. "I don't think it was a ghost, either," she agreed. "But that's what I've been trying to tell you. I think it might have been one of those Death Lights again. Henry said people get easily confused by it and wind up lost in the bayou!"

Trixie shook her head again. "I really don't think swamp gas could move like that. Besides, we're not lost; we can just turn back around and go back the way we came."

"Which way is that?" Di asked in a scared voice. "We've already gotten ourselves turned around so many times, I can't even tell which way we came!"

"Well, that's easy," Trixie said. "We came from over..." she trailed off as she realized they'd come much further than she'd thought. A bullfrog croaked nearby and all three girls jumped nervously. They could hear night animals scrounging in the underbrush.

Di clutched at Trixie's arm. "What if there's an alligator nearby," she wailed softly. "Oh, Trixie! We're lost! What do we do?"

## Chapter 14: Bob-Whites to the Rescue

Trixie drew in a deep breath. "Okay. We can get ourselves out of this," she said firmly. "Di, stand still for a moment and just think. You've really got the best sense of direction out of all of us."

Di bit down on her lower lip. For a long moment she said nothing, then slowly, she turned and pointed left. "I don't know why, but I think we should go this way."

The three girls moved forward cautiously. A night owl hooted nearby, and a small creature scurried across their path.

"What was that?" Honey demanded, hesitating.

Trixie grinned slightly. "I believe that was a nutria."

"Yuck!" Di declared. "Great. Rats and alligators. Is there anything else we need to worry about?"

Trixie was about to make a joking answer when she cut herself off before speaking. "Listen! Do you hear that?"

They held still, waiting. Somewhere not too far away, they could make out the sounds of someone digging.

"Come on," Trixie urged. "Let's go catch our ghost once and for all!"

They moved as quickly as they could through the trees. The digging noise grew steadily louder.

"I think we're coming to the tree line," Honey whispered. "It looks lighter up ahead."

They came to a halt at the edge of the oaks and were surprised to find themselves not near the graveyard as they had expected, but by a large clearing with two rows of decrepit, crumbling wooden buildings.

"Oh!" Honey exclaimed softly. "You know what I think this is? We must be at some old abandoned slaves' quarters."

The digging sounds were quite clear now. "I don't see anyone," Trixie murmured. "They must be behind one of the houses."

"Well, how do we find them without them finding us?" Di asked.

"Let's see if we can stick to the shadows and circle the clearing," Trixie suggested.

"That might work," Honey concurred, "unless the far side gets too close to the water."

They decided to move to the right, where the digging seemed loudest. They inched along in the cover of the trees, each step as quiet as possible.

"I think I'm starting to see some kind of light," Trixie whispered. "Do you see it?"

As they passed beyond the edge of the closest cabin, they could immediately see a lantern balanced on an old tree trunk. The light seemed very bright to their eyes after the heavy darkness and they blinked in the sudden glare.

Two people were standing near the light, one holding a shovel.

"It's Darren Leopold!" Trixie hissed. "I knew it!"

"And Cambry!" Honey added breathlessly. "What could they be doing?"

"They must be looking for Andre du Pree's missing treasure!" Trixie declared softly.

"But no one even knows if there *is* a missing treasure!" Honey whispered back.

"Apparently they think so!"

At that moment something small bounded by the girls, and despite their best intentions all three let out frightened yelps.

The rabbit that startled them scampered quickly away. They looked at one another in horror as Darren Leopold turned in their direction.

"Who's there?" he called. "Come out right now!" He dropped his shovel and snatched up a long shotgun.

"He's got a gun!" Trixie said anxiously. She grabbed her friends' hands. "Di, get us out of here!"

Cambry de Villemont hurried to the lantern and picked it up.

No longer concerned with keeping quiet, the girls crashed through the underbrush, darting in the opposite direction of the old slave cabins. They could hear Darren following close at their heels.

"Di!" Honey called out. "Do you know where we're going?"

"I hope so!" Di cried back. "If it helps any, I think the ground is getting harder!"

Trixie glanced over her shoulder. It appeared Cambry had taken up the pursuit as well. She could see the lantern bobbing crazily as the older woman chased them.

She looked ahead and narrowly avoided a low hanging branch. Just as she thought they were pulling ahead, Honey stumbled and lost her balance. Though she put out a hand to catch herself, she only managed to trip up Di as well. Both girls tumbled to the ground.

Trixie had to jump completely over them to avoid a further collision. She whirled around. "Stay down," she commanded sharply before suddenly banking to the left. "Let's go this way!" she called loudly. "Maybe we can lose them over here!"

She purposely made as much noise as she could, slapping at branches and snapping a few twigs as she passed. She noted with relief that both Darren and Cambry seemed to have fallen for her ploy. Taking a deep breath, just as she came upon a particularly wide oak, she turned to the side and pressed up against its massive trunk, freezing in place.

She was breathing heavily and she struggled to keep from giving her hiding spot away.

"Which way did they go?"

It was Cambry's voice. She sounded angry and out of breath. Trixie swallowed hard. Please let them keep going, she thought. Please!

A few more nerve-racking seconds passed and Trixie suddenly realized Cambry was very nearby. The scent of magnolia was so strong, it was all she could do to keep from sneezing.

"Trixie! Honey! Diana!"

Jim! It was Jim!

Trixie closed her eyes for a moment, hardly daring to believe. Jim was calling them and he wasn't too far away!

"Trixie!" That was Brian. Trixie almost smiled with relief. But though it was clear the boys were out looking for them, Cambry and Darren were much closer and Darren still had his shotgun.

"Do you hear that?" Darren demanded from somewhere off to Trixie's left. "Someone else is coming. We need to clear out!"

"It's too late for that!" Cambry cried. "Someone's already seen us tonight! We can't let them get away!"

"Honey! Trixie! Di!"

Trixie took a deep breath. She pursed her lips and blew the BWGs' signal for help, the bird whistle of their namesake.

*Bob-White! Bob-White! Bob-White!*

"What was that?" Cambry shouted.

"I don't know and I don't care!" Darren hollered. "I'm getting out of here while I can!" He spun around and dashed back in the direction of the slave cabins.

"This way!" someone shouted.

*Bob-White! Bob-White!*

Trixie silently cheered. Honey and Di had joined in the call for help.

Not far away, Trixie could now see the bright, powerful beam of several flashlights.

"Trixie! Where are you?"

She leaned to the side and peeked around the tree. At the sound of Jim's voice, Cambry had dropped her lantern and turned to run. "Over here, Jim! Here! Hurry! They're trying to get away!"

Jim and Brian were the first to reach Trixie's side. "Trixie!" Jim exclaimed, his voice hoarse with concern. "Are you all right? Where are Honey and Di?"

Before Trixie could answer, there was a loud shout followed by a high pitched shriek.

"We got her!" Di yelled out. "We got her!"

Trixie, Jim and Brian raced in the direction of her voice and a moment later came upon a scene Trixie was certain she'd never forget as long as she lived.

Honey and Di were both sitting on top of a struggling Cambry de Villemont!

"I tripped her with a tree branch!" Honey declared brightly.

"So I sat on her!" Di added, grinning.

"So I sat on her, too!" Honey finished with a giggle.

"Get them off of me!" Cambry screeched furiously.

Trixie couldn't help it. After the past hour filled with tension and fear, seeing Honey and Di perched on top of Cambry was simply too much. She crossed her arms over her stomach and laughed so hard she thought she might collapse.

## Chapter 15: The Journal of Claire de Villemont

By the time Dan and Mart reached the others, Jim and Brian were already helping Di and Honey to their feet.

John and Earl hurried up as well, and together they all escorted Cambry back to the plantation house.

"However did you find us?" Honey demanded. "I thought for sure we'd be lost out here at least until morning!"

Jim shook his head. "After Mart finished telling us about Henry and Darren, and Trixie's plan to talk to Earl and John, we decided we'd check up on you and find out what you'd learned from them. Only you weren't back yet, and when we went to look for you, we found both men patrolling the grounds. When they told us that neither of them had seen you girls, well, we knew there was trouble."

"We did go looking for them," Trixie said. "We just didn't find them, and then we saw someone walking through the trees. We tried to follow him, but we lost him at some point. Then we saw a light, so we followed *it* until it just up and disappeared. Honey thinks it was the Death Lights again. Anyway, when Di was trying to lead us home, we sort of stumbled upon Darren and Cambry on accident. They were out digging by some old slave cabins."

"Darren Leopold was here too?" Brian exclaimed.

"Yes!" Di answered. "And he had a shotgun! That's why we ran. But after you showed up, he ran off. I guess he got away."

"Not for long," John spoke up. "Mrs. de Villemont has already called for the sheriff.

As soon as we reach the house, we'll let him know to call in his men."

The walk back didn't seem nearly as long as Trixie had expected. She wondered if she and Honey and Di hadn't been as far away as they'd thought when they'd believed they were lost. It was so hard to tell with all the running around in the dark they'd done.

Mrs. de Villemont was standing on the front porch as they walked up. She gave a happy cry as soon as she spotted the girls and dashed down to meet them. After hugging each one in turn, she urged them all into the house.

"Cambry!" she said in surprise, catching sight of her cousin. "What are you doing here? And what happened to you? You look like you've been wrestling with a gator!"

They heard the crunch of tires on gravel and turned to see a patrol car pull up. Sheriff Donnelly, now dressed in uniform, and two deputies emerged from the vehicle.

"We've found them, David!" Mrs. de Villemont called. "But thank you for coming so quickly!"

"Mrs. de Villemont?" Trixie said quietly. "You'd better invite them in. There's something you should know and we can tell you and Sheriff Donnelly at the same time."

They all gathered in the parlor. In the light from the lamps scattered about the room, Honey and Di had their first good looks at themselves. "Oh, ick!" Di said, making a disgusted face. "Trixie, you tell them everything. I want to go take a shower, right now!"

Honey nodded. "I think I want to, too."

The girls slipped from the room and Trixie suddenly found herself with all eyes upon her.

"So, why don't you tell us what's going on," the sheriff said kindly.

Trixie inhaled deeply before beginning her tale. With an apologetic glance toward Mrs. de Villemont, she explained about the meeting she'd witnessed between Henry and Darren Leopold and her suspicions that they might be working together. She frowned and glanced around the room. "Where is Henry, anyway?"

Mrs. de Villemont answered. "He's in Kenner, Trixie. It's a little town near the city. His mother fell and broke her hip last week and he uses his nights off to visit her and make sure she's all right. Jesse goes when Henry's working."

"Oh," Trixie said, puzzled. "Then why did he meet with Darren Leopold this

morning?"

Mrs. de Villemont sighed. "Because I asked him, too. After that horrible confrontation, I didn't want to see Darren again, but I did need him to return any papers or files concerning myself and Rosehill. Henry figured the sooner that was taken care of, the better, so he called Darren and insisted he bring us everything right away."

Trixie looked over at Mart and he shrugged one shoulder. "I'm glad we were wrong about that," she said and Mart nodded.

"Well," Cambry cut in loudly. "Now that that's settled, I'd like to go home."

"Now hold on, Miss de Villemont," Sheriff Donnelly said. "We haven't heard your part in this."

Cambry's eyes glittered angrily and she scowled severely at the lawman.

"Cambry was working with Darren Leopold," Trixie said firmly. "Tonight, Honey, Di and I caught them digging behind the abandoned slave cabins. They chased us through the woods. We managed to catch Cambry, but Darren ran off."

Mrs. de Villemont gasped. At first Trixie thought it was because she was shocked to have confirmation of her cousin's duplicity, but instead she was looking at Trixie with a frightened expression. "Oh, my dear! Is that where you were? We never allow people back on that part of the property ever since Henry discovered a large alligator nest back there last summer!"

Trixie swallowed heavily at this pronouncement. "Maybe we'd better not ever tell Honey or Di that," she said faintly.

Mrs. de Villemont turned to her cousin. "Cambry! Whatever were you thinking? You're the one who's been tearing up Rosehill? Surely you didn't really expect to find Andre du Pree's treasure! Those old rumors are nothing but a fairy story! No one has ever even proved any treasure exists or that it's anywhere near here!"

Cambry raised a single eyebrow. "I'm not saying anything, Angie, without my lawyer!"

"Would that be the lawyer who ran off and left you holding the bag?" Sheriff Donnelly asked dryly.

There was a sudden loud knock on the door. Mrs. de Villemont's hand flew to her cheek. "Who could that be at this time of night?"

"I'll get it, ma'am," John offered politely. He stepped from the room and returned a few moments later with Jesse and Darren Leopold in tow. Jesse had one large hand planted on the lawyer's shoulder as he guided him into the room. "I decided to do a spot of late night fishing," he said with a grin, "and look what I caught me. A little thief!" Jesse poked Darren in the side. "He was out on a long boat in Bandit's Alley. *My* long boat to be precise. The one I still had docked for the season! And this here is my missing life jacket! And he had one of my good lanterns, to boot! As soon as I saw him I got to thinking about your troubles with a prowler, ma'am, and I figured I'd better reel him in."

Trixie snapped her fingers. "That must be how they've been coming and going at night! I've been wondering about that. And I'll bet the lantern light was the 'ghost' we've been seeing!"

Jesse nodded seriously. "I tend to agree with you, chere."

"Well, then," Sheriff Donnelly said. "It looks like we've got evidence of some crimes here. I suppose we should haul these two in. Stealing is no small matter."

"But I didn't steal anything!" Cambry wailed. "That was all Darren!"

The sheriff slowly smiled. "This is my favorite part," he said quietly. "When the guilty parties give each other up. Go on, Cambry. Tell us the whole story."

Cambry hesitated then nodded. "All right. A few months ago I went to see Darren. He's been the de Villemont lawyer for many years. I was having some... difficulties, financially, and I wanted his advice. That's when he proposed his crazy plan."

"Shut up, Cambry!" Darren Leopold growled. "Don't you know anything?"

Cambry ignored him. "A long time ago, Angie, right after your father-in-law died,

your husband gave Darren several boxes of papers to go through, to see if there was anything of importance. You know how Uncle always saved *everything*. Anyway, there wasn't really much there, except a very old diary. It turned out to be the journal of Claire de Villemont, and in it, well, there were several entries that seemed to indicate Andre du Pree had given Claire something very valuable and that she'd hidden it somewhere. Darren suggested we search for the treasure. Meanwhile, he was also trying to convince you to sell him Rosehill. He figured that would make the search easier, and we'd be able to rightfully claim anything we found for ourselves."

Mrs. de Villemont turned cold eyes on Darren. "You've had this journal in your possession and you never returned it to us? How dare you! The journal of Claire de Villemont would be treasure enough to me and I'm certain you know that!"

Sheriff Donnelly stepped forward. "Where is this journal now?"

Darren Leopold stared at the lawman defiantly.

"He keeps it in his safe," Cambry answered. "In his office."

The sheriff nodded. He turned to one of his men. "Get Judge Smith on the phone and tell him we need a search warrant. And while you're at it, call for another patrol car to bring our prisoners in." He looked over at Mrs. de Villemont and smiled. "Don't worry, Angelique. We'll have your journal back to you by morning."

"Thank you, David," Mrs. de Villemont said with a grateful smile.

"Now, then, I believe it's time we took these two and got out of your hair."

"Me, too?" Cambry demanded shrilly. "But I already told you, I didn't steal anything!"

"No, but you are guilty of trespassing and damaging the Rosehill grounds."

"And my garage," Mrs. de Villemont added. "And my car!"

Cambry flinched. "That was Darren's fault, too! We were going to search the rose gardens early one morning when no one was around, but then we were almost spotted by one of your maids. Darren had us hide in the garage and he scratched up your car with his shovel."

"She put a hole in the wall with hers," Darren snapped.

"Angelique? It's up to you," the sheriff said calmly. "I'm sure Jesse here will want to press charges against Mr. Leopold for the theft of his boat. Do you wish to press charges against Cambry for her role in this?"

Mrs. de Villemont thought for a moment, then rose from her seat. She crossed the room to the lawman and murmured something the others couldn't overhear. Sheriff Donnelly nodded once and chuckled softly. "Come along, Miss de Villemont. It looks like you're going to jail."

Cambry's eyes flew open wide. "Angie! You - you can't!"

Mrs. de Villemont regarded her cousin coolly. "I most certainly can."

The sheriff and his men escorted Cambry and Darren to the door. "I'll be by in the morning, Angelique," Sheriff Donnelly promised, "as soon as I can."

Jesse coughed into his hand and excused himself. "I think I'll be heading home now," he said. "I'd like to make sure that fool lawyer didn't do any real damage to my long boat."

"Oh, Jesse! How can we thank you?" Mrs. de Villemont exclaimed.

Jesse smiled bashfully. "Well, now. There's really nothing you need to say, ma'am. I was glad to be of service." As he stepped out off the porch and disappeared into the gloom of the night, the others could hear him whistling a jaunty tune.

"You're really going to press charges against your cousin, Mrs. de Villemont?" Trixie asked, grinning.

Mrs. de Villemont smiled back. "No, not really. I think Cambry may have already learned her lesson. But just to be sure, I told David to lock her up for a night or two. Now, I say we go to the kitchen and make a big pot of hot cocoa. I know it isn't chilly out, but with the night we've had, I think chocolate is in order. Wouldn't you all agree?"

## Chapter 16: Trixie Has the Answer

Sheriff Donnelly arrived at Rosehill the next morning as the Bob-Whites and Mrs. de Villemont were enjoying a late breakfast. He greeted everyone warmly then walked over to where Mrs. de Villemont was sitting. With a wide smile he held out a dark brown, leather-bound book tied with a piece of fraying ribbon.

"The journal!" Mrs. de Villemont cried. "As soon as we're done eating, why don't we retire to the parlor and have a look?"

Trixie found that after that suggestion she no longer had an appetite. All she wanted to do was hear the words of Claire de Villemont. She caught Jim flashing her a knowing grin and she shrugged ruefully.

Twenty minutes later they were all assembled together. The sheriff had regretfully excused himself, but Henry was present, leaning casually against the fireplace mantle.

Trixie approached Henry slowly and stammered out a red-faced apology. He let her squirm for a moment before he threw back his head and laughed jovially. "Don't you worry about it, Trixie," he said. "I'm just glad you girls didn't come to any harm last night!"

Mrs. de Villemont seated herself in a wingback chair by the window and gently untied the ribbon around Claire's journal. She carefully opened the book, brushing away a bit of dust. "Why, it's in quite good condition, considering its age," she remarked. She flipped through a few pages. "Hmmm. Mostly she's talking about life on the plantation. It's very fascinating, but I think I'll try to skip to the good part, as you young people would say." She peered over the book with a decided twinkle in her eyes.

There was a long moment of silence as she skimmed the writing. "Oh!" she exclaimed finally. "Listen to this! 'Andre came to see me tonight. It was to be our last chance to get away before I am forced to marry M. Gateau. But he was caught! Long have I suspected my sister of ill will towards us, and now I have my proof. Though she promised to help us run away together, instead Amilie called on Nathan and several of my father's slaves. They have chased my dear love out into the bayous. I can only pray that God will watch over him.'"

"How awful!" Di murmured sympathetically. "To be betrayed by her very own sister!"

Mrs. de Villemont nodded. She looked back down at the journal and turned a few more pages. "This is interesting. Perhaps this is where Darren and Cambry got their ideas. 'I have come to the conclusion that my love cannot return for me. I pray each night that he made it safe from the bayous and that he is somewhere far, far away from here. I will keep my secret for as long as I live. Amilie, at least, must never learn that I guard Andre's Rainbow. I shall never let her know.'"

"Andre's Rainbow?" Brian said slowly. "What do you suppose that could be?"

"I'm not really sure," Mrs. de Villemont answered. "Perhaps she mentions it again later on. Here's a passage about her mask. 'Tonight I have worked hard by the light of only my candle. I have finally completed my mask for the engagement ball Father insists we hold. I am so very weary and my fingers have bled many drops, but truly I can call this my greatest labor of love.'"

"When was her engagement ball again?" Honey asked. "I think you did mention it once."

"It was very soon after her portrait was painted. Just shortly after her nineteenth birthday," Mrs. de Villemont replied thoughtfully. "By these dates here, it would have been about two weeks after Andre disappeared." She continued to read through the journal, but to everyone's disappointment, no further mention of "Andre's Rainbow" was made.

"Well, goodness!" Mrs. de Villemont announced. "If that was all Darren and Cambry had to go on, I'm not surprised they came up empty-handed! How silly of them! Even supposing 'Andre's Rainbow' referred to some kind of treasure, well, certainly Claire would've taken it with her upon her marriage. She never would have been foolish enough to leave it behind, especially not when her sister was not to be trusted."

Trixie felt her shoulders slump. Mrs. de Villemont was right, but she had so hoped there would be some clue in the journal!

Mrs. de Villemont stood and carried the journal to a tall shelf. She slid it between two books and turned to smile at the Bob-Whites. "I'll need to contact an expert about how to properly preserve Claire's journal, but I suppose it will be safe where it is for now. Meanwhile, I thought perhaps you all would like a few quick lessons on ballroom dancing. I don't expect you to become instant masters, but a few tips I think should be of help."

It was hard for Trixie to muster up enthusiasm for the dance lessons. Several times she found her gaze wandering to the portrait of Claire de Villemont. If only there had been something more in that journal!

For the next two hours, the Bob-Whites worked with Mrs. de Villemont. While Honey and Di were able to drop into elegant, graceful curtsies after only a few tries, Trixie found herself constantly falling all the way to floor, landing in a cross-legged sit.

Finally, Mrs. de Villemont declared them ready for the ball. "I'm going to go see how our lunch is coming. I thought maybe we could eat out on the veranda. It really is a lovely day out. Why don't you all wash up and meet me there?"

The Bob-Whites took their turns in the washroom then let themselves out the front door.

"I'd like one more walk through the rose gardens while we wait," Di announced. "Would anyone like to join me?"

The others all agreed, even Dan, and so they walked down the path to the garden gate. Inside, Trixie only half listened to the chatter of her friends. When Jim finally recommended they return to the front of the house, he had to actually touch her arm to get her attention.

"Still thinking about that treasure?" he asked quietly.

Trixie nodded glumly. "I can't help it."

"I'm sorry, Trix, but I think Mrs. de Villemont is right. If 'Andre's Rainbow' was something valuable, Claire never would have left it behind here where Amilie might have discovered it."

Trixie knew Jim was making perfect sense, but it did little to make her feel better. She followed the others as they walked out to the main drive and crossed the pavement, heading for the front porch.

Trixie thought again of "Andre's Rainbow," and wondered what it could possibly be. A bright sparkle caught her eye and she turned toward it. The small diamond chips in Honey's watch were reflecting the bright Louisiana sun. Trixie stared at them for a moment, an idea forming. Excitement shot through her.

"That's it!" she shouted, startling the others. "That's it! I know where 'Andre's Rainbow' is! I know where Claire hid the treasure!" She rushed past her amazed friends in a mad dash for the house.

## Chapter 17: Laissez le bon temps rouler!

Trixie dashed up the wide porch steps and narrowly avoided careening into Mrs. de Villemont as their hostess walked out her front door.

"Goodness!" Mrs. de Villemont exclaimed. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes!" Trixie cried excitedly. "It's more than all right. Mrs. de Villemont, you have to come with us right away!"

Mrs. de Villemont's pretty face took on a puzzled look. "Where are we going?"

"Yeah, Trix," Mart muttered as he reached his sister's side. "What gives?"

"It's the mask!" Trixie called over her shoulder, running into the house and making a sharp turn toward the ballroom.

By the time the others caught up with her, Trixie was standing over Claire de Villemont's Mardi Gras mask display case. "Would you take it out, Mrs. de Villemont, please?" Trixie begged.

"Take it out? Oh, but my dear, we keep it in there because it's so fragile. I'm afraid-"

"Oh, please! Please!" Trixie urged. "It really is very important!"

"Trixie," Brian began, his tone severe. "What is this all about?"

Trixie shot her brother a pleading look. "I know why this mask was so important now. I do!"

Mrs. de Villemont slowly nodded her head. "All right, Trixie. We'll take it out." Carefully the older woman lifted the glass top and set it aside. She reached in with both hands and gingerly lifted the mask from its velvet bed. "Now what?"

"May I have it? Just for a moment?"

Mrs. de Villemont held out the mask.

As soon as she had it, Trixie was sure she was right. "It's very heavy."

"Yes," Mrs. de Villemont agreed. "But that's not uncommon for masks of that age. They didn't have the light-weight materials we do nowadays and often the masks were made from leather or even sometimes wood, with a square of fabric to cover them."

Trixie turned the mask over and studied the back. "I think this one is heavy for an entirely different reason." She flipped it back over, and with the edge of her fingernail, she picked at one particularly frayed feather.

"Trixie!" Honey exclaimed, horrified. "What are you doing?"

"It's all right, Honey. Look!" As Trixie pulled the feather from the mask, a tiny patch of the fabric beneath was exposed. There was a small, clear stone sewn into the material that caught the light from the chandelier above and sparkled like fire.

"What is that?" Dan asked, leaning forward for a better look.

"A diamond, I think," Trixie answered quietly. "I also think there's a lot more here." She held the mask back out to Mrs. de Villemont. "Would you like to check?"

Mrs. de Villemont's lips parted in a silent gasp. "I- I- I never dreamed...." She trailed off with a helpless shrug. Leading the Bob-Whites over to the alcove that was reserved for the musicians during plantation social events, she drew back a heavy rose and gold curtain to let more light in.

With long, steady fingers, Mrs. de Villemont began gently removing the old, faded feathers. As she pulled off each one, she handed them over to one of the girls. Slowly, the mask's material was revealed.

There were many stones sewn to the fabric. Diamonds, emeralds, rubies and a few sapphires. They glittered brightly in the morning sun. With each new discovery, the Bob-Whites' smiles grew, but they remained quiet as Mrs. de Villemont worked.

Finally, when the mask was free of its feather adornments, Mrs. de Villemont held it up for everyone to see.

"Oh, Trixie! Jewels! However did you know?" Honey stared at her best friend with wide eyes.

"It was in Claire's journal!" Trixie explained happily. "Remember how she said she'd

stayed up all night making her mask and it was truly a labor of love? Well, since it was for her engagement ball and she hated her future husband, it seemed like an odd thing to say, don't you think? She was hiding the jewels Andre had brought her. Cambry was right when she interpreted Claire's statement about 'guarding Andre's rainbow' to mean Claire really was in possession of Andre's fortune. She just didn't guess where Claire had hidden it. Claire and Andre were supposed to run away together, but then Amilie betrayed them and sent the servants after Andre. He ran out of the house and was chased into the bayous." She paused to draw in a deep breath. "And then when he was lost forever and Claire was forced to marry the man her father had chosen, she kept the mask with her always, and wore it to every ball so she had at least a reminder of the man she really loved. In fact, I think she was always hoping that somehow Andre would turn up again, so she never sold the jewels or even revealed them to anyone, wanting to have them if Andre returned for her. And I'll bet she didn't trust Amilie one bit, either, so she figured the jewels were best off hidden away."

"But poor Andre really did perish that night in the bayous, and Claire spent the rest of her life hoping against hope he'd somehow come back to her," Mrs. de Villemont murmured. "How terribly sad."

Trixie nodded. "I think she probably eventually accepted he was gone, but by that point she was a widow with enough money from her dead husband to live comfortably on her own. By then, I'm sure she kept the mask and jewels for sentimental reasons."

For a moment, everyone was silent, reflecting on the events of years before. But the somber mood was broken when Trixie suddenly reached out and put a hand on Mrs. de Villemont's arm. "Oh, Mrs. de Villemont! Do you know what this means? You definitely won't have to sell Rosehill now!"

Mrs. de Villemont's smile shone as brightly as the jewels in her hands. "Well, I don't know how much money these will fetch, but it certainly puts me in a good position to follow through with my dream to turn Rosehill into a Bed and Breakfast! Trixie, I don't even know how to begin to thank you!"

Jim grinned at Trixie and took her hand in his. "Well, Miss School-Girl Shamus, it looks like you've done it again!"

To the cheers of the other Bob-Whites, Trixie bowed.

Laughing, Mrs. de Villemont shook her head. "No, no, Trixie! What have I spent so much time trying to teach you?"

Blushing furiously, Trixie straightened up, then with only the slightest wobble, dipped into a deep curtsy.

The grandfather clock in the main hall chimed.

"Why, it's one o' clock!" Mrs. de Villemont exclaimed. "We'd best clear out of here so the servants have enough time to decorate! Come. We'll go call Sheriff Donnelly with the good news! And then we can spend the day relaxing and preparing for the ball! Goodness, but we have something to really celebrate now!"

As the Bob-Whites all prepared to follow their hostess, Jim gave Trixie's hand a light squeeze and held her back. "That was some detective work, Trix," he said warmly as the other's moved away. "You should be proud of yourself."

Trixie felt her cheeks grow warm again. "Thanks," she mumbled bashfully.

"I don't believe you ladies will be carrying dance cards tonight, but I just wanted to ask you if I might have the first dance with you?"

Without quite meeting his gaze, Trixie bobbed her head. "I'd like that," she said quietly.

Chuckling, Jim gave her hand another squeeze. "Let's go catch up with the others. I hope when Mrs. de Villemont gives the news to Sheriff Donnelly he thinks to pass it on to Cambry and Darren Leopold!"

Her momentary shyness forgotten, Trixie nodded vigorously. "Me, too! Let them squirm in their jails cells with that one!"

The Bob-Whites spent the early part of the afternoon playing a game of croquet on the wide lawn that ran along the east side of the plantation. Then, as the sun began tipping toward the west, it was Di who suggested they return to the house to prepare for the night's festivities.

The girls found their gowns pressed and waiting for them in their rooms. Just as Trixie was preparing to slip into hers, there was a knock at the door.

"Girls? May I come in?" Mrs. de Villemont cracked the door a little.

"Of course," Honey exclaimed. "Do you need our help with something?"

"You might say," Mrs. de Villemont replied with a mysterious smile as she stepped into the room. She was carrying a tall white bag. "Trixie, I know you already chose your costume, but there's something else I'd like you to wear."

She set the bag down on Honey's bed and reached up to unzip it. Moments later she was holding up a beautiful gown of deep blues with delicate lace trim.

"Why, it's Claire's dress!" Honey said. "The one from the portrait!"

Mrs. de Villemont smiled. "Not quite. That one was probably destroyed or thrown away many years ago. This is a copy I had made for one of Catherine's anniversary balls. I've had Julie working on it all afternoon, so I think it should fit just right. It will look wonderful on you, Trixie."

"It's very lovely," Trixie agreed. "But I'm almost afraid to even put it on. What if I spill something on it, or tear a hem, or—"

"Trixie!" Mrs. de Villemont held up her hands and laughed. "Don't worry about it! You're not nearly as clumsy as you think! Let me help you try it on, all right?"

Trixie was standing before the full length mirror as Di swept into the room, dressed in the violet gown she'd selected during their visit to Five Oaks. "Trixie! Don't you look darling!"

Trixie swung around. "I feel kind of silly," she admitted. "And these hoops are a nightmare! Can you imagine wearing them every day?"

"Ugh," Honey said, giggling. "No thanks!"

Half an hour later, the girls were ready to go down to dinner. Mrs. de Villemont excused herself to go change into her own costume. "I believe the boys are waiting for you in the parlor. Why don't you join them and I'll be with you momentarily?" She paused to give Trixie a quick hug. "I'm so glad you're wearing Claire's gown," she murmured. "I can't think of anything more appropriate. And we'll have to get your picture in front of Claire's portrait, too. I believe she'll be smiling down on us all tonight!"

As the girls walked into the parlor together, Mart jumped up from his seat. "The ladies have finally arrived! Laissez le bon temps rouler!"

"Lazy what?" Trixie demanded, her eyes narrowing.

Grinning, Jim stepped forward. "It's a local phrase, Trix. It means 'let the good times roll.' I think Mart is trying to say he's ready for the party to begin."

"Oh!" Trixie glanced at Jim. He was dressed as a southern gentleman, his dark suit bringing out the deep green of his eyes. He held a simple black mask in one hand and a single rose bud in the other.

"This is for you," he said, handing her the flower. "I talked Mrs. de Villemont's gardener into letting me steal it from the garden." He smiled at her, his gaze direct and admiring. "You look lovely, Trixie. I like your dress."

Trixie knew she was blushing furiously. "I- I like yours, too," she stammered. "I mean, your costume. Not your dress. Not that you're wearing a dress."

Jim's face was lit with gentle amusement as he thanked her for her compliment.

Trixie nodded toward Mart. "Leave it to him to dress as a court jester!"

"Well, it was between that or the pirate outfit, but we managed to convince him that Dan was more suited for that role."

Trixie suddenly giggled. "Oh, jeeppers! Can you imagine if they'd gone the other way? Mart as a pirate and Dan as a court jester?"

"Now that would've been something to see."

Mrs. de Villemont glided into the room moments later, wearing a flowing, elegant rose colored gown. "The guests are due to arrive in another hour, so let's go enjoy our dinner before the hordes descend!"

"Will there really be hordes?" Trixie asked, wide-eyed.

Mrs. de Villemont nodded solemnly. "We Louisianans take our balls and parties very seriously. Any excuse to get together and you can bet we'll be there!" She smiled then. "There should be plenty of people your age coming from miles around. And the more the merrier! We're going to all have a grand time!"

As they crossed the hall to the dining room, Honey glanced over at her best friend. "Can you believe the week is already over? Tomorrow we'll be getting back on a plane and flying home."

"Oh, let's not think about that right now," Di urged. "We have one more night. Let's just enjoy the magic!"

Magic, Trixie reflected silently. Was that the word? There certainly was something about Rosehill Plantation that made her wish their trip wasn't over quite yet. She turned as she felt a light tug on her sleeve.

"I just wanted to be sure Cinderella hasn't forgotten she promised me the first dance of the night," Jim whispered. "I'm afraid after that I'll lose you to all the boys in the neighborhood wanting to dance with the belle of the ball!"

Trixie felt a warm glow come over her. She didn't really believe she'd be the belle of the ball, not even in Claire's beautiful gown, but as long as *Jim* thought so, she knew the night would be very magical indeed!

The End