

This story is an entry for Jenni J's Trix-e-tron Challenge, which happens to be Jixemetri Circle Writing Challenge #8.

The Curse of the Alabaster Treasure

#45 in a series
by Dana Carlisle

Chapter One: La Isla del Encanto

Eighteen-year-old Trixie Belden sighed contentedly as she stepped onto the balcony and basked in the rays of the Puerto Rican sun. Just yesterday morning she had been enduring a cold and snowy March at her university in upstate New York—what a difference twenty-four hours could make!

Bless Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch and their defense contracts, Trixie thought as her sparkling blue eyes took in the vast turquoise of the Caribbean Sea stretching out below her for miles.

When the Roosevelt Roads Naval Station in Puerto Rico had closed, the U.S. government had held onto the property while they decided what to do with it. Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch had entered a proposal to turn the almost 9,000 acres of the former base into a resort. Puerto Rico was teeming with resorts, but Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch had an idea to make their resort different. With the vast land that the base had occupied, it would be easy to develop the land into a three-in-one resort: one portion would be an upscale, super-luxury all-inclusive property, another portion would be a more moderate vacation getaway aimed at families with children, and the last portion would be an inexpensive, but still well-appointed, hotel aimed at a younger, more adventurous crowd. Some places at each resort would be for that particular resort's guests only, but most of the property and activities would be accessible to all guests. The government had reviewed the thousands of proposals it had received, and in the end the Wheeler Enterprises/Lynch Corporation proposal had won.

Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch, in their infinite generosity, had invited the Bob-Whites down for spring break. All seven of the club members had been able to make the trip. Miss Trask had even joined them, more for a vacation and less as a chaperone, Trixie suspected. *After the harrowing escapades we've her through,* Trixie reflected, *she certainly deserves a vacation!*

The group was staying in the Las Casitas Villas at the El Conquistador Resort about ten minutes from the former Navy base. The girls were sharing a one-bedroom villa next door to the boys' two bedroom villa. Miss Trask, Mr. Wheeler, and Mr. Lynch each had their own villas not far from the Bob-Whites'.

The El Conquistador was situated on the eastern tip of the island, where the Atlantic met the Caribbean. The villas, their own separate entity on the resort property, sat high on a 300 foot bluff that overlooked the ocean and the resort's private island, Palomino Island, just two miles off-shore. Trixie could definitely get used to this. For the next seven days she and her friends could explore the island culture, hike through a tropical rainforest, soak up rays on a sun-drenched white sand beach, swim in the blue-green waters, shop at exclusive boutiques on cobblestone streets, visit the resort's casino and many nightclubs, or just do nothing at all!

Maybe even find a mystery! Trixie thought with a shiver of excitement. Who knew what lay out there on this *Isla del Encanto*—Island of Enchantment? Trixie was sure they wouldn't put that motto on their license plates if they weren't going to deliver.

Just then, Honey joined her on the balcony. "Isn't this delicious?"

Trixie nodded, her tousled ringlets falling into her eyes. “I was just thinking that I could definitely get used to this!”

Honey’s hazel eyes sparkled. “One full week of adventures ahead of us! Daddy’s left us a list of suggestions of things to do and see while we’re on the island. He’s even hired a guide to take us into the rainforest today.”

“Your dad is fabulous, Honey. To provide all of this for us,” Trixie’s arm swept expansively toward the tropical surroundings, “as well as our own personal guide? Wow!”

Honey grinned. “That’s not all—did you know that all of these villas come equipped with their own butler? Breakfast is served!”

Trixie and Honey raced through their room and out to the dining room where Di was spreading cream cheese on a bagel. “Good morning! Can you believe this spread?”

On the dining room table lay a variety of bagels, croissants, and Danishes, a tray full of spreads and jellies, and a basket full of fresh fruit. “Yummy!” Trixie said as she eagerly grabbed a Danish.

As Trixie was reaching for the pitcher of pineapple juice, a dark-skinned man appeared in the kitchen doorway. “Would you care for anything else, señoritas?”

Pretty Di Lynch smiled her thousand-watt smile at the butler. “No thanks, Miguel. This is wonderful!”

“Will you be requiring anything else today?” Miguel inquired. Trixie marveled at how much this man reminded her of Harrison, the Lynch’s butler back home.

The three girls exchanged looks, pondering what they might need. Honey finally spoke up. “I can’t think of anything, Miguel. We’re spending the day with a guide in El Yunque Rainforest. We won’t even be here.”

“I could have the kitchen prepare a packed lunch for a picnic, if you would like.”

Trixie smiled at the butler. “That sounds great! There will be eight of us, including our guide. Is that a problem?”

Miguel smiled. “Of course not. I shall return in an hour with a wonderful picnic lunch for you girls and your friends.”

“Thanks, Miguel,” the girls chorused as he disappeared out the front door.

Trixie had finished her Danish and was reaching for some fresh pineapple while Honey marveled at Miguel’s kindness. “Wasn’t he sweet to suggest a picnic lunch for us?”

Di agreed. “It really was. Of course, we should tell the boys and make sure they don’t have their butler make a second lunch.” She giggled. “You know Mart—he’ll be sure to request a seven course meal!”

The other girls laughed, knowing that Di did not exaggerate. Honey volunteered to run next door and inform the boys of their picnic plans.

“So, what’s Miss Trask going to do today while we’re in the rainforest?” Trixie wondered aloud. “Do you know, Di?”

Di shook her head. “I’m not sure. Most of the cultural things that Miss Trask likes are in San Juan, but I don’t think she’ll go there without us. I think we’re all going there day after tomorrow, on Tuesday.”

“Well, just being here at the resort is a treat. Maybe she’ll find a good book and just relax. I know she loves to read, but managing the Wheeler estate keeps her pretty busy. She certainly deserves a peaceful day to herself curled up with a book.”

Di snorted. "Says you!"

Trixie looked at her friend in surprise. "What?"

"Trixie Belden, you know perfectly well that you're going to find some kind of mystery today in the rainforest and this will be the first and last peaceful day Miss Trask has until she returns to Sleepyside to manage the Wheeler estate!" Di said emphatically, but not without affection.

Trixie grinned ruefully, her blue eyes sparkling with their usual mischief. "Guilty as charged. I guess managing the Bob-Whites and our mysteries *is* probably more stressful than managing the whole Wheeler estate!" The look in Trixie's eyes changed to one of excitement. "But, wouldn't it be fun to find an adventure here on the island? I mean, Puerto Rico has such a rich history—pirates and ancient Indian tribes and tribal wars and cannibalism and Spanish conquerors. Imagine!"

Honey re-entered the dining area in time to hear Trixie's last words. "We've been here less than 24 hours and Trixie's already longing for a mystery!"

Di's violet eyes twinkled. "You know our Trixie!"

"Maybe we should leave her here before she finds some pirates booty in the rainforest and the rest of our vacation is spent pursuing the adventure of a lifetime," Honey teased.

Trixie pretended to sulk, but her friends saw the glint in her eyes. "I don't see what's wrong with pursuing the adventure of a lifetime," she grouched.

Honey hugged her friend. "Absolutely nothing! You know we love your sense of adventure!"

"Despite it's accompanying sense for finding hot water!" Di chimed in.

Trixie giggled. "I promise *not* to try to find hidden pirate's treasure on our outing today!"

Honey groaned. "You've just jinxed us, Trixie. Now we're *sure* to find hidden treasure!"

Trixie laughed along with her friends, but inside she felt that familiar tingling. The tingling that told her that adventure, excitement, and mystery were just around the corner.

Chapter Two: Under the Waterfall

An hour and a half later, the Bob-Whites were settled into their rented SUV with their guide, Zeno, behind the wheel. Miguel had delivered on his promise and two picnic baskets full of delicious smelling food accompanied the group on their journey. Zeno expertly maneuvered the large SUV along Route 1, headed toward the old Naval base.

Mart, who was in the second back seat studying a map, spoke up. "Hey, Zeno?"

"Sí?" The Puerto Rican called back.

"Far be it for me to tell you how to drive, but aren't we going the wrong way to get to the Caribbean National Forest?"

Zeno smiled, his very dark skin a shocking contrast to his white teeth, and said, "If we were going to the main entrance to the rainforest, where all the tourists enter, yes. But you have me and I am going to show you the back side of the rainforest—the place only we natives know."

Jim spoke up. "Great, I love seeing things off the beaten tourist-path."

"You did say you are active, sí?" Zeno asked as he swerved to avoid a car that had just pulled out directly in front of them.

Honey and Di let out small screams while Dan fumed. “And I thought New York drivers were bad!”

Zeno laughed. “Most of my family lives in New York City and I have been there many times. New Yorkers have nothing on us Puerto Ricans! Anything goes here. Speed limits are not enforced and after 10 p.m. it is legal to run red lights.”

“It is?” Trixie asked, incredulous.

“Well, technically red lights are to be treated as stop signs, but no one complies—they just drive straight through. And although the law is after ten o’clock, no one stops after it turns dark, around seven o’clock. We are close to the equator so year-round our sun sets between 6 and 7 p.m. When I visit my family in New York in the summer it is very strange to have it be light as late as 9 p.m.!”

“Why are red lights treated so casually at night?” Brian wanted to know.

Zeno hesitated for a moment. “I do not want to scare you, but car jackings are very common on the island. It is easier not to get car jacked if you never stop.” The group digested this in silence, while Zeno went on. “Another thing you should know, should you drive around the island. Thieves will pretend to be stranded on the side of the road, or even hurt. And when you stop, they will rob you. It may be against your nature, but I suggest you do not stop to help any strangers.”

This was indeed against the Bob-Whites’ natures, but they also had a healthy dose of respect for their safety, except for Trixie at times, and knew they would heed Zeno’s advice.

“But I do not want you to think the island is filled with bad people—it is not! There are many kind and generous people and the island is not inherently dangerous. I only tell you for your safety.”

“Thanks for the warning, Zeno. We really appreciate it.” Jim spoke for the group and everyone nodded their agreement.

Trixie stared out the window at the Puerto Rican landscape. They were currently climbing a large hill, almost a mountain, along a very narrow and windy road. The verdant green of the land around them was startling in its lushness. This was in stark contrast to the poverty the group had seen the day before near San Juan on the way to the resort from the airport.

“Zeno?” Trixie called. “Were you just asking if we were active before that car cut you off?”

“Yes, Trixie,” Zeno called. He didn’t know by heart all their names yet but he remembered Trixie’s name. Such an unusual name for such a vibrant girl. Her blond curls and blue eyes fascinated him. “The main entrance to El Yunque, which is part of the U.S. National Park system, is paved and there are lots of paved trails for hiking. Where I am taking you there is one rough trail that extends for part of the way, but for the rest of the way we will be hiking directly up the river.”

“Cool!” The boys and Trixie exclaimed. Honey decided to reserve judgment until she saw the river, but Di looked less than thrilled.

Zeno looked in the rearview mirror and caught Di’s look. “Don’t worry, Di, it is not so bad. And the rewards will outweigh the hardships.”

Di rewarded their guide with a smile, and Honey also felt much better. Jim, seated in the front seat, was able to have the best view of the mountains ahead of them. “The tallest peaks are in the clouds,” he commented.

Zeno nodded. “Yes, I have in this area my whole life and I have never seen the tips of the mountains. They are always hidden by those clouds. The mountain range, Sierra del Luquillo, derives its name from the word Yúquíye, an aboriginal word meaning ‘Sacred Spirit of the White Earth Mountain.’ The aborigines called it that because it is always in a cloudy white haze.

“That is the highest, densest part of the rainforest. The rainforest gets an average of 120 inches of rainfall a year, the highest in all of Puerto Rico. The highest parts receive even more, it rains over 250 days annually up there.”

Jim whistled. “120 inches? That’s equal to about a hundred feet of snow a year!”

“You’re kidding?” Dan’s voice sounded as incredulous as Trixie felt.

“Yeah. Good old wet, heavy New York snow translates to about 6–10 inches per inch of rain. And that powdery snow Colorado is so famous for is about 14 inches per inch of rain so that makes it…” Jim quickly did the calculations in his head. “Wow! About 140 feet a year! That’s impressive.”

Zeno grinned. “And that’s just the average. The high altitudes get much more than that.”

The group was suitably impressed and eagerly looked out the windows as Zeno made a sharp right turn onto a dirt road that made the narrow, but paved, road they had just left look like an eight-lane super highway. The SUV bounced and jostled its way along until they pulled up to an old gate, barely hanging on its hinges. To their right was a well-worn wooden building. An old man stepped out from the building and went to the driver’s side window, which Zeno had rolled down.

“Hola,” the man said.

“Hola,” Zeno returned and handed him some money. The man waved and opened the gate. Zeno maneuvered the SUV through the gate and headed onto a grassy area where about 30 other vehicles were parked. The large grassy area was next to a shallow river, where many Puerto Rican children played, laughing and splashing. Families were spread out on the lawn, relaxing in chairs and on blankets, and chattering in Spanish. At least three or four large boom-boxes belted out competing tunes, but all had a strong Latin rhythm.

Zeno finally found a spot large enough for the SUV and parked. He turned, looked at the Bob-Whites, and grinned. “Welcome to El Yunque!”

The Bob-Whites smiled at him and then all turned to look out their windows. “Is this a park?” Di wondered, although it looked a little primitive to be a park.

Zeno laughed and shook his head. “No, this is that old man’s property. This is the best access point to the river trail. So, he built a little building where he sells *bebidas*—beverages—and snacks to the visitors. And he charges \$3 to park here. He makes a bundle!”

“But how do people know to come here?” Trixie wondered.

Zeno shrugged. “Word of mouth, I guess.” He opened his car door and climbed out. “Shall we, gang?” That’s all it took and soon Bob-Whites were pouring forth from all doors. Mart eagerly opened the back of the SUV and pulled out one of the picnic baskets. Jim grabbed the other one and Honey seized the two blankets they had brought. The group had difficulty finding a spot for their picnic, but finally found one near where the trees began.

Trixie and Di immediately took control of the picnic baskets and started passing around the food. There were all sorts of different kinds of sandwiches, and some side dishes that Trixie did not recognize. After everyone was settled and munching contentedly, exclaiming over the wonderful tastes of the new cuisine, Zeno explained what they were eating.

“These are standard sandwiches—*pernil* is pork, *bistec* is beef, and *mariscos* is seafood. The side dishes are very common side dishes, found in any Puerto Rican restaurant. *Tostones* are fried plantains. This is one of the most popular dishes in Puerto Rico, but I find that many Americans do not care for the taste. Similar to *tostones* is *mofongo*, or mashed plantain. This is a staple—*mofongo* comes with everything, much like fries or potatoes come with foods in America. A lot of our dinner foods are stuffed with *mofongo*. And, of course, *arroz y habichuelas*, is served at almost every meal. That’s rice and beans, another Puerto Rican staple. I see the cook has prepared flan for dessert. That is a very common dessert here on the island. You must also sample the *tres leches* while you are here. It is the most Puerto Rican of all desserts and translates directly to ‘three milks.’ It is very sweet and wonderful, although, for some it is too sweet.”

The group took all of this in, especially Mart, who was not only a walking encyclopedia of facts such as this, but also had a voracious appetite. The Bob-Whites sampled each other’s sandwiches and tried a bite of each of the side dishes. As Zeno had predicted, most of the Bob-Whites did not care for the *tostones* or the *mofongo*. Only Dan and Mart had more than one bite, but the whole group enthusiastically agreed that the flan was heavenly.

After lunch, the group unanimously agreed that a chance to rest and digest their food was in order before even contemplating the trek that lay ahead of them. The girls lounged on the blankets and giggled and gabbed, while the boys found a group of Puerto Ricans their age and joined them in their game of Frisbee.

Eventually, when the sun was almost high overhead, Zeno asked the club members if they were ready. The boys and Trixie answered an enthusiastic yes, while Di and Honey merely smiled their agreement. Jim and Trixie went to stow the picnic gear in the back of the SUV.

As the duo turned to head back to where the group was waiting near the river, Jim’s green eyes met Trixie’s blue ones. The supple redhead loved the bright blue depths that always seemed to be glistening with excitement. Jim couldn’t help but give Trixie a fond look. “Ready for an adventure?” He asked.

Trixie nodded up at him and grinned. “The adventure of a lifetime!”

Jim casually grabbed Trixie’s hand as they made their way across the lawn toward the river. The rest of the Bob-Whites were already in the calf-length depths laughing and splashing each other.

“Ready gang?” Jim said as he and Trixie stepped off the bank and into the cool water.

“Ready!” They chorused.

True to Zeno’s word, the river walk was slightly challenging, but the Bob-Whites were in such good shape that they were able to navigate the shallow, rocky waters with little difficulty. Zeno had warned them ahead of time to put on their oldest, sturdiest shoes and they had complied. No one minded getting their old ‘tennies’ wet and the rubber soles protected their feet from the rocks. Honey eagerly snapped pictures with the disposable, waterproof camera she had brought with her. After about a half an hour, they reached a point where Zeno told them they could exit the river take a trail.

“What do you think, gang?” Jim asked the club. “Should we keep going up the river and take the trail on the way back, or take the trail both ways.”

Dan, Brian, Mart, and Trixie immediately chorused. “The river!”

Honey and Di exchanged looks and agreed.

Dan looked at the two girls. “Are you sure? We can take the trail if you guys want.”

Honey immediately discouraged that idea. “No, this hasn’t been bad at all. The rocks are sometimes slippery, but this isn’t so rough-going.” She turned to their guide. “I assume it’s much like this for the rest of the way?”

Zeno nodded and that settled it. The group continued up the river, laughing and joking as they navigated the river. “What’s that bird I hear?” Jim wanted to know.

His friends quieted down and heard a chorus of *ko-kee, ko-kee*.

Zeno grinned at the redhead. “That, mi amigo, is Puerto Rico’s famous tree frog, the Coquí.”

“That’s a frog?” Di asked, dumbfounded.

“It’s such a pretty sound!” Honey added.

“Wait until you hear it all the time. First, you’ll go through a phase where its charm has worn off and the sound will drive you *loco*. And then you’ll get so used to it, you won’t even hear it anymore.”

“By the end of the week?” Dan asked doubtfully.

“The tree frogs are everywhere,” Zeno explained. “You can hear them from just about everywhere on the island, except the large urban centers like San Juan and Mayagüez, but everywhere else, you will hear them.” Zeno grinned mischievously. “Tonight, when you are trying to sleep in your villa, the *loco* phase will kick in and you won’t be able to sleep. I’ll wager you anything!”

Zeno had been right about everything so far, so none of the Bob-Whites was willing to get into a wager against him.

“Is there only one kind?” Jim, the naturalist at heart, wondered.

“There are sixteen different species, and almost all of them are found here in El Yunque, some exclusively.”

Presently, the troop came upon a widening of the river. Suddenly, although the river had generally been only knee deep and never more than waist deep, the water became quite deep. On the right hand bank, a tree branch hung out over the water and someone had tied a rope to it for swinging. Just ahead on the right was steep, rocky incline, about ten feet tall. Just beyond that, straight ahead, was a rushing waterfall. The trees came almost right up to the bank on the right side. On the left bank, directly across from the rope swing, was a clearing, about ten feet wide and ten feet long. Honey and Di immediately swam to the clearing and relaxed on solid ground while the Zeno, the boys, and Trixie eagerly swam to the right shore to climb the rocks and use the rope swing.

Honey and Di lamented the fact that they could not see the beautiful waterfall from their vantage point, but were entertained by Zeno’s antics as he swung on the rope and finally dropped into the water.

“Wow!” Brian exclaimed. When Zeno surfaced, he called out to him, “Is the water very deep?”

Zeno nodded. “I’d say at least ten to twenty feet deep.”

The Bob-Whites had lots of fun mastering the rock climb and jumping out to the swinging rope. Sometimes they missed the rope and landed in the water, but it was all fun. Honey and Di eventually swam over and soon, they too, were expertly jumping and catching the rope.

“This is such a great place!” Trixie exclaimed. “Zeno, thanks for bringing us here!”

“This is just a stop on the place I really want to take you, Trixie.”

“There’s more?” Mart said eagerly.

“Yes,” Zeno replied.

“Then what are we waiting for! Let’s get going!” Mart said. Zeno, Jim, Mart, and Dan were already on top of the cliff. Trixie, Honey, Di, and Brian were treading water in the swimming hole, but quickly made their way up to where the rest of the gang stood. They continued on, this time along the rocky embankment above the lower part of the river, and past the waterfall, which was now on their left. After about another fifteen minutes’ hike, the group reached another swimming hole, this time with a twenty-foot cliff next to it.

Di took one look and shook her head vehemently. “There is no way I am climbing *that* and jumping off it!”

Zeno grinned. “Believe it or not, the natural toe holds in this cliff are even easier to climb than the one back there that we climbed, despite the height. I promise you, you will not have trouble climbing.”

Di shook her head emphatically. “I’m not worried about the way up—I’m worried about the way down!”

Everyone laughed good-naturedly, but Honey was inclined to agree with Diana.

“Trust me, Diana,” Zeno said and led the way up. The seven Bob-Whites found that the climb was surprisingly easy. Once they had made their way to the top, Diana saw something that delighted her.

“A waterslide!” The pretty teenager exclaimed.

“A natural waterslide made just for you by Mother Nature herself!”

On the other side of the cliff, a small current of water flowed naturally through the rocks and emptied into the swimming hole beneath the cliff. The height of the rocks by the time they emptied into the watering hole was less than ten feet from the surface of the water. Zeno pointed to a rock that jutted out from the water across the swimming hole beneath them. “It is the dry season in Puerto Rico, so you will not have to worry about the current overshooting you and hitting your head on the rock, but during the wet season, you would have to be very careful. The current on the waterslide is very strong then.”

Di, Honey, and Trixie heeded his advice and took turns carefully sliding into the cool water beneath them, while Zeno showed the boys, in turn, how to jump off the cliff. The group happily jump, slid, and swam for the better part of an hour.

Finally, exhausted, they all found spots on the jutting rock and sunned themselves. Eventually, Zeno looked at the sun’s position in the sky and declared that it was time to go. The Bob-Whites followed him along the rocky path until they finally reached the waterfall that emptied into the first swimming hole.

As they stood on the cliff, contemplating the jump, Trixie looked at the churning waters of the waterfall. “What’s underneath the waterfall, Zeno? Can you swim underneath there?”

“It is possible, but due to the current of the waterfall, only the strongest swimmers must attempt it. Although, it is much easier now in the dry season since the current is not so swift. Two months from now it would be near impossible.”

“Well, gang?” Trixie turned to her friends, a mischievous glint in her blue eyes.

Di, Brian, and Mart immediately shook their heads. Honey, the best swimmer among them, contemplated it for a moment and then spoke up. “I think I’m too tired, Trix.”

Trixie turned to Jim and Dan. “Adventure of a lifetime?” She asked them.

Dan’s dark eyes sparkled and Jim’s green ones flashed with excitement. “Absolutely!” They chorused.

With Zeno leading the way, Trixie, Dan, and Jim swam beneath the current and soon found themselves underneath the waterfall.

“This is so cool!” Trixie exclaimed. Dan and Jim had to agree with her. She looked to her right. “Where does that go?” She asked Zeno, indicating a cave-like opening in the rock.

“I don’t know. I’ve never followed it—no one has ever thought to bring a flashlight and I don’t relish going in there without a light!”

Trixie felt her initial swell of curiosity and excitement extinguished with a wave of disappointment. She looked at Jim who was grinning and reaching into his fanny pack. He produced a small waterproof flashlight and held it out to her. “Miss Belden, would you do the honors?”

Trixie felt a rush of gratitude, excitement, and pride as she accepted the flashlight. Dan snickered. “I should have known you wouldn’t travel anywhere without being completely prepared.”

Jim grinned at his friend. “Natch!”

Meanwhile, Trixie was eagerly inspecting the crawlspace. “It goes in about ten feet or less. I’m goin’ ‘splorin’!” She said as she disappeared. Once inside she was surprised to find petroglyphs on the wall. There wasn’t a lot of room to maneuver and Trixie started to back out of the space. She dropped the flashlight in the process, and as it arced, she noticed a cavity in the wall. She shined the flashlight into the hollow and closed her eyes, not believing what she saw. When she opened her eyes, the object was still there.

In the grotto sat a small, wooden chest.

Chapter Three: The Alabaster Treasure

Trixie gingerly pulled the box out and noticed the wood was absolutely rotted with age. She opened the lid and looked inside. To her further surprise, the box was not empty. Instead, a small, but odd, figurine had been carved out of some kind of marble-like stone.

What is this? Trixie thought.

“Trix? You okay?” Jim called.

“Yeah, I’ll be right out.” Trixie backed out of the space, deciding to leave the rotted box where it was.

“Did you find buried treasure?” Dan teased.

“Uh, yeah, I sorta did,” Trixie admitted as she showed him the strange carving.

“Holy cow!” Dan and Jim exclaimed at the same time Zeno cried, “*Dios mio!*”

“That looks like a Taíno Indian *zemi*.” Zeno said with awe.

“A *zemi*?” Trixie asked, just as they heard the others calling their names.

“The others must be worried. I will explain on the ride back to your villa. Jim, put the *zemi* in your fanny pack for safekeeping. Dan, let the others know we are safe,” Zeno instructed. “We will follow.”

Everyone did as Zeno asked and soon the eight young people were standing on the riverbank where Di and Honey had rested earlier. Zeno looked at the sky worriedly. "We must hurry, it will be dark soon." He led the way along the trail, which eventually met a dirt road. The group hurriedly walked along in silence, while Trixie mulled over her finding.

What is a zemi? She wondered. *I can't believe that Di predicted I would find hidden treasure in a cave in the rainforest—and then I did!*

The Bob-Whites passed two or three houses that they had not noticed from the river as they headed down the dirt road. Suddenly, the road made a sharp right and Zeno herded them down a path to the left that led to the river. After another hike down the river, the exhausted Bob-Whites found themselves in the original field with the cars just as darkness began to fall. It was a much quieter scene that greeted them upon their return. The boom-boxes were gone, as were most of the people. Only a few couples or small groups of friends were scattered, sitting and talking. The families were gone and only six cars, including their rented SUV, remained.

After the group had fastened their seatbelts and Zeno had started the trek home, Di spoke up. "I am famished. And if *I'm* famished, I don't even want to *know* how Mart's stomach feels!"

"Empty, vacant, unfilled, vacuous, ..." Before Mart could continue in a thesaurus-like manner, Trixie interrupted.

"Well, this should keep your mind off of your stomach for a while!" She signaled to Jim to retrieve the peculiar carving from his pack.

"What is *that*?" Brian demanded, unceremoniously. Several gasps and exclamations accompanied his statement.

Jim passed the carving around for everyone to examine it.

Zeno spoke up. "I am heading to a small restaurant that has become a tradition to eat at after me and my friends spend a day in the rainforest. It is very casual and our bedraggled state will not raise any eyebrows," he smiled. "In the meantime, I shall tell you the story of the *zemi*."

"The *zemi*?" Mart asked.

"The indigenous people of the island, the Taíno Indians, lived here for thousands of years before mostly ceasing to exist as a culture about 50 years after the Spanish conquistadors arrived to claim this island. The Taínos had two gods. Or rather, two sets of gods. The *zemis* were good, and to be in their good graces meant that the Indians were protected from disasters such as disease or hurricanes. The other gods, the *maboyas*, came out at night and destroyed the crops, and were therefore very feared by the Taínos. The Indians would offer food and tobacco to the *zemis* to stay in their good graces. To the *maboyas*, they offered elaborate sacrifices to placate them.

"The Taínos carved icons out of wood, stone, and bones in the shapes of grotesque human faces and animals, mostly frogs, to represent the *zemis*. I have seen many samples of these carvings in various museums throughout the island, but I have never seen one carved of this material. I do not know what this is."

"It looks like alabaster," Brian commented as he studied it.

"Alabaster?" Trixie asked.

"Yes," Mart jumped in, "a soft, dense gypsum, usually white but sometimes translucent, suitable for carving."

Trixie glared at her almost-twin. "You really *did* swallow a dictionary that summer at camp."

Mart was about to retort, but Jim, knowing what could happen if the two siblings were allowed to bicker, broke in to ask the Puerto Rican a question. “There are really no Taínos left on the island?”

“Taíno blood is mostly what is left. Most Puerto Ricans, myself included, carry a mixture of Taíno, Spanish, and African blood. There are a few scattered tribes left, mostly in the central mountain region of Puerto Rico, called Jatiboní, but for the most part, the Taíno culture has died out.”

Zeno fell silent and the Bob-Whites pondered both the strange little carving and the sad history of the Indians, made nearly extinct on their own island at the hands of the Spanish conquistadors.

Soon, Zeno was pulling their rental into the small parking lot of what looked to be the Puerto Rican equivalent of a deli. Their hunger and their eagerness to eat drove thoughts of the Taíno and the *zemi* out of everyone’s minds. They entered the small restaurant and found they were the only ones in there. Five or six tables were scattered throughout the plain room, while shelves and shelves of many Puerto Rican delicacies caught the Bob-Whites’ eyes. Mart’s bright blue eyes, so like his sister’s, immediately zeroed in on a refrigerated glass case containing delicious looking pies and other baked goods.

Without asking what the Bob-Whites wanted, Zeno marched up to the deli counter and ordered eight Cubanos, eight *tres leches*, and eight Cokes. The Bob-Whites, who weren’t dealing well with the Spanish menu on the wall behind the cashier and more than trusted Zeno’s judgment by now, were happy to let him order.

Zeno turned to them. “It’ll be a while. Cubanos are hot sandwiches that take time to make.” The girls immediately headed to the bathroom while the boys browsed the shelves, interested in the foreign items before them. Zeno stood and casually spoke to the cashier in Spanish. Dan didn’t know Spanish, but it sure looked like a lot of flirting going on to him. The girls soon rejoined the boys and looked over the Puerto Rican goods.

“Yum,” Trixie stated as she picked up some candy. “*Joyas Tropicales* Pineapple Coconut Candy. Let’s take some back for Miss Trask and our younger sibs back home, shall we?”

Honey readily agreed. “They have that candy in lots of flavors. Mango, papaya, guava, sweet potato, cane syrup and coconut, papaya coconut, and mango coconut.”

Di wrinkled her nose. “Grab some of every flavor except for sweet potato!”

Honey accepted the bag Trixie offered her and started to fill it with the tropical candy. “I’ll throw in a few sweet potato ones—they sound intriguing!”

“*Dulce de Ajonjolí*,” Trixie read off of one unusual looking candy bar. “This almost looks like...”

“Sesame seeds,” Zeno provided, walking up to the group in time to hear Trixie’s remark. “It’s actually quite good. These candy bars come in a lot of flavors you Americans would probably consider unusual for sweets. *Batata* is sweet potato, *Crema de Leche* is cream of milk, *Paste de Naranja* is orange paste, *Coco-Piña*, as I am sure you can guess, is coconut-pineapple.”

Sure enough, as the Bob-Whites browsed they saw that no matter if it was hard candy, candy bars, or cookies, these flavors were commonly used. After they chose a large selection for themselves and their families and paid for it at the register, the cook announced their Cubanos were done. Jim and Dan carried the trays of Cubanos, Mart grabbed the tray full of *tres leches*, and the rest carried one or two Cokes to a large table near the window.

Zeno did not steer them wrong and all seven found the Cubanos absolutely delicious. “Yum,” Trixie said for what seemed like the tenth time that day. “What’s in these?”

“Pork tenderloin, ham, Swiss cheese, sweet pickles, a sauce of mayonnaise and mustard, all on sweet Cuban bread, and then heated.”

Most of the gang was just as enthusiastic about the *tres leches*, but Brian declared it too sweet for his taste. Mart immediately usurped the plastic cup full of the dessert and promptly finished it. Zeno looked at the New Yorkers.

“Is he always like this?”

“No,” Trixie said with a perfectly straight face. “Usually he’s worse.”

“I can’t believe he didn’t buy one of those pies over there as an appetizer while we waited,” Brian said.

Amid the laughter that followed this statement, Mart managed to look insulted. “I thought about it,” he admitted, which promptly brought a fresh round of mirth.

“Well, gang, I think it is time to head back to Las Casitas.” Zeno said when the giggles had finally subsided.

The Bob-Whites, exhausted as they were, were disappointed that the day had come to an end. “What are you doing tomorrow?” Honey asked.

“Tomorrow I am taking an American church group on an all day beach horseback ride.”

Trixie’s eyes lit up. “That sounds divine!”

“It should be fun,” Zeno agreed.

“What about Tuesday?” Honey persisted.

“On Tuesday I will be taking another group such as yourself into the rainforest. But I am free on Wednesday, if that’s what you are getting at?” Zeno’s dark eyes twinkled.

Honey blushed slightly. “Well, sort of.” She admitted.

“I think we’re supposed to go to Luquillo Beach on Wednesday, would you be interested in that?” Jim said easily.

Zeno smiled. “I would love it. I will be at your villas at 10 a.m. on Wednesday. Does that sound good?”

Everyone nodded. “That’s perfectly perfect,” Trixie added.

Later, when the tired group was settled in their respective villas and ready for sleep, and Trixie was examining the alabaster statue, Di looked at Trixie. “Didn’t I tell you that you would end up finding pirate’s treasure in the rainforest?”

Trixie returned her friend’s gaze. “You did, Di. And I laughed and then we talked about the adventure of a lifetime.” Trixie looked back down at the funny looking idol. “What do you suppose we’ll find out at the Museum of the Americas?” Zeno had suggested that the gang take the statue to the Museum of the Americas in Old San Juan when they went on Tuesday. He explained that the Museum held a large collection of pre-Columbian artifacts found on the island and elsewhere in the Caribbean.

“More adventure, I’m sure. Can you wait that long?” Honey chimed in.

“I guess I’ll have to. After the hike today, I like our idea to relax on Palomino Island tomorrow and head to San Juan the next day. I don’t think I could stand getting up early tomorrow and embarking on a long car trip—capped off with a lot of walking!”

“You and me both!” Di agreed.

Honey was staring at the white carving in Trixie's hands. "You don't suppose it's cursed do you?"

Both Trixie and Di looked at Honey with startled expressions. Honey herself looked pretty shocked. "I don't know what made me say that!" She exclaimed. "It just sort of popped out."

"What made you think of it?" Trixie asked curiously.

Honey looked abashed. "You'll laugh."

"No we won't, will we, Di?" Trixie looked at Di who nodded her agreement.

"Well," Honey said, "I was thinking of that old episode of the *Brady Bunch* where they go to Hawaii and Bobby and Peter find that Tiki idol and bad luck follows them wherever they go." Honey trailed off as she looked at her friends, expecting them to laugh.

What she saw made *her* laugh. Both of her friends, trying to be loyal to her and the promise they made, were doing their best not to crack up. The expressions on their faces were comical and Honey said, "Go ahead—laugh!"

The three girls dissolved into hilarity but later that night, after the lights were out and Trixie lay in her bed listening to the sound of the tree frogs, a sense of foreboding swept over her like ice water.

What if it was cursed?

Chapter Four: Bad luck...or a Curse?

Trixie awoke the next morning to bright yellow sunshine pouring into her room. Looking around at the cheerful room bathed in sunlight, Trixie chided herself.

You were just being silly last night. Curses are mere superstition. With this thought, the young blonde felt much better and got up to go look out at the clear blue-green ocean from her balcony, as she had done the morning before.

Soon, Honey was announcing that breakfast was ready and Trixie realized she was famished. When she arrived in the dining room, she found the same breakfast items as the previous day. Once again, she grabbed the nearest Danish and took a satisfying bite. Honey and Di were also quiet as they munched on their *criollo*, Puerto Rican breakfast rolls. The girls were just finishing up when Jim knocked on the door of their villa. "Ready for Palomino Island?"

"Not yet!" Trixie called. "We just finished breakfast. Give us half an hour?"

"No problem!" Jim called and was gone.

An hour later the seven Bob-Whites and Miss Trask were choosing an ideal spot on the beach. "Our own private island!" Trixie crowed as she spread her colorful beach towel on the white sand.

Mart snorted. "Yeah, ours and the thousands of others staying at this resort!"

Trixie stuck her tongue out at him. "Well, you know what I mean! I never stayed anywhere that would ferry me out to a private island at my whim!"

Honey looked affectionately at her friend. "We know what you mean, Trix."

Miss Trask rented an umbrella and set it up over her lounge chair. The manager of the Wheeler estate then shed her sensible tennis shoes and crisp khaki shorts and button-down short-sleeve shirt to reveal a modest one-piece bathing suit. The Bob-Whites tried hard not to

stare but with the exception of the “bonny” pink evening gown Miss Trask had worn in England, no one had ever seen her in anything but tailored outfits and sensible oxfords.

After she settled into her lounge chair with a steamy romance novel she looked at her young charges and smiled. “I *am* human, you know.”

The young people were obviously flustered by this statement. Honey turned pink and started to protest. “We know that, Miss Trask, it’s just, well...”

“You look great!” Jim assured her and turned to his friends in an attempt to change the subject. “Who’s up for jet-skiing?”

“Definitely me!” Dan spoke up immediately. Trixie, easily bored when forced to spend too much time in one place, also expressed interest.

Mart, Di, Honey, and Brian chose to “soak up some rays” as Mart put it, and decided they could rent one later if they changed their minds. Trixie, Jim, and Dan set off across the sand toward the water sports rentals. They spent quite some time browsing the surf shop before approaching the rental counter.

A very pretty Puerto Rican girl smiled at them as they drew near to the counter. “Hola,” she said. She looked at Dan and said something in Spanish. Dan smiled and said, “Habla usted inglés?”

The girl smiled and looked embarrassed. “I do. I’m sorry. You look very Spanish.”

Dan smiled to assure her it was no big deal. “Black Irish. I’m Dan.”

“I’m Rosa,” the girl said, her shy smile very becoming. “Can I help you rent something?”

“We want to rent jet-skis,” Dan stated.

After Rosa had them fill out the proper paperwork and charged the rental fee to the villa account, she gave them instructions to see Juan at the dock. The trio smiled and waved their thanks and headed over to the dock where the jet-skis sat. Juan was a very pleasant teenager who helped them choose jet-skis and adjusted their life jackets for them. He gave them a short lesson on how to accelerate, steer, and slow down—a challenge as there are no brakes on a jet-ski. Soon the three of them were racing across the clear blue waters, wind and spray in their faces. Trixie had never felt so free in her life.

Nothing compared to the wind blowing her sandy curls, an amazingly azure sky above, and the most gorgeous, clear, sparkling blue-green water she had ever seen in her life surrounding her. She peered down and saw schools of colorful fish swimming beneath the depths, the wake of the jet-ski of no concern to them since they were so far below the surface. The lush green of Puerto Rico lay to her right and the bright yellow sun beat down upon her, warming her. *Maybe I should open up my detective agency in the tropics*, she mused. And then Jim challenged her and Dan to a race and they were off. Tanned, smiling, relaxed boaters waved lazily at them as they sped by.

The time flew by and Trixie was disappointed when Jim motioned to his watch and pointed toward the docks. Trixie was very tempted to stay out longer, but this trip was already costing Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch a fortune and she didn’t want to add any extra rental fees, even if they wouldn’t mind, to the cost. It was with a heavy sigh that she turned over the keys and her lifejacket to Juan. As they headed down the dock, Dan excused himself to go flirt with Rosa some more. Jim and Trixie exchanged a sly glance and a headshake as they watched their amorous friend head inside the surf shop. Jim casually put his arm around Trixie as they headed back toward the rest of their club.

“You really can’t blame him. After all, he doesn’t have a special girl like I do.”

Trixie blushed and looked up at Jim. “That was really heaven out there, wasn’t it?” She said, unsure of how to respond to his statement.

A look of sheer pleasure settled on the redhead’s handsome features. “That was, in a word, amazing. I think I am going to have to save up and buy a jet-ski for the Wheeler Lake.”

Trixie laughed. “I’ll go half-sies with you—that way we can have it twice as fast! Maybe even by the time we’re home this summer.”

Jim leaned in close and murmured in her ear. “It’s a deal.”

Trixie knew it wasn’t the water droplets remaining on her damp skin that caused her to shiver. She was about to respond when Di came running across the beach. “Trixie! It’s Mart! He’s caught in a riptide!”

All thoughts of romance flew from Trixie’s mind as she and Jim took off into a run after Diana. As they approached the far end of the beach, they saw a crowd gathered. Jim held Trixie’s hand as they pushed their way through the throng of people staring out into the ocean.

Trixie arrived at the water’s edge just in time to see a handsome, rugged man who appeared to be in his early-thirties helping Mart out of the water. Brian was walking out to meet the duo. Honey and Di were frantically hugging each other, tears mingled with water on their pretty but anxious faces.

Trixie and Jim waded out into the water to meet Mart. “Is he okay?” Trixie frantically asked the man helping Brian hold Mart up.

“He’ll be fine, ma’am,” the man stated. The group exited the water to the applause of the horde of people waiting on the beach. “Clear out, please, people,” Mart’s savior said in a loud, authoritative voice. He was obviously used to giving commands and having them followed and this time was no different. The crowd dispersed, leaving the Bob-Whites minus Dan, Miss Trask, a Palomino Island employee, and the hero of the day.

Mart sank down to the ground and gave his friends a watery smile trying to reassure them. Di was crying quietly and Honey looked ready to start. Trixie and Brian’s faces were deathly white, and concern was etched on Jim’s handsome features. “I’m okay, really. Thanks to...” He looked questioningly at the man at his side.

“Michael,” he stated, offering a hand to Mart.

“Michael,” Mart said as he shook his rescuer’s hand. “Thank you so much. I, well, words are not enough to express what I am feeling right now.”

Michael nodded. “I understand.”

“What happened?” Trixie wanted to know.

Michael looked at her, his startlingly blue eyes piercing her own. “Your friend got caught in a riptide. It’s really the darndest thing. Riptides are very common on the west side of the island, but relatively unheard of around here. And I’ve never heard of any off the coast of Palomino Island, especially given the calm weather we’ve had this season.”

What are the chances of that? Something inside Trixie’s brain whispered. She ignored it. For now.

Jim shook Michael’s hand. “And you jumped in to save him, knowing the dangers. We really can never repay you.”

Michael looked embarrassed. “Well, I used to swim for a living and I know how to handle riptides. It was obvious your friend was panicking and trying to swim against the current toward shore. It’s the obvious most understandable reaction, but the absolute worst thing you can do. I knew he wouldn’t last long and so I swam around where I thought the riptide would

likely end and then swam parallel to the riptide until I could tell it was safe to swim in. I wasn't in as much danger as you might think."

"Well, you are still a hero to us. You'll always have our undying gratitude for saving my brother," Brian stated as he took his turn shaking Michael's hand.

"You earned a living swimming?" Honey asked.

"I was a Navy SEAL. I was stationed here before they closed the base. I did a few more tours in Florida and on the East Coast, but I fell in love with the Island so I took early retirement and came down here to give SCUBA lessons. It's a good life."

"Early retirement! You don't look that old!" Trixie blurted before she thought about it. She immediately blushed to the roots of her sandy hair. "Sorry. My mouth is often faster than my brain."

Michael laughed. "No worries. I went in when I was 18 and early retirement is offered after 15 years. So I'm really not *that* old!"

Trixie appreciated his good humor but she was still swimming in embarrassment—until she caught sight of Mart. He was still sitting, panting heavily, unable to quite catch his breath, his face pale, and he wasn't even laughing at her "foot-in-mouth syndrome" as he loved to call it.

"Mart, we should really take you to a hospital." Trixie stated.

"Absolutely," Miss Trask said in her no-nonsense way.

The others agreed but the Palomino Island employee spoke for the first time. "The hospitals are not good service. It would be better to see the house doctor at the resort. If it is not serious, he can treat you. If he cannot handle it, he can refer you to a private clinic."

Everyone looked to Miss Trask, who nodded her agreement at the plan. The employee nodded his head. "Good, good. I will arrange for a special water taxi to take you back to the resort immediately. I am so sorry this occurred. That area has always been safe for swimming. If there were danger, we would certainly place it out of limits. I hope you understand this. I am very sorry for this incident."

"We're not blaming the hotel for the incident, I assure you." Miss Trask stated briskly. "If you could arrange for that water taxi, we would be grateful."

"Of course, of course." The Puerto Rican hurried away while Brian helped Mart stand and Trixie told Honey where to look for Dan to let him know what had happened. After Honey hurried off, the young sleuth looked at Michael.

"Like Mart said, words cannot express our gratitude. Is there something we can do for you to show our appreciation?"

The former SEAL looked embarrassed. "Really, ma'am, there is nothing you can do. I'm glad I happened to be here and could help. That's enough."

Trixie understood how she felt when appreciative folks were thanking her for some good deed she had performed, so she did not persist. "Well, thank you. Perhaps you'd like to join us for dinner at the El Conquistador tonight?"

"I appreciate the gesture, but it's me and my wife's anniversary today." His blue eyes sparkled. "She might be a tad upset if I ditched her."

Trixie laughed and agreed. Meanwhile, Jim had an idea. "Well, dinner is on us. Please feel free to eat at one of the restaurants in the El Conquistador and charge it to Villa 317. Tell them Matthew Wheeler approved it if they give you problems."

Michael hesitated, not wanting anything for his role in saving Mart's life, but when he saw the earnest looks on the kids' faces, he couldn't say no. "Sure," he finally relented. "I'll do that."

The grins they gave him were more than enough reward in his eyes. "Well, you should get along to your taxi. I see your honey-haired friend returning with your other friend." Once again, Michael shook hands all around and graciously accepted their thanks.

It was a silent and tense group that made the twenty minute water taxi ride back to the resort. The group was met by two medics who took over the care and transport of Mart, via a hospital gurney. Mart tried to protest that it was too much, but he was overwhelmingly vetoed.

At his office, the doctor determined that Mart was just dehydrated and gave him an IV bag of fluids and sent him back to the villa to rest.

"We're supposed to go to Old San Juan tomorrow, Doctor. Should we cancel our trip?"

The doctor shook his head no. "Your brother is a strong, young man, Miss Belden. His fluids have been replenished. If he rests the remainder of the day and sleeps well tonight, I see no reason why you should cancel your trip. An excursion to Old San Juan is not to be missed!"

Trixie breathed a sigh of relief. Now, more than ever, with Mart's battle with the mysteriously appearing riptide, Trixie wanted answers about the carved alabaster figure sitting in her nightstand drawer.

After Mart was settled into his room at the villa, and Miss Trask had phoned Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch at the base to tell them what had happened, the Bob-Whites decided to explore the resort. While the club members were arguing over who got to stay with Mart, Miss Trask declared that she had had enough sun and excitement for the day and was perfectly content to curl up on the sofa and enjoy a good book. Her tone left no room for arguments and soon the six young people were exploring the grounds of the resort.

"Where to first?" Brian asked. "One of the 17 restaurants? The casino? Or perhaps one of the six pools? The whirlpools? The steam rooms?"

"How about the golf course, riding stables, or marina?" Jim chimed in.

"Tennis, anyone?" Trixie giggled.

"Kayaking? Parasailing? Charter-fishing?" Dan added.

Di and Honey giggled. "Okay, we've established there's lots to do! Now we have to pick one!"

"How about the hiking trails?" Trixie suggested. "It's the hottest part of the day, so people will be in swarms at the pools. After what happened this morning, I can definitely live without going to the beach, and the hiking trails should at least be somewhat shaded."

The rest of the group agreed with her and they set off to find the hiking trails. True to Trixie's predictions, the trails led off into the lush forest that surrounded the resort and the green canopy overhead provided a welcome respite from the sun's rays. The Bob-Whites saw hundreds of different species of palm trees and other tropical vegetation, colorful birds, and, ever present, was the singing of the Coquí.

"Zeno was right," Dan stated ruefully. "I got pretty irritated last night trying to sleep with all the darn frogs yakking away outside the window!"

Everyone laughed and agreed with Dan except Trixie, who grew quiet thinking of her strange premonition the night before. Jim noticed her abrupt silence.

"A penny for your thoughts, Trix."

Trixie's troubled blue eyes met Jim's curious green ones. "It's nothing."

Brian scoffed. "Trixie, with you it's never nothing. Spill it."

Trixie sighed. "Well, last night before we went to bed, Honey mentioned that old *Brady Bunch* episode where they go to Hawaii and find that cursed idol. Well, I couldn't help but wondering..." Trixie's voice trailed off as she caught sight of Brian's face.

"You couldn't help but wondering if the alabaster *zemi* you found is cursed," Brian finished for her in a stern voice.

Trixie nodded.

"Trixie," Brian began, but Dan interrupted.

"Hear her out Brian. Trixie's hunches have often turned out to be right."

Trixie shot Dan a grateful look. "Well, we were joking and laughing about it..."

"As well you should," Brian muttered, interrupting. Trixie gave him a dark look.

"But later, in bed, I had a strange feeling sweep over me. A feeling of foreboding. And I didn't like it. And then this morning both Michael and the Palomino Island guy said that it was really freaky for a riptide to be in that area. What are the chances?"

"It's a coincidence, Trixie." Her older brother insisted.

Jim didn't look totally convinced of Trixie's arguments, but he didn't look as skeptical as Brian, either, Trixie noted with reassurance.

Before anyone could add anything else to the discussion, Honey screamed.

Everyone looked at her in alarm. She was holding her shoulder and her face was contorted in pain. "Something bit me," she gasped. Trixie looked down at Honey's feet just in time to see a large spider scurrying away. She reacted on instinct and raced to reach the spider before it got away. The sudden movement made the spider freeze and Trixie was able to lightly step on it so as not to destroy it before the resort's doctor had a chance to identify it.

Jim nodded approvingly at Trixie. "Great thinking, Trix. Here's a handkerchief to carry it. Let's get Honey to the doctor."

By the time the Bob-Whites arrived at the doctor's office 30 minutes later, the bite had swollen considerably and was an angry red color. Honey's arm had started to swell, as well, despite the tourniquet Jim had applied to stop the spread of any potential poison.

The doctor looked surprised to see the gang back in his office. "Is Mart okay?" He asked, concerned.

"Mart's fine, but Honey here has been bitten by a spider." Jim said as he showed the physician Honey's arm. "Trixie managed to catch the spider so you could identify it."

The doctor accepted the handkerchief Trixie offered him and peered intently at the spider. Trixie did not miss the look of surprise that passed over the man's features.

"This is highly unusual. This type of spider is not normally found on this end of the island. It is only found up in the highest mountains in the central portion of the interior. Highly unusual."

"Is it poisonous?" Di asked.

"Well, all venom is technically poisonous, as your friend's reaction here proves." He spoke as he bustled around, seeing to Honey's shoulder. "The venom is causing the cellular damage which explains the swelling, redness, and the warmth of the affected area. This spider's poison is not fatal, however, it is rather strong and will be rather painful. If Honey rests this

evening, the poison should not spread so fast that the body can't take care of it. Drink plenty of fluids and if you develop a fever, please, call me immediately."

Honey nodded solemnly and took the salve and bandages that the doctor was holding out to her.

"Keep it dry and covered, the salve should stop any secondary infection from setting in and relieve a bit of the pain. If you're feeling up to it, I'm sure you can join your friends tomorrow on their trip to Old San Juan." The doctor shook his head. "Thousands of people stay here at this resort on a daily basis, and I rarely have the pleasure of meeting most of them, but you young folks I get to see twice in one day. Take care of yourselves. As much as I like your smiling young faces, I don't want to see you in here again!"

Chapter Five: The Taíno of Borikén

Honey and Mart both felt well enough to travel the next morning, so it was a full complement of Bob-Whites that headed northwest toward San Juan, Miss Trask at the wheel. The group was mostly silent, a combination of the worry over yesterday's accidents, the lingering memory of the stern lectures they had received from Honey and Di's dads the previous evening, and a desire to drink in the landscape rolling by.

When Trixie and her friends had joined Mr. Wheeler, Mr. Lynch, and Miss Trask for dinner at the elegant Italian restaurant at the resort, the adults had been surprised to find that not only was Mart missing, but Honey as well.

Mr. Wheeler's face had grown worried as he listened to the recounting of Honey's spider bite and trip to the doctor, and a mixture of exasperation and anxiety had settled over his features as he heard of the stone carving Trixie had found in the rainforest.

"I should have known that you'd find a mystery at some point, Trixie," Matthew Wheeler said in a resigned voice.

Edward Lynch spoke up. "Why are you just telling us about this statue now? If this is as old as your guide says, this is a seriously valuable artifact. You shouldn't be carrying it around."

"I know, Mr. Lynch, but we were just so tired when we got back from the rainforest Sunday night, and you and Mr. Wheeler were at your business dinner. We planned on telling you tonight at dinner and taking the carving to the Museum of the Americas tomorrow. We never planned on keeping it," Trixie said, distress apparent in her voice.

"I didn't think you would keep it, but you should have told one of us before this. You were at Palomino Island with Miss Trask all morning, why didn't you tell her then?"

Miss Trask looked at Trixie, her features stern. "That's what I would like to know."

Trixie looked down, shame-facedly. "I don't know."

Mr. Wheeler, as frustrated as he sometimes got with Trixie's "mystery-itis," couldn't bear to see the normally spunky young blonde distressed. He genuinely liked Trixie, and this was the girl who had helped him get reacquainted with his daughter and gave him his son. "No use crying over spilled milk. I don't believe a bit about the carving being cursed and causing Mart's accident and Honey's spider bite, so it's not like I think that you telling us sooner would have prevented these coincidental accidents. It's just obviously a very significant artifact that, as Edward pointed out, needs to be in a museum."

Jim immediately rushed to Trixie's defense. "When we go to Old San Juan, the first thing we'll do is go straight to the Museum."

Matthew nodded and then said thoughtfully, "I wonder if I should go with you."

"I was just thinking the same thing," Edward Lynch stated.

"Oh no! That's not necessary. We Bob-Whites wouldn't want to interrupt your business and cost you a whole day!" Trixie was horrified at the thought. "Miss Trask is already accompanying us to the city."

Matthew looked warmly at the crisp, grey-haired estate manager. "Yes, Miss Trask is very capable. Okay, it's settled then. Now, let's enjoy this delicious food."

As Trixie looked out the window of the SUV and watched as the rolling green hills gave way to houses and then to a town and then back to rolling green hills. Soon, the lush green foliage gave way to stretches of sand. Here and there along the roadside, Puerto Rican craftsmen were selling their wares out of their trucks. Trixie even saw a few individuals with grills selling grilled meats to passerby. It smelled heavenly as they passed by. And more than once she saw men and women selling something called a "*Coco frio*." She made a mental note to ask Zeno what a *coco frio* was when she saw him the next day. *Coco* she knew was 'coconut,' but she couldn't figure out the *frio* part.

As the landscape grew more urban and quite ugly with all the apparent poverty, Trixie's mind wandered. She started thinking back over some of their previous adventures, including the time when Mart had been trapped in the avalanche. Thinking of Mart's near-miss the day before made her shudder. And then she sat bolt upright as another thought occurred to her. Ever since the avalanche, Mart—understandably—had a fear of being caught in places where he had no control and there was a chance he could be in a similar situation. *Like a riptide*, Trixie's brain screamed. That thought was followed by the memory of something Jim had said one Halloween at the party that Di's imposter uncle had tried to ruin. *"I'm darned glad it wasn't Honey who grabbed that handle, Trixie. She's just beginning to get over her fear of spiders. Something like this would have been a serious setback."*

Mart's and Honey's biggest fears had been realized the day before. *Could that be a coincidence?* Trixie wondered.

She was about to open her mouth to share her revelations with the group when Miss Trask pulled the car onto a freeway exit and asked Jim, sitting in the front passenger seat, to look at the map and help her navigate through the confusing maze of San Juan. Trixie decided to let Miss Trask concentrate on driving. They would soon be at the Museum of the Americas and, hopefully, rid of the carving soon. Besides, most of the gang was skeptical about the curse theory, anyway.

Trixie looked around at her surroundings and wondered why San Juan was considered a "cosmopolitan city." What she saw were cramped, dingy buildings and a lot of poverty. But soon, the car passed into the Dorado section of San Juan, with luscious beaches, upscale five-star resorts, and expensive boutiques that rivaled Rodeo Drive or Fifth Avenue. After much more navigation around the narrow city streets that seemed to have been haphazardly placed around the city, Trixie found herself reveling at the charm of Old San Juan.

The narrow cobblestone streets and well-maintained pastel buildings were in sharp contrast to both the poverty and the modern luxury she had just seen.

"It's just adorable!" Di exclaimed. "I can't believe all of the colors!"

Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch had given them a pass to park on the Coast Guard base, near to the heart of Old San Juan. After finding a parking spot and walking a mere five minutes, they

found themselves in an enchanting atmosphere. To the right were the docks. Currently, there were four enormous cruise ships pulled into port, tourists spilling from them and leisurely strolling along, looking at all of the booths filled with Puerto Rican crafts, art, and food. To the left lay the city square and an amazing bronze fountain.

“Wow! It’s so beautiful,” Diana, the art major, exclaimed.

Mart consulted his guidebook. “According to this, the statue is called *Raíces*, which translates to ‘Roots’, and was sculpted in 1992 by the Spanish artist Luís Sanguino. It depicts the Amerindian, African, and Spanish origins of Puerto Rico as human figures, with dolphins cavorting at their feet.”

“So, it’s new. I thought everything in this city was really old.” Dan commented.

“Old San Juan is almost 500 years old, as are most of the cobblestone streets, buildings, the two forts, and the gate to the city. It was originally a military stronghold, but in the early 90’s, to coincide with the fifth centenary of the discovery of the Americas by Columbus, the government of Puerto Rico decided to erect a tribute to the island’s origins.”

“So, Mr. Walking-Guide-Book, which way to the Museum of the Americas?” Trixie asked, patting the purse which held the Taíno carving.”

“It’s got to be straight ahead into the neighborhoods of Old San Juan, but let me check the map to be sure,” Mart said as he thumbed through the tour book he was carrying.

Trixie snorted. “I’m surprised you don’t have that memorized already.”

Mart gave her a look but didn’t rise to her bait as he thumbed through the book and found the map. “Amazingly enough, there is a map of a walking tour of Old San Juan and we just happen to be standing right where it says to start. The Museum of the Americas is in the old Ballajá barracks, which happens to be stop number twelve on the walking tour.”

Trixie looked torn. “We did tell Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch we would take the statue to the museum first thing.”

Jim took the map from Mart. “Well, it looks to me as though taking the direct route isn’t much shorter *and* most of the points of interest on this map aren’t places you tour, but things you just look at, so that wouldn’t take up much extra time. And, with Mart and Honey in injured status, it’s probably better to see the sights on the way to the museum, instead of creating a bunch of extra walking.” He looked up at their chaperone, his green eyes twinkling. “What do you say, Miss Trask?”

Miss Trask tried to look stern but the glint in her blue eyes gave her away. “You’ve made some very good points, Jim. I think I’ve just been hoodwinked!”

The Bob-Whites cheered and started off on their walking tour. They strolled along the cobblestone streets, stopping here and there to take pictures of things that interested them. Mart read from the guide book at each point of interest, including La Princesa, once one of the most feared prisons in the Caribbean, the City Walls, once the most impregnable fortresses in the New World, and the San Juan Gate, built in 1635 and at one time the only entry point into the heavily guarded, walled city. Once they passed through the walls and into the old city, the Bob-Whites detoured slightly from their route to the museum and stopped at La Fortaleza, the residence of the Puerto Rican governor. Mart explained that the impressive building was over four centuries old and had housed over 150 governors. “It’s the oldest governor’s residence still in use in existence in the Americas.”

The Bob-Whites then retraced their steps and headed back in the direction of the Ballajá barracks. Along the way they passed the La Casa Rosada, a gorgeous villa built in the early nineteenth century for leaders of the Spanish Army, and Casa Blanca, a large white mansion

built for Juan Ponce de León. “Although the conquistador died before it was completed, the family lived in the mansion for over two centuries,” Mart read.

Before they knew it, the Bob-Whites were standing before the tangerine barracks that housed the Museum of the Americas. The Bob-Whites entered the impressive building and took the stairs to the second floor, where the museum was located. Mart, Brian, and Jim happily wandered the exhibits of pre-Columbian carvings, religious and cultural exhibits, and musical instruments, all telling the story of the island from the time of the ancient Taíno Indians through the Spanish conquistadors up to the present. Honey and Di appreciated the clothing and pottery exhibits, while Miss Trask enjoyed the art and basketwork exhibits. Trixie, however, impatiently strode through the exhibits looking for an exhibit devoted to the *zemis*. With Dan following, she finally found what she was looking for.

Her eyes lit up as she eagerly looked at the many different carvings. “They’re so different from each other,” she stated.

“Zeno did say that they carved animals and humans. Notice how a lot of them look like frogs? The tree frogs must have been prevalent on the island for a long time.”

Trixie nodded absent-mindedly, scanning the various figurines for one that resembled the one she had found. “I see wood carvings and stone carvings, but none of these is carved from alabaster like the one I found. A few of these have similar faces, but that’s it.”

While Dan was reading an information plaque about the *zemis*, Trixie looked around for a museum worker. Her eyes lit on an old Puerto Rican man and she immediately approached him.

“Habla usted inglés?” She asked the man, happy that Mart had taught all of the Bob-Whites this important phrase on the plane ride down.

“Yes, I speak English, young lady. How may I help you?” The kindly old gentleman asked.

“Do you know much about the Taíno *zemis*?” Trixie asked as Dan joined her.

“The Taíno Indians, who inhabited not only Puerto Rico but many of the nearby islands, including Cuba, Jamaica, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, are an ancient people who existed peacefully with nature and with visitors to their island. They named the island Borikén, or Borinquén as is common to say today, which in the Taíno language means ‘Land of the Mighty Lord.’ Some words from the Taíno language have even seeped into the Spanish and English languages. The words for ‘barbecue,’ ‘canoe,’ and ‘hurricane’ all have Taíno origins.”

The rest of the Bob-Whites had now found Trixie and Dan and gathered around, eagerly listening to the tale of the Taínos.

“The Taínos had two major gods: Yocahu, who was the supreme creator, and Jurakán, who was always angry and ruled the hurricanes. The lesser gods were the *zemis*, the good gods, and the *maboya*, the angry nocturnal gods whom the Indians feared. The Taínos immortalized their *zemis* by relief carvings, which are found in rocks and caves throughout the Greater Antilles, and by small statuettes, as you see in the exhibit behind you.”

“Did the Taínos ever place curses on these *zemis*?” Trixie wanted to know.

The curator looked at her curiously. “The carvings were made as idols to their gods, such as crucifixes that Catholics today hang on their walls, there would be no reason to curse them.”

“Were the carvings ever made out of materials other than wood or stone or bones?” Dan asked.

The curator shook his head. “Not that I know of. You ask all of these questions for a reason, no?”

Trixie took a deep breath and pulled the *zemi* from her purse. “I found this in the Caribbean National Forest. It seems to be made of something different than the other *zemis* I see.” She handed the figurine over to the curator, whose eyes had lit up when he saw the statue.

The old man eagerly took the carving and examined it closely. “This looks like alabaster, but I do not know of any alabaster deposits on the island. Perhaps it came from another island in the Antilles?” He asked, almost to himself. He pondered the piece for a few minutes more and then looked at Trixie with an inquisitive expression. “You asked about a curse. May I ask why?”

Trixie looked slightly uncomfortable. “Well, since finding this, we’ve had an unusual string of bad luck.”

“Bad luck?”

“Well, Mart,” she nodded toward her brother, “almost drown in a riptide that the locals say has never existed before and Honey,” she indicated her friend, “got bit by a spider that the resort’s doctor insists shouldn’t even be on this side of the island. It just, well, seemed like too much a coincidence.”

“I know of no Taíno curses on *zemis*, specifically, but there has always been the legend of a curse that was placed on the old Navy base called Roosevelt Roads. But you young kids surely have nothing to do with that.”

Trixie and Honey exchanged glances. “Well, Honey’s father and Diana’s father are developing the land into a resort.”

“Interesting,” the caretaker said. “Perhaps you are traveling to Ponce during your vacation?”

Seven pairs of eyes turned to look at Miss Trask. “I don’t believe we were planning on it, but if you think it is important, I am sure some arrangements could be made. We are staying at the Las Casitas Village in Fajardo. Is that far from Ponce?”

“Only about two hours. Ponce is home to the Tibes Ceremonial Center, which is considered the most important archaeological site in the Caribbean. Many artifacts from over a thousand years before Columbus landed on the island have been found there. There are many petroglyphs carved in the rocks, several ceremonial Taíno *bateyes*, or ball courts, have been uncovered, and an entire Taíno village has been re-created. There is also a museum there. This is where you will have the best luck finding out the origin of your *zemi*.” The Puerto Rican solemnly handed the carving back to Trixie.

“I was hoping to donate it to your museum.”

The curator smiled. “I thank you for your generosity, but I have a feeling in my bones that the statue would be best taken to Tibes.”

Trixie returned the kind old man’s smile. “Thank you, Mr...”

“Just call me, Wilfredo, miss.”

Trixie held out her hand. “Thank you very much for your time and your advice, Wilfredo. My name is Trixie.”

“Good luck, Trixie. I hope you enjoy your Puerto Rican vacation and I hope you find the answers you are looking for.”

“So do I, Wilfredo, so do I.”

The Bob-Whites wandered through the exhibits for a little while longer before exiting the barracks and reentering the bright Puerto Rican sunshine. The next stop on their walking tour was just down the street at the Plaza de San José to eat lunch. The group chose a small

restaurant called El Boquerón, which was a quaint place to fill up on traditional Puerto Rican foods. Mart noticed how popular *mofongo* truly was on the menu and pointed it out to everyone.

After lunch, the group headed back up the hill to the spectacular El Morro Fortress, the centuries old fort that had protected the city from pirate invaders. The Bob-Whites wandered through tunnels and room after room, finally reaching the turrets. They were rewarded with sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean.

Finally, the group headed back down the Calle del Cristo, one of the city's oldest and most famous streets. After snapping many pictures of the Catedral de San Juan, an impressive cathedral built in the early sixteenth century and typical of Spanish architecture, they walked another two blocks and found themselves in the heart of one of the best shopping districts in the city. While the girls wandered through unique boutiques, the boys enjoyed people watching on the narrow avenue.

Mart was starting to get tired and Honey's arm was aching, so instead of visiting Fort San Cristóbal, the group headed back to the Coast Guard annex and tumbled tiredly into their SUV. Jim offered to drive, but Miss Trask assured him she was fine to drive.

As they neared the resort, Miss Trask addressed the group. "I know you want to go to Ponce at once, but I really think we need to discuss this with Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch. Perhaps I can make a case for an overnight trip on Thursday. Ponce happens to have an excellent art museum, one of the best in the Caribbean, and I'm sure we can make a wonderful day of the Ceremonial Park and the Art Museum. We can then spend the night in Ponce and return to Las Casitas on Friday morning. Can you wait until Thursday, Trixie?"

"Of course, Miss Trask. We promised Zeno we would go to Luquillo Beach with him tomorrow anyway. Another day won't make a difference," Trixie said and then completed her sentence in her head. *I hope.*

Chapter Six: More Mishaps and Misfortune

Trixie awoke the next morning more confused than ever. Nothing terrible had happened the previous day while they were in possession of the *zemi*. Perhaps it *had* been coincidence. And what of the alleged curse on the old Navy base? Could Mr. Wheeler and Mr. Lynch's work have something to do with the mishaps the other day? Had leaving the area of the base and visiting San Juan improved their fortune? Or was this whole curse notion just mere superstition? Trixie stared at the alabaster carving and a sudden thought jumped into her head. Maybe the nothing had happened yesterday because the statue was on its way to being returned to the museum. *And now that we didn't give it to the museum, what will happen?* Trixie wondered.

She finally shook her head to clear her thoughts, her sandy curls bouncing as she did so. Trixie finally decided that she was going to enjoy the day at the beach. After all, Luquillo Beach was said to be one of the best on the island. She hadn't had a chance to just relax on the Palomino Island beach the other day due to Mart's accident, so she was looking forward to spreading her towel and then basking in the warm sunshine. In a few days she would be back in dreary New York.

Zeno arrived right at ten o'clock, as promised, and they embarked on the short trip to the beach, filling Zeno in on the latest discoveries about the statue on the way. Zeno didn't have much to add and when the gang saw the clear waters of the Caribbean, the white sand beach, and gently swaying palms, talk of the idol stopped.

They immediately found the ideal place to spread out their towels. The girls settled in for some serious sun worshipping and the boys headed off to check out the surf shop and the stands selling native crafts and gaudy souvenirs and tee-shirts.

The day drifted by lazily and Trixie chided herself for ever being worried about a silly old curse. She and Honey had enjoyed a swim in the clear sea and were toweling themselves off, when the boys reappeared.

“Zeno was telling us about the food here at that stand,” Mart said. “We’re going to head over and get some. Would you like anything?”

“What’s good, Zeno?” Di asked.

“The *empanadas*. They’re like turnovers and are stuffed with beef, chicken, or vegetables. There are also dessert *empanadas* filled with guava, mango, or pineapple and coconut. The *piña coladas* are fantastic—fresh squeezed pineapples and fresh coconut milk. I highly recommend one.”

“Well, I know the drinking age on the island is only eighteen, but I really don’t want any alcohol,” Honey declared.

“No problem. They make a non-alcoholic version. In my opinion these are a hundred times better than the rum version anyway. You can really taste the freshness of the drink. There are also tacos and *frituras*, fried food. Cod fritters are very popular.”

The girls decided on beef and chicken empanadas, a selection of dessert empanadas, and *piña coladas*—hold the rum—and sent the boys away to get the food. It was a while before the young men returned, but Trixie discovered that the food was worth the wait.

“This is delicious,” she exclaimed between bites. The others heartily agreed.

“By the way,” Trixie addressed Zeno. “What is *coco frio*?”

“*Coco frio* is a chilled coconut. The locals pick the coconuts from the trees, refrigerate them, drill a hole into the top, and add a straw for drinking the cool coconut milk. You must try it. Another island specialty you must try is a *pincho*. Perhaps you have seen the people along the roadsides selling meats from their grills?”

The Bob-Whites nodded and Zeno continued. “They are most likely selling our version of shish-kabobs. *Pinchos* are chicken, beef, or shrimp marinated in a spicy-sweet sauce, placed on sticks, and grilled. They are delicious!”

After lunch, the group settled down for siestas, but Dan was restless and decided that he was going to rent a jet-ski.

“Why? Rosa’s not here to give you the keys,” Trixie teased.

“No, but maybe I’ll find myself another beauty to help me.” Dan laughed as he headed toward the jet-ski rentals.

Time passed slowly underneath the languid sun and Trixie soon became restless herself. The sun was starting to get to her and she realized that Dan had been gone a long time. “How long are the jet-ski rentals for?” she asked.

“A half an hour.”

“How long as Dan been gone?”

Jim checked his watch. “An hour and a half.”

“An hour and a half?” Trixie said, alarmed. “He should be back by now.”

“Trixie, Dan’s a big boy. He’s probably flirting with some *senorita* or maybe there was a wait for an available jet-ski.” Brian rationalized.

Mart sat up and shook his head. “No, I watched when Dan started off. It was almost immediately after he left us.”

“Well, then he’s off flirting, like the other day.” Brian said again.

But Trixie was not convinced. She had a very sinking feeling that the curse or the bad luck or whatever was at work again. “Well, I’m going to go ask the vendor if Dan’s returned yet. Anybody want to come with me?”

Di stood up. “I feel like a walk. I’ll come with you, Trix.” The two girls started off down the beach, too concerned about their friend to notice the admiring looks they got as they crossed the expanse of white sand to the jet-ski rental kiosk.

Trixie’s concern turned to dread when the boy in charge of rentals told her that Dan had not returned. Di hurried back to their friends to report this troubling news while Trixie’s eyes scanned the bay to see if she could see Dan on anywhere a jet-ski. She could not.

“Is it possible he had engine trouble?” she asked the dark-skinned boy.

“It is unlikely. The jet-ski was brand new.”

“Well, he’s not out there and he should have been back by now. What can we do?”

“You are sure he is not out there?” The boy appeared very unconcerned and Trixie lost her temper.

“Look out there—do you see *any* jet-skiers?”

The boy turned to look and sure enough, there was a couple para-sailing and plenty of swimmers, but currently no one was on a jet-ski. The boy started to show the slightest bit of concern. “If he had engine trouble, he could have drifted out to sea. The current goes out around that bend there.”

“And then where?” Trixie asked, cold fear gripping her heart as she waited for the answer she dreaded.

“To the open Atlantic.”

Jim arrived in time to hear the youth’s statement. He addressed the Puerto Rican boy. “I don’t care what it costs, I want a rental boat and I want it now.”

The boy quickly complied and a speedboat was ready almost immediately. It was decided that Zeno, Trixie, Jim, and Brian would take the speedboat and begin to search, while the rest would stay onshore to alert the Coast Guard and wait in case Dan returned.

As the boat sped out of the bay and approached the isthmus, Trixie again felt the rush of the wind through her curls. But far from enjoying the sensation as she had the other day on the jet-ski, she could only concentrate on finding Dan. The silence was tense as the minutes ticked by and the small boat raced around the isthmus of land separating the small bay with the wide, open ocean.

Trixie felt a deep stab of disappointment when she did not see her friend as they cleared the strip of land. The waves on this side of the isthmus were quite rough and tossed the little boat to and fro as it headed toward the open sea.

Four pairs of eyes anxiously scanned the blue waters, praying to catch site of Dan.

Suddenly, Trixie shrieked. “There he is!” She pointed and Zeno immediately aimed the boat in the direction she pointed.

"I don't see him," Brian said, frustration apparent in his voice.

"He's so far out, he's just a little speck and he disappears every so often behind a close, large wave. But it's him, I know it's him." Trixie stated, her voice pregnant with hope.

As the boat drew closer, it became apparent that it was indeed Dan. Trixie's eyes welled with tears of relief. Dan, hearing the sound of the motor, looked up and even from a distance they could see the broad smile on his face.

Exhausted, dehydrated, and sun burnt, Dan Mangan was still a happy sight. "Thank God you found me!"

Zeno expertly maneuvered the boat alongside the jet-ski and Brian and Jim hurried to help Dan in the boat. Brian handed Dan a bottle of water he had thought to bring and made him take slow sips, despite the fact that his instinct was to gulp. As Jim and Zeno fastened the jet-ski to the boat with some rope they had found, Trixie covered Dan with a beach towel.

After Dan drank some water and recovered somewhat, and the boat was once again speeding toward the safety of land, he looked at his friends. "Thank God you found me." He repeated. "It was like I was living my worst nightmare!"

Trixie gasped. "What did you say?"

"It was like I was living my worst nightmare," Dan repeated. "I mean, I could always do okay on the streets of New York, but one of the most frightening things to a city boy like me is having to defend himself against Mother Nature. And there I was, stranded, surrounded by nothing but salt water, the sun beating down on me, and I didn't know what to do!"

"What happened?" Jim asked.

Dan shrugged. "For no apparent reason the engine just stopped and I started drifting. I had decided to take the jet-ski to the tip of that isthmus, just to look around it, but not leave the bay. Just as I was about to turn back, the engine stalled. I was pretty far away from the nearest people and when I tried to attract someone's attention, no one noticed. Before long I was on the other side of the peninsula and in the serious water. I knew you'd eventually notice I hadn't come back and that you would eventually find me, but man, was it excruciating waiting!" He shook his head. "It's funny. I've gone an hour without a drink. I've gone several hours without a drink. But, when you're surrounded by water you know you can't drink, you're hot, and you don't know when you'll be able to have some water, suddenly it's all you can think about! I don't know how people fall off ships at sea and tread water for days until they're rescued. That last hour or so was enough for me!"

As the speed boat neared the beach, it was obvious that the missing man had attracted quite a crowd. Dan chuckled ruefully. "That's the second time this week a Bob-White has drawn a crowd at the beach!"

Trixie was glad that Dan was able to laugh about his harrowing ordeal, but she was more convinced than ever that the Bob-Whites were receiving more than their fair share of bad luck. And Dan's "It was like living my worst nightmare" statement frightened her. She couldn't wait to get the Bob-Whites together and discuss it. Trixie thought of the leering face of the idol and shivered. She wanted to get it to Tibes, and quick.

Honey and Di rushed to meet Dan as he stepped out of the boat. Not only was the young boy who rented Dan the jet-ski anxiously waiting, but the owner of the kiosk was as well. Mart, sure that his friend was okay, hurried off to phone the Coast Guard and tell them that Dan had been found. Soon, the crowd dispersed and Jim was talking to the owner of the jet-ski rentals, who was apologizing profusely. "I do not know what happened. The jet-ski your friend was on was only purchased last week from a reputable dealer of a most reputable company. I can't

understand. In all the years I have never had a new jet-ski just stall. The old ones do, which is why I am constantly buying new ones. I have always been so careful.”

Well, you didn't count on the Bob-Whites and a five centuries old curse, Trixie thought. The owner tried to give them free rentals for the rest of their stay on the island, but Jim assured him that accidents happened and they didn't hold the owner accountable.

The owner still looked distressed, so Jim allowed him to refund the money Dan had given him for the rental. Jim's credit card had never been charged for the boat rental. After reassuring the troubled owner once more that all's well that ends well, the Bob-Whites and Zeno were finally able to leave the beach and make their way to the SUV.

After Zeno had dropped them off and promised to try to find some time to see them again before they left, Trixie and the rest of the gang met up in the boys' villa. She explained her theory about how Mart, Honey, and Dan had all been confronted with their worst fears realized.

“Maybe the curse feeds off of our fears.”

Brian scoffed. “Trixie, you're anthropomorphizing. And not only are you anthropomorphizing, you're anthropomorphizing something that does not exist. Curses are mere superstition created by primitive peoples who had no understanding of science and how things worked!”

Trixie glared at her older brother. “I see Mart's dictionary-itis seems to have affected you now. You can call it coincidence all you want, Brian Belden, but there is absolutely *no reason* any of these things should have happened. That riptide should not have been there and it affected Mart who, after his avalanche encounter, would be the person most panicked by the experience. That spider shouldn't have been on this side of the island but it was, and it chose to bite Honey—who has the biggest fear of spiders of all of us. A brand new jet-ski just not working like that? And stalling at the worst possible moment, with the person with the biggest fear of being left to deal with Mother Nature aboard? Brian, if you don't see it you're...you're just blind!” Trixie sputtered. The anxiety and frustration she had been feeling suddenly overcame her and she stormed out of the villa before anybody could see the tears stinging her eyes.

She stomped over to her own villa and immediately went to the balcony. She loved this balcony. There was something so peaceful about watching the gorgeous sea from this far up. The cloudless blue sky above her, the aqua water below her, and the lush green mountains to the west of her, were a sight to behold. Trixie sighed contentedly and leaned on the railing, feeling the tension oozing from her body as she drank in the sea air.

Trixie felt the vibration before she heard the cracking of metal, but it all happened in an instant. She screamed as she plunged through the wrought iron of the balcony toward the sharp rocks 300 feet below. At the last possible second, she managed to grab the bottom of the portion of railing that hadn't given way and she dangled precariously over the edge.

Her friends, hearing her scream, had rushed out onto the balcony in the boys' villa. Honey screamed at the sight she saw before her and Diana immediately burst into hysterical tears. Trixie knew they must be able to see the broken railing but not her hand, desperately clinging to the railing.

“I'm hanging on to the railing! Help!”

“Trixie!” Honey screamed. “Jim is on his way, he took off as soon as he saw the railing. Hang on, oh, please hang on!”

“I'm trying, Honey,” Trixie sobbed. “Oh God, I'm trying, but my hand is so slippery and my arm is so tired.”

“Trixie, don't talk. Save your strength. Jim is coming.”

Just when Trixie felt as though she couldn't hang on a second longer, she felt a strong hand grab her wrist and pull her up. "Jim, be careful!"

"I am, Trix. I've got Brian and Mart helping to stabilize me. Give me your other hand and I'll pull you up."

Trixie did as she was told and Jim carefully pulled her up over the side of the balcony and in to safety. When she was safe on the balcony, well away from the edge, he held her tight as she sobbed. He stroked her hair and murmured into her ear to try to calm her down.

"You're safe now, Trix. I'm here and I am not going to let anything happen to you."

Trixie eventually got control of her sobs and looked up at Jim. His face was so pale beneath his tan that his freckles stood out like beacons. His jaw was taut with tension, his brow wrinkled in worry, but there was something so heartbreakingly tender in his emerald eyes that Trixie thought she would melt. Never before had she felt so safe and protected, despite the danger she had faced a few moments before.

Jim helped her up and she made her way into the bedroom, where her friends anxiously awaited her. Di and Honey's eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, tear stains evident on their cheeks. Mart and Dan's features were rigid with anxiety. Brian was obviously worried, and also looked somewhat guilty.

"Trixie, I—" he started.

"Brian, I'm okay," Trixie smiled weakly as she sat down on the bed.

"I know, but if I hadn't shot my mouth off, then—"

"Then maybe I would have fallen when no one was around. It's not your fault," Trixie said firmly.

No one wanted to bring up the alabaster carving, but it was on every single one of their minds.

Trixie closed her eyes and started to talk. "Do you remember when Janie went over the cliff at home?" She asked, somewhat rhetorically as she knew no one would forget it. "I have never been so scared in my life. I kept thinking of poor Janie—hurt, hungry, thirsty, scared, hanging there for hours, all alone. That, to me, was much worse than when Lontard tied up me and Honey, because at least we had each other. And, well, maybe I was naïve, but I really didn't think he could go through with killing us. And when Tilney Britten kidnapped me, I had Mart. And even when Snipe Thompson held a gun on me while he robbed our antique show, I knew the boys and Spider were just across the street." Trixie opened her eyes and stared at her friends. "My biggest, deepest fear, and I just lived it."

Chapter Seven: Captain Kidd's Curse

As the SUV approached the entrance to the Tibes Ceremonial Park, Trixie felt a strange mixture of relief and apprehension wash over her. Would the mystery be solved here? Could she return this idol and be free to enjoy the last two days of her vacation?

After finding a place to park, the group headed immediately to the park museum. While the others browsed, Trixie approached one of the Indians working in the museum.

"Excuse me," she said, rather timidly. The young Indian turned and smiled at her.

"How may I help you?"

Without beating around the bush, Trixie pulled the *zemi* from her purse and showed it to the man. Instead of confusion, as had been on Wilfredo the curator's face, intense excitement registered on this man's exotic features.

"Yáyá!" He said excitedly as he took the statue from Trixie's hands. A torrent stream of a foreign language poured out of his mouth. Trixie knew it wasn't Spanish and decided, correctly, that it must be Taíno. "I will be right back!" He said to her as he ran into another room in the museum.

Honey and Jim joined Trixie at her side. "He seemed excited."

Trixie shrugged. "He's got the statue now, and not me. I am perfectly happy!"

But Honey knew her friend better than that. "Trixie, you're not going to be *perfectly* happy until you know the origin of the statue—and if it is indeed cursed."

Trixie grinned at her best friend. "Guilty as charged."

The rest joined them. The minutes passed slowly until the Indian returned with a very elderly gentleman. "This is Elder Carlos Guatubanamú Diego. We are very excited that you have brought this to us. Chief Carlos can tell you the story."

"*Tau Ah Taigüey Guaitiao*. Hello and good day, friends. Let us go outside and sit and I will tell you a story." The elder Indian beckoned the Bob-Whites to follow. Trixie felt a shiver of excitement run, tingling, along her spine. *This is it!* She thought.

When the group was settled in a circle around the elder, Trixie couldn't help but remember gathering around Captain Clark on Cobbett's Island, eagerly awaiting sea stories expertly told by the salty sailor.

"Many centuries ago, the Spanish conquistadors came to the island of Borikén. My people, the Taíno people, had lived here for thousands of years before the Spanish man came. About a hundred years before the Spaniards arrived, the Taínos had fought a fierce war with the Carib Indians. The Caribs were a fierce and blood-thirsty bunch of cannibals who were bent on conquering all of the islands in the Caribbean. When they came to Borikén, the Taínos were able to defend their land and continue living here in peace.

"When the conquistadors arrived, my people were weary, but willing to be friendly to these visitors. Trade between the two cultures began. As you probably know if you have made it here, my people loved to carve idols, the *ce mi*. One conquistador came and offered a large white stone, perfect for carving, in exchange for *caona*, gold. My people eagerly gave him the gold, which they could not carve and had little value to them, and happily accepted the white stone. They did not know it was alabaster, nor did that matter to them. They had a fine white stone that was easily carved. They carved a special *ce mi*, a *ce mi* to treasure above all others."

My idol! Trixie thought with excitement.

"This idol was revered by my people for nearly two centuries. In 1699, a bad man found his way into the interior of Borikén and stole the alabaster *ce mi*. He was known to be a pirate, a famous pirate, one of the fiercest of his day. Although his name cannot be confirmed because the Taíno language at the time was a spoken one and not a written one, and the stories are passed down in the oral tradition, it is believed that the pirate who stole the *ce mi* was none other than Captain Kidd. He was known to have visited Puerto Rico in 1699.

"My people were already nearly extinct at the hands of the foreign invaders. Now, another European man steals their greatest treasure. As you can imagine, they were quite incensed. The tribal chief placed a curse on the idol and all who came into possession of it. It would last until the *ce mi* was returned to the Taíno people."

"There *is* a curse!" Trixie breathed.

The elder looked at the blonde girl with wise eyes. "Yes, there is a curse. Have you experienced misfortune?"

"Have we ever!" Trixie said emphatically.

"You have done the right thing by returning the *cemi* to its proper people. I realize that by modern day law the statue technically belongs to you. But I hope you can understand what a rare and important artifact this is for my people. I do not wish to be vulgar, but perhaps we can come to terms on a price?"

Trixie was shaking her sandy curls emphatically. "No, I do not wish to sell you the idol." The elder's face fell as he heard her words. "The idol belongs to your people, not me. I am just happy that I could finally return it to its rightful owners."

The old Indian beamed. "My tribe thanks you sincerely, Miss..."

"Trixie. Just call me Trixie."

"Thank you, Trixie." He looked tenderly at the statue he held in his hands. "This is comparable to a Christian finding the Holy Grail. You see, it has been nearly three centuries since this was seen. It has become more legend than anything. Some of my people doubt its very existence." The man's dark eyes shone. "But no more."

Trixie felt a sense of serenity and tranquility watching this Taíno elder holding the artifact his people had been deprived of for over three centuries. She brimmed with pride and a sense of accomplishment knowing that she had played a part in its return.

Elder Carlos looked at her. "Can you tell me how you came to be in possession of this?"

So, with help of the Bob-Whites, Trixie told the story of Diana's teasing, of finding the idol, and of the mishaps that had befallen them while it was in their possession.

"I am sorry that you have had such a rough time during your visit to Borikén. I am glad you have made it through okay and that the *cemi* has made its way home. Can I interest you in joining a tribal ceremony tonight, celebrating the return of the idol?"

Trixie's blue eyes sparkled. She looked around at her friends and Miss Trask, who were all nodding enthusiastically. "We'd love it!"

The elder nodded. "Wonderful. Please, go and look around our ceremonial park, explore it and Ponce." He looked at Miss Trask. "You look as though you enjoy a good art museum."

Miss Trask smiled and nodded. "That I do."

"Please come back to the park tonight at seven o'clock. The park will be closed and the tourists will be gone. The moon will be out and we will perform our ritual of thanksgiving. You will be our honored guests. I will go and spread the news to my people of the *yuké cemi's* return."

The Bob-Whites waved to the man who had answered so many of their questions, as he departed to share the wonderful news with the other members of his tribe.

Trixie turned to the group, her eyes shining. "Well, we did it gang! Solved a mystery and helped an entire Indian tribe regain an important artifact. I'd say this vacation was a success!"

Her friends laughed at her statement, which was typical Trixie. But, despite all the misfortunes they had experienced since landing on Puerto Rico, the Bob-Whites couldn't help but be grateful for all of the wonderful things that had also happened. They had experienced a tropical rainforest, met a wonderful friend in Zeno, drank in the culture of a centuries-old city, seen the beauty of the Caribbean, and, most importantly, had played a role in returning a piece of history to a proud and illustrious people.

Yes, their time on the 'Island of Enchantment' certainly had been the adventure of a lifetime!

Notes:

- I sincerely thank Jenni for the inspiration—this story never would have been written without her wonderful interactive program at trixie-belden.com. The different covers and titles really *did* inspire me to write! Thanks, Jenni!
- I chose #45 because it's my hockey number!
- For those of you who don't know, I lived in Puerto Rico for two years while stationed at Naval Hospital Roosevelt Roads. I have stayed at and/or visited all of the places depicted in this story—if you are ever planning a trip to PR and want more info, please don't hesitate to email me at dana_carlisle@yahoo.com.
- I have provided links throughout the story to things/places I describe—they're completely optional, are not necessary to follow the story, and only provided if you want more info/pictures.
- The history of the Taíno people and the island of Puerto Rico is true, although the legend that carries this storyline is my own creation. I mean no disrespect to the Taíno culture.
- The U.S. Government has recently announced they are going to close the Naval Station at Roosevelt Roads, the largest Navy Base in the world.
- Although it may seem like it, this story was *not* inspired by a certain episode of *The Brady Bunch*—it's all a coincidence—really!
- However, this story was influenced by the *X-Files* episode entitled "Teso Dos Bichos."
- Frommers.com rocks! :)