

This was written in celebration of the ninth anniversary of Jixemetri—as Pat (Amygirl) says, the best place this side of Sleepside! The friends I've made at Jix are priceless, and I treasure the friendships so much. {{HUGS}} Of course, I'm a little slow on the uptake lately, so even though it was written with the \*spirit\* of celebrating the Ninth Jixanny, it's being posted for my Eighth Jixaversary. \*g\* As I didn't manage to actually finish this in time for the Ninth Jixanny, I've turned it into a Ninth Jixanny CWP Special Anniversary #9—with carryovers, even though they aren't required. And, as always, a big shout out and hug to Susan, who, in the true Bob-White spirit, always makes time to edit for me at the last minute. Thanks, my friend. {{HUGS}}

## Trixie Belden and the Mystery at the Park Nine Hotel

by Dana

"Hey, guys! I found something mysterious!" fourteen-year-old Trixie Belden called to her friends.

Predictably, Mart, Trixie's "almost-twin", groaned and launched into a string of impressive-sounding words that he wasn't able to spell. "Why is my feminine sibling incapable of sojourns pleasantly absent of enigmatic phenomenon?"

Dan Mangan groaned. "And why can't ever we just go on a trip *without* your vocabulary?"

Mart affected a wounded look, but before he could say anything else, Jim Frayne wisely brought the conversation back to its origins. "What did you find, Trix?"

Trixie looked at him, her wide, bright blue eyes shining. Without saying a word, she just grinned and pointed toward the floor of the hotel room that she was sharing with Honey and Di. Six pairs of eyes stared at the floor expectantly and then, finding nothing of interest, turned questioningly toward the impetuous sandy-haired blonde.

Honey Wheeler, Trixie's best friend and the epitome of tact, cleared her throat politely. "Uh, Trix? Can you be more specific, please?"

In response to her friend's request, Trixie merely waved her finger around excitedly. "You don't see it?" she fairly screeched. "The trap door!"

One thing that had intrigued Trixie on checking into their hotel in Geneva, on the north shore of Seneca Lake in upstate New York, was that the floors were hardwood. The Bob-Whites had stayed at many different types of places over the course of their adventures, but one of the only places that stood out to her for its lack of carpeting was the ski lodge on Mead's Mountain. But this quaint hotel also lacked carpets. It was this anomaly, combined with Trixie's sharp eyes and intense curiosity, that had caused her to notice the odd seams in the floor. Seams that spoke of nothing but a trap door...

Mart hooted. "Your imagination has run rampant this time, Shamus!" he exclaimed, even as Brian, the eldest, most-dependable, and least-imaginative Belden sibling, knelt down with a low whistle.

"I think Trixie's right," he said in a low voice.

Mart's look of shocked incredulity was comical, but Trixie was too excited about Brian's assessment to comment. "I knew it!" she exclaimed.

Brian looked up at his sister. "Cool it, Trix," he admonished. "It doesn't mean this is really a trap door. Or that you'll find anything more exciting than...than...yogurt lids."

Jim laughed. "Are you *still* thinking about all of those yogurt lids we sent to Ronda during that last fundraiser?"

Brian grinned. "Yeah, and if I'm traumatized by the hundreds we collected, imagine how poor Ronda feels about the *thousands* that she received. Anyway, this place was recently renovated, so chances are that there's nothing underneath these floorboards."

Trixie heard her brother's words, but her excitement and imagination had already run away with her. She was sure that there was *something* under there. Something more exciting than yogurt lids.

"What are you waiting for, Brian? Open it!"

Brian looked at his sister. "Trixie, we can't very well damage hotel property. I see the seams here, but other than manually prying it open—and damaging the floor in the process—I don't see how we can open it."

Trixie's sharp eyes darted around the room. "There *has* to be a way to open it. In books and movies, there's always something that triggers the trap door." Her eyes rested on Jim. "And in real life, too. Remember that button in that horrible still-life painting of fruit in your great-uncle's living room, Jim? It opened a trap door to a safe!"

"That's true, Trix, but like Brian said, this place has been recently renovated, so I don't see how the original trigger could still be here," Jim reasoned. "Assuming there ever was one."

Di Lynch, the group's expert on antiques and period furniture, looked around the room. "I don't know, Jim. The molding on the beamed ceilings, especially the cornice molds, look pretty authentic. Didn't Miss Trask say that this had been built in the 1920s as a private residence and had only recently been converted into a hotel with most of the original interior kept intact?" She pointed to a pair of wall sconces hanging on either side of the room's only window. "Those look like original Riddle Company sconces from the twenties, right down to the *estofado* paint effect."

"Esto-what-o?" Dan asked as he stared at the ornate silver sconces trimmed with a bright rose-gold paint.

Di took a few steps toward the sconces and pointed to the painted areas. "See this paint? It's a Spanish painting technique of applying paint to metals. The Riddle Company was known for using this technique from the twenties to the forties. These look authentic to me, but I could be wrong."

Trixie moved to examine the sconces closely. After inspecting the sconce hanging to the left of the window, she concluded that there was nothing interesting about it. An inspection of the right sconce, however, showed a small protrusion in the middle of one of the ornate designs that was not on the left one. Trixie reached out a finger and poked at it. To her gratification, she felt the button yield under the pressure of her finger and a loud whoosh filled the room as the trap door sprung open.

Trixie crowed in delight and rushed over to the open trap door as her friends stared on in amazement. She knelt beside Brian, ignoring the almost comical shocked look on his face, and eagerly looked in the hidden compartment. Soon, all of the Bob-Whites were crowded around her as she withdrew a plain, rather large, rectangular wooden box with a brass latch. The initials "HMC" were branded in the wood below the latch.

Trixie sat back and placed the box on her lap. She paused before opening it, taking a deep breath. Finally, she gently unfastened the latch and carefully lifted the lid. Inside was a treasure trove of memories—a leather-bound diary, also stamped with the initials HMC; a scrapbook that further inspection revealed was filled with photo montages, the people and places in them reflecting life in the 1930s and '40s; a scrap of plaid fabric of light turquoise and mustard, with thin red and dark blue stripes running throughout; a faded and brittle newspaper clipping; and finally, a yellowed envelope labeled "Finders Keepers" in an elegant female script.

"Wow," Honey breathed. "Should we open it?"

"Definitely!" Trixie exclaimed as she turned the fragile envelope over in her hands. It was not sealed, so it was an easy undertaking to lift the flap and slide the delicate pages out. She carefully unfolded the letter and began to read aloud.

"Dear Whomever," the letter began. "If you are reading this missive, then I never made it back to my beloved home on Seneca Lake. I fear that there are spies all about, surrounding me. Just the other day I caught old Miss Martha in my room. I know that she has been with the family since my father was a child and she's half-deaf and blind in one eye, but why should our cook have any business in my room? She said that she was helping the laundress, but I am sure that she was looking for the hidden compartment. As such, I have moved my most valuable possession to the other secret compartment in the house. There are many hiding spots about the estate, but I am sure that no one besides my father knows of this one."

"I am leaving my beloved Seneca Lake to be married to Wayne O'Trehy, of the Boston O'Trehys. Our fathers made the arrangements when I was born 18 years ago, and I fear that there is no escaping the marriage. I am to be married on the Summer Solstice, a romantic sounding day, but there is nothing romantic about marrying a man whom one does not love or even know very well. But as I am my father's daughter, I will bravely bear my cross.

"I cannot take my most valuable possession with me, for I am sure that the spies are waiting to hijack me on my journey to Boston and steal it. I cannot allow that sort of fate for my precious memento, a memento of a love that still burns in my bosom, even as I am betrothed to another. I pray that some day I will return to my family's homestead and can retrieve it, but if not, I hope some worthy individual will find it. I have left a series of clues to its whereabouts.

"Yours always, Heather Maura Carlisle.

"The eighteenth of May, nineteen-hundred-forty-eight."

When she was done reading the letter, Trixie looked up at her friends, her eyes twinkling. Before she could say a word, Mart said, "I ask again, why is my feminine sibling incapable of sojourns pleasantly absent of enigmatic phenomenon?"

"Because that would be boring," Trixie retorted. "You know we have to find her most treasured possession, right?" She shifted the papers in her hands so that the sheet behind the letter was now on top. Trixie almost cried out in frustration as she took in the strange characters and symbols that filled the page:



"How will we ever decipher this?" she groaned.

"Can I see that, Trix?" Brian asked. In response, she gingerly held out the paper filled with strange markings. Brian carefully took the paper and studied it. "I think I recognize these symbols," he said after a few moments.

"Really?" Honey cried out, almost as excited as Trixie. "Can you decipher it?"

Brian shook his head ruefully, a strand of dark hair falling onto his forehead. "Unfortunately, I'm not that good. But if there's a library near here, we may be able to look it up. It's an alchemist's alphabet."

"I don't mean to be a killjoy or anything," Dan said, "but are we sure we want to pursue this? She wrote that letter how many decades ago? I mean, the other clues could have vanished a long time ago."

Di spoke up. "Maybe so, but it would be such a fun adventure to just try!"

Mart looked at her, surprised. "Weren't you the one who in the car ride here opined about all of the relaxing on the beach you were going to be doing?"

Di shrugged. "I can always sun by the Wheeler Lake when we get home. And besides, we did your thing, didn't we? Who else would have made us stop in Binghamton and pull off the road to look at Blossom the Black Angus Bull?" Trixie beamed her thanks at her friend as Mart muttered something about how he at least didn't force *Mad Libs* on anybody during the car ride.

Honey reached into the box and picked up the newspaper clipping. The top read, "Finger Lakes Times, Geneva, N.Y. Tuesday, May 18, 1948". The article focused on a prominent doctor and his family who were moving to the area and the excitement the townsfolk felt about their new neighbors.

Mart, who had been looking at the back of the article as Honey described its contents, exclaimed, "Gleeps! Here's a 1948 Pontiac Deluxe Coupe for only \$1,460!"

"And gas is only 16 cents a gallon," Dan added.

"Here's an advertisement for a local grocery store," Di said. "A loaf of bread is 14 cents, and a pound of hamburger is 45 cents!"

"All wonderful information, but that does nothing to help us solve the puzzle of what the coded message says," Trixie reminded her friends with an impatient toss of her curls. She had been perusing the diary while the others concentrated on the newspaper, but there were only a handful of entries, and none of them seemed relevant to their quest.

Jim reached into the box and pulled out the square of plaid fabric, which was about four inches by four inches. "What do you think this is? Or what it means?"

Mart thought for a moment. "Maybe it's a clan tartan. The name Carlisle sounds as if it could have been a Scottish clan. We could probably check that out at the library, too."

Trixie re-read the letter another time, searching for more clues. She giggled halfway through, and Honey asked, "What? What's so funny?"

"Heather thinking that her old, half-deaf, blind-in-one-eye cook was a spy. I started imagining Miss Trask as a spy," Trixie explained.

The other Bob-Whites joined in her laughter.

"Can you imagine?" asked Honey as she chortled.

"I can just see it now," Mart said, striking a dramatic pose. "Trask. Miss Trask."

"I'll take my Darjeeling shaken, not stirred," Jim added with a chuckle.

After the merriment subsided, Trixie demanded that they head for the library right then.

"It's almost lunch time," Mart pointed out. "We can stop for food on the way to the library."

Trixie scowled. "You're always thinking of your stomach. Even at times like this!"

Jim grinned and reached out to tug one of Trixie's errant sandy curls. "Times like this," he teased. "Because the library holds such great adventure?"

Trixie grinned in spite of herself. "Or at least holds the knowledge that can lead to adventure."

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An hour-and-a-half later, after a sumptuous lunch at the Madderlake Café, the seven friends found themselves in the white-brick Geneva Public Library. It didn't take Brian long to find an alchemist's alphabet that looked similar to the figures on the paper Trixie held. Meanwhile, Honey was doing her own research, confirming that the turquoise-and-yellow plaid was indeed the Carlisle clan tartan.

Trixie watched eagerly as her dark-haired brother bent over a piece of paper, translating the symbols on the page. He appeared to be scowling at his translation, and Trixie was almost unable to bear the suspense anymore when he finally leaned back and scratched his head.

"This doesn't make any sense, but I've checked it twice," he said.

"What's it say?" Trixie demanded, impatient as always.

"'Mark Carstairs bathed here'," Brian read slowly.

"What?" Trixie snatched the sheet in front of Brian, and it was her turn to scowl. "This makes absolutely no sense."

"That's what I said."

"It's got to mean *something*," Dan reasoned. Just then, he had a thought. "What about the mineral springs in Saratoga? Uncle Bill said people used to go there for the springs all the time, and a ton of public bath houses started popping up in the twenties and thirties."

Trixie shook her head. "I don't think Heather expected us to go all the way to Saratoga."

"What about mineral springs around here then?" Jim suggested. "There could be some around here."

Additional research found that Clifton Springs, just ten miles northwest of Geneva, had mineral springs, but Trixie rejected this notion, too. "I don't think she meant for the clues to take anyone following them off the property."

"Maybe there's a mineral spring on the property somewhere," Honey reasoned. "The family could have built a private bath house. It sounds like they were well off, so it's not out of the question."

Trixie snapped her fingers. "That's it, Honey! I think I remember some pictures in that scrapbook that looked like they might have been taken in front of some type of bath house. Let's go!"

Jim chuckled at Trixie's exuberance. "First, you were so hot to get to the library, and now you're hot to leave it. I thought the library was a source of adventure!"

Trixie wrinkled her nose. "Well, if being in a library is adventure, I'm having too much adventure right now, and I don't think I like it! I'm hanging out in a library on my summer vacation!"

The others laughed, and Di stated, "As much as I love the idea of a treasure hunt, I still want equal time on the beach, Trixie. You know that, right?"

Trixie smiled at her friend as the group left the library. "I know, Di. Believe me, I want to solve this mystery quickly myself!"

Even though the group was eager to return to the Park Nine Hotel and continue their hunt, they decided to explore the town of Geneva while they were out and about. They investigated the shops and sights in the town's charming town square and main street and admired the beautiful views of Seneca Lake from Pulteney Square. Geneva had a wonderful small town feel, and the Bob-Whites were charmed by it, even Trixie, whose mind was never far from the mystery and eager to return to their hotel.

As they finally headed back to their lodgings, they debated whether they should explore the grounds and try to find the bath house themselves or whether they should ask the proprietor of the hotel. Exploring won out, and after examining the pictures in the scrapbook, the group fanned out over the 20-acre property. Jim and Trixie went in one direction, Brian and Honey in another, and Mart, Di, and Dan in a third. If anyone found the bath house, they were to use the Bob-White whistle to signal the others.

Jim and Trixie headed out to the more forested area of the property, passing by a group of holly bushes that Trixie imagined would look lovely in winter with their red berries. A trail led into the woods, and Trixie recalled that the hotel brochure had promised access to nature right on the property. They hadn't gotten very far along the path when they both heard the Bob-White whistle.

They stopped, listening, and when it came again, Jim said, "That sounds like it came from the direction that Mart, Di, and Dan were going to go. C'mon!" He grabbed Trixie's hand, and the pair raced in that direction.

Trixie, as excited as she was at possibly being on the brink of the next clue, had two very distinct thoughts that had nothing to do with mysterious happenings. One, she loved that Jim was just as excited as she was. Whenever Jim was on her side, she really felt as though she could just about fly. Two, the warmth of his hand on hers was just about the most wonderful feeling in the world. Trixie reveled in that feeling until they arrived to find the other five Bob-Whites already gathered around a small stone building with an arched doorway, but no door.

Di looked at Trixie. "We waited for you to get here. No one's been in, but when we peeked in from the doorway, I'd say we found our bath house."

Trixie headed immediately for the door, grateful for her friends' thoughtfulness. "Thanks for waiting until Jim and I could get here."

The inside of the bath house was very simple and made entirely of stone. On three sides of the one-room structure, the stones formed solid benches. An oval tub of marble, probably large enough to fit five or so adults, sat in the middle of the room. The only decoration in the room was a small statue of a bathing woman near the doorway.

"I bet a spring came up right here into the tub," Di said as she looked into the elliptical fixture. "Mineral baths were all the rage in the twenties and thirties, especially after the Sarasota bath houses became popular."

Mart looked at her, a mixture of pride and amazement in his eyes. "How do you know all of this?"

Di laughed. "Mummy was on a spa kick not too long ago, and I got to hear about the marvels of mineral baths—including their history. She finally went up to a spa in Saratoga and got the whole thing out of her system."

Meanwhile, Trixie was kneeling down in front of one of the benches, examining the stones that ran from the seat to the ground. "In the hollow area under these benches would be a great place to hide something," she said. "All we need to do is find a loose stone."

Soon, all of the Bob-Whites except for Dan, who appeared to be fascinated by the statue, were examining the mortar surrounding the stones that supported the benches. After a few minutes, Honey called. "Here's a stone that's much redder than any of the other stones in the house, and the mortar seems loose."

Trixie was by her side in a flash. "I think she's right!" she exclaimed as she looked around for something with which to pry away the mortar.

"Now, wait a minute," Brian said, correctly reading her action. "It's one thing to press a button and open a trap door, but it's entirely different to dig away at the mortar and damage the property."

Trixie sighed, deflated. She hated it when Brian was right. "Well, then what do you suggest we do?"

Dan's voice from behind her came unexpectedly. "I don't think you have to worry about doing any damage, Trix."

Trixie spun around. "Why not?"

"Because I found the next clue in the statue," Dan said, not even bothering to hide the smug smile that played about his lips.

Trixie gave a small shriek and lunged for the paper that Dan held tantalizingly in his hands, but he was too quick for her and moved it out of her reach before her fingers could snatch it from him.

"Not so fast," Dan said. "I'm finally along on an adventure, so I'd like to be the one to share the clue I found."

Trixie smiled good-naturedly. "You're right, Dan. I'm sorry to be so bossy."

"No problem, Shamus. We all know your limits on patience," Dan said with a grin. He then looked at the paper. "Unfortunately, it appears to be in the same weird alphabet as last time, so Brian's going to get the honors again."

Brian reached into his pocket to retrieve the alchemist alphabet that he had copied at the library along with the pencil stub he snatched and began his task at translation. After a few moments, he looked up. Trixie couldn't imagine why his face was so red. Was Brian...*embarrassed?*

"What is it, Bri?" she asked impatiently. "Read the clue!"

"Umm, *you* read it," he said as he thrust the paper into Trixie's hands. As she looked at the clue, she also turned bright red.

Mart, unable to contain his curiosity anymore, exploded. "For Pete's sake! What's the clue say?"

Trixie silently handed it to Mart, whose face also became pink as he looked at the words. He smirked as he handed the paper to Dan. "You found the clue, buddy. You get to read it."

"Would *somebody* read it already?" Honey wailed.

Dan burst out laughing as his dark eyes took in the words on the paper he held. "Follow Jim's treasure trail," he read aloud.

Trixie couldn't look at Jim, but she knew that he must be beet red. Honey finally spoke into the silence that followed Dan's outburst of laughter. "Well, obviously it can't mean we need to find a person named Jim and..." Her voice faded away as she realized there was no tactful way to finish that particular sentence.

"Maybe there's another statue," Dan said. "Maybe that statue is named Jim. After all, we did find this clue in a statue."

The Bob-Whites agreed that this sounded like the most logical solution. Di and Mart went to ask someone on the hotel staff about possible statues on the property, while the others decided to fan out and start looking, just in case there were statues hidden somewhere that the staff might not know about.

A frustrating two hours later, they hadn't found any statues on the property, and the front desk staff that Di and Mart spoke to were confident that there were no statues on the property.

Trixie sunk down on a nearby wrought iron bench and sighed. "What if there used to be a statue on the property and someone got rid of it? We'll never solve the mystery now!" she wailed. Jim sat down on the bench next to her.

"Don't think like that, Trix. We've never failed yet, and we're not going to now," he assured her. She smiled gratefully up at him. She loved having Jim in her corner.

Mart reminded that group that it was almost dinnertime, and Miss Trask was expecting them to be ready to eat at the Torrey Park Grill, a restaurant not too far from the hotel.

"We'll have a great dinner," Mart said encouragingly, "and we'll be ready to pick up on the mystery tomorrow. You'll see!"

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The next morning, Trixie hopped out of bed eagerly. "Honey!" she called. "Di! We need to get up! I think I figured it out!"

Di didn't move, but Honey opened bleary eyes and tried to focus on her friend. "Figured what out? What time is it?" She lifted her head, searching for the clock.

"I think I figured out who—or what—Jim's Treasure is! Get up!" she repeated.

Di finally did move enough to throw a pillow in Trixie's direction and then bury her head underneath the covers.

Honey's head sank back down into the comfort of her pillow. "My sentiments exactly," she mumbled.

Undeterred, Trixie marched over to the bed Honey and Di shared and yanked down the covers. "C'mon, guys! It's already almost eight o'clock. The boys have probably been up for ages. Mart's probably downstairs at the complimentary breakfast buffet going to town. We'll be lucky if there's anything left for us!"

Honey and Di grumbled a bit, but eventually the three girls were up, dressed, and heading down to the first floor of the hotel, where a breakfast buffet was set up. As Trixie had predicted, the boys, along with Miss Trask, were already seated at a table. Everyone's plate was nearly empty, and Mart was just standing up to have another go around when the girls approached.

"We were just about you come get you lazy squaws," Dan said with a smile.

Trixie stuck her tongue out at him, and the three girls headed with Mart to the buffet. While the girls were at the buffet, Jim and Dan were busy rearranging the tables in the dining room so that they could all sit together. After Trixie had loaded her plate with scrambled eggs, toast, bacon, and sausage, and Honey and Di had opted for lighter meals of yogurt, fruit salad, and waffles, the girls joined the rest of their group around the newly arranged tables.

"Did you solve your latest mystery in your sleep, Trixie?" Miss Trask asked with a teasing glint in her eyes. The Bob-Whites had brought their chaperone up to speed the night before at dinner. Margery Trask was delighted that the mystery that Trixie had managed to stumble on this time appeared safe and didn't have any obvious criminal involvement.

Trixie's face glowed as she replied, "Not the *whole* mystery. But I think I did figure out the clue!"

"Really?" Dan asked. "Do tell."

"What if Jim's Treasure was a horse?" Trixie asked. "He'd have to be exercised on trails. Maybe the trails we've been walking all over were actually once bridal paths. And we did find a stable on the premises."

Honey nodded. "That's right. It was filled with a lot of nice tack that was well preserved and seemed to be in quite good shape, even if it isn't being used right now."

"Should we ask at the hotel if anyone knows about horses that used to be kept on the property or how we could find out?" Jim asked.

"It couldn't hurt," Brian agreed. "I'm finished with my breakfast, so I'll go ask now."

Trixie kept herself busy by eating her breakfast as she awaited news from Brian. He was gone for quite awhile before he returned, his handsome face inscrutable. Trixie looked at him questioningly, and he said, "The owner of the hotel happened to be in this morning, so I was able to get quite a bit of information from her. There've been quite a few horses kept on this property over the years. Recently, there were even two goats, Tally and Oreo. She's really a character and told quite the story about those little goats. But anyway," he continued, "she said that there's a register of all of the livestock that was kept on the property in the stables. She said the building was in good shape, so she preserved the tack and keeps the building open so that guests can explore it if they want. She may even get more horses in her eventually for the guests to use."

"Excellent," Trixie said with a grin. She looked around. "Are we all done with breakfast and ready to go check out the stables?"

"Are you going to take no for an answer even if we aren't?" Mart asked.

"Nope! Let's go!"

Miss Trask excused herself, explaining she was going to do some shopping in town, and the Bob-Whites headed to where they remembered seeing the stable the day before. The structure was large enough to stable three horses, and the tack room was kept almost as neat and as tidy as Regan's. It was in this room that Trixie and her friends found the registry. Trixie flipped through it, careful not to tear the older pages, and finally found what she was looking for.

"Jim's Treasure," she read. "Out of Lucky Fascination, by Black Magic." She looked up, excited. "Well, now we know that there was definitely a horse named Jim's Treasure. We just have to figure out *which* trail Heather meant."

Mart, who had been leaning against the wall, suddenly jerked as his hand slipped. A horseshoe that was hanging on the wall near his hand slipped—but did not fall. As the horseshoe slid from its original spot, a panel in the wall opened near their feet.

"You're kidding me!" Dan exclaimed as the group stared, stunned, at the gaping hole now exposed in the wall.

"Talk about chance," Jim said.

"To chance!" Trixie cheered as she fell to her knees and peered into the opening. A moment later she pulled out a piece of paper filled with the strange symbols she now recognized as the alchemist alphabet. "This one is the longest one yet!"

Brian immediately set to translating the newest clue, and after several minutes, he read aloud, "Here I sit hour after hour, like a princess in her tower."

"Is there a tower somewhere on the property?" Di asked.

Trixie slowly shook her head. "I don't think so."

The seven friends sat in thoughtful silence for several moments before Brian said in a practical tone, "What's the highest point on the property?"

"The house—the hotel—sits on the highest point," Jim answered promptly.

"And the highest point of the hotel would be the top floor!" Trixie exclaimed, already halfway out the door and racing toward the hotel. The rest of the Bob-Whites followed her eagerly. It wasn't until they had almost reached the building that Trixie stopped suddenly and stared at the structure.

"I don't think that we can get to the top floor—it looks like it must be an attic up there, not a full floor. Guests probably don't have full access to the attic," she said ruefully and then groaned. "How will we ever get up there?"

"The attic?" a voice said from behind Trixie. "Why would you want to get into the attic?"

The sandy-haired sleuth turned to see a gray-haired woman looking at them quizzically.

Brian spoke up then. "Hi. Do you remember me? I asked you about horses this morning?"

The woman nodded. "Yes, I remember. I was surprised to hear anyone interested in the history of the livestock of this place. And now you're interested in the attic?" She looked at them expectantly.

Trixie looked at the woman and instantly knew she could trust her. She had a sudden need to tell the woman the whole story. Her words tumbled out, one after another, explaining everything that the Bob-Whites had found since their arrival. "And you see, we think the attic must be the place Heather meant!" she finished, gasping slightly for breath.

The woman's face held a faraway look. "Yes, Heather was a clever one—and so into intrigue."

"You know her?" Honey asked breathlessly.

The woman nodded. "She was my sister."

The Bob-Whites stared, and the woman blushed under their scrutiny. "This was my family's place many years ago," she explained. "We had to sell it to a doctor's family and move. I didn't care much, but Heather, she was heartbroken. She loved this land. It wasn't until I was older that I realized what we'd given up and just how precious this land was. I bided my time until it came up for sale. I couldn't afford it outright, especially after my husband died, so I came up with a plan to turn it into a hotel. The bank accepted my proposal. I tried to keep things as close as they were to when I lived here. The stables and the bath house are open for viewing, and I hope to get them functional at some point. I'd love to offer a mineral bath and horse-riding to my guests."

The Bob-Whites stared in fascination, awed by the story and unsure what to say. In their silence, the woman continued. "I'm sorry," she said, seeming to shake herself out of a reverie. "I haven't properly introduced myself. I'm Christina Friherre." She offered her hand to each of the Bob-Whites, and they introduced themselves in turn.

"I don't know what my sister meant in her letter. She was never sent to Boston to marry anyone by an arranged marriage, and there certainly weren't spies surrounding our family. She did have a wonderful sense of adventure, though!" Christina smiled, her eyes sparkling with memories. "I can see her, the night before we moved, creating a mystery to leave behind. That was something Heather would do," she said with an approving nod of her head.

"Can't we ask her?" Trixie blurted. "Let's call her and find out what she meant!"

A shadow passed over Christina's face, and Honey, who had understood what the past-tense references to Heather meant, put her hand on Trixie's shoulder. "Trixie..." she began.

But Christina shook her head at Honey's words, reading the sympathy on the young woman's face. "It's okay, darlin'," she said, and she reached for Honey's free hand. "Heather would have loved for everyone to follow these clues, but she never would've wanted anyone to feel sad over her." Honey smiled as she grasped the woman's hand in hers.

"Let's go see what my sister hid in the attic, shall we?"

The Bob-Whites admired this woman's spunk, and Trixie, who felt as if she had swallowed an entire storeful of shoes, nodded gratefully. They followed Christina inside, waiting while she retrieved a key from behind the front desk, and then the group continued up to the attic space behind their hostess. Once inside the attic, Trixie imagined that it hadn't changed much since the house was built. The ceiling consisted of exposed wooden beams that came to a peak at the top with sloping sides. The floor consisted of wood planks, and the Bob-Whites tread carefully, the taller ones needing to stoop, as they moved about the attic space. A few trunks and boxes littered the garret space, but for the most part, it was barren.

It was Mart who noticed a strange symbol carved into one of the slanted beams. "Doesn't this look like one of the symbols we've been following?" he asked as everyone crowded around to look at his finding.

Christina nodded. "My father built this house, and he loved alchemy and all of its mystery. My sister picked up that love from him. He also loved mysteries and intrigue. It's why he built secret compartments and hiding places all over the property. My sister always thought that was fantastic." A nostalgic smile crossed her face as she leaned forward to scrutinize the symbol. "This is the symbol for Leo, the sign under which both my father and sister were born."

Dan asked, "But what does an astrological sign have to do with alchemy?"

"There are twelve alchemical processes," Christina explained. "They're the basis of modern chemical processes and are symbolized by the astrological sign that dominates the process." She sat back and thought for a while. "I wasn't as good at this alchemy stuff as my sister, but my dad talked about it enough that I think I remember that Leo ruled the process of decomposition through digestion. I probably have a book somewhere that could tell us for sure. I still have a lot of my father's old books."

"So, is that supposed to be a clue?" Trixie asked. "The decomposition thing?"

"I don't know," Christina admitted. "Alchemists often digested matter by sealing it in a flask and burying it in manure or keeping it in direct sunlight, but I don't see how that can help here. You kids said you were already in the stable."

"And the letter did specifically say that the other secret compartment was in the house," Trixie said. "Either we're not to the final clue yet, or it means something else. Maybe we should still be in the stable."

Honey shook her head. "I don't think so, Trix. The last clue was in the stable, so I don't think she'd leave a clue for the stable in the stable. And the stable was low on the grounds. Hardly a place that felt like a tower."

Trixie smiled gratefully at her friend. "You're so right! Thanks for keeping me on track, Honey."

The honey-haired girl smiled. "Don't thank me yet," she said. "It's not like we've found the hiding spot!"

The group continued their search throughout the attic until Trixie noticed an anomaly at the base of the chimney pipe that traveled through the attic and exited through the roof. She dropped to her knees with a cry to her friends and began to vigorously search for a trap door or secret trigger. It wasn't long before her hands found what they sought, and yet another secret compartment opened up below the chimney stack. Excitedly, Trixie reached in and brought out a metal flask.

She looked up at Christina. "Did someone say flask?" she asked with a grin as she held out her find to their host.

Christina's look of wonderment spoke volumes as she reached out for the metal object. As she moved the object to look at it, something rattled around inside of it. "This was my dad's," she breathed. "It went missing right before we moved. I'll never forget my dad searching and searching for this at the new house, but it never turned up." Her look of disbelief changed to a grin. "And Heather never let on. Well, I'll be..." She shook the flask. "Heather never would have considered this her most treasured possession, so whatever is in here must be it."

Christina immediately tipped the flask upside down. The object inside rolled toward the narrow opening but did not come out. Christina reached inside the flask with her pinky and pulled out a delicate ring. She gasped. "I haven't seen this in years!"

Trixie leaned in and saw a round opal surrounded asymmetrically by three small lapis lazuli stones, all in a gold setting. The ring was simple, but the cool fire of the opal set off by the startling blue of the lapis lazuli made it a striking piece of jewelry.

"This was Heather's favorite ring. I can't believe she left this behind for a game of intrigue!"

"Maybe it wasn't a game for her," Trixie said. "Maybe she loved this place so much she couldn't bear to leave, so she left a piece of herself behind. A piece she loved very much."

Christina turned to Trixie, tears shimmering in her brown eyes. "That would be Heather. And of course, she'd do it in a way as to turn it into a mystery." She closed her eyes and held the ring to her heart. "I'm so glad that I followed my instinct and bought this place back. Any piece of Heather is a such a treasure to me, let alone a ring she loved so much." She opened her eyes and stared at the seven young people in front of her.

"But most of all, I'm so glad you young people stumbled onto this mystery and saw it through. You've given me something more precious than I could ever describe."

Trixie and the rest of the Bob-Whites smiled back, and Trixie felt the overwhelming warmth and fulfillment that always overtook her when she solved a mystery that was so meaningful. "We're glad, too."

Yes, Heather Maura Carlisle is a tribute to my sister, whom I miss more than words could ever express. The goats are named after her pets—Tally is her springer spaniel, and Oreo is her black-and-white cat.

Thanks to Ronda, who didn't even know she helped me, but without her stories, I wouldn't have known how to record information in a horse registry. \*g\* I tried to research online, but all of the horse registries I could find needed a membership to access them.

The title tag phrase I used was "To Chance!" (my doggy, whom I also miss more than words can say), and Ronda and Mark were the Jixsters with cameos. My something associated with a ninth anniversary is lapis lazuli, and for good measure, I included the number nine in the name of the hotel (which is a figment of my imagination and bears no resemblance to any hotels in Geneva, New York).

My carryover items were: a new neighbor (detailed in the newspaper clipping) (#2.1), a photo montage (SA#5), plaid (#2.2), scrapbook (#2.3), finding a sweet memento of someone's past (the box, its contents, and the final "treasure") (#2.4), puzzle (SA#6), late spring-to-summer event/holiday from May 20 through end of July (summer solstice) (#2.5), holly (#2.6), a mysterious code (SA#7), an odd "attraction" that someone insists on pulling off the road to see (Blossom the Black Angus Bull—<http://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/16703>) (#2.7), someone with a story about a goat (#2.8), an orphan (Jim or Dan, take your pick) (#2.9), comparing prices of something to 1948 (SA#8), the phrase, "I'm having too much adventure right now, and I don't think I like it!" (#2.10).