

Trixie Belden and the Mystery at Turtle Cove

By Dana

Trixie Belden stood next to the boat launch, hopping back and forth from one foot to another in excitement. She, her fellow Bob-Whites, and Matthew Wheeler were waiting for small pontoon boats to take them to the Turtle Cove Environmental Research Station, Southeastern Louisiana University's field station for environmental education and research. The station was located 50 miles northwest of New Orleans, five miles down a small river "pass" that connected Lake Pontchartrain with Lake Maurepas. The beating that it had taken from a particularly strong hurricane a little more than six months before had caused extensive damage to the facility and outlying research area. The president of the university, an old fraternity brother of Matthew Wheeler's, welcomed any help with the cleanup so that the important research undertaken at Turtle Cove could get back on track. Spring break was the perfect opportunity for the BWGs to lend seven pairs of helping hands.

When the Bob-Whites and their chaperone had first arrived at the boat launch, Bob Hastein, director of Turtle Cove had been on hand to greet them, insisting that he be called Bob and not Dr. Hastein. With his blond hair, lightened almost white from many hours spent in the sun, his tanned and somewhat sun-wrinkled face, and his bright green eyes, he was not only handsome but looked as though he knew his way around the outdoors. He had quickly explained to the group the damage that Turtle Cove had sustained.

"There's severe damage to the station building, the bulkheads, most of the boardwalks the researchers use to head out into the marsh areas for field study, and the wharf. The good news is that we've already scheduled a lot of repairs and are excited that there are going to be a lot of improvements as a result. We're trying to focus on the silver lining, anyway," he finished, and Trixie was impressed by the man's optimism.

He looked around at the Bob-Whites, his weather-beaten face taking on a somber look. "I'm sure you know that we've had to cease most of our operations at Turtle Cove facility while we make the necessary repairs following the hurricane." He paused, a deep, regretful sigh escaping his lips. "We've got a lot of university grad students who really need to be able to continue their research so that they can write their theses and graduate. Setbacks like this can cause serious harm to their graduate careers and financial situations." He paused again, shaking his head. "It's a real shame, and that's why we really appreciate you all coming down here to help us. The more hands that we have helping out, the sooner we can get back up and running and get our researchers back on track and our students closer to completing their research projects and graduating."

"We're just glad you gave us the opportunity to help!" Trixie exclaimed enthusiastically. The six remaining Bob-Whites nodded their emphatic agreement.

Currently, Bob said to the group, "The boats are ready. Are you all warm enough? It gets pretty cold when we get going out on the open water."

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The teenagers eagerly told him that they were much warmer than they would be in their native New York and set about boarding the boats. The pontoon boats weren't very large—they comfortably fit about five people each—and were completely open to the elements. Trixie, Jim Frayne, Honey Wheeler, and Trixie's oldest brother, Brian, piled into one boat, with a handsome young man called Derek Bishop at the helm. In another boat, Trixie's next oldest brother, Mart, helped pretty Di Lynch board, followed by Dan Mangan and Matt Wheeler. A gruff-looking, older gentleman with a shock of grey hair named Ted Burke manned that boat. Bob climbed into the third boat, along with four other scientists from Turtle Cove. Soon, the three boats were cruising down the pass.

Pass Manchac, a fifteen-foot wide, curvy, narrow inlet of water, was lined with tiny shacks. Trixie's curiosity was piqued by these little structures, which had apparently survived the hurricane. They did not appear as though they could possibly be inhabited, but she couldn't imagine that the university had built them. They were made of wood, some with corrugated steel roofs, and most of them had small porches. The porches butted right up to the small waterway, and all of the shacks had docks, most of which were adorned with rowboats. Trixie's mind churned for an explanation.

Suddenly, she saw a small, scruffy, brown-and-white dog standing on the porch of one of the little shacks, barking delightedly at the boats motoring by. Derek smiled at the young blonde sleuth as if reading her mind, explaining that people had lived in these tiny dwellings for years, sometimes generations, living off of the land and water. It was true that they did not have much, but they didn't need much, either. Trixie felt ashamed, remembering the time that she had described her comfortable family as "poor as church mice."

As Trixie watched the shaggy little dog, a man slowly ambled out onto the porch. Trixie was surprised when she saw him. He was young and muscular, his brown hair trimmed short, and his brown eyes soft and warm. He was well-groomed, and there was absolutely nothing about him that screamed poverty. Trixie reminded herself that a book should never be judged by its cover.

Soon, the reeds and the shacks gave away to the open water of Pass Manchac. The pontoon boats turned sharply to the right and picked up speed. Trixie felt shivers of excitement. The sky was a clear blue; so clear, actually, that it was stunning. Between the clear blue sky, the warm sun shining on her face, and the wind whipping through her loose, sandy blonde curls, Trixie didn't know when she had ever felt more alive in her whole life. She smiled as Jim took her hand, his green eyes lit with a smile that matched his crooked grin. She could tell he felt the same way.

As they rode along, Derek pointed out the brown pelicans, ibis, and egrets. Trixie really wanted to see an alligator and kept her eyes peeled, eagerly awaiting the opportunity to see one up close.

After they had ridden for about twenty or so minutes and passed the various buildings and docks that sat along Pass Manchac, Trixie saw a green structure up ahead on the right and guessed that it was the main Turtle Cove facility, called the Lodge or the Guest House. Thanks to the hurricane's vengeance, the front porch of the century-old building no longer existed, and

a makeshift floating dock, made of wooden planks and plastic barrels held together with rope, sat in front. The passengers disembarked onto the dock as an older man with long grey hair tied into a ponytail and a worn, weather-beaten face came out of the quaint green building, greeting them warmly. "So, did you see any gators on the way over?"

Trixie answered immediately. "No," she said glumly, "and I looked and looked!"

The man laughed. "Well, you'll see one before you leave. I can guarantee that."

Di looked apprehensive at the man's words. "Really? Because I think I could do without that experience, thank you very much."

"Well, you'll definitely see one at lunch. The meat of one anyway," the man explained.

"Really?" Mart eagerly asked. He was the most culinarily adventurous of the bunch, and he loved to try new foods wherever he went. Alligator was not something that he had had the opportunity to experience, and he was eager to try it. He wanted to see for himself if it tasted like chicken, as the old saying went.

The man nodded and smiled, the corners of his pale blue eyes crinkling up in a manner that somehow made Trixie feel oddly at ease. He almost reminded her of gruff Mr. Maypenny back home. "I've made some of my alligator and Andouille sausage sauce piquant for y'all." As he was speaking, he held out his hand to Mart. "I'm Joseph Rivers, caretaker here at Turtle Cove, but you can call me Joe. It's a pleasure to welcome you all down here. We love showing off our research station! Unfortunately, she's not at her best right now, but we're mighty grateful that y'all have come on down to help us get her back on her feet."

"We're glad to be here, sir," Mart said earnestly, shaking the man's hand. He then led the introductions of the Bob-Whites, ending with Honey and Jim's dad.

Joe offered his hand to Matt Wheeler. "Thank you, sir, for allowing these young'uns to come help us clean up after those storms."

"It's my pleasure, Joe," the redhead said, returning the man's bracing handshake. "We're glad that we could help in some small way."

"Oh, it's not small, sir," Joe said immediately.

"Y'all are lucky," Bob said as he joined the group, after all three boats were securely tied to moorings on the shore. "Joe's one of the best cooks around, and he's made you one of his specialties. He makes it from alligator that he catches himself here in the Manchac Swamp that surrounds us."

"Really?" Jim said, his curiosity piqued. "You can just go out and catch your own alligator? In New York State, you need all sorts of licenses and permits to hunt."

"Well, permits *are* required, but I do happen to have a permit to trap alligator," Joe explained.

"Wow!" Mart exclaimed. "That is so cool!"

Joe laughed and then said in his charming Louisiana drawl, "And now, if y'all will follow me, I'll show you around."

The group eagerly followed him inside into a large, quaint room, which took up most of the first floor. The walls were covered with maps and prints of the area, and stuffed and mounted local animals perched throughout. A series of chairs, futons, and couches with wooden frames sported green cushions, and several small tables and ottomans adorned the room. A fireplace stood at the far end of the room. Above it was a magnificent penciled drawing of Turtle Cove.

Di, who was particularly interested in art, wandered over toward the drawing. "This is absolutely gorgeous," she said.

"Thank you," Joe said. "I drew that the first year I started taking care of Turtle Cove."

"You drew this?" the black-haired beauty asked, impressed. "It's wonderful!"

Joe seemed embarrassed but pleased by the young girl's compliment.

After everyone had admired the drawing, Joe continued the tour. The former hunting and fishing lodge was a simple facility, but more than adequate for the needs of the researchers who utilized it, including a dining room and fully-stocked kitchen on the first floor, sleeping quarters on the second floor, and even a conference room and modernly equipped office on the third floor. Back downstairs in the kitchen following the tour, the group sniffed appreciatively at a large pot on the stove, which emitted a wonderful aroma. Trixie guessed that this must be the sauce piquante for which Joe was famous.

Joe explained that the guest rooms generally were used for only one or two nights when students worked too late to head back to campus at nights. Stays more than three days were rare.

"I know y'all are here for a week. I hope you'll be okay." The grizzled man seemed to fret, and Honey, who had already adored this sweet old man, hastened to reassure him.

"It's great!" she cried impulsively. "We'll be fine."

Jim added, "We've spent lots of time camping in tents. Some of us even spent a night in an abandoned schoolhouse in the middle of a blizzard. This is luxury!"

Joe's eyebrows shot up. "Stranded in a blizzard? That sounds downright terrifying!"

"That's funny," Dan commented with a chuckle, "because I was thinking that I'd rather be trapped in a blizzard than in the crosshairs of a category four hurricane!"

Joe, too, chuckled. "I guess it's all about what you're used to. The recent one caused a lot of damage, but it wasn't my first hurricane. And I suspect it won't be my last. But I've never seen snow in my life, so *that* is a downright frightening concept to me!"

Brian grinned. "I guess it would be at that. We had a hurricane in Sleepyside, but by the time it hit us, it had been on land for a bit and lost a lot of its strength. We were lucky."

Trixie nodded, her sandy curls bouncing. "The worst that happened was a tree crashed through the roof of our clubhouse. But we got temporary jobs as gamekeepers—that was before Mr. Maypenny got the job as gamekeeper, you see. We, well, Honey and me, thought he was a poacher, but we did what we could to earn the money to buy the lumber to repair the roof to repay Brian back so he could buy Mr. Lytell's jalopy."

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She was greeted with amused smiles all around at the end of her story. "What did I say?" she asked, her big blue eyes bewildered.

"It's not so much *what* you said, Trix," Mart said between chortles. "It was rather the speed with which you raced through the story without any regard to the fact that our new Louisianan friends have no idea who Mr. Maypenny or Mr. Lytell are."

Trixie looked sheepish as she turned to her hosts. "I guess I got carried away," she said with a rueful grin. "I forget that not everyone is in my head with me while I'm talking."

"That's all right, Trixie," Joe said with a friendly grin. "I'd love to hear all about Mr. Maypenny and your clubhouse and your lives in New York."

"That's good," Mart said, pausing to give an exaggerated sigh and a glance at his sister. "Because Trixie definitely likes to talk."

"Yeah?" his almost-twin shot back. "Well at least I speak in words of one syllable instead of sounding like I tried to get my daily fiber requirement by eating the dictionary!"

Brian looked toward the two older Louisianans. "You'll have to excuse my younger brother and sister," he said apologetically. "They haven't outgrown that sibling rivalry stage. Too close in age and all that."

Trixie looked ready to retort, but then she decided against it and smiled instead. "Having two know-it-all brothers drives me to distraction," she admitted, "but I do apologize for my behavior."

Joe threw back his head and laughed. "I'm the youngest of twelve kids, and Robert here is the oldest of seven, so we know a thing or two about sibling rivalry. Y'all have nothing to apologize for. I'm just mighty flattered you feel comfortable enough to act like normal kids. It's great." His pale blue eyes twinkled and he good-naturedly ordered them to wash up for lunch. After the Bob-Whites had washed their hands, they helped set the table and eagerly ate a delicious and hearty meal of Joe's famous alligator and Andouille sausage sauce piquant, which Mart declared "*magnifique!*"

After the lunch dishes had been cleaned up, Joe asked. "Now, are you ready to explore the marsh?"

"You bet!" came the excited chorus from the teenagers, and even Matt Wheeler looked eager to explore the swampland.

As they stepped out of the back door of the station, Trixie looked toward the swamp and felt that familiar tingle again. Something exciting lay ahead. She just knew it!

Before the hurricane, there had been a half-mile of boardwalk snaking around the marsh. Now, there was only about three hundred feet left, much of it twisted, torn up, and unusable. One of the Bob-Whites' tasks would be to help completely dislodge twisted planks and load them into boats to be recycled. Tearing out the useless boardwalk and replacing it with a functional

boardwalk was one of the more important post-hurricane tasks, so that the grad students and researchers would have access to their sampling points.

After traveling about fifty feet or so on the still-viable boardwalk, the group came upon a tall structure that appeared to have survived the high winds and storm surges. It was about fifteen-feet high and served as a scenic lookout.

Trixie immediately turned to Joe. "Is this safe? Can we climb it?" She ignored the amused glances of her friends.

Joe nodded. "Somehow that survived. We've made sure it's safe, so please feel free to climb it and get a bird's eye view of the swamp. Or what's left of it. It'll hold three to four people at a time."

Trixie immediately headed over to the simple wooden structure and carefully but eagerly climbed it. Jim, Mart, and Dan were right behind her.

At the top of the lookout, Trixie did indeed find that she had a bird's eye view of the area. Knowing its history, the sight was actually rather depressing, truth be told. What had once been a mighty cypress swamp, full of giant, hearty trees, was now a marsh, the grassy landscape peppered with the remnants of dead or dying trees. Trixie's eyes followed the boardwalk below. She could see the viable paths abruptly end in a tangled mess of uprooted planks. In the distance, the marsh ended in a more forested area, but it was clear that even that was not anywhere near as impressive as the cypress forest that had stood just fifty or so years ago, before over-logging of the area had left the area decimated and more vulnerable to hurricanes.

"I wish I could have seen it in its prime," Trixie lamented.

Jim agreed. "We need to take better care of our natural resources," he murmured, thinking of his dad, the naturalist.

After a few sober moments, during which Trixie's eagle eyes spotted a wooden building about two hundred yards from the Lodge, the foursome returned to the group waiting for them on the ground.

"Your turn!" Trixie said to the remaining Bob-Whites and Matthew Wheeler in an attempt at cheerfulness as her foot hit the ground.

As she waited for the group in the lookout tower to return, Trixie turned to Joe. "I noticed another building off to the left of Turtle Cove, well left from the vantage point of the tower. Is that part of Turtle Cove?"

Joe nodded. "That's the annex. It sustained quite a bit of damage, and we're not able to use it currently."

"Damage from the hurricane?" the young sleuth asked.

Joe looked uncomfortable for a brief moment. "Some of it happened during the hurricane," he admitted, and then the grizzled man swiftly changed the subject. "An important animal to this ecosystem, one you might not have heard of, is the nutria. They're rodents, and they look like big rats, but they're actually related to the beaver. Y'all will also have to be careful of snakes. A

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lot of them live out here, a fair amount of them of the poisonous variety. You did bring heavy-duty boots, didn't you?"

Trixie was too busy thinking of his previous statement to respond, but Jim did. "We did bring them, sir. We wear them in the woods back home, where we have copperheads."

A discussion of poisonous snakes ensued, but Trixie kept wondering about the Turtle Cove caretaker's admission that "some" of the damage had been during the storm and his eagerness to change the subject.

So, Trixie wondered, if the hurricane and resulting storm surge and high winds hadn't caused the damage, what—or who—had?

The rest of the afternoon was devoted to learning exactly what was expected of them. Matt Wheeler had said his good-byes to the Bob-Whites, shaking hands with Joe and saying that he knew the kids were in good hands. A Turtle Cove staff member ferried him back to the boat launch, and from there, he was going to take the Wheeler jet to Dallas, San Antonio, and El Paso, where he had business. He would be back in a week to pick them up.

To complete the work, the Bob-Whites would be assigned to teams with Turtle Cove staff members and grad students, who would be arriving the following morning. Each team was assigned a work area. Jim and Trixie had been paired the caretaker himself. The groups split up, each heading to their assigned area to assess the work ahead, which would begin the next day.

In their boat, which Joe and Jim paddled since motorized boats were not allowed on the surface of the experimental marsh, Trixie told Joe that Jim's dad had been a naturalist. She went on to explain about the school for underprivileged boys that Jim planned to open, with a curriculum that would include a lot of outdoor subjects.

"It sounds like an ambitious endeavor," Joe commented. "But given what I can already tell about you kids, I'm sure you'll be successful." He turned to the perky young blonde girl and asked with a grin, "And what do you want to be when you grow up, Trixie?"

Trixie hesitated a moment, never sure when an adult was going to make fun of her career ambitions. "Well..." she started to say.

Jim smiled at her encouragingly. "Go ahead," he urged. "Tell him. You told him all about *my* plans."

"No one laughs at *your* plans," Trixie retorted.

"I promise not to laugh," Joe vowed solemnly.

Trixie smiled at the older gentleman's encouragement. "Honey and I, well, we want to be detectives and have our own detective agency some day."

"Now why would I find that funny?" Joe asked. "Being a detective, doing right by people, finding justice, that's a fine job."

Trixie looked at Jim and pretended to scowl. "*Some* people tease Honey and me and call us 'schoolgirl shamuses.'"

Jim smiled as he reached out and, almost without thinking, tugged his favorite curl, the errant one that always fell in the middle of Trixie's forehead. "You know I mean that in the nicest possible way, Shamus."

Trixie blushed, and Joe looked on with a knowing grin. Seeing that Jim suddenly looked a bit uncomfortable as he realized that he had worn more of his heart on his sleeve than he had intended, and in front of a near stranger at that, Joe changed the subject.

"No matter what they call you, they really believe in you, I bet," he said cheerfully as he steered the boat.

Trixie thought back to Joe's earlier comments. As long as the subject of her "detectiving" had been brought up, she figured she might as well do some. "Joe," she began, "I hope you don't mind me asking, but you mentioned some damage that wasn't because of the hurricane. Can you tell us about it? Maybe we could all keep our eyes peeled for you."

Joe looked surprised for a moment and then chuckled. "I guess I can't keep anything past the future detective." His smile quickly vanished, however, and a heavy sigh escaped his lips as he admitted, "There *was* something unusual going on around the time the hurricane came through."

Trixie felt the hairs stand up on the back of her neck as she leaned forward excitedly. "What?" she asked breathlessly.

"We obviously did a lot of damage assessment after the hurricane," Joe began. "There was a second storm that hit following the hurricane. Some of the damage I found after that second storm seemed odd, and I knew it wasn't from the hurricane. I reported the unusual damage to Bob, and he told me not to make a big fuss about it to the Turtle Cove researchers. He didn't want them any more worried than they already were. We tried to tell ourselves it was caused by animals. We really wanted to believe that, and we weren't sure it wasn't."

For a moment, Trixie thought of her cousin, Cap. He had a love of the outdoors, just as Joe did. Cap Belden was savvy about the forest he lived in and all of its creatures. Trixie had no doubts that the same could be said of Joe. If Joe thought that damage was unusual, then Trixie was sure it hadn't been caused by animals. And she was sure that the weathered man before her was, too.

Joe was saying, "Derek noticed that some of the damage was a bit unusual, so when he mentioned it, I casually said that I was aware and had reported it to Bob. He seemed to accept my explanation that it was caused by animals, and I thought that was that." Joe paused, exhaling his breath in another big sigh.

"But...?" Trixie prompted, unable to control herself.

"But then we started to sustain more damage. Damage that definitely couldn't have been caused by the storm surges or by animals. By that time, we'd done enough repairs that the facility was locked up tighter than a drum, and all the windows broken during the hurricane had been replaced."

“So it had to be human?” Trixie questioned. “And someone with a key to the Turtle Cove facility?”

Joe hesitated, and Trixie knew that it was hard for the man to consider that someone he worked with and trusted could have caused the mysterious damage.

“Well, I trust the Turtle Cove people,” he finally said, looking off in the distance as he steered their boat. “We function a bit like a family out here. We all work together for a common goal, and there’s a certain amount of loyalty present among the people who work and live at Turtle Cove. On the other hand, it’s hard to figure out how an outsider could have had access.”

“And there’s no way that signs of a break-in could have been overlooked?” Trixie asked.

“We boarded up our annex, the one you saw from the lookout tower earlier today, Trixie, before the hurricane hit. We never had a chance to take the boards down before the following storm hit. After that second storm, I used my key to let myself inside, and that’s when I saw that all of the wooden classroom chairs in the basement had been smashed to bits. There was some flood damage, but no flood could have caused that kind of damage to the chairs. I mean, there’s no mistaking, they would have all been worthless after the hurricane anyway—and they were old and not in use to boot—but the damage was unlike anything I’ve seen following a storm.” He rubbed his tanned and leathery face with a big, rough hand.

Trixie continued to question Joe. “Do you know anyone who might have a grudge against Turtle Cove? Anyone who left but might still have a key?”

Joe shook his head. “We’ve only had one person leave under bad conditions. He decided that Turtle Cove would be a great place to throw a keg party, and he got caught. We changed the locks after he left. Besides, that was, oh, about five or six years back now. I don’t see why he’d reappear now.”

“Just in case, do you have any idea where he is now? What was his name?” Trixie wanted to know.

“His name was Craig...Craig Webster. He stayed on at the university. He was a good kid at heart, really. Afterward, he said it was a wake-up call. Getting caught made him evaluate things, and he decided his heart wasn’t in biology. He transferred to the engineering program. Graduated, last I heard.”

Trixie filed this information away, even though she didn’t really think this Craig was a viable suspect. The revenge motive at this point, especially since the incident had allowed him to find his true calling, was pretty weak.

“Has anything happened since then? Any more damage?” Jim wanted to know.

The caretaker shook his head. “That was the end of it. It’s been several months, and there’s been no new damage, so we’ve decided to forget it and move on.”

Before Trixie could ask another question, Joe pulled the boat alongside the section of boardwalk assigned to them, and she was forced to swallow her curiosity as the three set about determining the best course of action for removing the twisted planks that had once been an attractive and valuable boardwalk.

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The next morning, the grad students who planned to help with the clean-up efforts arrived at Turtle Cove. Everyone gathered in the third-floor classroom, where Joe introduced the Bob-Whites to the students and then set about introducing each of the students to the New Yorkers.

“This one right here standing on the other side of me is Andy Sutton,” the Turtle Cove caretaker said, indicating an extremely tall and lanky blond with crystal clear blue eyes. He had a goatee and looked a little scruffy, but his smile was warm.

“Standing next to him is Toni Griffiths.” Toni was a tall, lithe, black girl with a mass of curly black hair and friendly brown eyes. She gave the visitors a sweet smile.

“And next to Toni is Ken Peterson.” Ken was a short, stocky boy with thick, shaggy dark hair, dark eyes that were almost black, and about three days growth of hair on his chin and cheeks. He waved nonchalantly at the visiting New Yorkers but didn’t smile.

“Next to Ken is Dale Carter.” Dale smiled and waved at the group. With his handsomely rugged features, sparkling green eyes, platinum hair, tanned skin, and muscled body, Trixie was sure that a lot of girls fell for him. A surreptitious look over at Di and Honey showed that they definitely noticed Dale’s good looks.

“That’s Greg Walsh,” Joe said, indicating a tall boy with brown hair cut in almost military fashion. Although he forced a smile, his brown eyes did not look very friendly. Trixie made a mental note of this. Could he be the vandal?

“By Greg is John Smith. He’s a visiting student from the state university system. Just started here at the beginning of the semester to work on a semester-long project that involves the types of snakes that live in the Manchac Swamp.” John smiled at them, his easy grin making them all feel at home. His dishwater blond hair was fashionably styled, and his brown eyes held firm beneath their gaze.

“And last, but very most certainly not least,” Joe continued, “is Lisa Stevens.” Lisa was a heavysset girl with brown hair pulled back into a ponytail and large, expressive gray eyes. She smiled in a friendly manner at the Bob-Whites.

It turned out that Lisa, Ken, John, and Greg were staying over at Turtle Cove with the Bob-Whites. Toni, Andy, and Dale would be commuting back and forth during the clean-up operation. The Bob-White males were staying in one of the rooms equipped with two sets of bunk beds. The other room equipped with two bunks would house the girls that were staying over, and Ken, John, and Greg would share the remaining room. Because that room had two single beds, a cot would be brought in. The grad students quickly stowed their gear in their assigned rooms, and the day of hard work commenced.

Jim and Trixie climbed into the rowboat with Joe and Dale, the grad student who had been assigned to their group.

Clearing out the boardwalk and catwalk debris was a challenging task on many fronts. Because only small boats could be used in the marsh, there was no way to take a large load of the wooden planks back to the dry ground at Turtle Cove, so only a small amount could be loaded

at a time, necessitating many trips back and forth. It was also necessary to wear heavy and awkward waders while performing the work in the muck of the marsh. The Bob-Whites were no strangers to hard work, however, and they had soon impressed the grad students with their dedication, drive, and work ethic. Despite the hard work, the hours passed relatively quickly as the small groups kept up a friendly chatter to distract themselves from the physical labor. As the sun began its slow descent in the sky, Joe indicated to his group that it was time to head back. The grad student and two teenagers loaded their last load of planks onto the floating trailer attached to the boat and soon the foursome was heading back to the comfort of the Lodge.

After a simple but hard-earned dinner of grilled hamburgers and hot dogs, potato salad, and baked beans, the exhausted group was lounging around the first floor of the cozy research facility. Lisa and Toni sat on one of the futons in the main room, giggling and gossiping just like Trixie, Honey, and Di did. John and Greg sat on the floor in front of a low-lying coffee table, getting ready to play cards. Andy relaxed in one of the chairs by the fireplace, slightly set aside from everyone. He looked pleasant enough and interested in the conversations around him, but he didn't participate in any of the banter flowing around him. Trixie wondered why.

Ken sat and chatted with Di and Mart, whom he had accompanied into the Manchac Swamp that day. Honey and Brian sat comfortably next to each other, conversing on a futon that served as sort of a barrier between the main room and dining room. At one end of the dining room table, Dale was deep in conversation with Joe and Bob. At the other end, Dan and Jim shared construction notes from the day's work.

Eventually, everyone migrated into the main room. The Bob-Whites shared some stories about their lives in New York, and in return, the visitors sat and listened in fascination as the grad students explained what it was like growing up in Louisiana, the land of voodoo, ghosts, and a tumultuous history.

"There's a good story about the Manchac Swamp itself," Joe said, grinning at the Bob-Whites. "There was a voodoo priestess who lived in a little town on the swamp that no longer exists. She used to sit on her front porch and sings songs about the day she would die. One famous line was, 'One day I'm gonna die, and I'm gonna take all of you with me.' Well, on the day of her funeral, in 1915, a massive hurricane hit the area, triggering a 30-foot tidal wave that killed everyone attending her funeral, which was most of the town. They were all buried in a mass grave in the swamp along with her, and they still haunt the swamp to this day."

Joe told a couple more chilling New Orleans ghost stories and then switched to the topic of environmental concerns of the Mississippi basin. Everything he said was fascinating, and the Bob-Whites enjoyed hearing about legends of the area, as well the local environmental concerns.

The hard day's work had taken its toll, though, and it wasn't too long before everyone headed to their respective rooms, and Joe headed to the caretaker's cottage. Although Trixie wanted to stay awake and process her observations and thoughts about the various students, she was fast asleep not long after her head hit the pillow.

The following morning, the group was up with the sun, eager to get started on the work that lay ahead. After they had eaten breakfast and gathered up some healthy snacks and their supplies, the group filed out the front door with Joe in the lead.

The caretaker's startled exclamation of "What the...?" caught Trixie's attention immediately. Everyone followed Joe's gaze to the floating dock. The makeshift structure was keeling at an unnatural forty-five degree angle, half of it submerged in the water of the pass. The site created a chorus of exclamations ranging from surprise to anger.

The group hurried toward the dock. After all of the men had pulled the wounded dock onto the shore, it became apparent that someone had used the plastic barrels floating the dock as target practice. The barrels had started to slowly fill with water and sink. Fortunately, the one pontoon boat that remained at Turtle Cove overnight was tied to a mooring on the banks and not the dock, and the small pontoon boats that ferried passengers to and from the research station could still drop people off along the shore, but this new development wasn't a welcome one following all of the damage the research station already had sustained.

"Is that common around here?" Trixie wanted to know. "People shooting stuff for fun?"

Joe shrugged. "It happens. It hasn't happened to us, specifically, but there's always kids who think destroying things is fun."

He sighed. "I'll give Bob a call and let him know about this latest development. If he can get some replacement barrels out here today, then we can fix it today. This was just a makeshift dock we knocked together in a few hours after the hurricane. We're hoping we'll get the funding to build a permanent one soon."

"Wouldn't we have heard the shots?" Honey wondered.

An expression of worry settled over the weather-beaten features of the caretaker. "People have been known to use subsonic ammunition to poach game because it's quieter than regular ammo. I hope we don't have a poacher on our hands on top of everything else."

Trixie and Jim exchanged concerned glances. Joe was already dealing with so much after the hurricanes. They hated anything that added more stress and worry to the friendly old man.

"I can go call Bob, if you want, Joe," one of the grad students volunteered.

Joe shook his head. "Thanks, Toni, but I'll do it myself." He looked at the group. "Everyone go ahead and head out to your areas and get started. There's no reason we should all be delayed in our work." The sober group followed his orders and headed into the experimental marsh. Jim, Trixie, and Dale, who had been assigned to Joe's group, headed inside the Lodge, taking seats on the green-cushioned furniture in the main room while the caretaker went to make his phone call.

As the three sat there, Jim and Dale making small talk about hunting and fishing, Trixie was lost in thought. True, the latest vandalism could have been from random "thrill seekers," but Trixie couldn't help but wonder if it might be related to the earlier vandalism. But, if so, why had

there been several months between the events? She waited for a lull in the boys' conversation to try to do some discrete sleuthing.

The sandy-haired would-be shamus turned to Dale and tried her best to sound conversational. "So, everyone here seems really great. It's fun hanging out with college students." She knew that Di would be so much better at this tactic. Trixie hoped her smile was flirtatious and didn't look as painful as it felt—but not so flirtatious that Jim noticed anything. Truth be told, Trixie felt a little ridiculous, but in her Trixie-like fashion, she had plowed ahead.

Her platinum-haired quarry smiled at her, his green eyes sparkling, and he didn't seem to notice how uncomfortable she was playing this role. "Yeah, everyone's pretty cool. Turtle Cove attracts cool people. We want to restore the area to what it was like before all the logging began."

Trixie had learned that the excessive logging at the turn of the century had absolutely decimated the formerly great cypress swamps and forests in the area and had contributed to hurricanes having the ability to create an absolute swath of destruction when they hit. It was hard to believe that anyone who cared about the environment and worked hard to correct these past wrongs would trash the environmental research station so vital to the effort.

The teen thought hard and then asked, "Do you guys like to pull pranks on each other?"

Dale shook his head. "Nope. The requirements to graduate are pretty intense, and we wouldn't do anything to mess that up." He gave Trixie a shrewd look. "Are you thinking of the dock?"

Trixie nodded candidly. "It's just so hard to believe anyone would want to trash Turtle Cove."

"I agree," Dale said as Joe joined them, indicating that Bob was going to do his best to get some replacement barrels out that day and they could all head into the marsh to start their work.

While they worked, Trixie's one-track mind focused on the mystery at hand, running suspects and theories and scenarios through her mind, her body practically on auto pilot. Although it was hard labor, Trixie had been concentrating so hard on the vandalism that she was surprised when she realized that they already had a full load of planks to take back to the Lodge.

It was during the team's second trip to unload wood that they saw Bob arrive to assess the damage to the dock. He had tied his boat up to a mooring on the shore, and Trixie could see that he had managed to procure some replacement plastic barrels. The three young people unloaded their load of planks while the caretaker and director conferred about the dock. Trixie kept a worried eye on their conversation, and she noticed that Jim and Dale were doing the same thing.

It was nearing lunch time when the other teams began to return to the green building with their second or third loads of planks. Since they were done unloading their load, Trixie and Jim began heating up the seafood gumbo that had been prepared ahead of time and slicing loaves of bread to serve with it while Dale went to offer his help to fix the dock.

After lunch, the girls cleaned up the kitchen while the boys went to help repair the dock.

As she wiped the kitchen counter, Trixie reflected that it was unusual that *no one* had heard anything, whether or not the person had used whatever kind of quiet ammunition it was that

Joe had mentioned. Although they had all been exhausted, she wasn't convinced that they all could have been in such a deep slumber. She knew from their experience with the diamond that Bobby had found in the gatehouse and the resulting mystery that Jim was a light sleeper. What was it Mart had said at the time? Something about Jim how had developed the protective instincts of woods animals. Of course, the two rooms where the Bob-Whites were staying faced the back of the house. The male grad students had the room facing the front of the house.

It took a couple of hours to repair the dock, which meant that they only had a couple of hours before sunset, and no one wanted to be out in the Manchac Swamp after dark. The group decided not to split up, with all of them concentrating their efforts on one area close to the main building. That would allow them to get a lot done in one area and not be too far from Turtle Cove when it got dark.

It was a subdued group of Bob-Whites and grad students that completed their work that afternoon, returning to the Lodge as the sun began to sink below the horizon. Dinner—reheated gumbo because Joe had made enough for an army—was delicious, but a quiet and sober affair. The students not staying over said their solemn good-byes, and no raucous, enthusiastic storytelling occurred that night. After catching the news, everyone retired to their rooms for quiet activities. While Honey and Di read magazines in their lower bunks, Trixie sat on her upper bunk and wrote a letter to Bobby, who was once again disappointed not to be able to travel with the “big kids.” It wasn't long before she yawned and put her letter-writing materials away. The even breathing from the other three bunks told her that the other girls had already called it quits. Soon, the comfortable bed lulled Trixie to sleep.

It was like *déjà vu*. As she, Honey, and Di padded down the stairs the next morning, Trixie once again heard Joe saying, “What the...?” as he had the morning before.

“Who would do such a rotten thing?” she next heard Toni demanding, her normally sweet voice filled with a mixture of shock and anger.

The three Bob-White females gave each other alarmed looks and sped the rest of the way down the stairs. They were greeted with the sight of Joe, Andy, Dale, and Toni staring at a broken window in the main room of the Lodge.

Those who had spent the night at the Lodge crowded behind the girls.

John looked extremely furious as he contemplated the shattered glass. “This is lower than low,” he spat out.

“I take it none of you heard anything during the night?” Joe asked.

The Bob-Whites and the four grad students who had spent the night in the Lodge all shook their heads. Trixie wondered what the chances were that *everyone* had slept so deeply that they had not heard the shattering tinkle of breaking glass. They were no second-story windows on the side of the building with the broken window, though, so Trixie supposed that if everyone was sleeping soundly on the second floor, there might be a small chance that they would not have heard the window being broken.

It was as she realized that there were no shards lying around the inside of the Lodge that Trixie recognized the significance of the shards being on the *outside*. She gasped, but only Jim and Honey heard her in the confusion. Joe was investigating the window, and the grad students had crowded around him while the Bob-Whites had hung back. Mart was comforting Di, while Dan stood to the side, a stony look on his face.

“What is it, Trix?” Honey whispered.

“That window was broken from the *inside*,” Trixie hissed.

Honey looked and suddenly realized that her friend was right. She drew a sharp intake of breath. “You’re right!” she whispered. “But that means...”

“It means that whoever did this was in the house with us last night, for one thing,” Jim finished grimly.

“And it has to be an *inside* job,” Trixie said. “And whoever it is is *really* stupid—or he *wants* us to know that it’s an inside job. Which also actually makes him pretty stupid, because it narrows the suspects down considerably.”

Joe looked over to where Jim, Trixie, and Honey were speaking in urgent whispers.

“What are you guys thinking?” he drawled, interested to know if the future detectives had noticed what he had.

Trixie wasn’t sure that she wanted to point out that it had to be an inside job if the students hadn’t grasped this yet, but she took a deep breath, knowing she had no choice. “The glass is on the outside,” she said simply.

A light dawned in Andy’s eyes first. “Whoever broke the windows was standing *inside*!”

Joe nodded. “It looks that way,” he said soberly.

“But...but...*why*?” Lisa seemed absolutely flabbergasted.

Dale, John, and Greg looked downright furious.

“Whoever the varmint is, if I catch him, he’ll wish he’d never been born!” Greg declared. His brown eyes held such enmity in them that Trixie was actually frightened for a moment. Greg clearly had a temper.

Does that mean anything to this case? Trixie wondered. Does Greg’s temper play into the vandalism somehow? Is he acting right now, trying to throw us off the scent? Trixie remembered the line about the lady protesting too much.

“I’ll help you string ‘im up,” Andy said, his voice shaking with barely suppressed anger.

Lisa looked ready to cry, and Toni’s eyes held fear.

Di shivered as she asked, “So, do you think he was in here while we were sleeping?”

Silence descended upon the group. Worried eyes met as everyone contemplated their safety. And then worry shifted to suspicion as each person realized that every other person was a suspect.

Joe called the university to request that law enforcement come out to investigate, but he was told that vandalism of a remote research station was very low on the priority list with everything going on following the hurricane. It was unlikely that anyone would be able to come for several days.

Once again, Trixie hated to see the worry weighing on the man she had come to adore almost as much as Mr. Maypenny in the short time that she had known him. She laid a hand on his arm with an encouraging look from Honey.

“Joe, I’ll go outside with and help clean it up since they can’t send out any police.” Her blue eyes gave him a long look, and she hoped that he would understand exactly what she was offering. “While you and I clean up the glass, some of the boys can board the window, and the others can get breakfast together. Okay?” she asked gently but compellingly.

She was gratified when understanding lit in Joe’s watery blue eyes. “That sounds great, Trixie. Thanks.”

She smiled warmly. “Anytime.”

Joe turned to Dale. “Dale, can you call Bob and let him know about the latest situation? Andy and Greg, there’s some plywood in the annex you can use to fix the window. Are Derek and Ted outside still messing with the boats? Let them know what happened, and they can help carry the plywood. Everyone else, you can fix breakfast or stay out of the way if the kitchen gets too crowded.”

Everyone set about following his orders, and Trixie and Joe grabbed a bag, gloves, and a dust broom before heading outside together.

When they were alone, Joe said in a low voice, “You want to investigate, don’t you?” At Trixie’s nod, he said, “Matt Wheeler told me that you and his daughter are fine detectives and have solved a number of cases at home and while on trips.”

Never comfortable when she was being complimented, Trixie felt her cheeks go pink as she responded, “All of the Bob-Whites like to help people who are in trouble, and we’d like to help you. We’ve absolutely all fallen in love with Turtle Cove in the few days we’ve been here.”

Joe smiled warmly at her. “It’s a mighty fine place,” he agreed. “And I can’t thank you young’uns enough for helping us clean up. Solving the mystery of this vandalism, well, that would just be icing on the cake.”

“Joe, you don’t think that the dock was random anymore, do you?” Trixie asked bluntly.

Joe shook his head. “Not really, not with it being followed up by this the very next day.”

“I don’t think so, either.”

The two put on gloves, bending down to collect the glass shards. Trixie looked for obvious fingerprints on the glass, but without a fingerprinting kit, she knew she really couldn’t do much anyway. The best she could do was make sure that no one handled the glass without gloves, which no one was likely to do anyway for safety reasons, to try to preserve the glass in case the police could follow up at some point. Given all of the looting that had occurred after the

hurricane and the fact that hundreds of thousands of people were still displaced, their homes destroyed or too badly damaged to live in, it wasn't a surprise that a broken window at a remote environmental research station was considered low priority.

Trixie then noticed that there was a sticky residue on a lot of the pieces of glass.

"Do you know what this sticky residue is, Joe?" she asked. "I don't remember the window having anything sticky on it when we were hanging out in the room the last few days."

Joe took the piece of glass Trixie offered him and examined it. "It looks like tape residue."

"Like masking tape?"

"It's stickier. More like...duct tape." At that, Joe drew in a sharp breath.

"What?" Trixie asked eagerly. "Did you think of something?"

"There's an old wives' tale that you can break glass more quietly if you use masking tape. It doesn't work. But duct tape...that's a different story!"

"So the vandal used duct tape to hide the sound," Trixie mused. "But why would he bother then removing the duct tape from the shards? Wouldn't he just leave the whole mess here?"

Joe shook his head. "I don't know. Taking the time to remove the duct tape would take longer and increase the likelihood that he would get caught. But maybe he didn't think we'd notice the residue and we'd be thrown off about how quiet it obviously was?"

"But the police would find it," Trixie reasoned.

Joe shook his head as a heavy sigh escaped his lips. "Whoever did this probably knew what I did before I even called the university this morning. We had very little chance of getting the police out here for this."

A sigh escaped Trixie's own lips as Brian joined them. "Do you guys need any help? Breakfast is ready."

"Sure," Joe said. "The more the merrier. Grab a pair of gloves and help."

After the glass was cleaned up, the gaping hole where the window had once been was boarded up, and everyone had eaten breakfast, it was a quiet group that finally headed out into the marsh for the long day of cleanup.

As they headed out to their assigned work area, Trixie felt bad for the Turtle Cove caretaker. Joe's worn face looked positively beaten, his normally clear blue eyes clouded with worry underneath a deeply furrowed brow.

Her thoughts turned to who might have had the best opportunity to break the window. She decided that those sleeping in would have the least amount of chance of waking anyone up, as opposed to someone coming through the front door, which Trixie had noted squeaked heavily. That left as suspects Lisa, Greg, John, and Ken. Trixie was relatively sure that she would have awoken if Lisa had tried to sneak out, so she shelved Lisa as a suspect—for now. She would keep an open mind, though, just in case.

Trixie Belden and the Mystery of Turtle Cove

That left Greg, John, and Ken. Trixie recalled Greg's behavior since the Bob-Whites had arrived at Turtle Cove. He definitely wasn't very friendly—and therefore the most suspicious acting in Trixie's mind. He always seemed to have a surly look on his face. Trixie decided that he was definitely at the top of her suspect list.

Next, she considered John. She wondered if there was a way that she could covertly find out how deep of a sleeper John Smith was.

John Smith. That name suddenly caught Trixie's attention. John Smith...it was so common as to sound phony. What if he had come here with a fake name to cause destruction at Turtle Cove?

Trixie felt a little deflated as she realized that John had started his research at Turtle Cove *after* the vandalism had started. Of course, maybe John and Greg were working together! Trixie's mind leapt at various possibilities as she puzzled over how to solve the mystery of the vandalism occurring at Turtle Cove.

Deep in thought and unaware that Jim was studying her with sharp green eyes, the young sleuth shook her head as she realized that she had better stop jumping to conclusions and concentrate on the facts of the case.

As if there are a lot of facts! Trixie lamented to herself. It was no wonder that her brain was jumping to any possible conclusion. She almost wondered if they would have to wait for more vandalism to get more clues. It was not a pleasant thought.

She turned to Joe and asked, "How hard would it be to get a key to Turtle Cove?"

It was Joe who answered. "Anyone who has reason to be at Turtle Cove for research purposes has a key. Faculty, grad students, researchers..."

"What about visiting student researchers?" Trixie asked, thinking about John Smith, even though he hadn't technically been a visiting student researcher when someone had vandalized the annex. But, it was good to know, just in case.

"If they have reason to come out to the facility without university personnel, yes," Joe replied.

Trixie was unable to ask any more questions as they arrived at their section of the boardwalk and started their long day of work.

Once again, it was subdued bunch that gathered around the first floor of the Lodge after dinner that night. But there was a noticeable difference this time. The grad students were definitely avoiding the Bob-Whites and regarding them with open suspicion.

Trixie, Honey, and Di decided to sit at the dining room table and play cards, while the Bob-White men talked quietly together in the main room.

Trixie was studiously ignoring the suspicious looks of the grad students, but Honey and Di found it harder to ignore.

"Why do they keep looking at us like that?" Di said in a low voice as she played a card.

Honey added in sympathy, "I know. I feel like a criminal or something. What did we do?"

“As far as they’re concerned, the vandalism started when we showed up,” Trixie responded in a low voice as she played a card on top of Di’s. “We’re their prime suspects.”

Di looked at her friend with surprised violet eyes. “But I thought you said that there was a bunch of damage right after the hurricane?”

Trixie nodded, explaining, “Yes, but Joe and Bob didn’t want to worry anybody, so they kept it to themselves. Even the staff isn’t aware of the past vandalism.”

Honey looked at Trixie shrewdly as she played one of her own cards on top of Trixie’s. “But you’re here for one day, Trixie, and you figure it out just by a comment Joe made that you thought was odd.”

Trixie grinned at her friend. “I can’t help it if I’m especially nosy!”

Di and Honey immediately protested. “It’s because you’re smart.”

At their comments, Trixie just continued to grin at them. Finally, Honey and Di were also both cracking smiles.

“Okay, smart *and* nosy,” Honey conceded before the three dissolved into giggles.

As they all hit their bunks after the card game, Trixie was torn between trying to stay awake and see if the vandal struck again, but she knew that if she did, she would never be able to function at the level that she needed to the following day. In the end, she decided that as much as she wanted to solve the mystery of the vandalism, she and the other Bob-Whites had made a commitment to do their best to help with the cleanup, and that was job one. She had to do her best to fulfill her work commitment. It pained her to put the mystery second, but she knew that’s what she needed to do.

Maybe I’m growing up, was her last thought as she drifted to sleep.

The sleuth wasn’t sure what time it was or exactly what had awoken her, but it was still dark inside the camp-like room as she blinked her eyes open. She lay perfectly still, listening intently for any telltale sound that would tell her something was amiss, some clue as to why she had been roused from sleep and found herself instantly, totally wide awake.

As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her ears picked up the sound of footsteps creeping stealthily toward the door of her room. Careful not to make a sound, Trixie adjusted the tilt of her head to look toward the other bunk. There was just enough ambient light seeping through the window from the moon so that she could see the other upper bunk, where Lisa slept, was empty. By that time, the footsteps had retreated down the hall, so Trixie stealthily climbed out of her bunk and padded silently out of the room after her roommate.

The sandy-haired blonde hung behind, watching her ponytailed quarry skulking toward the steps to the third floor. Trixie crept along the hallway, trying to hug the wall as she had seen Lisa do. The last thing she needed was a groaning floorboard announcing her presence to everyone in the house. As Trixie reached the bottom of the stairs, she could hear whispered voices on the floor above.

Trixie couldn't understand the words, or identify who the other speaker was, so she carefully tiptoed up the stairs. When she had almost reached the top, she crouched and paused to listen. She was still hidden, but she could now make out the words, even if she still couldn't identify the second voice.

"—what we planned," one of the whispered voices hissed. It was so low that Trixie wasn't even sure whether it belonged to Lisa or not.

"I can't help that. I didn't know they'd call in a bunch of do-gooders!"

"What does that have to do with breaking a window? From the *inside*, no less."

"I *told* you I didn't do that," the second voice protested, a little louder. Trixie wasn't sure whose voice it was, but that last statement, indignantly rising slightly above a whisper, told her that it was male

"Shhh! Someone will hear you." Lisa hissed. "If you didn't do it, then who did? Bambi?"

"I don't know, Lisa, but it wasn't me. What would be the point now? Jacking up the damage from the storm sure didn't do anything to get things replaced quicker around here. Wrecking perfectly good stuff is just malicious, stupid, and counterproductive."

"At least we agree on that," Lisa returned.

Bingo! Trixie thought. Lisa and whomever she was talking to had been responsible for the unusual damage that had occurred after the hurricane. It sounded like they had actually thought they were doing a good thing—trying to make sure that Turtle Cove got the necessary assistance in a region devastated by the hurricane and needing so much—however misguided. Neither of them seemed to be behind this latest vandalism, though.

The teen was so lost in thought that she didn't realize that Lisa and the mystery man had finished their conversation and were rapidly approaching the stairs. By the time Trixie realized that the footfalls were extremely close, it was too late. Trixie was trapped on the stairs.

The young woman stood, frozen, as two figures came into view. Lisa Stevens and Ken Peterson stopped short at the sight of the visitor standing on the stairs, their faces caught in an expression of shock.

Trixie decided to channel Di and put on an act for the two grad students. She smiled brightly, pretending to be relieved. "Oh! It's you! I heard noises up here, and after the broken window, I wanted to make sure that it wasn't somebody up to no good."

Ken's dark eyes narrowed. "Or *you're* the one who's prowling around, up to no good."

Trixie decided to make a calculated risk at that moment. "If you're so convinced it was me, than why were you and Lisa just accusing each other? And I certainly wasn't responsible for the damage after the hurricane. As you well know."

The accusatory looks turned guilty. "You knew about that?" Lisa asked.

Trixie nodded, her face softening. "Joe told me about it." She glanced over her shoulder and then back at Ken and Lisa. "Can we go upstairs in the classroom and talk? Quietly?"

The pair exchanged glances, and with a resigned sigh escaping each of their lips, they both nodded.

“Sure,” Lisa said. “Let’s go.”

After the three had crept quietly back upstairs and settled as silently as possible into some classroom chairs, Trixie explained, “When he was giving us a tour, Joe slipped and made a comment about some damage not related to the hurricane. I pressed him about it, and he told me that there had been some unusual damage right after the storm, but the vandalism had stopped pretty quickly. He told only Bob about it because he didn’t want to worry all of you guys. You were all already worried about your research.”

Ken ran a hand through his shaggy dark hair. “*Panicked* is more like it,” he said. “We’re all on tight schedules to graduate. Any delay costs us a lot of money in enrollment fees. To stay eligible for financial aid and defer our student loans, we have to be enrolled full time. But if we can’t do our research, we’re paying for all of those credits for nothing.”

Trixie looked at the pair with sympathetic blue eyes. “After such a devastating hurricane rolled through, I can’t even imagine what it was like to lose so much.”

Lisa looked down. “My family lost their house. I told them I would drop out and come home and help them. They insisted I stay enrolled at the university. I was the first one in my family to graduate from college, and grad school seems like a miracle to them. They’d be devastated if I interrupted that. So, I stayed in. But then I saw my plans unraveling. I need to graduate and get a job and start making money as soon as possible to help them.”

During Lisa’s story, Ken had reached over and taken her hand in his. Trixie was glad the heartbroken girl in front of her had a good friend to offer her support. Trixie herself was feeling heartbroken after just listening to her story.

Ken looked at Trixie. “We were desperate. FEMA funds seemed to be going everywhere but here. And I know they had a good reason. So many people were—still are—displaced by the hurricane. But, like Lisa said, we need to graduate so that we can help our families. We didn’t do any extra damage to the property, I swear. We just made the existing damage worse, so that we might move up the priority ladder to get emergency funds. We love Turtle Cove. We’d never want to see it hurt. Seeing it after the hurricane was just awful.”

“I understand,” Trixie said, thinking of how the Bob-Whites had felt seeing the tree through the roof of their clubhouse after the hurricane that had come through Sleepyside. They had all felt discouraged and in despair, and that damage didn’t hold a candle to what these students were facing. She could certainly see them taking desperate measures to help their families. Hadn’t she pretended to have a yen for Ben, distasteful as it was, just so Brian could get his jalopy? “I really do. I think you need to come clean with Joe. I think he’ll understand.”

“You’re not going to tell him?” Lisa asked in disbelief.

Trixie shook her head. “It’s not my place. But it is throwing him off the track in trying to solve this new vandalism. If it’s not connected at all to the old vandalism, then he needs to know that.”

“You believe that we’re not involved in this new stuff?” Ken asked.

“I do, and not just because I overheard part of your conversation. I know you guys have a real love of this place and don’t want to see it harmed, especially now that some cleanup has been done, and you’re getting back on track with your research to be able to graduate on time.” She grinned at the older pair. “What was it you said? That would be malicious, stupid, and counterproductive?”

Ken and Lisa exhaled shakily in relief and then grinned back at her. “Something like that,” Ken said.

“So, we need to figure out who has a motive. How long have you guys been doing research at Turtle Cove?”

“The two of us started at the same time,” Lisa said. “We’ve both been here a year-and-a-half.”

“What about the others?” Trixie wanted to know.

Ken thought for a moment. “Well, we’re all in the research phase of our degree, which means that we’ve taken all of our required courses and passed our qualifying exams, and now we’re just focused on our research.

“Andy started at the same time as the two of us. Dale’s been here since the summer. He had been planning to start his research in the fall semester, but then the summer job he had lined up fell through, so he decided to get a head start. He was lucky he did. Toni’s been here the longest. She started the semester before Lisa, Andy, and me, and she’s supposed to graduate at the end of this semester. Greg and John both started at the beginning of this semester, so we’ve only known them a couple months.”

“What exactly is the deal with John? Being a visiting student?” Trixie wanted to know.

“Southeastern Louisiana University is incredibly fortunate to have this environmental research station for not only its grad student program, but its undergrad environmental programs as well. Other universities aren’t so lucky, so we partner with them to allow their students to do research vital to their theses or dissertations that they can’t do at their universities,” Ken explained.

“So, it’s kind of like an internship?”

“Basically. The students pay their normal tuition to their home institution, and receive their normal credits, but they just do their research here.”

“So what research is he doing that he can’t do at his home university?” Trixie wanted to know.

“He’s focused on wetland and ecosystem restoration. His home school actually has a great program in that, and he’s been doing research there, but he wanted the field experience in the Manchac Swamp, which has been famously decimated by logging,” Ken stated.

Trixie thought about that for a minute. “So, he didn’t actually *need* to come here; he just *wanted* to?”

Ken and Lisa exchanged looks. “Yeah, I suppose. Why?” Lisa asked.

Trixie shrugged. "I don't know. I'm just trying to gather facts. Maybe I'm coming at it the wrong way, but someone who *needed* to be here would be less likely to cause damage than someone who could do research elsewhere."

Ken looked thoughtful for a moment and then said, "That makes sense. And everyone else has been here much longer, except for Greg. I know them better, and I really can't see them doing anything like this."

"What about Greg?" Trixie asked, thinking about Greg's surly attitude. "I hope you don't mind me saying, but he seems to have a chip on his shoulder."

Ken and Lisa both smiled at this but looked a little uncomfortable. "Well, he does. He's really not normally like this, but he didn't think that a bunch of high schoolers coming in here and 'messing with things'—his words, not mine—was a good idea. No offense," Lisa said.

Trixie smiled. "None taken. And I don't blame him for thinking that. But I hope we've proven that we're here to work and help and not get in the way."

The grad students nodded emphatically at this. "Oh, we're all impressed. You guys are really hardworking and friendly. We like that. And not everyone shared Greg's opinion. We were happy that we were going to get seven extra pairs of hands to help out around here! Greg was starting to come around, too, until..." Lisa trailed off, her discomfort returning.

"Until what? And if it's about all the suspicious looks we were getting from you guys tonight, don't worry about it. We understand. We show up and then a bunch of vandalism starts happening. It doesn't look good. But I hope you know now that we would never do such a thing. We came here to help, not cause trouble."

Ken nodded. "I understand that. The fact that you guys came down here to work on your vacation says a lot about you." He looked at Lisa. "We never should have listened to John."

"John?" Trixie's ears perked up at this. Something about John, and his name, and his story just *bothered* her.

"Yeah, he's the one who started talking about how you guys showed up and stuff started happening. Even though it really doesn't make sense when you think about it. Who volunteers to work instead of relax over spring break and then does damage to the property they're helping to restore?" Ken said.

"Sounds like John was trying to throw everyone off the scent," Trixie said, thinking aloud.

"You think John did it?" Lisa wanted to know.

"I don't know who did it. I just don't know why John would want to single us out," Trixie said diplomatically, regretting thinking out loud and then patting herself on the back for channeling Honey and her tact. It wouldn't do any good to start accusing people—even if Trixie did have one of her gut feelings. She changed the subject. "What about the staff? Anyone new there?"

Both of the grad students shook their head in unison. "Nope," Ken answered aloud. "Bob and Joe have been here for forever, and you can see what this place means to them. And Ted and Derek have been here at least ten years or so. This is the kind of place that inspires loyalty."

"I can see why," Trixie said. "I've only been here a few days, and I love it."

Lisa grinned. "You've been bitten. Maybe we'll see you down here again as a budding environmental researcher."

Trixie returned her grin. "Sorry, but Honey and I are going to be detectives."

"Well, no wonder you're up here investigating and methodically asking us all these questions!" Ken said.

"Guilty as charged," Trixie said, a twinkle in her eye. "But we'd all better go back downstairs and try to get some sleep. We have a long day tomorrow. Thanks for all of the info."

"Thanks for caring enough about Turtle Cove to want to get to the bottom of this," Ken said.

Lisa looked at him, the two sharing a look, before they both turned back to Trixie. "And we'll tell Joe about the older damage," Lisa said. She shook her head. "I don't know what we were thinking. We must have been insane."

"Those were insane times," Trixie assured her. "Nothing was normal. Joe knows you wouldn't do that under normal circumstances."

"Thanks, Trixie," the two said in unison.

Back in her bed, tucked under her covers, Trixie's mind continued to race as she considered all of her suspects. Greg and John really seemed the only viable ones, and she couldn't help but think that John's actions had been suspicious. If Lisa and Ken said that Greg wasn't normally so surly, Trixie could believe that his attitude was motivated by thinking a bunch of high school kids were going to mess things up, and not because he had a grudge against Turtle Cove.

Finding out if John had a grudge against Turtle Cove could provide a motive, Trixie thought, her brain finally tiring and starting to succumb to sleep. He's the only one who can complete his research elsewhere if this place is out of operation, was her last thought before slumber overtook her.

The young detective's mind must have been working on the problem while she slept, because Trixie woke up before dawn with an idea of how she wanted to proceed. After a quick visit to the caretaker's cottage to let Joe in on her thinking and plan, she called an emergency meeting of the Bob-Whites during breakfast. They ate their cereal clustered around one of the small tables in the main room, while the grad students ate at the dining room table. As Trixie caught the rest of her fellow New Yorkers up on the vandalism situation, including her late night chat with Ken and Lisa, she surreptitiously kept an eye on the dining room.

Sure enough, even not being privy to the actual conversation, Trixie could tell that John was clearly viewing the meeting of the Bob-Whites with suspicion and trying to create suspicion in the other grad students as well. She could tell that Ken and Lisa were defending the group, as whenever they spoke, the other students' faces softened. Trixie knew that the bevy of Bob-Whites talking quietly with each other would look suspicious, but she didn't care. She needed to get her friends up to speed on the latest mystery and her plan, and she knew that Ken and

Lisa were on her side. Besides, it didn't matter what everyone thought right then. If things went well that day, everyone would *know* who the culprit was that evening.

After breakfast, Joe entered the Lodge and gave Trixie a nearly imperceptible nod. Knowing her plan was on track, Trixie looked at her fellow workers. "Let's get started on the day, shall we?" she said in a cheerful voice.

She led the way outside and across the grassy yard to where the rowboats were tied to the boardwalk at the edge of the marsh, looking around for the hole that she knew Joe had just dug at her request. When her sharp eyes spotted it just ahead, she turned to look toward the group following her. "How did everybody sleep last night?" she asked cheerfully, and then stumbled into the hole, giving a sharp cry as she fell to the ground.

Cries of "Trixie!" and "Are you all right?" surrounded her.

Trixie looked down at her ankle. "I think I twisted my ankle," she moaned.

Brian knelt beside her, explaining to the Louisianans, "I have a few first aid courses under my belt. Do you guys have a first aid kit handy?"

Dale was the first to pipe up, "I'll go get it!" as he quickly hurried back toward the Lodge.

Brian gently lifted Trixie's boot-encased foot. "If you've sprained it, it will start to swell soon. We should get your boot off quickly," he explained as he began to untie and remove the knee-length utility boot.

"I'll get some ice in case it swells," Toni volunteered and hurried after Dale.

Trixie looked ruefully at the group. "I'm so sorry about this guys. I'm *such* a klutz."

Andy reassured her that it could happen to anyone, while John snidely added, "Especially since you weren't watching where you were going. Out here in the bayou, you never know when you're going to run into varmint holes."

Trixie smiled inwardly. Her ploy had worked. John thought it was a legitimate accident. Now, he wouldn't be suspicious when she stayed at the Lodge all day and did her own form of research.

Mart glared at the visiting student as he and Jim helped his sister up. He knew it was a ruse, too, but he couldn't help his temper flare at that crack. "We have 'varmint holes,' as you call them, in the woods where we live, too."

After Trixie was settled on one of the green couches, her foot elevated and wrapped in the ice and elastic bandage that Toni and Dale brought her, she was apologetic. "I'm sorry, guys. Please go out and get to work. I'm sorry I delayed you this long, and I don't want to delay the cleanup any longer. I'll be fine here."

"Trixie, I can stay with you if you need me to," Honey pretended to volunteer, knowing that even if Trixie truly were injured, her friend would be more concerned about reducing the manpower in the swamp and would refuse the offer.

The sandy-haired blonde waved her friend away. "No, thanks, Honey. I'll be fine. I promise. I don't want to cause anyone else to stay behind on account of me." She turned to Dale, Joe, and Jim, feeling bad for all of them for being "down a man" on their team, but particularly Dale. Joe

and Jim knew the real reason she was staying behind, but Dale was completely in the dark. "I'm sorry I'm leaving you guys in the lurch."

The three hurried to reassure her it was okay and that they just wanted her ankle to heal.

Ken gave her a look and suddenly volunteered, "I'll switch with Dale."

Everyone looked at him in surprise, including Trixie. He grinned at Dale. "What? I had a job at a construction site one summer, so I'm used to all this hard labor. You were what? A lifeguard? You'd just be a liability to Jim and Joe," he said teasingly.

Dale laughed. "For that crack, I'm going to take you up on your offer!"

With that, the group headed back outside for the second time, Di giving Trixie a wink before she disappeared through the doorway. Trixie smiled at Diana's surreptitious compliment of her acting skills. The "invalid" also noticed that Ken had left his sunglasses and hat behind. Sure enough, a few moments later, she heard him call out, "Hang on! I left my sunglasses inside!"

Trixie smiled. It looked like Ken could play possum for a good cause just as she could.

As soon as he entered, he said in a low voice. "Your ankle's fine, isn't it? I saw Joe with a garden shovel before breakfast, and now I know why. Good luck sleuthing today, and I'm going to tell Joe the truth this morning while we work. Thanks for everything, Trix."

"You're welcome," she said, feeling a warm glow inside her as he disappeared back through the door and outside. She loved making friends, she loved helping people, she loved traveling, and she loved solving mysteries. What could be better than all four at once?

By the time everyone started trooping inside the Lodge for lunch, Trixie had already made all of the calls that she needed to make, and her fishing expedition had been successful. She had given up the ruse of having a sprained ankle and was busying herself in the kitchen making a large pot of spaghetti for the hungry workers. Garlic bread was warming in the oven, spreading its fragrant aroma throughout the open first floor.

Mart was the first one through the door, and he sniffed appreciatively even as he give his sister an inquisitive look. John and Greg were right behind him, however, so Trixie could do nothing more than give him a slight nod.

"Hey, Trix!" Mart said as he headed toward the kitchen. "You're up! Your ankle is okay? It's not swollen, sprained?"

Trixie looked down at her ankle, still wrapped in its bandage, and then looked up and smiled. "It smarted for a while," she answered, "but I think the ice and the bandage did the trick. It must not have been sprained. I guess I just turned it a bit. I want to go out into the marsh and help after lunch."

Brian and Jim had entered the house in time to hear this last remark. "Are you sure, Trix?" Brian asked. "It could feel better because it's numb from the ice. You don't want to make it worse."

"I'm sure, big brother," Trixie said lightly. "I need to be in the marsh helping this afternoon."

“Well, that was sure a quick recovery,” John drawled, not even bothering to hide the look of suspicion on his face. Long gone was the easy grin that had made them feel so welcome a few days ago.

Trixie fixed him with a stiff smile. “What can I say? I’m a fast healer.”

As the others trooped in, they saw Trixie on her feet and also wondered aloud if she was okay. She once again explained that the ice and rest had done wonders, and it hadn’t swollen, so she didn’t think it was sprained, and she wanted to go back out into the marsh after lunch.

“Speaking of lunch, let’s forget about my ankle. Everyone have some spaghetti!” she enticed. The hungry workers needed no further encouragement, and they all helped themselves to the spaghetti and garlic bread that Trixie had prepared.

After everyone was seated, Honey pulled Trixie to a corner of the main room as they juggled their plates of spaghetti on their laps. “So, partner, did you find what you were looking for?” she asked in a low voice.

“I sure did, Honey!” Trixie responded. “Pay dirt.”

Honey grinned. “Good job, Trix.”

“Couldn’t have done it without you telling me how to navigate the system. Being your mom’s private secretary and dealing with all of the universities and institutions that want donations sure paid off!”

“Glad I could ‘holp’ out,” Honey returned, using the term for help that Bobby Belden always used when he had been younger.

“I’m going to need all of your help tonight to lay a trap,” Trixie said, looking around to make sure she wasn’t heard.

“You know we Bob-Whites are there for you,” Honey responded.

“All for one and one for all,” Trixie said lightly as she took a bite of the garlic bread.

Unfortunately, the Bob-Whites did not catch the culprit that night. For the second night in a row, no vandalism occurred. Trixie wondered if John was on to them. What if he had been prowling about the night that Trixie, Lisa, and Ken had had their talk on the third floor and had overheard them? Maybe that was why there had been no vandalism.

Trixie thought about John’s behavior the morning following her talk with the two grad students. He had still been campaigning to make the Bob-Whites look guilty, even with Lisa and Ken present, so she figured that he probably hadn’t heard them. The scenario that Trixie hoped was in play was that the vandal was lying low for a couple of days after the window in case anyone was watching. The dock had been chalked up to troublemakers out having malicious fun, so no one kept watch afterward. But once the window was broken from the inside, there was a greater chance that someone would stay on watch. Trixie reflected that under normal circumstances, someone probably would have, but with all available personnel performing

strenuous work all day and falling exhausted into bed at night, there was really no one to watch the place.

She really hoped that the vandal, whom she was sure was John, was just trying to lull them into a false sense of security and would try to strike again while the Bob-Whites were still here. It made sense that he would, since he seemed so eager to pin it on the visitors. The New Yorkers were only going to be around for two more nights, so he only had a limited opportunity to make it look like they were the vandals.

That day, after a long day in the marsh and a satisfying dinner of crawfish étouffée, the group was more tired than usual. The fourth day spent working in the hot and humid conditions, wading through muck in awkward waders, and hauling around lumber was really beginning to take its toll on everyone, young and old alike.

The group sat around the main room of the Lodge listening to the radio. No one engaged in a card game or anything more strenuous than sinking deep into cushions.

Joe hadn't taken off to his cottage yet and was relaxing with the grad students and Bob-Whites. Derek and Ted had already taken the other grad students back to the boat launch where their cars waited.

"We've gotten a lot of work done this week," the grizzled man said. "You young'uns have done real good work. Me and Bob can't thank you enough. He wishes that he'd been able to be here more this week, but he's had a lot of meetings with FEMA and the university to get some aid."

"That's more important anyway," Lisa said, and everyone else nodded their agreement.

"Based on the reports from each team, I think we're only about a half-day from being finished clearing out all of the mangled boardwalk," Joe continued.

A cheer went up among the group, only slightly subdued as a result of the exhaustion they were all feeling.

"So, I figured that we could all sleep in tomorrow morning. Hang out here, eat lunch, and then finish up," Joe explained. "I know it might make more sense to just dive in and get the work done, but I really think that we need a little bit of a break. If we hit the boardwalks with renewed energy after lunch, I'm sure we'll be done before quittin' time tomorrow."

"That sounds like a good plan to me," Ken agreed.

Joe grinned. "Good, 'cause I told Derek and Ted not to come back with the other students until after lunch. I told them they could show up for lunch if they wanted to."

"What are you making?" Lisa wanted to know.

"Dirty rice," Joe responded.

All of the grad students immediately broke into grins. "They'll be here before lunch," Greg stated matter-of-factly.

"What's dirty rice?" Dan asked the group. "All the food has been so fantastic this week, and I haven't been familiar with most of it!"

Mart nodded his head emphatically. "I'm not sure I've ever eaten this well in my whole life!"

Trixie snorted. "You tend to eat well no matter the circumstances, Mart Belden!"

"Everything *has* been really delicious, Joe," Honey broke in before the almost twins could start a battle of words. "Like Dan, I'd really like to know what dirty rice is."

It was actually John who answered the honey-haired girl. "It's a classic Creole rice dish that looks 'dirty' from chicken livers. It has bell peppers and cayenne pepper and some other fixin's. It's usually a side dish, but Joe makes a hearty version that's perfect for lunch by adding some of his homemade alligator sausage. It's awesome!"

Di, who had been hesitant to try alligator and crawfish at first but had ended up loving them both, said, "It sounds divine. Joe, I'd love to get some of your recipes to take back to our cook, if you don't mind."

Honey jumped at that. "Oh! If you'd be willing to share, Joe, I'd love for our cook to make some of your dishes, too! She's been in a stew rut recently."

"Cooks?" Greg scoffed. "I didn't realize I'd been staying with such fancy people."

Honey and Di immediately looked hurt, and all four Bob-White boys and Trixie were about to jump to their defense, but before they could it was Joe who spoke up.

"Just because someone has a cook doesn't make them fancy," he said in an even voice. "I'm practically *your* cook, ain't I? You've seen first-hand how hard these young'uns have worked all week. They've kept up with all of us native Louisianans, even though they're not used to this weather by a long shot." He smiled at Honey and Di. "I'd be mighty pleased to share some of my recipes with you ladies. If you can't find crawfish or alligator sausage, shrimp or pork sausage will do in a pinch," he said with a wink.

Honey and Di beamed at the dear old man they'd come to love during the short time they'd been at Turtle Cove. "Thanks, Joe," the chorused.

And without the fireworks that would have accompanied anything the remaining Bob-Whites might have said, the matter was settled, and Greg was apologizing, truly contrite.

"You guys have been great, really, and I'm sorry I said what I did. I guess it was because you *do* work so hard that I was startled to learn you all have cooks. Most of the rich kids I know are pretty lazy."

"It's understandable," Trixie said as a peace offering. "And not all of us have cooks. We Beldens live on a little farm, and it's our mom who puts fantastic food on the table. Dan lives with Mr. Maypenny in a cabin in the woods by us. And Jim was adopted by Honey's family, but he comes from a farming background, too."

"But enough about us," Honey said lightly. "Tell us more stories about the area. We found the ones the other night absolutely fascinating."

Trixie nodded eagerly. "Especially the ghost stories," she said with ghoulish delight.

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Joe laughed and obliged, telling mesmerizing stories for the next hour or so, until it became hard for everyone to hide their yawns, fatigue overtaking them despite their interest in the tales the caretaker expertly wove.

As the group climbed to the second floor, they all agreed that they would sleep like the dead that night.

Trixie, however, knew this wasn't true. The Bob-Whites would be on guard, especially now that they could sleep in the next morning. She could have kissed Joe for arranging that! The sleuth also had a feeling that Lisa and Ken would be staying awake, too.

Sure enough, as the girls lay in their bunks, Trixie never heard the telltale even breathing of slumber from any of the other bunks. No one spoke, though, afraid that their quarry would realize that they were awake and not carry out his next act of vandalism. Trixie had a lot of information about "John Smith," but they *needed* to catch him in the act to have a foolproof case against him.

After what seemed like forever, when Trixie was absolutely sure that dawn was about to break, she heard a noise in the hallway. She strained to listen, and when she was sure she heard the cautious footfalls pass by the bathroom, she was convinced that it was the vandal and not someone making nighttime use of the facilities.

As quietly as she could, she slipped from her top bunk to the floor. Lisa was also climbing down silently from her own top bunk.

"Do you want me and Di to follow you?" Honey whispered.

"Give us a three minute head start. If he's going where I think he is, we'll meet you on the third floor. If not, we'll have the boys with us," Trixie said, and she and Lisa were hurrying into the hall, where Jim and Dan were waiting for them, as prearranged. Ken was there, too.

Jim silently pointed to the third floor, and Trixie nodded. She looked to Ken, who held up the camera that he had borrowed, with Joe's permission, from the classroom equipment. By unspoken agreement, Ken went first, followed by Trixie, Lisa, Dan, and then Jim, each person giving the person before a thirty second head start so that the sound of their combined footsteps wouldn't alert the vandal.

When Trixie arrived at the door to the classroom just behind Ken, she saw that the vandal was so intent on his "work" that he was unaware that he was being watched. Trixie reached her hand toward the light switch, pausing to let Ken get the camera ready. She counted down from three with her other hand, and then flicked on the light switch. The soft click was immediately followed with by the whirring of the camera shutter.

"Smile! You're on candid camera!" Trixie exclaimed as the young man they had come to know as John Smith whirled around, his hand with a paintbrush covered in red paint hovering above the classroom wall.

"What the...?" he asked in confusion, and Trixie couldn't help but recognize the symmetry in the words he uttered at being discovered. The same as when his own nasty surprises had been discovered.

“The game’s over, Don Bishop,” Trixie said.

The dishwasher blond stared at her, agape. “How...?”

By that time, everyone had crowded behind Trixie and Ken, who were still standing in the doorway. Even Joe was there, only having pretended to return to his cottage. The only one missing the party was Greg, who was still sound asleep in his cot on the second floor.

Ken and Trixie stepped aside to allow Joe into the room.

“Son, put down the paintbrush. You’re in enough trouble already,” the caretaker urged the visiting student, who seemed unable to move. Finally, his shoulders sagged and he lowered his hand, the paintbrush falling into the paint can beneath.

“Just because you didn’t get into the grad program at Southeastern doesn’t mean you had to take it out on the research facility,” Joe continued. “We can talk about this, son.”

Trixie knew that Joe was angry at the young man who had caused so much damage, but she knew his anger was somewhat tempered because his vandalism hadn’t been permanent or even too expensive. She knew that Joe wanted any student who wanted the opportunity to do research at Turtle Cove to be able to do so, and he could imagine the disappointment in a “young’un” who was turned away. Disappointment so deep and fierce that it could fester into something menacing in someone who was already less than stable.

Don/John looked at the group standing at the door. “How...how do you know my name?”

“You left a trail from undergrad to grad, despite your relationship with the young staffer in your alma mater’s registrar’s office who helped you forge your transcripts so you could get into your current institution under an assumed name,” Trixie said.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. “That’s what you were doing the morning you ‘twisted’ your ankle,” he said accusingly. “You were spying on me!”

“Don’t turn this around on Trixie,” Jim said, warning in his voice as his redheaded temper rose at this creep turning things around and making Trixie out to be the bad guy.

“I did what I needed to do to protect this place,” Trixie said quietly.

Don sank into one of the classroom chairs. “This isn’t fair,” he said, sounding utterly defeated. “It’s not fair that I didn’t get into this place. Someone had to pay.”

Honey approached the young man and sat down. “You need help, Don. You went to a lot of trouble just to get into a program under a fake name so you could come here and do damage.”

Don looked up at her. “It didn’t start out that way,” he said. “I was so embarrassed at not getting into Southeastern that I couldn’t live with myself. I wanted to be someone new. It became...it became all I thought about. I just needed to be someone new. And, yeah, my ex-girlfriend helped me get into grad school with a different name. She just changed the name on my transcript and certified them with the university seal. It was so easy that the next thing I knew, I was creating a whole new identity. It cost a lot, but it was worth it. I was no longer Don Bishop, loser. I was John Smith, a name synonymous with anonymity.”

“But your girlfriend didn’t alter the grades on your transcripts. John Smith got into grad school with Don Bishop’s qualifications,” Honey reminded him.

“I know. I can’t explain it. I just didn’t want to be *him* anymore. I wanted to be the John Smith who was doing pretty well in grad school. And then I got the opportunity to do some research at Turtle Cove. I thought it would be great. I could thumb my nose at the university that rejected me and use its precious research station anyway. I could do the research I wanted in the place I wanted.” He looked down at his hands. “But then I got here, and all of the old feelings started again. The anger. The disappointment. I...I couldn’t control it. And then I heard that visitors were coming. It was the perfect way to get rid of some of this anger. Do some damage. Feel better at Don Bishop being such a loser. And the damage could coincide with the visit of a bunch of strangers. It was perfect.”

He looked up then. “I thought it was so perfect...”

Trixie was actually beginning to feel sorry for the guy. He was obviously more than a little delusional, and he was clearly pathologically controlled by his emotions. It was good that he would be getting help as a result of the vandalism. Trixie was just glad that he would be getting help before he continued to worsen...and maybe took the anger he felt so deeply out on another human being.

The next morning, as they were waiting for Joe and Ken to return from escorting Don to the boat launch, where Bob and the police were waiting to take him into custody, the Bob-Whites and Greg and Lisa sat around the dining room table, discussing the events of the night before.

“I can’t believe I slept through it,” Greg said with a disappointed shake of his head. He then looked at the New Yorkers apologetically. “I’m really sorry I was kind of a jerk when you guys first got here. I thought you’d be in the way, but it’s just opposite. The boardwalk’s almost done, and you took a possible sociopath out of commission before he could do any real damage. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Me, neither,” Lisa said. She had confided in the girls earlier that morning that Joe had forgiven her and Ken for their misguided acts after the hurricane. They were going to be doing a lot of extra work around Turtle Cove to make up for it, but Joe decided to handle the matter himself and wasn’t going to report them to the director of the facility.

Lisa had expressed how grateful she was for Trixie helping her and Ken see the light, as the guilt was getting harder and harder to live with every day.

“We don’t need thanks,” Di jumped in, seeing how embarrassed Trixie was with the attention, even though Di thought that her friend should be used to it by now.

“Absolutely not,” Mart agreed.

Joe and Ken had entered the Lodge just in time to hear Di and Mart’s words.

“Now that’s too bad,” Joe said. “Because as a thank you for all your hard work and solving the mystery, I was going to take you all on a ghost tour of New Orleans tomorrow night, but if you don’t want it...”

His voice trailed off as he was overcome with a chorus of shouts from happy Bob-Whites.

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“Of course, we want it!”

“That would be great!”

“I hope we get to see a ghost!”

“I want to see a voodoo priestess!”

Everyone was laughing and talking as they made plans to visit the Big Easy on their last night in Louisiana. Matthew Wheeler was returning with the Wheeler jet the day after next.

Trixie was gratified to see that the happy mood that had been present before the broken window had been found had returned. These were strong, resilient people, and she admired every one of them. She hoped that she would be able to return some day and see Turtle Cove restored to its former glory, as proud, as strong, and as resilient as the people who cared for it.

She looked up to see Jim smiling at her, his green eyes knowing. He reached out and tugged on his favorite curl. “You did it, Shamus.”

“We did it,” Trixie returned.

“You’ll see it strong again one day, like it was,” Jim said, as if he had been reading her mind.

And in her heart of hearts, Trixie knew that someday she would.

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Word count: 17,175

Thank you to Misty for coming up with the wonderful idea to honor Amy Kalinski-Gorom’s memory. Thanks to Susan for brainstorming with me and, not only getting me past my writer’s block but making me *excited* about this story again! How excited? In the 2.5 hours following the session, I reworked several scenes and added nearly 2,000 words. The day after the brainstorming session I wrote nearly 6,600 words in 5 hours to finish the story. Also thank you to Susan and Julia for their last-minute edits. Has anyone noticed how many of my author’s notes mention “last-minute” edits? It’s priceless to know that I have such wonderful friends that even when I’m a brat and send them things last minute, I know they’ll still cheerfully edit for me, and most importantly, still love me! :) Susan and Julia, you along with Mary and Sue, are the Bob-Whites of my world, and I am so thankful for each and every one of you!

Many thanks to the wonderful staff at Turtle Cove Environmental Research Station and Environmental Marsh, which I had the pleasure of visiting about 6 months after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita reared their ugly heads. I still wear the Turtle Cove t-shirt they gave me as a gift with pride! Most of the descriptions of the station, its devastation, and plans to rebuild were accurate at the time that I visited. It’s taken nearly a decade and millions of FEMA dollars and grants, but the research station is almost restored and is stronger than ever. I did take some liberties with the placement of windows and such to try to increase plausibility.

The director and the caretaker are based on real individuals, although the names have been changed (the pseudonyms are derived from the origins of their real names because I couldn’t bear to change them completely, so wonderful were these men and their hospitality! And, yes, “Joe” did serve us his specialty, alligator and Andouille sausage piquant from an alligator that he had “wrestled” himself). All of the grad students in this story, however, are completely my own creation.

The first image in the title graphic is an overhead view of Turtle Cove as it was, the center is the restored and improved Turtle Cove, and the third image is an image of the Manchac Swamp...not far from where the voodoo priestess who took the whole town with her on her funeral day is buried. The graphic is in the

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same style of my loose universe of stories starting with “Trixie Belden and...” because apparently I think it’s a good idea to have another universe on my hands!

That moment on the boat that Trixie experienced? Feeling more alive than ever? That was purely how I felt that day, almost exactly 9 years ago to the date this compilation is being released, and I’ve never forgotten it. It was in that beautiful, exhilarating, peaceful moment that this story was born. I *knew* I *had* to write about it. And write about it I did, during NaNoWriMo in November 2006. And it was *awful*. But I always planned on rewriting it “soon.” And then soon became “someday.” And then I wondered if I’d ever return to it! Amy’s CWE seemed like the perfect chance to dust off the story, keep some parts, kill *a lot* of bad parts—and some darlings that were painful to kill—rewrite, slash a bloated character list, reassign the motive and culprit about a hundred times, and then finally write a proper ending. This story has been almost a decade in the making, and I can think of no more deserving person than Amy to write it for.

The Jix community lost a lovely author way too soon, and as I’ve collected the donations for the compilations, I’ve read many, many stories of how so many of us are so personally affected by cancer. My heart goes out to Amy’s family and friends, and to all Jixsters who have been touched by this terrible disease. I can’t thank the Jix community enough for the massive outpouring of support for this CWE: the nearly 50 writers who lovingly shared their time and talent to honor Amy, and the nearly 100 donors who contributed to end this horrible disease and/or support animals in need, another issue near and dear to Amy’s and so many of our hearts.

Thank you, dear Jixsters, for showing me that the Bob-White spirit is alive and well.

I am also happy to be able to publicly release this story in celebration of my 14th Jixaversary. The fact that it falls the day before the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina making landfall on the Gulf Coast just adds a certain synchronicity.