

THE STUFFED SLEUTHS AFFAIR - Part 1

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"Look! There's the lake!" Nancy said, pointing over the side of the powder-blue convertible at the glittering, crystal-blue expanse. Sunlight glittered off the surface of the water, shining between the trunks of the pines which lined the highway.

"A whole week in charming little Lake Benson!" Bess said. "Oh, I can't wait!"

"It's going to be great," George agreed. "The weather's perfect for swimming."

"*And* for showing off our bathing suits!" Bess giggled. "Do you think there'll be many cute boys?"

"How should I know? I haven't been here since I was seven years old. I mostly remember Dickie Hodges trying to scare me with a handful of worms."

"George Fayne, scared of a few little worms?" Bess asked in feigned shock.

George smiled. "I said he *tried*. Then I made him eat them."

"Golly, speaking of food, I'm famished!" Bess said. "Can we stop for supper when we get into town?"

"How did I know that would be your next question?" George laughed.

"Your aunt may be wondering where we are, George," Nancy reminded. "We'd better hurry over to her cabin first and drop our things off."

The titian-haired girl glanced into her rear-view mirror. While the winding mountain road was mostly free of traffic, the black sedan which had been following them for the last half-hour was so close it was practically right on her bumper.

"Well," she said. "Speaking of being in a hurry! Gosh, I hope they aren't going to try to pass me *here*."

But that was precisely what the sedan began to do, increasing its speed and pulling alongside the convertible.

"Golly, they must be bonkers!" Bess exclaimed. "If another car comes along that curve just now, there'll be a crack-up!"

"I'll slow down just a bit and let them get around--oh-h-h!" Nancy exclaimed. For the sedan had jerked to the right, its front bumper smacking against Nancy's with a metallic clonk!

"You *maniac*!" George shouted angrily at the other car. "Watch where you're going!"

The driver of the sedan didn't listen. Nudging against Nancy's car, it began to force her away from the center line. She wouldn't be able to turn--and they were headed right for a sharp curve! If nothing was done, the girls would be forced to drive straight off the edge of the cliff!

Bess shrieked in fear as Nancy struggled with the wheel. The sedan was simply too powerful. She couldn't turn the car. So she did the only thing she could do, and stepped on the brakes, hard. The ugly sounds of squealing rubber and screeching metal filled the still air as the convertible separated from the sedan and spun around. Nancy caught one last glimpse of the sedan as it roared around the curve, barely avoiding the cliff itself -- and then it was gone.

"Did anybody get the license number?" she asked.

"No," said Bess and George.

"Damn! Neither did I."

They backed up and pulled over to a safe spot to survey the damage. Nancy felt heartsick as she spotted the sharp, ugly gash and the patch of bare, crumpled metal on her front bumper.

"Oh, Nancy!" George said sympathetically. "Your poor car!"

"The trunk popped open!" Bess said suddenly. She dashed around the end of the car for a look, then sighed in relief. "Thank goodness! My suitcase didn't fall out. I would have just died if anything happened to my bathing suit!"

“How can you think about some old bathing suit when Nancy's beautiful car is in ruins?” George chided her.

“It's brand new!” Bess shot back, eyes flashing. “And it's not just some old bathing suit! It's absolutely perfect! And I had to diet for just about *forever* in order to get into it!”

“I know,” George said, rolling her eyes. “I could hear your stomach growling all summer, oh chubby cousin of mine.”

“Oh, George, don't tease her,” Nancy said, with no confidence that the brash young brunette would heed her words. “And my car isn't in 'ruins'. It's only gotten a little dinged.”

Nancy tried to put on a brave face, but her worst fears were confirmed when they got back on the road. As she drove down the mountain, she could feel that the car was handling poorly. More than just the chassis had been damaged in the crash. By the time she reached Benson's quaint Main Street, the car was sputtering and struggling. “Keep your eyes peeled for a garage,” Nancy said.

“Look!” Bess chirped, pointing. Nancy turned her head. A banner hung across the street announced the Lake Benson Fishing Festival and Fry-Off. A smiling fish relaxed in a frying pan, basting itself with oil.

“Doesn't that look heavenly?”

“It's a *cartoon*, Bess.” George said, rolling her eyes.

“A delicious-looking cartoon!” Bess agreed. “*Oh*, I can practically *smell* that fish frying now!”

“Your stomach never goes on vacation, does it?”

“My stomach knows how to enjoy the finer things in life!”

Nancy tried to ignore the bickering cousins and scanned the road ahead with her sharp eyes. Soon enough--and no thanks to Bess and George--she spotted a garage.

“Hmm,” the white-haired old mechanic said, peering under the hood. “Give me an hour. I'll fix 'er up good as new.”

“Goodness, that fast?”

“Young lady, there's no faster mechanic than me in all of Lake Benson!” the mechanic said proudly.

“And how many mechanics are there in Lake Benson?” Nancy asked.

“Oh, er. Just me. But I'm fast, don't you worry!”

Bess tugged on Nancy's sleeve and pointed across the street. A neon-lit malt shop sat opposite the garage, its sign promising delicious hamburgers, hot fries, and cold milkshakes.

“*Please*, let's stop for dinner!” the plump blonde begged. “I'm absolutely *ravenous!*”

“I guess there's no helping it,” George said. “Go ahead and order me a burger, Nancy. I'll run down to the phone booth and let Aunt Mildred know about our car trouble.”

The mechanic nodded. “Just don't go too far. I'll give you the high sign when your car's purring again!”

One phone call later, George stepped into the malt shop to see her cousin tucking enthusiastically into a double cheeseburger dripping with toppings. She raised an eyebrow.

“Well. How's the diet going?”

“My diet has been officially suspended until tomorrow,” Bess said, snatching another French fry and daintily nibbling on it. “What's the fun in traveling if you can't enjoy yourself a *little?*”

“You're going to eat yourself right out of that bathing suit, if you're not careful.”

“It's only one night. Anyway, it's September already. After this vacation, I'll have all winter to slim back down.” Defiantly, Bess took a sloppy bite of cheeseburger.

“Yes, we all know how much weight you lose over the holidays,” George said sarcastically.

“Thanks for watching my hamburger, Nancy. If you hadn't, the human Hoover here would have slurped it right up!”

“I wouldn't eat your food!” Bess protested. “Though, I may try one of those yummy-looking hot dogs they've got. I'm practically hollow after all day in the car!”

Nancy and George were rather hungry as well, and the girls each polished off a hamburger and fries and a tall root-beer float heaped with vanilla ice cream--to which Bess added not just a chili dog, but a slice of pizza and most of a basket of huge, crisp onion rings.

"You girls want to try some of our famous apple pie?" the soda jerk asked, nodding at a glass-covered brown pastry perched temptingly on the counter.

"Oh, no, I couldn't possibly!" Nancy protested.

"I'll take a slice!" Bess chirped. "Doesn't it look good? All crispy and flaky and fresh from the oven--u-m-mmm-mm!"

"You're making me want to try it after all," Nancy admitted. "I really oughtn't, but--"

"Oh, come on! We're stuck here anyway, aren't we?"

Nancy glanced out the window. Across the street, the old mechanic caught her eye and shook his head. It was still some time before the car would be ready.

"Well--why not? It does look delicious!"

"Delicious? It looks absolutely, positively, mouth-wateringly *scrumptious!*" Bess giggled, leaning forward onto the counter and casting a flirtatious look at the handsome young soda jerk. He blushed and uncovered the pie.

"For such true lovers of pie," he said, cutting into it, "three extra-large pieces!"

"Nice work, cousin," George said dryly as a double-wide slab of pie was placed in front of her. Bess just smiled and picked up her fork.

The sun had almost set by the time Nancy's fork clattered onto her empty plate. "Oh, dear," she groaned. "That was a little *too* good!"

George nodded ruefully. "If we move at a nice slow waddle, I think I can *just* about manage to make it across the street."

Bess removed the napkin from the collar of her sweater and daintily dabbed a few errant crumbs from the corners of her mouth. "I think we're ready for the check," she commented, stifling a ladylike burp.

The soda jerk gave a low whistle of appreciation. "Young lady, you sure can eat."

"Understatement of the year," George muttered. Bess shot her a dirty look. "I do enjoy a good meal, from time to time," she said sweetly.

"More like *all* the time--ow!" George stumbled as Bess kicked her in the shin.

"You really ought to enter the fish-eating contest at the end of the festival. Will you be in town that long?"

"A week-long food festival?" George laughed. "Trust us, by the end of the week we'll probably need a team of movers just to roll her out of t--OW! Nancy?"

"Honestly, George, that's quite enough," Nancy said with a scowl. "Please, tell us about this contest."

"Oh, you really should come. All the local businesses offer prizes." He grinned. "We're putting up a year's supply of our fabulous pies!"

"Oh, dear. I feel like I've eaten a years' supply already," Nancy said with a wan smile.

"Ha! Well, if you're watching your figure, there are other prizes. Miss Tanner at the sports shop is putting up a brand-new, top-of-the-line pole and tackle box, and I heard Mr. Fleishmann of Fleishmann's Department Store bragging he was donating a month in a fishing cabin on the lake for the first-place winner--though knowing that old skinflint, he probably found the most ramshackle heap he could rent."

Nancy laughed musically. "Well, perhaps we'll enter after all, then--provided we've got any room by then!" After paying a very reasonable amount, considering the amount they'd eaten, the girls made their way to the mechanic's shop.

"Perfect timing!" the mechanic said. He gestured to Nancy's car, which was once again a sleek vision of powder-blue beauty.

“How much do I owe you?” Nancy asked. The number the mechanic gave her was also quite reasonable--for car repairs. But it was quite a lot more than their bill at the malt shop had been!

“What a blow to our vacation budget,” Nancy sighed.

“I'd like to smack that rat who hit us!” George said. Her eyebrows suddenly went up. “Say, has anyone come in tonight with a black sedan that was crumpled on the right side?”

“Why--no, I haven't seen a car like that,” the mechanic said.

“Do please tell us if someone does bring it in,” Nancy asked. “I would hate for someone to get away with driving so recklessly!” She wrote Aunt Mildred's telephone number down on a blank page of her notebook and tore it off for him.

The girls piled into the convertible and drove down the brightly lit main street. They turned before reaching the docks, passing quaint cottages, then a stretch of thick forest. The road followed the shoreline, twisting and turning. Soon Nancy was pulling into the driveway of Aunt Mildred's cabin, a fine, sturdily built structure set just back from the beach. The moon, huge and luminous, was just rising over the trees, and the smooth lake reflected its light like a flawless mirror.

A tall, lanky woman with a loose bun of brown hair and thick glasses popped out of the door, smiling broadly. “George!” she cried happily. “My, how...big you've gotten since the last time I saw you!”

“That's Bess, Aunt Mildred,” George corrected. “I'm George.”

Soon, the tomboyish brunette was caught up in a bear hug that even she couldn't wriggle out of. Aunt Mildred lifted her right off her feet, then set her down again.

“It's nice to see you too!” George laughed. Nancy nodded. “Thank you for letting Bess and I visit!” she said politely.

“Think nothing of it, dear, think nothing of it!” Aunt Mildred said. “Come in, come in! You poor girls must be famished.”

“Well, as a matter of fact--” Nancy began. She sniffed. “Is that...fresh fried fish?”

“Oh, *no!*” George said under her breath, catching a glimpse of the dinner table through the door.

“Ms. Fayne, we--” Nancy began. “I mean--well--we have a lot of things to unpack, and--”

“Nonsense! You're guests, dear! I'll go fetch your luggage. You poor starving things go ahead and tuck into your dinner while it's still warm!”

And with that she hurried out to the car, leaving Nancy, Bess and George to goggle at a table loaded down with juicy fried catfish, slaw, corn, and all the trimmings.

“Poor starving things!” George repeated bitterly. “You and your let's-stay-for-a-slice-of-pie, Bess! I ought to whop you one in the snoot!”

“Well-well, you're the one who didn't tell your aunt we were eating in town!” Bess protested.

“Oh, golly, what are we going to do?” Nancy said, frowning her brow and putting a hand to her full stomach. “I couldn't eat all this if I *was* starving!”

“Look, she even made little signs to mark our places!” George groaned. “She went to all this work. It's just going to kill her when she finds out we're not hungry.”

“Nancy Drew! George Fayne! I'm surprised at both of you!” Bess clucked, pushing past them and taking a seat at the far end of the table, behind the card with her name on it in delicate cursive. “We can't hurt her feelings like that!”

“My cousin, the human garbage disposal! You just don't understand us mere mortals, cuz. Our stomachs have *limits*. And don't think *you're* invulnerable, either, after all that chow you guzzled at the malt shop!”

“I suppose there's no helping it,” Nancy sighed, picking up a fork. “We'll just have to find room. *Somewhere.*”

Aunt Mildred returning to find the three girls resolutely stuffing their already-stuffed stomachs with the delicious fish. She beamed. “Do you like it?”

“It's... wonderful!” Nancy coughed, hoping she didn't look *too* green.

"I caught it myself out by Specter Island. That's where all the best fishing is, you know--right across from the house, at twilight, and I have it all to myself because everyone else is too superstitious to fish there near dark. They're scared of the ghost!"

"A g-g-ghost?" Bess hiccuped. "Gee whiz, really?"

"Of course not, dear! Why, it's just a silly old story. The only things haunting that island are some of the biggest, juiciest lunkers you could even hope to catch! How about another helping?"

Aunt Mildred held out another crispy slab of fish. Nancy hastily put a hand over her plate.

"Oh, *no!* I'm absolutely full to the gills!"

"If I eat any more fish, I'll *grow* gills," George commented.

"I'll take it!" Bess said cheerfully, holding out her plate. George elbowed her.

"Owch! That hurts!"

"It'll hurt a lot worse when you burst like a punctured tire. I mean, *hypers*, Bess, really! You look like you're smuggling a Thanksgiving turkey under your sweater."

Bess patted her bulging stomach and sighed. "But it's all so *good!*"

It took two more rounds of fish and a dish of ice cream for dessert, but eventually even the normally bottomless blonde had to admit defeat.

"Would you like another bowl, dear?" Aunt Mildred asked. Bess shook her head emphatically. "Are you sure?"

"I'll never eat again!" Bess moaned. "I don't even think I can *move!* Just let me die happy and bury me right here at the dinner table!"

"Don't believe a word of it, Aunt Mildred," George said slyly. "If I know my cousin, she'll be eating you out of house and home bright and early tomorrow morning."

The girls helped with the dishes--or rather, Nancy and George did, Bess apparently being quite serious about being too full to move--and decided to retire early.

"Come on, Nan," George said, "let's see if we can't haul her up the stairs!"

She put her hands under Bess's armpits. The plump girl shrieked and decided she might be able to walk after all.

The guest room contained a sumptuous queen-sized bed and a small but cozy twin in the cover. The two cousins took the shared bed and passed out almost in tandem, Bess's quiet snores mixing with George's occasional tomboyish snorts.

Nancy crawled into the twin and pulled the quilt up to her chin. It was lovely and warm, and yet sleep failed to overtake the teen-aged sleuth. She may not have eaten as much as Bess, but gulping two big dinners in quick succession had left her unpleasantly crammed, and more than a little queasy. Now she was finding it impossible to get comfortable and fall into slumber.

I really did overdo it, she sighed, pulling the fabric tight across her middle and regarding the telltale bulge as if it were the evidence in a murder case. *Some case*, she scolded herself. *The Mystery of the Gluttonous Girl Detective!*

Then again, her only other option had been to hurt Aunt Mildred's feelings. And she had to admit, the woman could certainly cook.

Admitting defeat, she silently slid out of bed and padded out into the hall. She found the bathroom and fixed herself a stomach-settling glass of bicarbonate of soda. Then she sat by the window, sipping the fizzy water and waiting for it to work its magic.

The view of the lake was a lovely one. The lights of distant houses, sparkling stars, a vast and luminous moon, all repeated in rippling, distorted form in the water. Specter Island sat in the middle of the tableau, a dark splotch of primeval forest surrounded by a galaxy of lights.

Nancy gasped. A moment later, her eyes narrowed.

Specter Island was supposed to be uninhabited--except for the ghosts. And Nancy didn't believe in such things, of course!

So--what was that lighted lantern doing, bobbing between the shadowed trunks of the trees?

The next morning, Nancy was jolted awake by a piteous wail.

Ghost!, she thought at once. But of course, that was ridiculous--it couldn't be a ghost, not with daylight streaming into the window.

It couldn't be a ghost because there are no ghosts! Golly, Nancy, you know you don't believe in that mumbo jumbo! she told herself. The strange vision of the previous night felt like a dream.

Suddenly, the wail burst forth again. Nancy leaped to her feet and rushed towards the plaintive sound.

She found George standing outside the bathroom. The brunette rolled her eyes. "Her Hungriness is having some sort of crisis. I'm sorry, Nancy, did she wake you up?"

Nancy ignored her and rapped on the door. "Bess? Are you all right?"

"I'm okay, d-don't come in!" Bess pleaded.

"Are you hurt?" Nancy lowered her voice. "What's wrong? Bess, if something happened--"

"I'm not hurt, I..I just..." Bess mumbled.

Nancy and George exchange curious looks.

"You just what?" Nancy asked.

The door jerked open a few inches and Bess peered out. She was wrapped in a towel, and her face was crimson beneath the stray blonde strands.

"I ripped my suit," she hissed. "We're supposed to go down to the lake today and *I ripped my brand new suit!*" She let the towel drop, revealing a long tear along the side of her beautiful tangerine one-piece.

"Oh." Nancy said. "Oh, Bess. It's--it's not that bad, really--"

"I can't go out like this!" Bess wailed. "It's indecent!"

"You can borrow one of--" Nancy began, then broke off. A gallon of Spry and a crowbar couldn't have gotten Bess into one of Nancy's suits. The attempt could only end in tears--and two ripped suits instead of one.

"It fit yesterday morning!" Bess sobbed. "I *can't* have gained that much weight in *one day!*"

"That *is* pretty impressive, even for you," George observed. "Just how many pounds did you pack on? There's got to be a scale around here somewhere."

"George Fayne, you're *horrible!*" Bess cried. She burst into tears, weeping into a towel.

"Bess, we'll find a suit for you," Nancy said lamely. "We will. Aunt Mildred must have a spare."

As it happened, there *was* a spare in one of the guest closets--an old-fashioned bathing costume with alternating stripes of dark and light green. It fit Bess perfectly.

"I look like a watermelon," she moaned, lifting her soft, round belly as she regarded herself in the mirror. George opened her mouth, but Nancy shot her a look that said *don't you dare*.

A sumptuous breakfast of fluffy buttermilk pancakes, thick, crispy bacon, and mounds of perfectly cooked eggs awaited them downstairs. Bess buried her plate under a small mountain of food. "Don't say a word, George Fayne," she snapped.

"I didn't!"

"Well, you were *going* to. And of course you're right. I've brought this on myself." She sighed, then licked her lips. "But since I'm *already* hopelessly fat, there's no reason I should starve myself *now*."

"Aunt Mildred," Nancy asked, "if it's all right with you, perhaps we'll take the boat out on the lake today."

"Going to do a little fishing?"

"Going to try, at least," Nancy said, but there was a telltale sparkle in her eye. Her appetite for mysteries was even greater than Bess's appetite for food, and right now Specter Island was smelling mighty tasty.

"I'll pack you girls a nice, big lunch!" Aunt Mildred said cheerfully, withdrawing to the kitchen. Nancy paused, a bite of her third pancake halfway to her mouth. "Ohhhh, dear."

"I'll bet I know why all the fish around here are so big," Bess giggled. "She probably throws her leftovers in the lake!"

"They'll be going hungry with *you* around, then," George observed. "Come on, Bess, haven't you had enough?"

Bess glared. Defiantly, she heaped more food on her plate.

"You're going to make yourself sick!"

"I won't!" Bess sniffled. "Can't you just let me enjoy my food for once?"

"For *once!* You never *stop* enjoying your food!" George laughed. "The only reason you were able to shave off any weight at all is that you had me guard all your money *and* the key to the pantry--and even *then* I caught you flirting with the grocery clerks for scraps!"

Bess looked down, her face reddening, and took another bite of pancake. She tried to stifle a sob.

Nancy set down her fork. "Who wants to help me load the boat? Bess?"

"I'm not done," Bess mumbled.

Nancy turned to George and smiled sweetly. "Then George will help me. Won't you, George?"

George shrugged. "Sure." She followed Nancy outside, towards the beach. Suddenly, the girl detective turned and fixed her with a stare. The lake behind her sparkled in the sun, but her face was full of storm clouds.

"Nancy?"

"I'm sorry, but--but I have to say this," Nancy said, trying to keep her voice even. She took a deep breath and steadied herself. "George Fayne, sometimes you really are the worst."

"Nancy--"

"Now, you keep quiet a minute, and let me talk! I've told myself that it was just how you two have always gotten along, that it wasn't my place to interfere. Maybe sometimes--maybe sometimes I was just too gosh darned busy to pay attention. But I can't do that anymore. And it's getting worse! You've been awful to Bess on this trip, George. Why, you're becoming nothing but a big bully!"

"Oh, is *that* was this is about?" George grinned sheepishly, her dark curls wild in the cool breeze. "*Hypers*, Nancy, so I like to have a little fun with her. It's just teasing."

"George, you made her cry. This isn't fun for her."

"You're really upset about this, aren't you? Look, Nancy, *someone* has to say something. What am I supposed to do, just ignore her bad habits until she's as big as a house?"

"Goading her like that isn't helping. She's in there right now eating herself sick just to prove you can't stop her." Nancy crossed her arms. "And when she does, I'll bet you'll have the perfect put-down ready, just to make sure she knows how bad to feel about herself."

George scowled, but Nancy stood her ground. A moment later, the taller girl looked away.

"What do you want me to say, huh?", she mumbled angrily. "You want me to promise I won't make fun of Bess?"

Nancy fought to keep her voice steady. She was use to standing up to smugglers, bank robbers, kidnapers--but not *George!*

"I don't care what you *say*," she said, "but here is what is going to happen. We're going to walk back in there. You won't apologize. You won't let on that anything is wrong. And then, George dear, you are going to eat until bacon and eggs are coming out your ears."

"But--"

"Hold on." Nancy raised her notebook. "I'm also going to make a little note every time I hear you making fun of your cousin's weight, or her size, or her appetite, or telling her she's going to get fat, or any of the other mean, cruel things you've been saying. And for every nasty comment, you are going to eat one enormous, gooey brownie, or one nice, big, piece of cheesecake, or one double milkshake, or whatever else I decide, as a penalty."

"You're threatening me with *dessert?*" George smirked. "Be still, my pounding heart!"

“George Fayne, lately I'm not even sure you *have* a heart,” Nancy said coldly. “So I'll aim for your waistline instead. Maybe gaining a little weight yourself will help you understand how Bess feels.”

“A *little* weight? I'd have to be plump as a Christmas ham before I knew how *she*--oh, for gosh sakes, she's not even here!”

Nancy finished the neat little check mark and put the pad away. “That's one piece of chocolate cake for you.”

“What if I don't go along with this?” George said. “What then?”

“Then at the end of the week, you'll be *walking* back to River Heights,” Nancy said. She gave George a smile so full of sugar, it could have counted as her penalty dessert.

Bess looked up guiltily when they entered. She'd failed to lick the table bare in the time they were gone, but it wasn't for lack of trying. One limp strip of bacon dangled from the side of her mouth, and she tried to position her napkin in her lap so that it would cover the bulge of her middle. It didn't work. With Bess's green bathing suit, the napkin looked more like a white picnic cloth spread out on the top of a grassy hill.

Nancy heaped most of the remaining food on two plates. One for her, one for George. George's was bigger. She pushed it over, giving the girl a stern glare to go with it.

George looked down at the plate, then up to Nancy's face, then down again. She sighed and pulled the plate over to her, digging into the topmost pancake.

The kitchen phone rang, and Nancy heard Aunt Mildred answer it. “Yes...yes...yes, she's here. Just a moment, please. Nancy! You've got a phone call.”

It took Nancy a moment to place the voice on the other end of the line, especially as phone service here in remote lake country wasn't terribly good, but soon she remembered the kindly, wrinkled face of the mechanic. She greeted him and inquired as to the reason for his call.

“Yes, well--it might be nothing,” he said, “and I hate to bother you, but you asked about that black sedan?”

“Yes!” Nancy said eagerly. “Did you see it?”

“We--ell, no, I'm afraid not. But I did get a visit from the county sheriff this morning. It seems a car of that description was used in a bank robbery in Dixon's Corners yesterday afternoon! Passers-by only caught a few numbers of the license plate. I don't suppose you saw them?”

Nancy had not. *Some girl detective I am!*, she scolded herself. But it had happened so fast, and she had understandably been focused on not driving right off the road. Wishing she had more information, she thanked the mechanic and hung up the phone.

Could the two sedans be one and the same? Were they connected to the strange lights on Specter Island? Her stomach may have been full, but her curiosity was far from sated.

It was after nine A.M. by the time the girls slid the little rowboat into the choppy waters of the lake. Bess was still dressed in her green swimsuit, unwilling to give up this symbol of summer freedom, even if it *did* honestly make her look quite a bit like a watermelon. Nancy had changed into a blue-gray sweater over a sensible pleated skirt. George donned crisp white nautical shorts and a black top, though she had a bit of trouble getting the shorts fastened after Nancy had politely but firmly piled her plate with seconds, thirds, and fourths. Her tall, slender frame made the bulge in her middle all the more obvious. She looked like a snake who'd just swallowed a pig.

With the cousins both so replete they could barely sit upright, it fell to Nancy to do most of the rowing, despite her own lethargic fullness. She sternly reminded herself that she was badly in need of a little wholesome exercise, and fell into a comfortable rhythm as she hauled on the oars.

The rowboat creaked and listed. Nancy bit her lip nervously. This was Aunt Mildred's personal fishing boat. It wasn't really made for three girls, all of whom had been topped off with a heaping

breakfast. And then there was the picnic hamper, loaded down with so many sandwiches, it had taken George and Nancy both to get it into the boat.

“Why are we taking *food* with us?” George had groaned. But there was no saying no to Aunt Mildred.

“It doesn't hurt to be prepared,” Bess pointed out. “What if we're shipwrecked?”

George rolled her eyes. “As if you've got anything to worry about. You're so buoyant you could just float back to--*Nancy! Really!*”

Nancy had made another neat little check mark in her notebook.

The dark pines of Specter Island loomed over them as the three girls hauled the boat into a rocky inlet. The air here was dank and cool, smelling of wet sand and earth. They could still see Aunt Mildred's cheery sunlit house across the lake, but here on the shadowed side of the island it felt as if they had stepped into another world.

Bess shivered. Goose-flesh was sprouting up along her bare arms and legs. “Brrr! I wish I had a little more insulation!”

George opened her mouth. She saw Nancy eyeing her, notebook at the ready, and closed it again.

“You don't think--” Bess looked at the dark woods. “You don't think the woods are really haunted by some malevolent presence?”

“I don't think there are any ghosts here,” Nancy said, choosing her words carefully. “Let's--”

“Stop right there, girls!” said a harsh voice from the trees. “What are you doing on *my* island?”