THE LAST GARDEN

"Look, Frank," said Marjorary. "Even the sides of the rail cars have garden scenes painted on them."

"It only seems appropriate," replied Frank.

"Isn't this exciting, Susan?" exclaimed Marjorary.

"Yes, it certainly is," answered Susan. "Try to contain yourself, Frank."

"Whose idea was this, dear sister-in-law?" asked Frank.

"Yours, of course," said Susan. "I do humbly apologize."

"And what's more, whose treat is this?" asked Frank.

"I shall curb my tongue for the rest of the day," said Susan, with a smile.

"Okay, our tickets say we are supposed to go to the Rose Car," said Frank. "It looks like that is the next one." "You mean the one with roses painted all over the side," said Susan.

"Unless that is a clue to throw us off track," responded Frank.

"Welcome to the Gulf Coast Garden Railway," said the host. "This is the Rose Car, so if your tickets say you are to be here, then you are at the right place. I would like to remind you to always keep your tickets handy as your ticket number is a valuable piece of the puzzle. Your waitress is waiting inside the car to seat you."

"Thank you, sir," said Frank.

"Good morning, folks," said the waitress standing inside the door. "May I see your tickets, please ... Very good, please follow me ... Here is your table, 762, 993, and 455. My name is 898 and I will be serving you this morning."

"Can we just call you 8 for short?" asked Frank.

"Actually, 455," replied 898. "My full name is 898-78654356, so 898 is already shortened."

"Okay," said Frank.

"May I start you out with some fresh juice from the *Citrus sinensis* or perhaps a cup of *Coffea arabica*?"

"Do you have any juice from the *Lycopersicon esculentum*?" asked Frank.

"Yes, we do, sir," answered 898. "Large or small?"

"Large, please."

"Ladies?" asked the waitress.

"I'll just have water," said Marjorary.

"Water for me also," said Susan. "But without the ... uh, uh ..."

"Citrus limon," whispered Frank.

"Yes, without the *Citrus limon*, please," said Susan. "How do you know all this, Frank? Wait, what is that you're looking at?"

"Oh, this handy 'Guide to Plant Names' booklet for your journey?" answered Frank. "I picked one up in the depot lobby. Well, I did get one for each of you, too."

"Thanks," said Susan. "Couldn't you have given them to us a little earlier?" "I like to see you struggle a little," replied Frank.

Taking down the card sitting in the holder of the vase of roses adorning their table, Marjorary said, "What do we have here? It says, 'The leaf that falls the farthest is at the top of the tree.' I wonder what that means."

"That certainly sounds logical," said Frank.

"Perhaps it is some kind of clue," added Susan.

"You could be right, Susan," said Frank. "Remember, the brochure for the railway said surprises were always in order."

When the waitress came to take their order, Marjorary asked her about the card and what it meant. 898 responded with a shrug of her shoulders.

"That shrug was an answer, whether she meant it to be or not," said Frank. "I think it is a clue of some kind, so we should keep it handy. Perhaps more will come, and the answer will become clearer." When their meals arrived, they unrolled their napkins with the silverware in them. A note fell out of each napkin roll.

"Mine says, 'A name doesn't always add up'," said Susan.

"Mine says the same," said Marjorary.

"Same here," said Frank. "Remember, the host said our ticket numbers were a part of the puzzle. What is your ticket number, Marjorary?"

"It's 762-15," answered Marjorary. "What's yours, Susan?"

"993-21," replied Susan.

"Mine is 455-17," said Frank.

"Okay, Frank, you are the mathematician of the family," said Marjorary. "What does it mean?"

Studying the numbers for a minute, Frank then said, "Okay, let's take the first three numbers of each ticket and add them up. Marjorary, yours are 7+6+2, which equals 15, and that's the number that follows the dash."

"Mine are 9+9+3, which equals 21, and that is also the number that follows the dash," said Susan. "But look at mine," said Frank. "4+5+5 equals 14, which is not the number that follows the dash. Since the note said, 'A name doesn't always add up' and since our waitress called us by number instead of our name, I figure that my ticket is the clue."

"But what clue?" asked Susan.

"Okay ... suppose we substitute the corresponding letter of the alphabet for the number," pondered Frank. "Then Marjorary, yours would be GFB-O. That doesn't seem to make any sense. Susan, yours would be IIC-U. I don't get anything there either. Mine would be DEE-Q, which doesn't seem to mean anything."

"So, that can't be it," said Marjorary.

"Wait, remember, my name is the only one that doesn't add up, so ... I think we have to ignore the number 17 on my ticket," said Frank. "What other possible combinations are there in the alphabet for that last number?"

"DEEP ... DEEM ... DEED, to name a few," said Susan.

"And DEER," said Frank. "Since this is a garden excursion, I would bet on deer, but I think we should keep them all on the table with our first clue."

After finishing their meals, Susan got up from the table and said, "I'll be right back. I need to visit the little girl's room." When she got back to the table, she said, "I've got some more information."

"What's that?" asked Marjorary.

"I talked to another lady back there, and she said they also got some mysterious notes, but they hadn't thought about them as being clues to something. She sounded very interested when I told her what we thought. The thing is, none of their clues were the same as ours."

"Hmm ... that could possibly mean they have a different mystery than ours, or ... maybe we have to collaborate with each other and put all the clues together to solve the puzzle," said Frank. "Did she say what their notes said?"

"No," answered Susan.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced their host. "We will be stopping in about fifteen minutes for our first garden tour of the day. Be sure to gather all the belongings that you wish to bring with you."

When the train reached the depot, they disembarked and then boarded buses for the journey to the botanical garden, which was about ten miles away. The entrance to the garden dazzled the eye with a mass of color. As they got off the bus, a young lady gave them handouts for the garden.

When Frank opened one of the handouts, he saw a listing of many of the plants living in the garden. The handout had one particular plant highlighted in yellow marker—the Golden Rain Tree.

"Look at this, girls," said Frank. "Do your handouts have anything highlighted?"

"Yes," replied Marjorary. "Mine has the Gold Mound Duranta."

"And mine, the Golden Shrimp Plant," added Susan. "Just a second, let me talk to that lady I saw earlier."

When Susan came back, she said, "They have other plants highlighted on their handouts, but none with the word gold or golden."

"I think, then, that we need to focus on those words," remarked Frank. "Since the garden tour is self-guided, keep an eye out for those three plants and let's take a good, hard look at them when we find them. Remember, we have to be back at the bus at noon."

They eventually found all three plants, but they noted nothing unusual about the plants themselves. The Golden Rain Tree or *Koelreuteria paniculata* had an equal number of yellow blooms and pink seed pods for an interesting combination. The Gold Mound Duranta or *Duranta erecta* 'Gold Mound' formed an interesting color contrast with the dark green Podocarpus behind it and the bright red Geraniums in front of it. The Golden Shrimp Plant or *Pachystachys lutea* was in full bloom with its interesting flowers.

As noon time neared, they headed back to the buses for the return trip to the train depot. When they got back to the train, they walked over to the Rose Car. The host announced to those gathering at the car that they were now going to be boarding the Daisy Car for the next leg of the trip.

"Interesting," said Frank. "That probably means we get to sample all the different cars and their décor."

"I like it," said Marjorary.

For the next four hours, they passed beautiful beaches, thick pine forests, interesting swamps, and Red Maples just beginning to turn color. They had a delicious dinner but received no further clues.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced their host. "In ten minutes, we will be arriving at the next depot where we will disembark and head to your accommodations for the night at the Live Oak Hotel. I'm sure you will find the ambiance at the hotel quite fascinating, so enjoy."

"There she sits, girls," said Frank, pointing to the clearly visible hotel above the tree line. "It looks like that wide, meandering path is a gardening excursion of its own."

"Just look at the mass of flowers lining the path!" exclaimed Marjorary.

"I wonder how much time we have before we have to check in?" wondered Susan.

"Take all the time you want," said the lady walking behind them. "This is all free time for the rest of the day. They know you were on the train, so the check in is already prearranged. This is our second time here, so we kind of know a little of the process."

"Well, thank you," said Susan.

"These solid beds of annuals certainly catch your eye," remarked Frank. "But you have to look a little deeper to see some interesting solitary plants, too."

"Uh oh," said Susan. "We're coming to a side path. Do we take it?"

"Of course," answered Marjorary.

"I've got a feeling the designers will have us reach our destination whichever path we take," said Frank.

"But I don't want to miss anything," said Susan.

"Look about ten feet ahead of you, Susan," said Frank. "There's another path coming out. I bet that's where this side path comes back out, so you don't have to miss anything."

"Good," said Susan.

Clicking away with his camera, Frank said, "I love it. They have everything labeled."

"And the labels themselves are interesting," said Marjorary.

"Yeah, they look custom made," said Frank. "I bet they make them right here on the premises. I was reading a little bit of the history of this hotel when we were waiting in the depot. It is owned exclusively by the rail line. They actually have two other garden tours that run from other parts of the state and stop here. The hotel is only for the guests of the tours. They have the schedule timed so that the hotel is always operating and full, as long as the tours are full. As hard as it was to get tickets, I would guess the tours are usually full."

"Well, I'm certainly impressed so far," said Susan.

"I'm afraid we're going to run out of daylight before we even get up to the hotel," said Marjorary.

"It says here in the brochure that they have numerous well-lit nighttime activities in and around the greenhouses near the hotel," replied Frank. "They serve breakfast beginning at 6:00 AM and the rest of the morning is all free time to explore the rest of the gardens around the hotel. Lunch is at 12 noon and then we board the train to continue the return trip." "I like all the little signs that have gardening quotes on them," remarked Marjorary.

"Seen any more clues, Frank?" asked Susan.

"No, nothing that I've noticed."

At 8:00 PM that night, they saw a fascinating light show from the courtyard of the hotel. The many-colored lights interwoven into the landscape extended the beauty that the plants themselves provided during the day.

"What a wonderful way to cap off the day," said Marjorary.

"Yeah, but I'm ready to head up to our room," said Frank.

Lobby, halls, elevators, and rooms were all adorned with gardening décor. A guest at the Live Oak Hotel becomes immersed into the plant world day and night.

A beautiful vase filled with red roses sat on the table in their room. Frank picked up the card that read, 'Welcome 762, 993, and 455'.

"Now, this is interesting, girls," stated Frank. "Inside this card is a smaller card. It says, 'A pinnate leaf has many paths'... I think we've found another clue." "Sounds like it," said Susan.

"I think it's a treasure hunt," said Marjorary.

"Hmm ... very possible," replied Frank.

When morning arrived, our guests headed to the dining room for breakfast. A buffet bar held copious amounts of traditional and exotic offerings. Many of the fruit and vegetable dishes are harvested from the hotel gardens seasonally.

"What are you looking at, Frank?" asked Marjorary.

"Just observing the surroundings and guests," answered Frank. "You never know if you're being watched, particularly with all the mystery of these clues we've received. Somebody could be checking to see if we've found anything."

"Don't you think that's a little overdramatic, Frank?" asked Susan.

"You never know ..."

"When we finish breakfast, can we explore the gardens behind the hotel?" asked Marjorary.

"Absolutely," answered Frank. "Before we start back there, though, I want to get a picture of you ladies standing under the namesake tree out front. I believe it's the biggest live oak I've ever seen."

Returning with a fully loaded plate from the buffet counter, Frank unrolled his napkin. Expecting another note, he was not disappointed.

"Okay, I've got a note," said Frank. "Do you ladies have one?"

"I didn't get one," replied Susan.

"Me neither," said Marjorary. "What does your note say, Frank?"

"It says, 'My bark is worse than my bite'."

"An obvious thought is it has something to do with a dogwood tree," said Susan.

"Very true," said Frank. "But we must consider the clues as a whole, rather than individually. On with breakfast, though. I always say ..."

"A man thinks better on a full stomach," said the ladies in unison.

Rested, refreshed, and refueled, the trio made their way out to the big live oak tree and then to the paths of the back gardens. "Okay, girls, Live Oak Sam says to watch out for furry and not-so-furry friends who call these gardens home."

"Where did you get that?" asked Susan.

"From that sign over there," answered Frank. "See, there's a picture of Live Oak Sam."

"Well, if I come across one of the not-sofurry friends, I'll let you negotiate with him, Frank," declared Marjorary.

"My negotiating skill with slithering creatures consists mostly of going the other way," replied Frank.

"Figures," said Susan.

"Look at that interesting Shampoo Ginger over there," said Marjorary. "The sign says it is still used in shampoos and conditioners around the world."

"Look, ladies," said Frank. "Keep watching that hole in that stub branch of the live oak."

"Oh, how cute," said Marjorary. "Those two little squirrels popping their heads out. They're probably wondering where dinner is." "I get the same way waiting for the pizza delivery guy," stated Frank.

"We know," said the girls in unison.

"I'm not sure how much farther these paths go, but it is getting to be around 11 o'clock," said Frank. "We should probably start making our way back to the hotel."

"Okay, but just one more little side path," said Susan.

They arrived back at the hotel dining room a little before noon. The hostess, waiters, and waitresses all wore the typical gardening attire of coveralls and straw hats. The menu gave them a choice of six different meal packages and a railway special of the day.

"I think I'll have a Rueben sandwich," said Marjorary.

"I'm going all out with the railway special, the Engineer's Beef Stew," said Frank.

"Where do you see Engineer's Beef Stew, Frank?" asked Susan.

"At the bottom of the page," answered Frank. "That big box that says Railway Special." "The box on my menu says the railway special is a strawberry salad," said Susan. "Wait ... at the bottom of the box it says, 'Squirrels like strawberries, too'."

When the waitress came to their table to take their order, they asked her about the railway special.

"Oh, we hand out those menus randomly as a test," answered 241, their waitress. "But you can have either."

"Okay, look at the red bar across the top of your menu, Susan," said Frank. "I don't see anybody else in the dining room with that red bar on their menu."

"I don't understand," said Susan. "Do you think my menu is also a clue and if so, why are we the only ones apparently receiving it?"

"I don't know, Susan," answered Frank. "But it is becoming more curious."

When they were finishing their desserts, the waitress came around and asked if they wanted re-fills on their coffee.

"One last round for the road?" asked 241.

"I'm good," said Frank.

"Not for me, thank you," answered Susan.

"I've had my fill, too," replied Marjorary.

"Oh, by the way, sir," said the waitress. "A gentleman at another table asked me to give this envelope to you."

"What gentleman?" asked Frank.

"That man ... well, he was over there, but I don't see him now," she answered.

"Open it up, Frank," demanded Marjorary.

"Okay ... it is a letter written in calligraphy. It says, 'All things must come to an end. Beware the Pink Trumpet Vine'."

"What does that mean?" asked Susan.

"I don't know," said Frank. "Marjorary, Google Pink Trumpet Vine on your phone. I don't remember its botanical name."

"One of the botanical names for the Pink Trumpet Vine is *Pandorea ricasoliana*," said Marjorary. "It says they named the genus after Pandora."

"Of course, Pandora's Box," said Frank. "An ominous clue, indeed. But why would a source of evil have a connection to a garden tour?" "And why us?" asked Susan.

"This is starting to feel a little creepy to me, Frank," said Marjorary.

"Pandora's Box was Greek mythology," said Frank. "Not something real. Whoever gave us this note is either warning us about something or giving us another clue to find something. I think when we get aboard the train, we should lay out all of the clues and see where they lead us. I've got a feeling it is something in the last garden that we visit on our way back."

"Welcome to the Daisy car," said the host. "If you were in the Daisy car when you arrived at the hotel, you should now go to the Camellia car."

"That would be us," said Frank.

"It's two cars down, sir," said the host.

"Once we get there and get settled in, we can lay out all the clues and see if we can see the whole picture," said Frank. "Before we do that, though, let's split up and see if we can learn anything from some of the other passengers."

A half hour later, they regrouped at their table.

"Anybody learn anything?" asked Frank. "The people I talked to didn't know anything about any clues."

"Nobody I talked to knew anything either," said Susan.

"I talked to that lady I told about the clues earlier in the trip, but she said they never got anything else, so they just forgot about it," said Marjorary. "Do you think we just imagined they were clues and got carried away?"

"No, I don't," answered Frank. "Neither do I know why we have been singled out, but I say we continue on with the plan."

"I'm in," said Susan.

"Me, too," said Marjorary. "Unless it gets any creepier."

"Understood," said Frank. "Okay, here's what we have in the order that we received them:

- The leaf that falls the farthest is at the top of the tree.
- A name doesn't always add up, which when we converted our name numbers to letters, we arrived at deed, deep, deem, or deer.
- The brochures that highlighted plants, including the Golden Rain Tree, Gold Mound Duranta, and Golden Shrimp Plant
- A pinnate leaf has many paths.
- My bark is worse than my bite.
- Squirrels like strawberries, too.
- All things must come to an end. Beware the Pink Trumpet Vine. When we looked up the genus name, we found it referred to Pandora.

"Just because we received them in that order doesn't mean we have to follow them in that order to a conclusion, does it?" asked Susan.

"No, I don't think it does," answered Frank.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced the host. "In approximately fifteen minutes we will be arriving at the next depot, where you will get off and take a short bus ride to Walker Gardens."

"That doesn't give us a whole lot of time to work on this," said Frank. "We'll have to bring the list with us and see if we come across anything that makes what we have any clearer."

Walker Gardens had well-paved walkways that intertwined the gardens, so you were usually within five or six feet of any planting. The entrance walk led to a large visitor center where they could begin their exploration.

"Wait, wait, wait," said Susan. "Come over here to this sign, guys."

"Acerola the pirate is said to have spent time in the area of Walker Gardens," said Frank, reading the sign.

"There's the kicker," said Susan. "Legend has it that Acerola buried a treasure chest somewhere on the current garden property."

"But despite all the digging and landscaping in the gardens, no one has ever found a treasure," said Marjorary. "So, you may be right about these clues being for a treasure hunt, Marjorary," said Frank. "But, given what we know about everyone else on the train apparently not receiving clues, I don't think this is a feature of the Gulf Coast Garden Railway."

"If the treasure were gold, that would explain the clue that referenced those plants with gold or golden in their name," said Susan.

"Yes, it would, Susan," affirmed Frank. "So, if we still want to proceed, then we need to get started down the main path and watch for anything where the clues might fit."

The main walkway led behind the Visitor Center, where it eventually arrived at an intersection of six different paths. Each path had a sign with the path's name on it. The farthest one to the right was Turtle Crossing. The one next to it was Deer Trail.

"I think we must certainly take Deer Trail," said Frank. "Do you ladies concur?"

"It has to be," said Marjorary.

After about twenty minutes on Deer Trail, Frank noticed that the path appeared to be merging with a main walkway ahead. "This path seems to not have any answers," said Frank. "And we are running out of path."

"Wait," said Susan. "Look over there. It looks like a mulched side path."

"Yeah, you're right," said Frank. "Let's go down it a little."

"Oh, look," said Marjorary. "There's a squirrel, and he is eating something."

"It looks like a strawberry," said Susan.

"Yes, it is," exclaimed Marjorary. "And now, he's running up into that tree with it."

"Is that tree what I think it is, Frank?" asked Susan.

"Yes, indeed," replied Frank. "It is a dogwood." Studying the tree, he continued, "Watch the top of the tree."

"The wind is blowing down a leaf from the top of the tree," said Susan.

"Then it is all beginning to fit," remarked Marjorary.

"Yeah, but it all almost seems too easy, too much of a coincidence, almost contrived," said Frank. "Now, we are down to our last clue, 'All things must come to an end. Beware the Pink Trumpet Vine'. Does anybody see one?"

"Over there," said Susan. "It is a huge sprawling plant growing over the surrounding plants."

"Hmm," said Frank. "This would certainly seem to be the spot." Walking around the huge vine, Frank stopped dead in his tracks. "Back here, ladies."

About ten feet behind the Pink Trumpet Vine, they saw a shovel stuck in the ground.

"It appears as though we are to dig here," said Frank, drolly. "I guess I'll have a go."

After digging down about two feet, Frank's shovel hit something hard. Digging around the object, he soon discovered it to be a box of some sort. Further clearing away of the dirt revealed a rectangular, leather-covered chest.

"Could that really be Acerola's buried treasure?" asked Marjorary, excitedly.

"Can you open the lid, Frank?" asked Susan.

"I probably could, but I don't know if I should," he answered.

"Why?" asked the ladies in unison.

"Remember Pandora's Box," said Frank.

"You said that was just Greek mythology, Frank," countered Susan.

"Yeah, but, but ..." stammered Frank. "Okay, here goes."

"Look at all that gold coin," exclaimed Susan.

"We're rich," said Marjorary. "But, of course ... it's not ours."

"No, it belongs to Walker Gardens," said Frank. "I will stay here, and you ladies go get some help from the Visitor Center."

When Susan and Marjorary came back down the path, they were accompanied by twenty people. An hour later, television crews descended on the site. It was a historical find never seen in the region before. Legend had become fact.

"Why us?" posed Susan.

"I don't know," said Frank. "It was all kind of strange."

"And what about Pandora's Box?" asked Marjorary.

"I've been thinking about that," said Frank. "It could have been a Pandora's Box in a way. What if someone else had found it who didn't share our belief that it belonged to the gardens? What if whoever opened that box decided to keep all the gold for themselves? I think in a case like that, there might have been evil connected to the wrong possession of the treasure."

"Why were we given seemingly easy clues to find it?" asked Susan. "I mean, somebody had to know it was there. Why didn't they just dig it up?"

"That is a puzzle," replied Frank. "It had to be somebody that had a connection to the pirates or, at least, had the information. There has to be some kind of moral rationale as to why, whoever they are, they didn't dig it up themselves. Like I said before, I don't think this had anything to do with the railway, yet someone in the railway and/or the hotel had to get the clues specifically to us. How they could have known that we would handle it the way we did, I don't know. It almost has a supernatural air to it."

"What do you mean, Frank?" asked Marjorary. "Who is the one person who would know for sure where the treasure lies?" posed Frank.

"Well, the pirate Acerola would certainly know, but he's been dead a couple hundred years," answered Susan.

"Exactly," said Frank. "If he had given the location to someone before he died, I can't imagine that no one would have dug it up in over two hundred years."

"Then who?" asked Marjorary.

"Perhaps ... our mystery person is ... well, perhaps it is Acerola himself behind it all," said Frank.

"Acerola's ghost?" asked Susan. "That sounds kind of ... I know ... supernatural."

"Perhaps," replied Frank. "It is one possible explanation, though one that most would probably not believe. Doesn't everything that happens in this garden have a supernatural touch to it? Botanists can explain the how's of the science, but not the why's of the life."

"Okay," said Susan. "What if Acerola is stuck in some kind of purgatory and his continued

redemption depends on correcting the wrong of the stolen coin?"

"Perhaps," said Frank. "We can merely speculate on that, with no witnesses. But then, perhaps ... we are not meant to know ... I think we should get back to the train before we get caught up in all the hoopla."

"You don't want to be in the spotlight?" asked Susan.

"I don't take pictures well," answered Frank. "We didn't do anything special—just followed the clues given to us. Besides, the story of Acerola's treasure isn't over. Whoever gave us all those clues had to have a plan. Why they went about it in the manner they did, well ... that's still a mystery. It wouldn't be a stretch to think that plan also included how the treasure would be used ... Remember what we said about possible unleashed evil."

"So, it's still possible that Walker Gardens might not use the treasure wisely?" asked Marjorary.

"Oh. I don't know anything about the people running this garden," answered Frank. "I'd like to think with everything that I've seen here they would continue with planting more beautiful plants. But ... suddenly coming into a large amount of money can make people do strange things sometimes."

"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also," said Susan.

"Sounds vaguely familiar, Susan," said Frank. "It most definitely fits. Hopefully, those in power will heed that advice as well."

"There remains a cloud of uncertainty, though," said Susan. "But we've done all that we can do, haven't we?"

"Yes, I believe that we have," said Frank. "There is one thing I'm sure about. This is not the last garden to ever hold a treasure."

"You think there is more buried treasure in other gardens?" asked Susan.

"Walk into our own gardens at home," answered Frank. "God has put a treasure in every unopened flower."