

TRIXIE BELDEN #1 THE SECRET OF THE MANSION

by Julie Campbell
illustrated by Mary Stevens






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The Secret of the Mansion



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illustrated by Mary Stevens
cover illustration by Michael Koelsch

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Chapter 1

The Haunted House

“Oh, Moms,” Trixie moaned, running her hands through her short, sandy curls. “I’ll just die if I don’t have a horse.”

Mrs. Belden looked up from the row of tomato plants she was transplanting in the fence in vegetable garden.

“Trixie,” she said, trying to look stern, “if you died as many times as you thought you were going to, you’d have to be a cat with nine lives to be with us for one day.”

“I don’t care!” Tears of indignation welled up in Trixie’s round blue eyes. She scooped up a fat little worm, watched it wriggle in the palm of her hand for a minute, then gently let it go. “With Brian and Mart at camp this summer, I’ll die of boredom. I mean it, Moms.”

Mrs. Belden sighed. “You declared you’d suffer the same fate if we didn’t buy you a bike three years ago. Remember?” She stood up, frowning in the glare of the hot July sun. “No more listen, Trixie, once and for all. If you want to buy a horse like the one you fell in love with at the horse show yesterday, you will have to earn the money yourself. You know perfectly well the only reason your brothers could go to camp is because they are working as junior counselors.”

Crabapple Farm, Trixie reflected, was really a grand place to live, and she had always had a lot of fun there, but she did wish there was another girl in the neighborhood. The big estate, known as the Manor House, which bounded the Belden property on the west had been vacant ever since Trixie could remember. There were no other homes nearby except the crumbling mansion on the eastern hill, where queer old Mr. Frayne lived alone.

The three estates faced a quiet country road two miles from the village of Sleepyside that nestled among the rolling hills on the east bank of the Hudson River. Trixie’s father worked in the bank in Sleepyside, and Trixie and her brothers went to the village school. She had many friends in Sleepyside, but she rarely saw them except when school was in session. Now that her brothers, Brian and Mart, had gone to camp, there was nobody but her little brother Bobby, to play with.

Trixie impatiently kicked a hole in the dust of the path with her shoe.

“It’s not fair. You wouldn’t let me try for a job as a waitress or anything. Maybe I could have gone, too.”

“You’re only thirteen,” her mother said patiently. “Next year we might consider something of the sort. Dad and I are really sorry, dear,” she added gently, “that we couldn’t afford to send you to camp this year.”

Trixie suddenly felt ashamed of herself, and she impulsively threw her arms around her mother. “Oh, I know, Moms, and I’m a pest to nag at you. I won’t any more. I promise.”

“You can begin to earn the money for your horse right here, Trixie,” Mrs. Belden said laughing. “There’s plenty to do around here with Brian and Mart away. I’ll pay you something every week if you help me with Bobby and the housework. And I know Dad would be glad to increase your allowance if you do some weeding in the garden every day and take over Mart’s chore of feeding the chickens and gathering the eggs.”

“Oh, Moms!” Trixie hugged her mother tighter. “Maybe I could earn five dollars a week

Do you think I could?"

Mrs. Belden nodded and smiled. "Something like that," she said. "At any rate, if you really work, I should think you could count on having a horse next summer." She shaded her eyes with one hand and stared at the car that was just coming into the driveway. "Why, isn't that Dad now? What could have happened to bring him home from the bank before lunch?"

Trixie had already darted through the gate and was racing up the path from the vegetable garden, calling over her shoulder, "I'll talk to him right now, and then maybe I can start earning the money for my horse today."

At the top of the driveway, Mr. Belden backed and turned the car around. Trixie jumped on the running board, shouting, "Dad! Mother said I could earn the money for a horse if I help with the garden and chickens and Bobby. May I? Please, Dad, may I?"

Mr. Belden left the motor running but pulled on the emergency brake. "I guess so, Trixie," he said, "but we'll talk about that later. I've just been to the hospital," he spoke to Mrs. Belden as she joined Trixie beside the car. "On my way into the village this morning I found old Mr. Frayne lying at the foot of his driveway. He was unconscious, and I took him right into the hospital."

"Oh, Peter!" Mrs. Belden cried. "That poor old man living up there all alone! I've worried about him so often, but he would never let anyone come near him. He's probably been sick for days."

"That's right," Mr. Belden said. "He's suffering from pneumonia complicated by malnutrition. The doctors said there was very little chance that he would pull through."

"Serves him right," Trixie said, wiping her grimy hands on her rolled-up blue jeans. "That mean old miser. You should have left him lying in the driveway, Dad."

Mr. Belden frowned. "Why, Trixie! I don't like you to talk that way, and you know you don't mean it. Although Mr. Frayne may not have always been a very pleasant neighbor, he's still a neighbor."

"I'm sorry, Dad." Trixie squinted up at the big rambling mansion half-hidden by the trees on top of the hill. "He never seemed like a neighbor to me," she added under her breath.

As her father drove away, she turned to her mother. "Why, old man Frayne said he'd call the police if he ever caught any of us trespassing. Remember that time he yelled at Mart and —?"

"Now, Trixie," Mrs. Belden interrupted. "You're old enough to understand Mr. Frayne's attitude. He and your father had a disagreement about the boundary line between the two properties. Of course, Dad didn't want to take the matter to court because nobody really cares who owns that little patch of the woods, but Mr. Frayne insisted. Naturally, when the decision went against him he resented it."

Trixie pulled up a piece of grass and chewed it thoughtfully. "Well, his game chickens come down on our property whenever they please, and you don't complain. And just last week Momm, Reddy chased Queenie, the black hen, into Mr. Frayne's property. I tore after him because I didn't want him to hurt Queenie, even though she does belong to the old miser. But I needn't have worried, because I guess those game hens can take care of themselves. Just as I caught up to them, she suddenly turned and flew right into Reddy's face, flapping her wings and squawking and scratching like anything." Trixie laughed. "Reddy was the most surprised Irish setter you ever saw. He tucked his tail between his legs and dashed off into the woods."

and just then Mr. Frayne burst out of his house, waving a shotgun and shouting at me. Goll. I was awfully scared for a minute, Moms. He said he'd shoot Reddy if he ever crossed the boundary line again."

"I'm sorry that happened, dear," Mrs. Belden said as they strolled back to the garden. "But I honestly don't think Mr. Frayne would really shoot Reddy."

"I do." Trixie kicked a pebble across the path. "He's such a wrinkled little old man with such a cross face. I bet he doesn't weigh much more than Bobby does, and in those funny patched clothes, he looks like a scarecrow. And his land's in a terrible state. It's all choked with weeds and vines except for a clearing right around the house which isn't a lawn any more, because the chickens have scratched it bare."

"He wasn't always a wrinkled old man, Trixie," Mrs. Belden said quietly. "And Ten Acres was once as much of a showplace as the Manor House on the other hill is now. Gri sometimes changes people, you know. Before Mrs. Frayne died, he was a charming old gentleman, and he and his wife were very kind to your father and me when we moved up here from the city. That was before you were born, and Brian and Mart were still babies. She carefully slipped a cardboard collar around one of the tomato plants. "I'll never forgive the night Mrs. Frayne died. It was a terrible shock to all of us."

"What happened, Mother?" Trixie knelt in the next row and began thinning the feathered little carrots. "All I know is that she was bitten by a copperhead snake. But you don't *have* to die from a copperhead bite. Dad told us all long ago what to do in case any of us were bitten. First, you put on a tourniquet; then you cut into the fang marks with a knife or a razor blade, and then you suck out the blood to keep the poison from spreading. Didn't Mr. Frayne know what to do, Moms?"

Mrs. Belden pressed the last tomato plant into place with her fingers and stood up.

"I don't know, Trixie, but he must have been terribly upset. He absolutely adored his wife. She was a beautiful little old lady, and everyone loved her." She slipped off her gloves and wiped her face with her handkerchief. "It happened one evening when they were sitting out in their summerhouse. The snake must have been curled under Mrs. Frayne's chair, and she probably kicked it accidentally. When Mrs. Frayne cried out, Mr. Frayne just picked her up in his arms to rush her to the hospital for the antivenin. Naturally, he took the short cut, and right in the middle of that deserted upper road, the car broke down. Whether he didn't know what to do, or was too excited to do anything, I do not know. At any rate, they simply waited there until a car came along. They waited for hours, and, by that time, it was too late."

"How dreadful, Moms," Trixie gasped.

Shading her eyes with her hand, Mrs. Belden glanced up at the old mansion on the eastern hill.

"Poor Mr. Frayne," she murmured. "He was never the same again. He left his car right there on the road where it had broken down and never allowed another automobile on the place after that." She added slowly, "I wonder what happened to the summerhouse. You used to be able to see it quite plainly from here."

But Trixie was no longer looking at the Frayne mansion. She was looking in the opposite direction.

"Moms, Moms!" she cried. "Something's going on up at the Manor House. See all those vans? Somebody must be moving in."

Mrs. Belden turned and glanced up at the huge estate which bounded Crabapple Farm on the west.

“Why, yes, Trixie,” she said. “I meant to tell you last night, but you were too excited about that horse to listen. A family named Wheeler moved in yesterday. Your father met Mr. Wheeler at the bank. He has a daughter about your age and told Dad he hoped you’d run up and see her.”

“Oh, Mother,” Trixie interrupted excitedly. “Do you see what I see? Horses! Horses being led out toward the stables. Couldn’t I go up right now and meet Mr. Wheeler’s daughter?”

Mrs. Belden smiled. “Well, I guess it’s all right. But what about your job?”

Trixie saw her little brother racing across the lawn with Reddy at his heels.

“I’ll take Bobby with me,” she said quickly, “so you won’t have to worry about him. Come on, Bobby, hurry up.” Trixie pulled open the gate so hard she almost tore it off its hinges.

“Hey!” Bobby shouted as he started down the path to the gate. “Where’re you going? Can I go, too? Wait for me, Trixie.”

The middle of the path was rough with partially exposed tree roots, and Bobby tripped, as he often did, and sprawled in the red-brown dust. Trixie stared at him with disgust. “Oh, Bobby, Bobby,” she cried, “now you’re all dirty. You can’t go calling on rich people looking like that!”

Bobby scrambled to his feet, rubbing the dirt into his moist skin as he tried to brush it off. “Hey!” He grinned. “What rich people? Do I look all right now, Trixie? I wanna go calling on rich people.”

Trixie turned to her mother in despair. “Do I have to take him, Mother? Do I *have* to?”

Mrs. Belden shrugged her shoulders. “That depends on whether or not you feel a horse worth working for. You could, of course, finish thinning the carrots instead, and there’s an hour’s dusting to do indoors.”

“Oh, all right, Moms.” Trixie grabbed Bobby’s grimy hand. She was tired of working in the garden, and she despised any kind of housework. “But first I’ll wash you up,” she told the little boy, “and put a clean sunsuit on you. And for heaven’s sake, Bobby, when you meet these people, don’t tell them I said they were rich, and please try to stop yelling ‘Hey’ all the time.”



Ten minutes later, Trixie and Bobby began the long climb up the Manor House driveway with Reddy racing ahead of them. At the turn in the road, a fat little cocker spaniel rushed down to meet them. Right behind the puppy was a tall thin girl whose pale face was framed in shoulder-length, light-brown hair. She cringed as Reddy, disdainfully ignoring the black puppy, raced around her in circles, barking furiously.

“Don’t pay any attention to him,” Trixie cried quickly, seeing that her new neighbor was really frightened. “He’s just showing off. He wouldn’t hurt a fly. I’m Trixie Belden,” she went on hurriedly. “My kid brother and I live in the hollow in that little white frame house—Crabapple Farm, you know.”

The girl stared solemnly from Trixie to Bobby and back again. “How do you do?” she said, holding out her slender hand. “My name is Honey—Honey Wheeler.”

Trixie shook hands, feeling rather foolish at such a display of formality. *Oh, my, she thought, almost sick with disappointment, she’s stuck-up. Who would go around in a white lined dress and stockings and sandals unless there’s a party?* Aloud she asked, without much hope, “Do you ride horseback?”

Honey smiled, then. “Oh, yes,” she said. “Do you?”

Trixie shook her head ruefully. “No, but I want to learn like anything. The only thing I have to ride is a babyish old bike. But I’m earning the money now to buy a horse just as soon

as I can.”

“A bike?” Honey’s smile widened, and Trixie had to admit that the girl was really pretty a pale sort of way. “I wish I had a bike,” she said wistfully. “Mother wouldn’t let me have one in the city because of traffic, and the rest of the time I was at boarding school and camps where they’re not allowed.” Timidly she moved a step nearer to Trixie. “I’ll teach you how to ride horseback,” she offered. “Then perhaps you would show me how to ride a bike.”

Trixie could hardly believe her ears. “That’s great,” she gasped. “Let’s start right away. I mean the horseback part. I can teach you how to ride a bike any time.” She turned impatiently to Bobby, who was joyously cuddling the cocker spaniel puppy. “You go home now, Bobby, and play in the sandpile.”

Bobby ignored her and grinned up at Honey. “Are you rich?” he demanded. “Hey! What’s it like to be rich?”

Trixie felt her cheeks flame hotly, but Honey merely smiled and said, “It’s not nice at all to be like Bobby. I can’t remember when I didn’t want to be like other people.” She turned shyly toward Trixie and added, “When I was little, my nurses never let me play in the dirt the way Bobby is now, and I was never allowed to go any place by myself for fear of being kidnaped. She stopped suddenly as her enormous hazel eyes filled with tears. “I hardly ever saw my father and mother until I got sick. And now they’ve bought this big old place just for me. But what good is it? What good is anything if you’re never allowed to have any fun?”

Trixie could never bear to see anyone unhappy. “Gee,” she said, putting her arm sympathetically around Honey’s thin shoulders. “I never thought about it like that. I always thought it would be wonderful to have a lot of money.” She stopped as the word *money* gave her an idea. “I tell you what let’s do.” She whirled Honey around and pointed across the woods to Ten Acres, which she called Miser’s Mansion in her own mind. “See that big old gray and yellow house on the opposite hill?”

Honey nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief.

“Well,” Trixie went on excitedly, “a crazy old man lives there all alone. Dad took him to the hospital this morning, so this is a swell time to explore. I’ve always wanted to see what the inside of the house was like.”

“Trixie Belden!” Honey gasped in a shocked voice.



“You wouldn’t really break into somebody’s house!”

“Of course not.” Trixie grinned. “Old Mr. Frayne would probably have me thrown in jail if I did such a thing. But there’s no reason why we couldn’t peek in through a window. You know what they say in the village?” she demanded. “They say there’s a half million dollars hidden there. Let’s go!”

“I wouldn’t go near that creepy old place,” Honey said firmly. “And I don’t believe there’s any money hidden there. Why, the house is practically falling to pieces, and it hasn’t been painted in ages.”

“How do you know all that?” Trixie demanded impatiently. “You can’t see it *that* clearly from here.”

“I was there early this morning,” Honey explained. “Daddy and I were out riding, and we went up that old driveway thinking it was a road to the woods. We didn’t realize that it led to the Mansion until we were halfway up. Then, of course, we knew we were trespassing, so we turned around. It looked like a deserted house to me, and I was glad to get away from there. Nobody would want to live in such a horrible, run-down place.”

Trixie bent down and fumbled with her shoelace to hide the disappointment on her face. *She’s worse than I thought she was at first, she thought. A silly old fraidy cat.* Aloud she said coldly, “Of course, a lot of people think old Mr. Frayne went crazy after his wife died, and he

lost all his money. That's why the place is run-down. Anyway, I'm going to look around the while Mr. Frayne's in the hospital. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"Are you sure he's in the hospital?" Honey asked, suddenly.

Trixie straightened up. "Of course. Dad took him in early this morning. He's not expected to live."

"That's funny," Honey said slowly. "We were there about an hour ago. As we rode down the hill, I got the creepy feeling you get when you know somebody you can't see is watching you. I looked back over my shoulder quickly, and I saw a face at one of the windows." She shivered slightly. "I'll bet that house is haunted!"

Chapter 2

Through the Hedge

Trixie hooted with laughter. "You're just imagining things," she said. "I never heard of anything so silly."

Honey bit her lip. "Naturally, I don't really believe in ghosts," she said in a hurt voice, "but I did see a face at the window."

"Oh, skip it," Trixie said impatiently. "If you're really scared, I'll explore up there myself some other time. Right now, I can hardly wait to get on a horse." She gave Honey a little push. "Go on and change into dungarees."

Honey stared at her. "I haven't any dungarees," she said slowly. "I always wear a habit and boots when I ride."

"What difference does it make what you wear?" Trixie interrupted. She wheeled around to where Bobby was rolling in the grass with the puppy. "Go on home now," she wheedled. "If you're a good boy this morning, I'll play with you all afternoon. It's a promise."

Bobby giggled as the puppy licked his face. "Don't want to go home. Want to stay here and play with the puppy. Hey, what's his name, anyway?" he asked Honey.

"Bud." Honey smiled. "Bobby doesn't have to go home, Trixie," she said quietly. "He can stay here with my governess. Miss Trask won't mind keeping an eye on him. She's really very nice, you know. She's not like the other ones who were perfectly horrible. Oh, here she comes now."

Around the bend in the driveway appeared a trim, middle-aged woman with very short, crisp, gray hair. She was wearing a tailored slack suit and sturdy-looking brown and white oxfords. She had bright blue eyes which twinkled merrily as she caught sight of Bobby frolicking with the puppy.

"What have we here?" she asked with a friendly smile. "So you've found some playmates already, Honey?"

"Oh, yes," Honey cried. "This is Trixie Belden and her brother, Bobby. They live in the darling little farmhouse down in the hollow. We were just about to go riding."

Trixie, slightly awed in the presence of such an unknown creature as a governess, mumbled, "How do you do?"

Bobby scrambled to his feet. "Hey," he shouted, tossing his silky curls in Honey's direction. "*She* said you'd keep an eye on me while they 'splore. Trixie's supposed to, you know, instead of weeding, but I won't tell if you play games with me."

Trixie felt like shaking the little boy, but Miss Trask held out her hand to him, laughing. "Of course, I'll play games with you. Run along, Honey, and have a nice ride through the woods with your new friend." She glanced approvingly at Trixie's dungarees. "It's a pity you have to bother to change, Honey," she said. "Now that we're in the country, you really ought to dress the way Trixie does. I'll speak to your mother right away about getting you some blue jeans and loafers."

Honey threw her arms impulsively around her governess. "Oh, Miss Trask, will you? You're such an angel. And will you also ask her if I can have a bike, too? Trixie's going to teach me how to ride one. I've wanted a bike ever since I can remember." She ran off toward

the house, her pale face flushed with pleasure.

Trixie stared after her, thinking, *Why, she's just like a poor little rich girl in a storybook. Imagine having to ask your governess to ask your mother for something! It's no wonder she acts queer, sometimes.*

Miss Trask turned to Trixie as Honey went into the house to change. As though reading Trixie's mind, Miss Trask said quietly, "It's truly shameful the way that child has been brought up. I mean to see to it that a lot of changes are made. She has just recovered from a long illness and is still rather nervous. I'd like her to get as tanned and strong as you are. Will you help me, Trixie?"

Trixie looked down at the toe of her shoe, embarrassed. "Why, sure," she said huskily. "I don't know exactly what you mean, Miss Trask, but I'll help. Of course I will."

"Good." Miss Trask swung Bobby's hand as they strolled up the sloping driveway and back to the newly white-washed stable where tall stalks of pink and red hollyhocks grew in profusion. A broad-shouldered, pleasant-faced man was grooming a big black horse, and Miss Trask called out to him.

"Good morning, Regan. This is Miss Trixie Belden. Will you saddle a couple of horses, so she and Honey can explore the woods?" She smiled at Trixie. "Have fun. Don't worry about Bobby. I'll let him play in the wading pool until you come back."

"Thanks," Trixie said, staring entranced at the big gleaming horse. She sucked in a deep breath of the air that was fragrant with the smell of clean horses and hay and saddle soap. She moved closer and patted the gelding's satiny neck. "Oh, you beautiful, beautiful thing!" she crooned as Jupiter nuzzled her pocket, hinting for a lump of sugar. "I haven't anything for you today, darling, but tomorrow I'll bring you apples and carrots. Just you wait and see."

"You speak a horse's language, Miss," Regan said approvingly. "Jupe understood every word you said. He likes you and he doesn't like everybody."

"I love him," Trixie cried. "Please, Mr. Regan, could I ride him today?"

"Well, now," Regan said slowly, "that depends. He's not easy to handle, Jupiter isn't. Mr. Wheeler rides him mostly, and he's got a very heavy touch. Honey now, she can't hold Jupiter in. Just hasn't enough strength in her wrists. But you look like a husky youngster. Done much riding?"

Reluctantly, Trixie shook her head. "I've never even been on a horse," she admitted ruefully. "But I know I can ride him, Mr. Regan. I *know* I can."

Regan guffawed loudly. "Never even been on a horse! Why, Miss, you wouldn't have a chance in the world with Jupe. He'd know right off that you were a beginner, and would he take you for a ride!" He slapped Jupiter's neck affectionately. "He wouldn't stop until you held the New York traffic; that is, if you stayed on that long."

Trixie swallowed hard to keep from showing her disappointment. "But when I learn to ride, you'll let me try him, won't you, Mr. Regan?" she begged meekly. "Please!"

"That I will," Regan promised. "But, right now, I think you'd better start with Lady. She's real gentle and easy to handle. Mrs. Wheeler's mare, she is. Come on, you can help me saddle her."

Trixie followed him inside the stable, and a lovely dapple-gray mare whinnied from her stall. "That's the sweet girl," Regan crooned as he slipped a halter over Lady's head and led her out. "Here, Miss," he said to Trixie, "you hold her a minute," and he disappeared into the

tack room.

The horsy smell of leather and soap and hay was stronger in here, and Trixie inhaled deep breath of it as she waited for Regan. "You're a darling girl," she whispered to the dainty little mare, "and I wish you belonged to me." When Regan came back, she said, "Please don't call me Miss, Mr. Regan. My name's Trixie."

Regan deftly slid the halter over Lady's head and slipped a snaffle bit into her mouth. "Okay, Trixie," he said as he showed her how to gather up the reins. "Just call me Regan." He gently placed a saddle on Lady's back and bent over to buckle the girth in place. "I'll have to tighten the cinch a bit after you get on," he told Trixie. "Lady has the habit of blowing herself up while she's being saddled." He grinned. "It's a smart trick, and you have to watch out for it with a lot of horses. Wouldn't want the saddle to slip off, would you?"

Trixie solemnly shook her head. Regan led Lady out into the yard and pulled down the stirrups. Measuring the length of Trixie's leg with his eye, he adjusted the leather straps accordingly. He held one stirrup iron for her. "Up you go," he ordered.

Trixie promptly discovered that mounting a horse was not as easy as she had thought it would be; but after two unsuccessful tries she found herself, breathless and excited, in the saddle. She was on a horse at last!

"Heels down!" Regan commanded. "And keep 'em down, with the irons under the balls of your feet." He led Lady into a partially fenced-in field. "If you don't keep your heels down, you'll never learn how to post a trot or keep your seat in a gallop. What's more, if you get thrown and the horse runs away, you're not likely to have your foot caught in a stirrup if your heels are down instead of your toes. Getting dragged isn't fun," he finished soberly. "Just remember that!"

"I will," Trixie promised, so thrilled that her whole body trembled. "May I gallop her now, Regan, may I?"

"Indeed you don't," Regan said briskly. "You start with a walk. Just lift the reins a little, and she'll move right out."



Honey appeared, then, in an immaculate white riding habit and russet boots so shiny you could see your face in them. “Come here, Honey,” Regan said. “Lead your friend around the corral a couple of times while I saddle Strawberry. Trixie’d better get the feel of the saddle a bit before she gets too frisky.”

Trixie tried to control her impatience as they walked around the field, and Honey asked, “Are you really going up to that old mansion?”

“Sure,” Trixie said. “Why don’t we ride through the woods right now? You don’t have to go way up to the house if you don’t want to.”

Honey thought about this for a minute, and then she said, “All right. I guess I was mistaken about that face. I do imagine things, you know, such weird things.”

“Everybody does,” Trixie said good-naturedly. “When I was a kid, whenever there was a thunderstorm, I thought I saw the headless horseman galloping across the sky in the flashes of lightning.”

Honey stopped and looked up at her curiously. “Headless horseman?” she repeated, in a surprised voice. “How awful!”

Trixie grinned. “Sure, this is the part of the Hudson River Valley that Washington Irving wrote about in *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow*. The village got its name, Sleepyside, from the old story, you know.”

“Oh.” Honey looked relieved, but she added seriously, “I hope I don’t dream about headless horseman. I have awful nightmares, sometimes. I wake up screaming.”

“Do I have to keep on walking Lady, forever?” Trixie interrupted impatiently.

“I guess you could try trotting, now,” Honey said. “Gather up the reins a little and touch Lady’s flank lightly with one heel.”

Lady obediently set off at a smooth trot, but Trixie bounced and jounced in the saddle until she thought her head would jar off. *That would make the legend come true. I’d be a headless horseman*, she thought grimly. She could not keep her feet in the stirrups, and the swinging irons hit Lady’s sides sharply. Thinking Trixie wanted her to go faster, Lady broke into a canter. Before Trixie knew what had happened, she was lying in the middle of the field, staring forlornly up at the bright blue sky. She wasn’t the least bit hurt, but she winced inwardly. *Now’s Honey’s chance to get back at me for making fun of her when she thought she saw a face at the Mansion*, she reflected bitterly.

She scrambled to her feet and was surprised to see that Honey, who was calmly holding Lady’s head, was not laughing. “Everybody does that the first time, Trixie,” she said. “Anyway, I’m glad you’re not hurt.”

Trixie meekly climbed back into the saddle. “I was an awful dope,” she said. “I didn’t keep my heels down. I’ll do better next time.”

Regan came into the corral then, leading a magnificent strawberry roan called Strawberry. Regan left Honey to mount without his help; and Trixie noticed, with envy, that although Strawberry tossed his head and pranced, Honey seemed to have no difficulty and adjusted her own stirrups from her seat in the saddle.

“Regan,” Trixie breathed admiringly, “do you think I’ll ever get that good?”

“Sure.” Regan stared at the grass stains on Trixie’s shirt and then said with a little note of amusement and understanding in his voice, “Had your first spill already, huh?”

Trixie nodded shamefacedly.

“Well, now, you know what I think?” Regan demanded. “I think you ought to take it easy this first day. Mrs. Wheeler rode Lady this morning before breakfast, so the mare doesn’t need any more exercise. Why don’t you just keep her at a walk until you sort of get used to things?” He added quickly as Trixie’s face showed her disappointment, “I’ll give you a lesson in posting tomorrow. You’ll catch on quick, don’t worry. People who really love horses are just natural-born riders.”

“I think Regan’s right,” Honey said. “If you do too much today, Trixie, you’ll be so stiff tomorrow you won’t even be able to climb into a saddle, much less ride.”

“But I’ll spoil your fun,” Trixie objected. “You’ll want to trot and canter and I won’t be able to keep up.”

Honey smiled. “It’s awfully hot, anyway, and Strawberry will work himself into a lather. I let him out of a walk. I can exercise him this evening when it’s cooler.”

Golly, Trixie thought, *she is a good sport. She just said that to make it easier for me*. Aloud, she said with a grin, “Okay, Honey, you’re the boss at this ranch.”

They walked their horses along the path that circled the willow-bordered lake, and Trixie saw a new rowboat tied alongside the rustic boathouse. “Oh, boy!” she shouted. “Now we can fish in the middle of the lake. You’re a lucky duck to live up here, Honey!”

“I don’t know how to fish,” Honey said quickly. “And I wouldn’t touch a horrible squirming

worm for anything!”

The word “Sissy!” was on the tip of Trixie’s tongue, but she caught herself just in time. “I put the worms on the hook,” she said. “We can have a lot of fun. Brian and Mart and I have caught a lot of fish off the boathouse. You see,” she explained, “the Manor House has been empty for so many years we got so we thought of the lake as belonging to our property.”

“I want you to keep right on thinking that, Trixie,” Honey cried impulsively. “You and your brothers must come here as often as you like.”

“Great,” Trixie said. “We can skate on it in winter and toboggan down your hill.” They were in the woods now and Trixie added, “I can hardly wait to see what it’s like inside the Miser’s Mansion. I’ve always wanted to know whether he really is a miser or just a poor old grouch.”

“It looks as though the house had been empty for years,” Honey said as they approached the Frayne property. “Why, the upstairs windows are so covered with dirt you can’t see through them. And just look at the way everything has grown up around here. It’s a regular wilderness except for that little space right around the house.”

The trail ended at the boundary line between the two properties which was marked by a thick hedge interlaced with heavy vines. A narrow path wound from this point down the hill to the hollow and Crabapple Farm.

“Let’s tie our horses to this tree,” Trixie said as she slid out of the saddle, “and push our way through the hedge. If we go around to the driveway, somebody might see us and wonder what we’re doing.”

“I wouldn’t dare crawl through that underbrush,” Honey said as she dismounted. “It’s probably alive with snakes.”

Trixie paid no attention to her and started through the hedge. “Wonder whatever happened to the summerhouse where Mrs. Frayne got bitten by the copperhead,” she said, tugging at a ropelike vine. “It must have been right about here if Mother could see it plainly from the garden down in the hollow.”

“Copperhead!” Honey had forced herself to take a few steps after Trixie, but now she stopped, shaking with horror. “Are there copperheads around here?”

“Sure,” Trixie shrugged. “But they won’t hurt you unless you bother them.”

“I can’t stand snakes,” Honey insisted, with a shiver. “And copperheads are poisonous. I wouldn’t want to be bitten by one of them.”

“You won’t be bitten, Honey,” Trixie assured her, pushing ahead.

“I’m not so sure of that.” Honey cringed as a vine slapped against her face. “Didn’t you just say that Mrs. Frayne got bitten?”

“That was in the summerhouse,” Trixie said. “And the summerhouse seems to have disappeared. Anyway, it was one of those things that happen once in a lifetime.”

“Once is enough,” Honey said with a nervous giggle as she gingerly took another step forward. At that moment, the underbrush sprang to life as a loud squawking sound rent the silence, and something black and angry flapped against Honey’s legs. Honey screamed in terror and frantically grabbed Trixie’s arm.

Chapter 3

A Scream and a Dog

Trixie was so startled herself that, for a moment, she stood stock-still. Then, she laughed with relief as she saw that their attacker was Queenie, the little black game hen. With Honey still clinging to her arm, Trixie shouted, "Come on!" and pushed the rest of the way into the clearing. Queenie flung herself at Honey's legs once more, then, squawking like an irate fury, darted across the courtyard. The other hens immediately took up the chorus, fluttering and cackling in wild confusion as they scattered in all directions. From the safety of the woods on the other side of the house, the bright-colored game cock flapped his wings and crowed defiantly.

"What was it?" Honey asked weakly. "I never was so scared in all my life."

"Nothing but a little black hen," Trixie said. "Why, you're shaking like a leaf. I was kind of scared myself," she admitted. "In another minute, she would have flown in our faces. It was a good thing you had boots on. She would have scratched your legs plenty."

"Oh, please, Trixie," Honey pleaded. "Let's go home. She may come back any minute."

Trixie burst into laughter. "Don't be such a fraidy cat, Honey. She wouldn't have come near us if she hadn't thought we were after her eggs. She must have a nest somewhere around here, and she won't come near this spot again for a long time for fear we might find where it's hidden."

She led the way across the clearing. "Come on, let's peek through a window." Honey followed reluctantly.

There was something so gloomy and forbidding about the weatherbeaten old house that even Trixie found herself whispering as they approached it. The downstairs windows were almost as dirty as the upstairs ones, and she had to wipe a spot on the glass in order to peer inside. "Honey," she said, "this must have been the dining-room, once. Look at that sideboard—it's white with mold, and did you ever see so much junk in all your life?"

The room was piled high with yellowed newspapers, tin cans, and cardboard cartons of every description. Stacked on the sideboard, table, and chairs were dirty bottles and jars of all sizes and shapes.

"I'll bet all those boxes and cans and jars are full of money," Trixie said in an awed voice. "I wish we dared go inside."



Honey shuddered. "I wouldn't go in there for anything in the world. It's probably full of spiders and rats. And this is the very window where I saw a face early this morning."

Trixie stared thoughtfully. "Did you really and truly see someone, Honey? Are you sure you weren't just imagining?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Honey said. "Someone or *something* was staring at Daddy and me as we rode away."

"It might have been a tramp," Trixie said slowly. "And one way to find out is to see if any of the doors or windows are unlocked. If they are, we ought to lock them to make sure nobody breaks in here while Mr. Frayne is in the hospital."

She ran up the rickety front steps, which sagged dangerously beneath her weight, and twisted the doorknob back and forth. "That's locked," she said as she jumped off the porch. "Let's check the windows."

The front windows were all either locked or warped out of shape, but the first one Trixie tried on the east side of the house opened rather easily. "I'll have to go in and lock it from the inside," she said, climbing over the ledge.

"Then how will you get out again?" Honey demanded.

"The key to the back door is probably in the lock," Trixie said. "After I've checked all the windows, I'll let myself out that way, then lock the back door from the outside and give Daddy a call."

the key to keep for Mr. Frayne. Come on in and help me.”

“I don’t think we ought to go in,” Honey said nervously. “As you said yourself, it’s against the law.”

“I’m not breaking any law,” Trixie said exasperatedly. “I’m only doing what any neighbor would do for another. If Mr. Frayne were conscious, he’d probably ask us to make sure his house was all locked up.”

Something scuttled across the floor as Trixie jumped down from the window sill. “Nothing but a field mouse,” she told Honey, with a mischievous grin. “He’s more scared of us than you are of him. But you’d better climb inside. That hen might come back any minute.”

Honey glanced fearfully over her shoulder. “I guess you’re right,” she said. “It wouldn’t be neighborly to leave the place unlocked.” She swung herself gingerly through the window. “But suppose that face I saw belonged to a tramp,” she whispered. “And suppose the tramp is still here?”

Trixie shrugged. “Then we’ll tell him to get out or we’ll call the police. Come on, let’s be sure the key is in the back door before we check the windows.”

This room, which had once been the luxurious study, was as cluttered as the dining-room. The pictures and prints on the walls were thickly coated with dust, and a barricade of barrels blocked the other windows. The huge roll-top desk was fuzzy with mold, and mice had obviously been nesting in the upholstery of the leather-covered sofa. A green fly droned monotonously against a windowpane, but there was no other sound to break the eerie, empty silence of the old house. It was like the threatening hush that comes before a thunderstorm. The girls picked their way across the room, walking on tiptoe, hardly daring to whisper. At the entrance to the next room, Trixie stopped with a gasp of surprise.

The enormous paneled living-room was filled with debris, and lying sound asleep on an old mattress in the middle of the floor was a tall, redheaded boy. Close beside him was a shotgun, and near his head was a silver christening mug that gleamed in the sunlight which poured in through an open window.

Honey pointed a trembling finger at the boy. “That must be the face I saw this morning,” she whispered.

Trixie looked at her blankly. “At least, it wasn’t a ghost,” she giggled. “But who in the world can he be? He must be about Brian’s age—fifteen, don’t you think?”

Honey nodded. “I’m scared. Suppose he wakes up and finds us here? He might shoot us with that awful-looking gun.”

Trixie was not at all sure that the boy wouldn’t do just that, but she took a cautious step forward, hoping to read the inscription on the silver mug. The floor board creaked suddenly, startling her so that she lost her balance and clutched at the stack of mildewed books. The pile swayed for a minute in midair, then the books toppled to the floor with a loud crash.

The girls stood frozen in their tracks as the boy woke up in a flash and grabbed the gun. There was no sign of friendliness on the boy’s freckled face, and his green eyes were dark with suspicion.

Honey found her voice first. “Oh, please, don’t shoot us,” she almost sobbed. “We didn’t mean to spy on you. Really we didn’t.”

The boy frowned and set his jaw. “What are you doing here?” he demanded sullenly. “You have no business in this house.”

Trixie came out of her shocked trance then. "Neither have you," she said hotly. "This place belongs to Mr. James Winthrop Frayne, our neighbor. My father took him to the hospital this morning. We were just checking to be sure all the doors and windows were locked. But you see, she finished tartly, "seem to have moved right in."

The boy got slowly to his feet, still clutching the gun. "To the hospital?" he repeated dazedly. "Where and why?"

"The Sleepyside Hospital," Trixie told him. "He's got pneumonia and he's half-starved, too. Not," she added, "that it's any of your business, but the doctors don't think he'll get well."

The boy's broad shoulders drooped disconsolately as he carefully laid the gun on the mattress at his heels. "I thought he was dead," he said, more to himself than to the girls. "When I got here this morning and found the place deserted and filled with junk, I figured Uncle James must have died a long time ago."

"Uncle James!" Trixie and Honey stared at him, wide-eyed. "Was—is—Mr. Frayne your uncle?"

For answer the boy reached down and picked up the silver cup. He held it out so that Trixie could see the engraving. She read the words out loud in an astonished voice: "James Winthrop Frayne II."

"My great-uncle," the boy explained. "I walked most of the way from Albany to find him. But I guess I got here too late." He shrugged. "Well, I'll stick around for a while, anyway. There's a vegetable garden in the back and plenty of chickens and rabbits and squirrels. And he went on in a sullen, threatening voice, "if you girls tell anyone I'm here, I'll fix you good."

"We're not tattletales," Trixie cried indignantly in protest.

"But what about your father and mother?" Honey asked. "Won't they worry about you?"

"I haven't any family except Uncle James," the boy told her in a still more sullen voice. "I've got a stepfather, if you can call him that. I call him Simon Legree, myself. And if he finds out where I am, he'll drag me back to his farm and beat me and make me slave from morning till night without pay." Tensely, he wound his strong fingers around the silver mug. "I tell you, I won't go back and nobody's going to make me. See?"

Timidly, almost tearfully, Honey burst out with: "Of course you don't have to go back. You can come home and live with my family. My father'll adopt you. I've always wanted a brother, and Daddy's got lots of money so you can have a horse and a dog and anything else you want. Nobody'll ever beat you again."

"Don't be silly," Trixie interrupted. "He can stay at our house where he'll have brothers about the same age. I've got three of them," she grinned. "The youngest one is an awful pest but Brian and Mart are swell. And my mother and father are just wonderful."

The boy laughed sarcastically. "Gee, you two are funny," he sneered. "Arguing about who's going to have me. Stop your kidding! One would think you really meant it."

"I do mean it," Trixie and Honey cried together, and then they laughed, too.

"I believe you do," he said, sobering slowly, and all of the tense stubbornness seemed to ebb out of him. "Nobody's been nice to me since my mother died two years ago, and I guess I've forgotten how to act with decent people." He held out his right hand. "Shake," he said. "My name's Jim. What's yours?"

Solemnly, the girls shook hands with him in turn and introduced themselves.

"I'm Trixie Belden, and I live down there at Crabapple Farm," Trixie said.

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