

Neighbors

Wednesday, July 7, 1948

The big yellow school bus rumbled to a stop as it reached the gravel road leading back to several neighboring truck farms outside of Albany, New York. A tall, redheaded boy stood and walked slowly from the back of the bus to the front. He waited behind several other children who jumped out, whooping with joy over the prospect of a summer's freedom from homework.

"Have a good summer, Jim," said the bus driver to the boy, who stood silently, waiting for the other children to disperse.

"Thanks," the redhead replied, flashing a brief smile to the driver before swinging himself to the ground from the bottom step. As he walked away, arms free of school books for the first time since September, he hunched his shoulders. The bus pulled away and the driver thought no more about Jim Frayne.

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Jim walked on for another half-mile, past two neighbors' properties, before stopping to check the mailbox outside the gate separating his stepfather's gravel drive from the gravel lane that wound its way down to a dead end near the riverbank. He reached into the box and pulled out a few bills and the daily newspaper, and then opened the gate. As he stepped onto his stepfather's property, he felt the familiar clench in his stomach that accompanied every encounter with Jonesy. But he fingered the envelope in his shirt pocket and a faint smile danced across his face as he remembered the letter inside. As he neared the white farmhouse at the end of the drive, the smile faded from his face although his steps didn't slow. Jonesy was talking with another man, who was loading baskets of vegetables into the bed of a pickup truck parked on the section of gravel drive that led down to the barn. Jim knew the contents of the baskets: green beans, cabbage, lettuce, onions and broccoli. He had picked a bushel of each one before catching the school bus that morning. The man must be

one of Jonesy's regular buyers who supplied restaurants and small neighborhood markets with seasonal vegetables.

Jonesy paused his conversation with the man loading baskets of vegetables and Jim could tell he was rolling a cigarette. When he turned his head to light it, he noticed Jim.

"Hurry up and change into some work clothes, boy," he called before taking a full drag on the cigarette.

"Yes, sir." Jim knew better than to talk back. He headed toward the house, making sure not to drag his feet.

Upstairs in his room, he pulled the envelope from his shirt pocket and read the letter again.

"Dear Jim,

It gives me great pleasure to notify you that you have been chosen to receive a full-tuition scholarship from Union College at Schenectady as a consequence of writing the county-wide first-place winning essay on the topic of conserving our natural habitat.

Your work ethic, the obvious care you have taken to research your topic, and your ability to express yourself in writing all demonstrate you are worthy of this great honor. The scholarship is renewable for four years, dependent upon your retaining a grade-point average to be determined by the college. It will be held for the period of two years, since you are not a high-school graduate yet.

Please accept my congratulations, in union with all of the faculty and staff of the High School.

*Sincerely,
Alfred Hart, Principal"*

Jim allowed himself a real smile as he gazed at the wonderful words. Then he folded the letter, slid in back into its envelope, and carefully placed it under the small stack of clean T-shirts and underwear in his top drawer. Jonesy never nosed around in his dresser, although he

scrutinized every garment Jim wore, to detect any signs that his stepson was carelessly ripping or tearing them. Jim well knew his stepfather kept an account of every penny spent on his clothing, and he exacted a severe penalty for damages.

Once changed into his overalls and a t-shirt, Jim slowly descended the stairs. He paused in the kitchen to get a glass of water from the kitchen faucet before grabbing his straw hat and pulling on the work boots that sat on the back porch. Then it was around to the side yard, where Jonesy waited for him.

“Go get old Mose hitched up to the plow, and plow up them two fields of peas and spinach. We missed doing them last week because of rain, and we need to get another crop in the ground quick. There’s still time to put out tomatoes and a late crop of summer squash. Tomorrow you can start hoeing out the corn first thing.”

“Yes, sir.” Unusually for him, Jim hesitated, scraping the toe of his work shoe in the gravel. “I was hoping you’d had time to think about what I asked you.”

“Bout workin’ at one of them fancy boys’ camps?” Jonesy peered at him and Jim forced himself to stare calmly into the older man’s narrow brown eyes.

“Yes, sir.”

“No reason for you to go to work at one of them places. I got plenty of work for you right here.” Jonesy spat, aiming accurately at a spot exactly an inch to the side of Jim’s shoe.

“But I could earn money for college, so I wouldn’t be a burden on you when I go.” Jim hated the pleading tone that had crept into his voice.

“You don’t need no college degree. You kin work right here on the farm alongside of me, and when that there great-uncle of yours kicks the bucket, you’ll be able to keep the farm goin’ while I take care of that money of his.” He cackled. “Haw, haw! I’ll take care of it, all right. About damn time I get paid back for everything I’ve done for you over the past four years.”

Jim pressed his lips together to hold back the angry words he wanted to shout. He inhaled a couple of deep breaths through his nose and made one more try. "You won't have to pay for any college for me. I won a scholarship."

"Haw, haw! A likely story!" Jonesy slapped his thigh as he cackled again. "I got a nice bridge I'll sell you in Brooklyn, too. You must think I fell off the cabbage truck yesterday, boy." His derisive laughter stopped and he began to unbuckle his belt. "That's enough of your lip. Now, git out there like I told you and start that plowin'. We got work to do." He pulled the belt off and folded it back on itself, but Jim didn't wait to see what was coming next. He made himself walk past Jonesy, toward the barn, without saying anything. Inside he was seething.

After plowing until the sun slipped below the horizon, Jim unhitched old Mose and walked him back to the barn, feeding, watering and rubbing down the old horse before heading inside for a late supper.

Jonesy sat at the scrubbed wooden kitchen table, empty plate in front of him, smoking his after-dinner cigarette. An empty plate sat at Jim's place across the table, and on the stovetop, pans of food were cooling to room temperature. With the energy-conserving, automatic motions of fatigue, Jim washed up at the washstand and then helped himself to meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and fresh peas from the kitchen garden. Jonesy paid a woman from one of the neighboring farms to come twice a week to cook, clean, and do laundry. Today was one of her days, and the food was good, but Jim had a hard time enjoying it, not only because of his fatigue but because he knew Jonesy tracked and recorded the cost of every morsel he consumed.

As soon as Jim swallowed his last bite and wiped his lips with a napkin, Jonesy stood and stretched before stalking across the worn linoleum floor to the living room. When he switched on the radio Jim could hear the machine's static as Jonesy tuned it to his favorite station. Finding it, the older man slouched into his easy chair and started rolling another cigarette.

“You be sure to clean them dishes good,” he called out before taking his first puff. “And make sure you sweep the floor, too. Or else.”

Jim nodded, swallowing a sharp retort. It did no good to backtalk Jonesy and only earned him a greater chance for a whipping. As he put away the meager leftovers into Jonesy’s refrigerator and wiped the dishes clean, his angry thoughts coalesced into an idea that quickly became a plan. *I’ll run away to Sleepyside, to Great-Uncle James, he decided. Whatever his falling-out was with Dad, he made me his heir. So if he would take me, my life couldn’t be worse than it is here.*

After finishing the dishes and cleaning the kitchen to a state of almost painful neatness, Jim normally retreated to his room to read and study. With the dismissal of school for the year, he felt at loose ends, but he definitely didn’t feel like sitting in the living room with Jonesy, listening to Abbott and Costello. Instead, he climbed the steps to his room on the second floor, stripped to his underwear and crawled into bed. Although he wanted to stay awake and plan his escape, he was too tired to hold his eyes open. *I’ll plan better if I can get a couple of hours’ sleep first*, he decided.

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Jim snapped into wakefulness with a start as moonlight played across the bare floor of his room. He was alone, and Jonesy was *not* standing at the foot of his bed, horsewhip in hand. In fact, his stepfather’s snoring seemed to create a faint vibration in the air that could be felt from the other bedroom. A faint breeze wafted in from the open window and he noticed that the air had cooled slightly.

He lay for a moment, gathering his thoughts, and remembered the decision he’d made just before falling asleep. Now was the time—the time to leave this house, to escape Jonesy’s oppression and ridicule. He sat up and looked outside—no later than eleven or so, he calculated from the position of the moon. By sunrise he could put plenty of distance between himself and Jonesy, and with any luck he could stay off the road during daylight. The Albany Post Road led directly to Sleepyside, so if he followed it he was bound to be able to reach Uncle James’ house within a couple of days.

Jim tiptoed across the room to his closet, carefully avoiding the one squeaky board in the middle of the room. He quickly located the battered old Boy Scout knapsack that had been his father's. Although he wanted—and needed—to travel lightly, an extra pair of socks, a T-shirt, and underwear seemed necessary. His dad's old canteen was already inside the knapsack but he knew he couldn't fill it in the house without making a noise that might awaken his stepfather. He'd have to depend on finding a clean, flowing stream on his way south. He unrolled his socks and pushed an engraved silver christening mug down inside one of them, pulling the other sock over it afterward to keep it from rubbing or bumping against the metal canteen. It was a gift from his great-uncle and he might need it to prove his identity.

Donning a clean pair of blue jeans, T-shirt, and socks, he hesitated between wearing his rubber-soled sneakers or the sturdy work boots he wore for his farm chores, which were sitting inside the kitchen door. Deciding in favor of comfort and lighter weight, he picked up the sneakers and made his way down the steps in his sock-clad feet without making a sound. He hesitated for a moment at the back door, debating whether to pick the lock on Jonesy's gun cabinet and take the shotgun that had been his father's. With a sigh of regret, he accepted that it would take too long and possibly make noise he couldn't afford. He pushed thoughts of the shotgun into a locked cell in his mind and slipped out the door, holding the doorknob so there wouldn't be a telltale click as the latch engaged. Jonesy's snoring never varied and Jim sighed with relief as he started down the gravel drive toward the road.

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Friday morning...

As the rosy dawn peeped over the trees lining the opposite side of the road, Jim trudged onward, debating whether to stop immediately, find a place to hide himself and sleep for a few hours, or to press on; he'd just passed a road sign with the legend, *Sleepyside—5 miles*. The trouble was that each time he heard the rumble of an approaching vehicle, he feared it was Jonesy, hot on his trail. And if not Jonesy himself, someone who might remember him and describe him to

Jonesy later. Because where else would he try to go, except Sleepyside and his great-uncle's home?

Hunger gnawed at him; he'd been unable to forage much food on his journey south. As a point of honor—and out of fear of getting caught—he wouldn't enter a field or garden that belonged to someone else; the few wild berries he'd found had not assuaged his growling stomach. He was numb with tiredness after walking all night, and his sneakers seemed to have gotten much heavier; the canvas shoes were coated with a layer of gray dust stirred up from the gravel shoulder that had melded with the overnight dewfall into a concrete-like substance. The almost-empty knapsack dragged at his shoulders and pressed his sweat-dampened T-shirt against his back, irritating the blistered skin rubbed by its straps. He'd filled his canteen an hour earlier, which was good, but it bounced against his lower back in a way that was annoying as well as uncomfortable.

Just as he decided he had no choice but to get off the road and conceal himself for the day, he saw another road sign: *Glen Road*, and his heart leapt with thanksgiving. With each step, he was closer to finding his only living relative, and the only person who could potentially save him from being sent back to Jonesy. Despite his fatigue, he quickened his pace as he turned onto the road that should lead him to Ten Acres. But he soon realized he had no idea how long he would need to follow Glen Road before he reached his goal, and his steps slowed again.

After what he could only estimate was another half-hour or two miles, he almost missed the mailbox that read "Ten Acres." This must be it! Next to the mailbox, a crumbling asphalt driveway filled a narrow gap in an overgrown hedge, choked with vines. When he peered up the curving drive he could just make out a large, Victorian residence with a sagging front porch. Peeling paint covered yellow siding, gray shutters, and white trim. Its façade should have been brightened by a number of windows, but even from this distance the windows were dull with grime. Jim's heart sank. Maybe Uncle James was dead—had been dead for some time.

But he hadn't come this far to give up. If the house was empty, at least it might provide him with a place to sleep for the day, maybe

some food, and he could plan what to do next. He looked in either direction up and down the road, and seeing no traffic, he started up the drive. Once out of sight of the road, he swung his knapsack from his shoulders, took out the canteen, and drank deeply from the still-cool water. Then he tipped his face to the sun, poured some of the water over it and wiped it with his T-shirt before digging out his spare T-shirt and changing into it. He finger-combed his hair and walked up to the front door, treading carefully on the warped wooden steps.

First he tried the doorbell, but could hear no sound after he pressed the button. No one answered his knock, and he crossed his fingers as he tried a second time. Still no answer. He started checking the windows that were within his reach, and soon found one on the side of the house that was both unlocked and not too warped to open. He pushed it up as high as he could, and hoisted himself over the sill.

Once inside, he blinked, trying to accustom his vision to the total gloom inside. He was inside a large room, its walls paneled in wood that at one time must have been elegant and luxurious. Now, dust dulled every surface. Heavy drapes were drawn against the sun, but the brightness outside accentuated the splits and frays in the fabric folds. As his eyes adjusted to the dimness, he noticed stacks of books on the floor, a rolltop desk next to him, its closed top dotted with mold. On the room's interior wall, a fireplace was covered with a black screen; a litter of papers and envelopes covered the mantel. A barrel filled with bottle caps sat just inside the doorway leading to the foyer. As he took a step toward the hallway, Jim almost fell over a grubby mattress on the floor. He sighed. How had Uncle James lived in these conditions? And if he was dead—as seemed likely—was his home being used by vagrants? Suddenly too tired to think about those questions any longer, Jim sat down on the mattress and put his head in his hands.

No matter what, I've got to get some sleep now, he decided. I'll see if there's a bathroom here and then I'll crash on the mattress. He opened his eyes and saw a shotgun lying on the floor next to the mattress. Picking it up, he examined it closely.

This must have been Uncle James', he decided. *It's just like Dad's.* He thought with a pang of the gun he'd left at Jonesy's. This one was

the same make and model, and a box of shot lay on the floor next to it. Unlike everything else in the room, the gun looked as if it had been well-maintained. *Good. I can shoot a rabbit or squirrel for food as long as I'm here.*

He stood, still holding the gun, and walked into the foyer. At the far end, he found a boarded-up door that might lead upstairs. A once-elegant dining room was just as disheveled and cluttered with piles of newspaper as the living room. He found a powder room, but the water didn't work. Neither did the light switch in the small room. At the back of the house he found a kitchen, with a non-working gas stove, and a sink with a small pump that worked. The kitchen led out onto an enclosed porch which held an empty icebox and a full-size pump. He primed the pump and filled his canteen, then walked slowly back to the desolate living room.

Entering the room, he saw something he'd missed on his first, cursory inspection. A thick family Bible lay on the floor on the opposite side of the mattress from where he'd found the shotgun. He sank down on the mattress, laying the gun next to him, and picked up the book. Family tree information on the front endpaper confirmed he was in the right place, and that the Bible had belonged to his uncle. He pulled the christening mug from its place inside his socks and studied it for a moment. Then he laid the book and cup down on the floor next to each other, and stretched out on the mattress. Although his mind churned with the need to adjust his plans based on the fact that his great-uncle wasn't here, exhaustion from the long trip as well as the shock of his dashed hopes, overcame his attempts to decide on a new plan.

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Friday, July 9, 1948

Trixie Belden scowled at her reflection in the spotty little bathroom mirror. "Why do we have to be up before the crack of dawn to go out to the farm? I know Dad doesn't want my help with the fencing, and I'll have to help Moms cook on Grandpa's ancient stove. On such a hot day, too!"

It was the ninth of July and Trixie and her two older brothers had been out of school for less than two weeks. Even at 6:00 a.m. it was already warm in the cramped New York City apartment. Trixie at least had her own room, but it was so small and stuffy it was more like a closet. Mart and Brian slept in bunk beds in the other, slightly larger bedroom, and her parents occupied the largest of the three.

“Hurry up, Trix!” Mart knocked on the door. “*Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain-tops,*” he recited. In his normal voice he added, “Dad wants to get going. If we miss the 6:25 it’ll be roasting by the time we make it to Sleepyside. He wants to get started on the fencing before it gets too hot.”

“Okay, okay!” She raked a comb through her short, unruly curls and stuck her tongue out at her reflection before opening the door and ducking under her brother’s outstretched arm.

“Morning, Sunshine!” It was her oldest brother, Brian. Dark-eyed and black-haired like their father, he grinned at her, showing the dimple that had all the girls in his class sighing, although he was too young to date any of them. Brian was so smart he had skipped two grades and had just finished his sophomore year in high school.

“Hi Brian!” In spite of her distaste for the early hour, she gave him a smile as she passed him in the narrow hallway. Mart liked to tease, but Brian was her staunch supporter.

“Come on, Trixie.” Her mother stood next to the dining room table, fanning her face with her apron. “The boys and your Dad have already eaten.”

“I just want some cereal, Moms.” She kissed her mother and slid into the banquette against the wall.

“I made your favorite blueberry pancakes, sweetie.” Helen Belden looked disappointed and pushed a damp curl out of her face.

Trixie sighed. “In that case...” She accepted a plate with a stack of the fragrant pancakes and tucked in. *No wonder I’m sturdy*, she said to herself. No one could be thin with Moms’ cooking to eat every day.

Soon the five Beldens were walking briskly to the subway stop that would take them to the train out of the city to Sleepyside and Grandpa Belden’s home, Crabapple Farm. Trixie’s father had taken the day off from the bank where he worked, so that they could spend a long weekend helping Grandpa with seasonal upkeep on the property. It wasn’t actually a working farm, but Grandpa maintained the fields and fencing although two of the four acres were leased to a neighbor, who raised hay for his horses.

Horses! Trixie had dreamed of having a horse of her own for as long as she could remember. From time to time she saw kids her own age riding in Central Park, and last year her parents had given her horseback riding lessons at Claremont Academy. The handsome young redheaded instructor had said she was a fast learner. But then her parents had some extra expenses come up and the riding lessons stopped.

“I’ll just die if I can’t have a horse!” She didn’t realize she’d spoken out loud.

“A horse! In the City! Your equestrienne dreams require a country estate, my dear Beatrix.” With only eleven months’ difference in their age, she and Mart were often mistaken twins, and he knew every button to push with his teasing.

Trixie glared at him. “Don’t call me Beatrix!” She’d never liked her name, and her middle name, Alicia, was no better. *I guess Moms wanted a frilly little girl she could dress up in ruffly dresses*. But she was named for her grandmother Johnson and so she never complained about it to her parents.

“Well, it could be worse. You could have been named for Grandmother Belden,” Mart reminded her with a grin.

“Zorilla?” She shuddered.

“Keep it down, kids!” Brian’s head popped up over the seat the almost-twins shared. “Don’t let Moms and Dad hear you saying our grandparents had awful names.”

“They’re way behind us,” Mart pointed out. “They couldn’t possibly hear.” Nevertheless, he pulled out his favorite book, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, and started reading.

Trixie stared out the window of the train, at the scenery which was increasingly lush and green as they traveled farther away from the city. As they passed a country estate, she stared at a group of horses grazing in a fenced-in field. *I could keep a horse at Grandpa’s, she thought. He has a barn, and maybe he could let it use one of the fields where the hay is growing now. I could come out every weekend and ride the horse, and I’d even dust the furniture every weekend if he’d only let me keep my horse there...* She sighed at the thought of dusting, but it would be worth it if she could have her very own horse. Well, maybe it would be worth it.

When she couldn’t come up with any better inspiration about how to convince her parents to buy a horse, she reached down for the satchel where Mart and Brian had stowed books, and pulled out her binoculars. *You can learn a lot by watching people, she assured herself. Even solve crimes. So it’s like being a secret agent, not just plain old nosiness.* But she didn’t see anything that looked the least bit suspicious or even interesting along the route.

At the train station, Trixie expected to see her grandfather waiting for them. But when they disembarked, Grandpa’s old farm truck was nowhere in sight.

“Where’s Grandpa?” Mart asked. “He’s always waiting for us.”

“I hope nothing has happened to him,” Mrs. Belden worried. “He doesn’t take into account that he’s seventy-eight years old.”

Mr. Belden frowned. “We can wait a few minutes. But I’ll go inside the station and use the phone, just in case he’s just running behind.”

Trixie could see her father feeding coins into the pay phone as the rest of the family waited outside. Brian was the first one to recognize the rumble of the old truck. “Here he comes!” he said, pointing in the direction of the sound.

Grandpa parked and strolled over to the little group. He picked up the pots planted with late-fruiting tomato plants that Mrs. Belden was going to plant in his kitchen garden. She’d been nursing them along on the fire escape outside of their city apartment, but they were spindly and pale. As soon as she’d told him about the tomato plants, Grandpa had insisted she bring them to Crabapple Farm and plant them in some real dirt.

“Sorry I’m running late today, Helen,” Grandpa apologized. “As I pulled out of the driveway I saw my neighbor, J. W. Frayne, collapsed on the ground next to his mailbox. He was almost unconscious, but I was able to get him into the truck and take him to the hospital. He’s in a bad way; I don’t know if he’ll make it.” He shook his head and started back to the truck with the two pots. Trixie and her mother followed him while Brian and Mart picked up the couple of small suitcases containing changes of clothing they would use for the weekend.

“Oh, my!” Mrs. Belden looked sad. “The poor man!”

“Why did you help him, Grandpa?” Trixie asked. “He’s always so grumpy if he sees us near his property. He’s just—just a mean old man!”

“Trixie!” her mother exclaimed. “That’s not a kind thing to say.”

Trixie felt the heat rising from her shirt collar to her hairline, but she didn’t apologize for what she’d said.

Grandpa didn’t look at her. Instead he busied himself pulling out his pipe, packing tobacco into the bowl, and coaxing it to light. *He looks like Dad when he does that*, Trixie thought. Once the pipe was going, he removed the stem from his lips and cleared his throat.

“J.W. hasn’t ever been the same since his wife died. Before that, you couldn’t ask for a better neighbor. When Nell died, he seemed to lose his reason for living. He blamed himself and he could never be happy afterward. But he’s a neighbor, and in the country, neighbors have to look out for each other.”

Trixie’s dad had caught up to the rest of his family, all standing around the truck.

“Pete, I was just telling Helen that J.W. Frayne’s in a bad way,” Grandpa said as he shook hands with his son. “I took him to the hospital this morning, that’s why I was late getting here.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Mr. Belden said, helping his wife climb into the front seat as Trixie and her brothers scrambled into the truck bed. “I’ll never forget how good Mrs. Frayne was to Mother when she was sick.”

Trixie had never heard this story before, but before she could ask any questions, Mr. Belden swung up into the passenger seat and pulled the door shut. Grandpa started up the truck and it was too noisy to do much talking. Besides, riding in the back of the truck was fun. She prepared to enjoy the air cooling her skin and blowing her hair.

The two miles from the train station to Grandpa’s were just the same as always, and Trixie sighed again. Was she to live her entire life with no excitement at all?

Just as they were about to turn into Grandpa’s drive, Trixie finally saw something different through her binoculars. The big estate house next door to Grandpa’s land had been empty for several years. Although a caretaker kept the property mowed and maintained the house, it had a neglected air and rarely showed signs of activity. Today, the windows were sparkling and the house had evidently been freshly painted—its white was so bright it almost hurt her eyes.

“Look at the old Spencer house,” she shouted to her brothers over the noise of the truck and air that buffeted the truck bed.

“New people must have bought it,” Brian yelled back. “Wonder if we’ll still be able to swim in the lake?”

“Maybe Grandpa can ask them,” Mart suggested. “What I’d like to know is if they have any kids our age.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty boring at Grandpa’s.” Trixie stared through the binoculars, willing the inhabitants of the house to come outside where she could see them. What she could see was almost more exciting—three horses peacefully grazing in a fenced-in pasture on the far side of the large house.

At Grandpa’s house, the three scrambled out of the truck bed and stretched their legs while their parents and grandfather disembarked from the cab. Mart pulled a compass out of his pocket and shielded his eyes as he stared up at the sun, trying to calculate the time from the sun’s position.

“It’s still only about eight-o’clock,” he said with satisfaction.

“Boys, go inside and get a drink. Grandpa wants to get started on the fencing right away,” their mother said. “Trixie, you and I will cultivate the garden and then do some dusting before time to start on some dinner.”

“Grandpa, Grandpa!” Trixie cried as her grandfather headed for the small barnlike outbuilding where his tractor and tools were stored.

The older man stopped and turned around, lifting his straw hat and setting it back on his head after wiping his face with a bandana. “Yes, Trixie?” he asked.

“I’ll help you with the shovels and things,” she offered, running to catch up with him.

“I’ve already loaded everything onto a trailer; just need to hook up to the truck when the boys are ready. Did you want to ask me something?”

“I guess my face is easier to read than I thought,” she replied, her face heating. “I noticed that the Manor House has been painted, and there are horses in a fenced-in field up near the house. Are there new people living there?”

“Yes, a family from the City bought the place—they actually just moved in yesterday. Mr. Lytell told me they’ve got a daughter about your age, who’s been ill, and they are hoping that she’ll build up her strength living out here in the country.” He had reached the barn and slid the doors open. Trixie saw a roll of fencing, a bundle of fenceposts, a post-hole digger, and four shovels on the trailer.

“You’d better run along, Trixie,” her grandfather said. “Your dad and the boys will help me and your mom could use your help in the garden this morning.”

Trixie sighed, but headed back to the house, meeting Mart and Brian as they came back out, wearing straw hats like Grandpa’s.

During the summer, the Beldens traveled out to Crabapple Farm almost every weekend to visit their grandfather and help around the property. Trixie enjoyed getting out of the city, but nothing ever happened out here in the country. There was no scope for her to develop her talents as a master spy, and no children her age to do things with. Grandpa was old, his crabby hermit neighbor Mr. Frayne was old, the nosy storekeeper Mr. Lytell was old. But remembering the signs of occupancy at the Manor House, her spirits lifted. The new people had a daughter her age! Mart and Brian had each other, and she used to be able to follow them and join in their games. Now, they didn’t want her—and her mother had started depending on her to do more household chores and help with cooking. A new neighbor, someone her own age, might be just the solution to her summer boredom.

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Trixie pushed her damp, sweaty curls away from her face. She and Moms had just finished hoeing Grandpa’s small garden, fenced in to keep out the raccoons, rabbits, and skunks. The summer vegetables were just starting to produce, and Moms had transplanted the late-

fruiting tomatoes she'd been babying on the fire escape of their city apartment, since Grandpa had offered space in his garden. As much as she disliked sweating over the garden, Trixie's mouth watered at the thought of the tomatoes they would be able to eat until late October.

"Moms, do you think I could go exploring up at the Manor House after I do the dusting?"

Her mother looked up at her with a puzzled expression. "I don't want you children trespassing," she said. "But as long as you stay on Grandpa's property I suppose it will be all right."

"Grandpa said a new family moved in, with a daughter my age. Maybe I'll see her outside."

"Yes, but I think she's been ill and is very delicate. We can ask him more about the family over lunch." Helen Belden turned her attention back to the plants. Her face was almost as red as a tomato, and a smear of dirt decorated one cheek. "Sweetie, why don't you run along inside and wash up? You're awfully hot and I'll be finished here in just a few more minutes." She smiled up at her daughter and Trixie couldn't help smiling back. Moms was pretty understanding most of the time.

As it turned out, the dusting didn't take as long as Trixie had feared. Grandpa lived basically in one room of his spacious old farmhouse, and rarely entered the other rooms, which were furnished sparsely with old-fashioned pieces. The lack of clutter made it easy to dust those unused rooms, and Moms took care of Grandpa's living-sleeping room and kitchen.

"Trixie, if you want to go outside and walk up the road to Lytell's store for a strawberry soda or popsicle, why don't you go on ahead?" Moms suggested when Trixie went to put away the furniture polish and dustcloth.

"Before lunch?" Trixie couldn't believe her ears.

“It’s not going to get any cooler,” her mother answered with a chuckle. “You’ve worked hard and deserve a treat. Besides, I think it’s going to be a little while before the men take a break from the fencing.” She reached into the pocket of her apron and handed Trixie a dime.

“Gleeps! Thank you, Moms!” Impulsively. Trixie hugged her mother and as soon as she had stuffed the coin into the pocket of her dungarees, she ran out the front door, letting the screen door slam shut behind her.

She raced down the steep driveway, wishing she had a dog for company. Of course, they had no room in their city apartment for a dog as well as five people. Grandpa had a dog, but the arthritic old bassett hound, Zeke, had never been one to run and play fetch with Trixie and her brothers. He spent most of his time guarding the fireplace. *An Irish setter, that’s what I’d like, she thought. A dog like Big Red, who could explore all over the countryside with me. We could hunt together here on the farm in the fall with Brian and Mart. A dog like that would never get too tired to run and play.*

By this time she was almost down the driveway and onto Glen Road. Stopping to check the mailbox, she saw that there were a couple of envelopes inside. *I’ll take the mail up to the house when I get back from Lytell’s, she told herself. Right now, I’m going to walk past the new family’s driveway. Maybe I’ll see the new girl outside. Maybe she’ll be riding one of those horses.*

As she neared the stone columns on either side of the new family’s driveway, she shielded her eyes and squinted to see as far as possible up the long, curving drive. She could barely make out a thin woman in a white dress, way up the drive. That must be the mom, she thought. Wonder if she’ll walk down closer to the road. Maybe, by the time I get back from Lytell’s she’ll be checking her mail and I can ask about her daughter.

Slightly disappointed, she walked on. Lytell’s store was about a mile past Crabapple Farm, at the intersection of Glen Road and Spring Valley Road. On this warm Friday morning, cars were few and far between, and Trixie started to wish she’d brought her binoculars with her. At least she might have been able to see some interesting birds.

The road's gravel shoulder was wide and she wasn't too worried about cars. But the sun shone down hotly and by the time she reached the store, she was sweating and her shirt clung damply to her back.

The cool dimness of the store was refreshing, and Trixie blinked her eyes several times to accustom herself to the reduced light, before glancing around to see if the storekeeper had moved the soft drink cooler since her last visit.

"What can I do for you today, Miss Belden?"

Trixie jumped at the sound of the reedy voice. "Oh, hello, Mr. Lytell," she answered. "I just wondered if you have any strawberry pop today."

The elderly man snatched off his glasses and peered at her. "I might have a few." He cackled as if he'd said something funny. "I laid in some stock for your new neighbor. Her governess has been in to look over the store. A very nice lady, Miss Trask, her name is."

"Governess?" Trixie's heart sank. The new girl must be very swanky to have a governess. So swanky, she probably wouldn't even want to talk to someone like Trixie. Her daydream of riding horses with the new girl popped like a soap bubble and she gave a gusty sigh.

"Of course, a millionaire like Matthew Wheeler would have a governess for his daughter," Mr. Lytell continued, polishing his glasses on his apron. "He couldn't leave her to rattle around in that house with the servants when he and his wife are off to foreign parts at the drop of a hat." He walked across the store and lifted the lid of the drink cooler. Pulling out three bottles of strawberry pop, he set them down on the worn wooden counter.

"Oh, I just need one today. My brothers are busy helping Dad and Grandpa put up some fence." Trixie handed over her dime and took one of the bottles, using the cooler's built-in opener to break the seal of the cap.

As she pulled the cap off, Mr. Lytell spoke up. "Danged strawberry pop! All the way from St. Louis—humph! Next thing you know,

someone's going to be asking for frozen French fries and Reynolds Wrap." He snorted in disgust. "Now, don't throw that cap on the ground, Miss Belden! Use the barrel by the door there."

"Well, thank you, Mr. Lytell," Trixie said, dropping the bottle cap into the barrel and stepping outside. She remembered just in time to grab the handle of the screen door to stop it from slamming shut. The storekeeper had let his feelings about such carelessness be known on other occasions when the Belden children had visited the store. Her ears burned a little as she heard him grumble, "Harum-scarum girl!" but she kept moving.

The trip back to Crabapple Farm seemed to take longer, but with the cold drink to refresh her, she started thinking about old Mr. Frayne. His property was unkempt and the big old Victorian mansion was dilapidated. Trixie had heard her parents and grandfather wondering why the Westchester County Board of Health hadn't forced Mr. Frayne to clean up the property. The tall hedge that bordered the roadside was overgrown and choked with some kind of weedy vine, and the house was barely visible. She'd always been curious about it. Mrs. Green from the village, who came to Crabapple Farm once a week to clean for Grandpa and collect his laundry, told stories that would have curled Trixie's hair if it wasn't already curly. One of her stories centered on speculation that there was a fortune hidden inside the house somewhere. Another was that the spirit of Mrs. Frayne haunted the summerhouse, a tumbledown structure behind the house that overlooked the Hudson River.

"Really, I should just check to make sure the house is locked up," Trixie thought. "Any good neighbor would do that much." She glanced up and down the road to see if anyone was watching her. Seeing no one, she started walking up the cracked and crumbling asphalt driveway.

* * *

Honey Wheeler stretched, closing her eyes against the early-morning sunlight pouring into her bedroom. What time was it, anyway? She opened one eye just enough to look at her watch. Seven-thirty! She groaned, but then remembered where she was. The new house in the

country! Today was the first full day, and Daddy had asked her to join him on an early-morning ride.

She jumped out of bed and almost ran to the en suite bathroom to wash her face and brush her teeth and hair. Then she hurried back into her bedroom where her riding habit and boots were set out and ready to don. She dressed as quickly as she could, and made her way quickly but quietly down the curving staircase and into the dining room, where her parents were drinking coffee and reading the newspapers.

“Good morning, Mother.” She walked over and bent down to kiss her mother. Mrs. Wheeler returned the kiss, reaching up to embrace her daughter affectionately.

“Did you sleep well, darling?” she asked with a smile.

“Yes, pretty well. It was awfully warm at first, but once I went to sleep I didn’t wake up again until a few minutes ago.”

“I’m glad, sweetheart. Between the heat and the insects chirping, I hardly slept a wink.” Mrs. Wheeler sipped her coffee. “Thankfully I’ve already been out on Lady this morning while it was still a bit cooler. Today I’ll be busy packing for our trip to Canada. I hope the heat won’t be as bad there.”

“You’re leaving right away?” Honey couldn’t keep all of the disappointment out of her voice.

“Yes, darling. You know we’ve had this trip scheduled for months.” Mrs. Wheeler frowned slightly. “Miss Trask tells me the next-door neighbor has a granddaughter about your age who visits frequently during the summer. Perhaps she’ll call Mr. Belden and see when his family is visiting next.”

“That would be nice.” Honey pasted a smile onto her face, knowing her mother was trying to make her feel better. But she had noticed that not only were the other houses on this stretch of Glen Road rather far apart, but also that the closest neighbors were all elderly men.

“Honey-girl, how soon will you be ready to go for our ride?” her father interrupted her thoughts.

“We can go now if you want to. I’m not really hungry yet.” She smiled at him.

“If you’re ready, I am.” Mr. Wheeler folded his newspaper and stood up. He was already dressed for riding, and she realized he’d probably already been out with her mother.

“Jupe didn’t work off all of his energy this morning, so I told Regan I’d be back to exercise him when you could come along. Now’s a good time, before it gets any hotter.”

“I’m ready now,” Honey said. “I’ll just have some cereal and fruit when I get back, so Cook won’t have to go to any trouble for me.”

“All right, dear,” her mother replied with a smile. “Best to get out now before it gets too hot, anyway. But do eat a good breakfast when you get back.”

Forty minutes later, Honey and her father had ridden halfway around the lower end of their lake. They paused to let the horses take a breather after the brisk gallop, and Honey gazed across the rolling land. In the distance she could see several men working on a fence. Beyond that, a large, rather dilapidated house—a mansion, really—was partially visible through a break in the trees. An upstairs window sported a sagging shutter that had pulled away from the frame, and although she was a bit far away to pick out details, the yellow-painted siding seemed chipped and grimy. In fact, the house appeared deserted.

“Daddy, what is the house over there?” She pointed to the shabby structure. “I’m surprised to see such a tumbledown place out here when most of the houses are so big and nice.”

“The property is called Ten Acres. An elderly man lives there alone,” her father replied. “Mr. Frayne is a longtime client of George Rainsford, who has done some legal work for me and actually helped

me find our new house. He's just let the place go since his wife died over ten years ago."

"The poor man!" Honey felt tears of sympathy gathering in her eyes. She turned away so her dad wouldn't see, since she often felt she let her feelings show too easily, and blinked to clear the tears while she stared at the old house. As she was staring at it, a face appeared in the window where the loose shutter was hanging.

"Daddy! There's a face at the window," she exclaimed, shading her eyes with her hand. The face disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

"I don't see anything," her father said. "But I spoke to the storekeeper, Mr. Lytell, this morning while I was out with your mother. He told me Mr. Frayne was taken to the hospital this morning, just before we stopped at the store."

"I'm sure it wasn't my imagination," she protested.

"Well, I'll call the police and have them check the property for vagrants as soon as we get home." Matthew Wheeler lifted Jupiter's reins and touched the big gelding's flank with his heel, and Honey did the same to her new mount, Strawberry, following behind. She couldn't help feeling a bit spooked by the face she'd glimpsed in the window of the rundown mansion.

Back at the Manor House stable, Mr. Wheeler rubbed down Jupiter and watered him before going into the stable's office to use the telephone. Honey was still grooming Strawberry and could hear him.

"Yes, we're very sure," he was saying. "My daughter and I were out riding and there was a face at an upstairs window. It's been very dry and I wouldn't like to think tramps might be camping out there, with Mr. Frayne in the hospital. Theft, property damage, fire, trespassing on my property... You understand, don't you, Sergeant Molinson?"

A few moments of silence followed. Then she heard her father again. "All right. Thank you, Sergeant." She heard the click of the phone as he hung up.

“Nothing to worry about, Honey-girl. The police will send an officer out this afternoon to check around the property. I’ll clean Strawberry’s tack if you want to go on in to breakfast.”

“I don’t like to leave you with it, Daddy! A horsewoman should take care of her horse—you’ve always told me that.”

“Well, I think we can make an exception just this once.” He grinned and ruffled her hair. “This ride has put some color in my girl’s pale cheeks. I hope it’s given you an appetite, too. We want you to be happy and healthy in our new home.”

Honey smiled back at him. “I’m sure I’ll be able to eat something,” she replied, trying not to think of the lack of young people in the neighborhood and the potential scariness of starting a new school...maybe.

* * *

“Boy!” Jonesy’s voice intruded on his sleep and Jim struggled to open his eyes and answer. “Boy! Answer me when I call you! Get your lazy ass out of bed and get busy hoeing that corn like I told you.” Jim could hear the thwack of Jonesy’s belt against his other hand. He was fond of giving a preview of what he was ready to do to his stepson if Jim didn’t jump quickly enough to obey. Then he reached forward to swipe away a pile of books Jim had set up as a barricade against his bed. The books crashed to the floor.

That’s it! Jim grabbed the shotgun at his side, aimed and squeezed the trigger.

“Ow! What are you doing here? Don’t shoot me again!” It was the voice of a young girl, not Jonesy’s cigarette-roughened bark. Jim opened his eyes and saw a curly-haired blonde girl clutching her upper arm, not ten feet away from him. A trickle of blood escaped from between her fingers and ran down her arm. He put the gun down carefully.

“Criminy!” He could think of more choice words, but realized immediately that Jonesy’s vocabulary would be the wrong choice in this situation. “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

“I’m Trixie Belden and I’m a neighbor of Mr. James Winthrop Frayne! That is, my grandfather lives next door. You’re trespassing on his property!” She was as indignant as a game hen whose chicks were being threatened.

“I could say the same for you. Mr. Frayne is my great-uncle.” He held out his christening mug for her to read.

She leaned forward to read it, still clutching her arm. “Well, maybe you *are* a relative of his. But he’s not here. My grandfather took him to the hospital this morning, with pneumonia. He’s very sick and probably won’t make it. I just came over to make sure the house was locked up.” She took her hand away and stared at the blood that covered her palm as well as the sleeve of her shirt. “And you’ve made yourself at home—and you shot me!”

Jim jumped up, snatching his canteen and the two socks that had held his cup. “Come back to the porch and let me clean that arm.” He gestured to her to follow him.

The girl was pretty spunky, he admitted to himself. She hadn’t screamed or fainted, and she was following him. On the porch, he poured water onto one sock and blotted the blood from the injured arm, and then tied the dry sock around the arm. He was relieved to see that the gunshot had merely grazed her. Still, he’d better make sure she got home safely.

“What *are* you doing here?” she demanded, still feisty. “Won’t your parents be worried about you?”

“My parents are dead. I live with my stepfather and the only thing he’ll be worried about is missing out on Uncle James’ money if I’m out of his clutches. Not that it looks like my uncle had any money left.”

“I bet he does! I bet his money is hidden somewhere in this house. We should look for it.” Her wound forgotten, Trixie was irrepressible. Jim sighed.

“I’m taking you home. And then I’m moving on, if your parents don’t have me tossed into jail.” Jim pressed his lips together. Trixie’s parents would be well within their rights to call the police. But he wouldn’t run away from his responsibility. “Let’s go. Which way is your house?”

“My grandfather’s house, actually. It’s the white frame farmhouse down in the hollow.” Trixie waved vaguely in what apparently was the direction. “Why are you moving on? Your uncle might be glad to see you. Well, if he regains consciousness, that is.”

Jim’s lips tightened again. “I can’t afford to wait. Once Jonesy—my stepfather—realizes I’ve left for good, he’ll come looking for me, and this is the first place he’ll look. I walked most of the way from Albany to get away from him and find my uncle. When I got here and saw the condition of this house, I thought he must have died a long time ago. I fell asleep and was dreaming Jonesy was standing over me with his belt. He’s done that so many times, and I just decided I couldn’t take it any more. Lead the way. I won’t leave until I know you’re safe with your family.”

Trixie started walking, and Jim stayed next to her, watching the sock-wrapped arm anxiously to see if it was still bleeding. Down the dilapidated drive and back onto Glen Road, where Jim glanced apprehensively in either direction.

“Don’t worry, there’s hardly any traffic here and it’s just the people who live here,” Trixie assured him.

“So what? If one of your neighbors sees you walking down the road with a bloody bandage on your arm I bet they’ll be curious about what happened.” Jim wasn’t feeling optimistic.

“Here’s Grandpa’s driveway,” Trixie told him. “It’ll be fine.”

Jim felt as relaxed as if he was walking to the guillotine, but he felt honor-bound to hand her over to her parents. They turned into the driveway together.

Trixie walked around to the side porch and opened the screen door. “Yoo-hoo!” she called. “Moms!”

“I’m in the kitchen, Trixie. What took you so long?” A pretty blonde woman who reminded Jim of his own mother stood at the old-fashioned gas stove, frying chicken.

“Come on inside,” Trixie said to Jim, beckoning him to follow her. “I went to check on old Mr. Frayne’s house, since he’s in the hospital. I was trying to be a good neighbor and make sure it was locked up. And look who I found!”

The woman turned away from her stove and as the frying chicken sizzled in the skillet, she took in her daughter’s bloodied shirt and bandaged arm. “Trixie! What happened to you? And who is this young man?”

“I’m fine, Moms!” Trixie tossed her head and her short curls bounced. “It’s just a graze. This is Jim Frayne, old Mr. Frayne’s great-nephew. He ran away from his awful stepfather to see if he could live here with his uncle. When he found the house empty he thought Mr. Frayne was dead. He decided to sleep for a few hours before taking off again and I startled him when I went in to make sure the place was locked up. He shot me but he didn’t mean to...”

“Trixie!” her mother exclaimed again. “Merciful heavens! Whatever possessed you to go inside of Mr. Frayne’s house? Didn’t you take a minute to think before you went in? Maybe you didn’t get hurt badly this time, but you might have been ki—anything could have happened, and no one would have known where you were.” She sighed and checked each piece of sizzling chicken before turning back to her daughter and Trixie’s unexpected companion. “Where is the gun now, young man?”

Jim gulped and then cleared his throat before speaking. “It’s—I left it at Uncle James’ house. It’s his shotgun. My dad had one just like it

that he gave me before he died. I couldn't bring it with me from Jonesy's—my stepfather—and when I saw the gun at my uncle's house, right next to the mattress where someone had been sleeping, I thought I might be able to kill a rabbit or squirrel for food later, but I was so tired I just laid down next to the gun and went right to sleep. I guess I was dreaming about my stepfather standing over me with his whip..." He took a deep breath before continuing. "Trixie knocked over a pile of books and that must have startled me. I was more scared than she was when I saw what I'd done." He stared steadily at Mrs. Belden, willing his sincerity to show in his eyes. If she decided to call the police—as he was certain she would—he would be out of the frying pan and into the fire. The thought of a frying pan, combined with the luscious sight and smell of the frying chicken Trixie's mom was cooking, caused his stomach to rumble loudly.

"How long has it been since you ate anything?" Mrs. Belden's tone had a slight edge and she stared as if she could see right into his soul.

"I ate a few berries on the way from Albany," he managed to say casually. "I passed a few farms and gardens, but it wouldn't have been right to help myself to someone else's food or crops." He stared down at the floor of the cozy Belden kitchen.

"Well, you're not going anywhere until you eat a good meal, and if you're determined to move on, I'll pack something for you to eat later, too." Mrs. Belden smiled at him. "But you might like to stay on until Mr. Frayne's condition changes, at least."

"Thank you, Ma'am. But my stepfather wouldn't dream of letting me out of his guardianship, because he wants to be sure of getting hold of any money I may inherit from my uncle. I don't care about the money—if there is any—but I won't go back to him, and slave from dawn to dusk without pay, while he insults me and my dad, and threatens me with a whip if I don't work as fast as he wants." Jim felt his jaw tighten as he spoke of Jonesy. He took a deep breath and forced his muscles to relax.

Mrs. Belden started to lift the pieces of fried chicken from the skillet, setting them down on a platter lined with paper towels. Once every

piece had been removed from the pan, she turned off the flame and faced Jim and Trixie.

“Trixie, let’s take a look at your arm and put a regular bandage on it,” she suggested. “Jim, you can wash up after I dress Trixie’s arm.”

“Uh, I’ll just wait here,” he stammered, cracking his knuckles in nervous surprise. In spite of his hunger, he’d been calculating whether he’d have time to get clear away from the house while the bandage was changed.

“No, I don’t want you taking off before you eat something.” Her bright blue eyes twinkled, but her voice was firm.

“Don’t you dare leave!” Trixie exclaimed, grabbing his hand. “You know you’re hungry, and besides that, my parents will help you. They’re wonderful, and so are my grandpa and brothers.”

Jim subsided, wondering just how many brothers Trixie had and when they would appear. He stood up and followed the two females to a large bathroom off the hallway, where Mrs. Belden removed the sock from Trixie’s arm and washed the abrasion with soap and water before painting it with iodine and wrapping the arm with some clean gauze. Trixie grimaced a little during the procedure, but never complained.

“Now, run upstairs and see if you have any spare shirts here that you can change in to,” Mrs. Belden instructed her daughter. Trixie nodded and scampered off to change, while her mother handed Jim a washcloth and face towel.

“My husband, father-in-law, and sons will be here in a few minutes, so don’t try anything foolish,” she said, stepping out and closing the door behind her.

As Jim emerged from the bathroom a few minutes later with clean face and hands, he saw Trixie setting the dining-room table and her mother pouring cream gravy from the skillet into a serving bowl.

“What can I do to help?” he asked.

“You can start setting food on the table,” Mrs. Belden said, handing him the bowl of gravy. It was all Jim could do to keep from drooling, and he saw bowls of green beans, fresh corn off the cob, and a plate of sliced tomatoes on the kitchen table.

“The very first tomatoes and corn,” she said with a proud smile. “I just picked them this morning after Trixie and I transplanted some late tomatoes.” He nodded and started carrying the serving dishes to adjacent dining room.

He was on his way back to the kitchen when a commotion at the kitchen door heralded the entrance of two men and two teenaged boys.

“Helen, you’ve outdone yourself, as usual,” said the older of the two men.

“I smell biscuits baking,” the younger man added, closing his eyes and inhaling the air with an ecstatic smile.

“I anticipate we are in for an epicurean banquet,” announced a skinny young boy with a blond crewcut, rubbing his stomach.

The other boy, taller and dark-haired, just smiled. “What can I do to help, Moms?” he asked.

“You boys can help Jim get the food on the table,” Mrs. Belden told them, turning back to the stove to open the oven door and pull out a baking sheet lined with golden-brown biscuits. Jim shrank back, feeling trapped. His eyes darted toward the only door he’d seen so far, but the four males blocked any escape path from the kitchen.

“Jim? Who’s Jim?” several voices asked at once.

Trixie appeared at his side and pulled him into the kitchen. “This is Jim—James Winthrop Frayne the Second,” she told the new arrivals. “He’s a great-nephew of Mr. Frayne and he walked here from Albany to escape his cruel stepfather. He needs our help.” She took a deep

breath before continuing. “Jim, this is my Grandpa Belden, my dad, and my brothers—Brian and Mart.” She indicated each one in turn.

“Well, well.” The older man took a step closer to Jim and peered at him. “So you’re Win Frayne’s son. You surely are the spit and image of him at your age. Don’t you think so, Peter?”

“Can we please continue this at the table?” Mrs. Belden asked. She held a towel-lined basket piled high with the fresh biscuits. “The food is ready, I know everyone is hungry, and we’ll have more space in the dining room.”

Jim noticed her face was flushed and beads of perspiration stood out on her temples. The kitchen was already uncomfortably warm and it now held seven people. “Let me take the biscuits, Mrs. Belden,” he offered. Holding the basket, he led the way to the dining room, with Trixie right behind him. The other boys carried serving dishes and Trixie’s dad carried up the rear with the platter of fried chicken.

When all were seated, Grandpa Belden offered grace and Mrs. Belden asked everyone to hold their questions until the food was passed around. Jim felt thankful for the small reprieve, although he wondered if he’d be able to eat anything with so many eyes trained on him. It didn’t take long for him to become the focus of conversation.

“Dad, you asked if I thought Jim resembles his father, but I don’t really remember Win Frayne, except for his red hair,” Mr. Belden said. “He was older than me, about Hal’s age if I remember rightly. Seems like Hal was a sophomore in high school when the Fraynes moved into Ten Acres, and their nephew spent most of his time at boarding school and camp, I think.”

“How well do you know your uncle?” Grandpa Belden asked. “I don’t remember your family visiting here before.”

“I don’t know him at all,” Jim answered truthfully. “I don’t really understand why, but he and my dad had some sort of falling-out about the time my great-aunt died, and I’m pretty sure they never spoke again. My mom tried to contact him when my dad...when my dad passed away...but he never answered her letters.”

“What about your mom?” Mart, the blond brother, spoke. “Won’t she be worried about you?”

Jim took a drink from his water glass before answering. “My mom died two years ago. She had married my stepfather about a year after my dad died. When Jonesy—my stepfather—found out Uncle James had made me his heir, he made sure to have himself appointed my legal guardian, so he has total control over me. He snooped around Sleepyside after Mom died and found out my uncle was elderly and not in the best health, so he’s sure it won’t be long before he has access to the Frayne fortune.” He couldn’t help snorting. “Not that it looks like Uncle James had any money left.”

“I’m sorry for being nosy,” Mart apologized. “What a tough situation.”

“There must be something we can do to help.” It was Brian, the dark-haired brother. “Dad? Grandpa?”

“Please, Dad? Grandpa?” Trixie had been silent since they sat down, but now she cast pleading looks at her father and grandfather. Jim wondered if anyone could resist those big blue eyes, even though he felt there was nothing to be done.

“Trixie said your stepfather was cruel,” Mr. Belden said. “What did she mean by that?”

“He has a truck farm outside of Albany,” Jim replied. “He makes me work on it, with no pay, from morning to night whenever school’s not in session. I wanted to get a job as a junior counselor at camp, but he refused to let me even try.” He took a deep breath. “It’s not that I mind working, but he makes sure I don’t have any spending money or any free time to do school sports or other activities. He accounts for every minute of my time and he even keeps a ledger of what he spends on my food and clothing.”

Grandpa Belden put down his fork and used his napkin. “Your great-uncle and aunt were good neighbors to my wife and me, years ago. If

there's some way I could return his kindness by helping you, I'd like to try. Let's finish eating and I'll make a couple of phone calls."

"Thank you, sir, but I don't want to involve anyone else. Like I said, Jonesy is my legal guardian and it won't be any use, I'm afraid."

"Young man, you may not have any reason to trust me, but your stepfather isn't the only one with access to the law. You have my word that if what you say is true, we Beldens will do everything we can to gain your freedom from that stepfather of yours."

"Dad, you're still on the board of Directors of the Sleepyside Bank, aren't you?" Trixie's father asked.

"Yes, I am. I'm sure the bank president, Bob Whitfield, will know if J.W. Frayne has an estate agent or trustee to manage his money."

Jim saw that Trixie was watching her dad and grandfather as intently as he was. "Oh, Grandpa! Do you really think we can keep Jim from going back to his awful stepfather?" She was almost bouncing in her chair.

"Don't put your cart before your horse, Trixie, but yes, I think it's possible." The old man's eyes crinkled as he smiled at his excited granddaughter. "Please, go ahead and eat," he said as he pushed his chair back. "I'm full, but don't let this delicious meal go to waste. I have a telephone call to make before my granddaughter bounces right out of her chair." Old Mr. Belden walked out of the dining room to the little wall niche that held the telephone, and Jim could hear him ask to be connected to the First National Bank of Sleepyside. Then Brian asked him about his grade in school, and as the four teens discussed their favorite (and least-liked subjects), he lost track of the one-sided telephone conversation.

* * *

The table fell silent as Mr. Belden hung up the phone with a click and walked back into the dining room. "J.W. does have an estate agent, a George Rainsford," he said. "Bob notified Rainsford this morning that J.W. was ill and taken to the hospital, and Rainsford came down

from the City to check on him. He's at Bob's office right now and is going to ride out here to meet Jim. Meantime, he's asked our new neighbor, Matthew Wheeler, to meet him here. Seems Wheeler was at school with Win Frayne and they were close friends at one time."

"I wish I'd brought my christening mug with me," Jim said. "I don't know how else to prove who I am."

"Don't worry about that, Jim," Trixie's father said. "I've heard of George Rainsford, and he's a very good lawyer and a smart man. As for Matthew Wheeler, no one has better instincts than he does. Sure, he was born rich, but he's built a very successful business empire and that takes a lot of smarts as well as good instincts. Between the two of them, there won't be any doubt about the truth of your story or otherwise."

"And after all, we can just go back to Ten Acres and get the mug if they want to see it," Trixie reminded him.

"Why are you all doing this for me, a total stranger?" Jim was afraid to imagine that his life with Jonesy might be over.

"Jim, we believe you." Trixie's mother brushed tears from her eyes, although she was smiling at him. "We want to help you because no child should have to live the way you've told us you do."

"Your great-uncle changed after his wife died," Trixie's father said. "But no one could have asked for a better neighbor when my mother was going through her final illness." He cleared his throat. "We're neighbors, and neighbors look out for each other."

The End

Author's Notes

11,932 words

This story was inspired by the newest CWE: *One Lives, One Dies—the Butterfly Effect*. I'd like to thank the new CWE team, Deanna, MaryC, and Vivian for coming up with it! My canon orphan was Peter Belden and I decided to save his

father. Admittedly, Peter was an adult when his parents died, but he was only in his early 20s. Would the Peter Belden family have left the city, where Peter was working in a bank, to live at Crabapple Farm if he had a surviving parent who was able to live there alone? Would they have had that fourth child, or stopped with three, due to the cramped apartment living situation if they did stay in the city? I started from there. Because of Jim's mention of riding Jonesy's old farm horses (in canon), I also decided to set the story in 1948, the year *Secret of the Mansion* was originally published.

It was a struggle sometimes to get 1948 right (although hopefully no one here is old enough to catch me out if I didn't!) but I did some research and tried my best to stay in period. Also, Grandpa Belden, being an old man, uses a 24-year-old stove and sees no reason to replace it since it still works perfectly well. I made a collage of some of the different items mentioned in the story that I looked up to help me go back 70 years into the past.

Finally, this is intended to be a standalone story. I think it's cohesive as is, and I like Grandpa's comment as an ending point. However, due to the deadline I wasn't able to quite finish up a couple of elements I wanted to include, and there may be an epilogue to conclude it at some point.

Many thanks to my faithful editors, Ryl and Trish, who caught several inconsistencies and some awkward phrasing. I couldn't get along without you!

Thank you to all of my readers! Your feedback is inspiring and I appreciate you all!