

This story tells some of the events of *Trixie Belden and the Secret of the Mansion* from Honey's point of view. That said, it should come as no surprise that a lot of the dialogue is Julie Campbell's creation and not mine. Random House holds the copyright to the characters and the dialogue, but I am going to borrow them—without permission of course! I used the original 1948 dustjacket edition as my reference (which follows different punctuation rules than we have to day—but I left it as is!). I have decided to set this universe in 1954 and have tried to be true to the time—as much as I knew how to be!

Poor Little Rich Girl by Dana

Wednesday, July 14, 1954

Thirteen-year-old Honey Wheeler lay in bed in the room she occupied at her parents' Manhattan penthouse in between camp and boarding school. She looked around the meticulously decorated room. The young girl never considered it "her" room—it was just a place she spent a few days in every now and then. She didn't even get to help decorate it. Honey's mother oversaw that project.

Honey's sad hazel eyes took in the shelf full of collector's dolls from around the world. A pretty little black-haired girl from Spain stood next to an equally pretty blond girl dressed in traditional Dutch garb. An exotic Oriental doll in a silk kimono contrasted the red-haired peasant girl arrayed in French provincial dress. Over two-dozen dolls stared vacantly back at Honey, their lacquered eyes displaying a complete void that made the young girl feel oddly depressed.

Honey often felt that the dolls mirrored herself—a pretty mannequin dressed up in the appropriate clothes, put on display for her mother's friends, playing the part of the perfect daughter but possessing no emotions or thoughts that were truly her own. The daughter of one of New York's most influential businessmen and a prominent socialite, Honey had grown up surrounded by wealth and privilege. She had every luxury imaginable save one: the luxury of being secure in the knowledge that her parents loved and treasured her.

The dolls that mocked her from her shelf were a prime example of what the young girl had to deal with. Honey desperately wanted her parents' love. She wanted to spend time in her parents' company. Just once she wanted to hear her beautiful, refined mother say to her, "Darling, your daddy and I need to go to Austria but we can't bear to be apart from you. Hurry and pack—you're coming with us."

But Honey's daydreams never materialized. She stayed at camp or her dreary boarding school, and instead of receiving her parents' attention, she received a collector's doll from whatever country her parents happened to be in. The new doll would be placed on the shelf in Honey's room by a maid and Honey would eventually see it the next time she visited her parents' apartment. Matthew and Madeleine Wheeler begrudged their daughter even the simple joy of presenting their gift in person. Not that she had ever asked for, or even desired, the dolls in the first place.

Honey sighed. Her life was filled with such things. "Her" room was routinely redecorated at her mother's whim with no input from Honey as to what she might want. Her closets were filled with clothes she disliked because she was never asked what she would like to wear. And tomorrow they would move to a country house out in Westchester County. It was ostensibly for Honey because she had been ill and her father thought the "fresh country air" would do her good. But he had never asked her if that's what she would like.

Honey sighed again and closed her eyes. She prayed she would have a dreamless slumber and not be terrorized by the nightmares that normally plagued her sleep.

* * *

"Honey, would you like to go for a horseback ride with me?" Matthew Wheeler asked his daughter the following morning. The Wheelers had risen with the sun to arrive at their new country estate early in the day.

Honey looked at her father in surprise, a shy smile tentatively lighting up her face. "Sure, Daddy."

Matt smiled at his only child. "Change into a riding habit and I'll meet you at the stable."

Honey hurried up to her room and quickly donned her riding clothes, hoping fervently that her busy father would not receive an important phone call or remember any urgent business that would keep him from riding with her.

To her delight, when she reached the stable she found her father mounted atop his black gelding, Jupiter. Regan, the groom, had her mother's dapple-gray mare saddled and ready for her.

"I already tightened the cinch on Lady, Miss Honey," the red-haired groom stated. "She shouldn't give you any trouble."

"Thanks, Regan," Honey said as she gracefully swung herself up on to the gentle horse.

The father and daughter duo set out into the clear, crisp country morning. Honey reflected that moving up here for the summer might not be so bad. After all, her horrible old governess had been let go and she adored Miss Trask, her new governess. If her dad was going to take some time away from his usually long workdays and spend time with her on the estate horseback riding and swimming in the small lake, then Honey was already looking forward to the summer!

Mr. Wheeler broke the silence as they passed a small, white farmhouse in the hollow that lay below their hill. "Do you see that farmhouse?"

"Yes, it's simply darling," Honey replied as she looked at the house, nestled comfortably in its hollow.

"I met the man who lives there when I had some business at the local bank. He has a daughter your age. Maybe you could go calling and introduce yourself."

At his words, Honey felt the sudden swell of two emotions inside her. The first undeniable emotion was excitement. But right on the heels of that came an incredible shyness that overwhelmed any positive feelings she might have had. Part of Honey was sure that the girl would not like her, but the other half held out a wild hope that she and this girl would become fast friends and her lonely days would be over.

Honey was still lost in her thoughts when they reached a small lane and Matthew led Jupiter toward it. "Shall we see where this leads?"

Honey smiled and nodded as she urged Lady to follow the large black horse toward the uphill lane. She rode in silence with her father until they turned a curve in the road and saw a dilapidated structure before them. *That old mansion looks downright mournful*, Honey reflected. It was dark and gloomy despite the bright sunshine. Honey involuntarily shivered.

"We'd best turn back," her father said, oblivious to Honey's reaction to the old mansion. "Even though the house looks deserted, we must be trespassing."

Honey quickly agreed and turned Lady around, glad to be leaving the gloomy atmosphere that surrounded the house. As she headed away, she felt an odd prickling sensation at the back of her neck and the most overwhelming feeling that she was being watched stole over her. She continued forward, trying to ignore the feeling, but something compelled her to look at the ramshackle house one last time. Her sharp eyes took in the peeling paint, the precariously hanging shutters, and the dirt caked windows. It was the sight of one of the windows that made her heart stop.

A face was staring right at her!

* * *

As Honey changed out of her riding clothes, safe in the confines of her room, she tried to tell herself that she had just imagined the face at the window. She knew better than anyone that she was not the most steely-nerved girl on earth. Her nervous habits had often excluded her from being asked to play with the other children she went to school with and were the reason for her frequent nightmares. *This was just nerves*, she told herself as she dressed.

When she finished dressing, she looked in the long mirror. She wanted to make a good impression when she went calling on her new neighbors so she had chosen a simple white linen dress, stockings, and dainty summer sandals. Satisfied with her appearance, she went to find Miss Trask to tell her of her plan to introduce herself to the girl next door.

Having informed her governess, Honey was soon headed down the long driveway of her new home with her puppy and suddenly stopped, frightened. A large red dog was racing toward her, barking furiously. So intent on this dog was she, Honey didn't realize he belonged to anybody until she heard a young girl's voice.

"Don't pay any attention to him! He's just showing off. He wouldn't hurt a fly. I'm Trixie Belden," a girl about Honey's age was saying. "My kid brother and I live in the hollow in that little white frame house—Crabapple Farm, you know."

Honey, hearing the girl's words and realizing that the dog was now racing in friendly circles, regained her composure. Wanting desperately for this girl with the sandy blond curls to like her, she put on her very best manners. "How do you do?" she said, holding out her slender hand as she had been taught. "My name is Honey—Honey Wheeler."

"Do you ride horseback?"

Honey smiled, eager to impress her friend. "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 grinned excitedly. She had always wanted to learn how to ride a bicycle and saw nothing "babyish" about it. To be able to climb onto a bicycle and ride, feeling the wind in her hair—Honey was sure that would be heaven! "I wish I had a bike. Mother wouldn't let me have one in the city because of the traffic, and the rest of the time I was at boarding school and camp, 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."

Honey's new friend looked excited. "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 black 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?"

Honey smiled ruefully at Bobby's question. Normally she would give a polite and positive response to such a question, no matter how she truly felt, but something about Bobby and Trixie's casually carefree attitudes and being away from the city in the freedom of the country made Honey respond truthfully. "It's not nice at all, 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 anyplace by myself for fear of being kidnapped." 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?"

"Gee," Trixie 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. I tell you what let's do." Honey suddenly found herself being whirled around and watched as Trixie pointed toward the dilapidated mansion on the other hill. "See that big old gray and yellow house on the opposite hill?"

Honey nodded and dabbed at her eyes with a dainty handkerchief, disgusted with herself for allowing her emotions to get the best of her. What would this obviously happy and vivacious girl think of her now?

"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 was shocked. "You wouldn't really break into somebody's house and—and—!"

"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, still remembering her experience of an hour before. "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 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."

Honey noticed Trixie fumbling with her shoelace and realized the girl was disappointed in her response. But she couldn't pretend she liked the idea of exploring that horrible old house!

"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 there while Mr. Frayne's in the hospital. You don't have to if you don't want to." Trixie stated.

"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!"

Honey was mortified as Trixie hooted with laughter. "You're just imaging things," she said. "I never heard of anything so silly."

Honey bit her lip, ashamed at her new friend's reaction. "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, somewhat impatiently Honey thought. "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. Dungarees? Oh what Honey wouldn't do to own a pair of dungarees! "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 wheeled. "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," he asked Honey. "What's his name, anyway?"

"Bud." Honey smiled, and trying to make up for her earlier nervousness, she made an offer. "Bobby doesn't have to go home, Trixie, 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, eager to show off her new acquaintances to her governess. "This is Trixie Belden and her brother, Bobby. They live in that darling little farmhouse down in the hollow. We were just about to go riding."

Trixie mumbled, "How do you do?"

Honey watched as the exuberant 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."

Honey smiled to herself as 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. It would be wonderful if she could have some dungarees like Trixie. She was sick to death of wearing frilly dresses wherever she went and now that she was in the country she wanted more than anything to dress in comfortable clothes. "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."

Honey ran up to the house to change, happiness flooding through her. She already loved Sleepyside! She hummed happily to herself as she hurriedly changed into her white riding habit and shiny, russet boots for the second time that day. *Well, I'm certainly getting more exercise in the country than I ever have!* She reflected as she hurried to the stables.

"Come here, Honey," Regan said when she entered. "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."

Honey absent-mindedly led Trixie around the corral and finally 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. She really didn't want to see that house again, but she didn't want to be a spoilsport either, so 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, filled with curiosity. "Headless horseman?" she repeated in a surprised voice. "How awful!"

Trixie looked down at her and 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 that old story, you know."

"Oh." Honey was relieved that it was just a story, but she added seriously, "I hope I don't dream about a headless horseman. I have awful nightmares, sometimes. I wake up screaming." She was about to go on further but Trixie interrupted.

"Do I have to keep on walking Lady forever?"

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

Honey watched as Lady obediently set off at a smooth trot, but the inexperienced rider on her back bounced and jounced in the saddle. Honey gasped as Trixie lost the stirrups, and the swinging irons hit Lady's sides sharply, causing Lady broke into a canter. Before Honey could react, the blond girl was lying in the middle of the field, staring up at the bright blue sky. Trixie scrambled to her feet and Honey, calmly holding Lady's head, tried to reassure her. "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. As Honey mounted, she could hear Trixie and Regan speaking softly, but she

wasn't close enough to hear what they were saying. She did notice Regan point at Trixie's grass stained shirt. She moved closer and caught Regan's next words.

"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? 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, remembering how sore she was when she first learned to ride. "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, happy to put her friend at ease. "It's awfully hot, anyway, and Strawberry will work himself into a lather if I let him out of a walk. I can exercise him this evening when it's cooler."

Honey was pleased with the grin Trixie gave her as she said, "Okay, Honey, you're the boss at this ranch."

They walked their horses along the path that circled the willow-bordered lake. "Oh, boy!" Trixie 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, without thinking. "And I wouldn't touch a horrible squirming worm for anything!" As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. Trixie was sure to think she was a sissy now! Her brain searched for some way to recover. She so desperately wanted Trixie to like her!

"I'll put the worms on the hook," Trixie was saying. "We can have a lot of fun. Brian and Mart and I have caught a lot of fish off the boathouse. You see, 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. She thought of the grand times she could have with the next-door neighbors. "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 has been empty for years," Honey said as they approached the Frayne property. She was finding it hard to believe that anyone could live in a house in such awful condition. "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. This was the country after all—there were sure to be snakes out here! "It's probably alive with snakes."

Trixie didn't respond to her fear 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. This was worse than the plain old snakes she had feared—copperheads were poisonous! "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," Trixie stated assuredly and then pushed 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 happens 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 grabbed Trixie's arm.

Honey was still shaking when she heard, to her utter disbelief, Trixie laugh and shout, "Come on!" Before Honey knew what had happened, Trixie had pushed the rest of the way into the clearing. As a black hen flung herself at Honey's legs, the frightened girl realized that she was not being attacked by a monster—only a hen. The hen squawked and took off across the clearing. 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 gamecock 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," Honey was gratified to hear Trixie admit. "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, and Honey's gratification of a few moments before quickly faded. "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.

The downstairs windows were almost as dirty as the upstairs ones, and Trixie 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?"

Honey took a tentative look inside the window and saw that 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 and for once didn't care if Trixie thought she was a fraidy-cat. "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, positively. "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 go 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 back out again?" Honey demanded, not happy with Trixie entering the forbidding mansion and even less happy at the prospect of being left alone outside.

"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 Dad the key to keep from 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 windowsill. "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, desperately trying to convince herself that she was doing the right thing. "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 Honey realized had once been a 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 rolltop 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, and 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 on the west side of the house.

Honey pointed a trembling finger at the boy. "That must be the face I saw this morning," she whispered. She wasn't sure if she was relieved that she hadn't imagined it or scared to have actually found someone in a house that should have been empty. She suspected what she was feeling was an odd mixture of both relief and fear.

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 or so, don't you think?"

Honey nodded, not giving a hoot about how old he was. All she could think about was that gun! "I'm scared. Suppose he wakes up and finds us here. He might shoot us with that awful-looking gun."

Honey watched as Trixie took a cautious step forward, obviously hoping to see if she could read the inscription on the silver mug. The floorboard 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. She was determined to beg the boy to spare them. "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 seemed to come 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," she finished tartly, "seem to have moved right in."

The boy, who Honey was slowly admitting to herself was pretty cute now that he didn't seem to want to shoot them, got slowly to his feet. "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."

Honey noticed that the handsome 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 so that the girls could see the engraving. Trixie 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?"

Honey had never heard a sadder story in all her life! She thought of all the times she had wanted a brother and suddenly she was talking a mile a minute. "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 simply wonderful."

The boy laughed and Honey winced at the bitter, sarcastic tone it held. "Gee, you two are funny," he sneered. "Arguing about who's going to have me. Stop your kidding! One would think you really mean it."

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

"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.

"And I'm Honey Wheeler, and I just moved into the large house on the hill," Honey added.

"Well," Jim said, "I'd sure like to be adopted by both of you, but it's impossible. Jonesy—that's my stepfather—is my legal guardian, and he'll never let anybody take his place. You see," he went on as the three of them sat down on the old mattress, "when I was born, my father's Uncle James sent me this mug; and at the same time, he wrote Mother and Dad that he and Aunt Nell were naming me in their wills as their sole heir. Sometime later Aunt Nell died, and Mother never heard from him again; but she always told me that someday I'd inherit about half a million dollars, and Jonesy thinks he's going to have control of it when Uncle James dies." He

glanced ruefully around the cluttered room. "It looks like I'm going to inherit nothing but a lot of old junk, doesn't it?"

"Don't be too sure of that," Trixie cried excitedly, "A lot of people think there's a fortune hidden in this old house."

"That's impossible, Trixie," Honey declared emphatically. "Nobody who had any money would live in such an untidy place."

"That's right," Jim agreed. Honey was flattered that this obviously very smart and handsome boy agreed with her. "Uncle James must have lost all his money in bad investments. But Jonesy doesn't think so. You see, he snooped around in Sleepyside right after Mother died and heard the same story that there's a fortune in this old mansion, somewhere. He's just waiting until Uncle James dies so he can get his hands on it. I'll never see a penny of it."

"He sounds like an awful person," Honey said, tears of sympathy welling up in her hazel eyes. She thought of her parents and how she sometimes wondered if they loved her or not, but they had never *beat* her. "Did he really beat you, Jim?"

"Sure," Jim said and Honey was shocked at his nonchalance. "But I didn't mind that so much. Of course, he never did while Mother was alive. He really loved her, and I guess she loved him. She was never very strong," he continued, his green eyes dark with sorrow, "and Jonesy was always very gentle with her. I hated him from the beginning, and I know he felt the same way about me; but we never let Mother know how we felt. It would have broken her heart."

"Is your father dead, too, Jim?" Trixie asked in the quietest voice Honey had heard her use yet.

"Yes." He stared out of the window for a minute, and the sun glinted in the gold lights in his bright red hair. "You know what?" he asked suddenly. "Someday, I'm going to own a great big all-year-round camp for kids who haven't any fathers of their own. I'm going to run it so they can study lessons and learn a trade at the same time that I teach them how to swim and box and shoot and ride and skate. They're going to know how to live in the woods and understand all kinds of wild animals. My dad taught me to—" He stopped, his freckled face flushed with embarrassment. "I guess this sounds pretty funny to you. Me shooting off like this in a broken-down old house without even a cent to my name!"

"It doesn't sound funny at all!" Trixie broke in. "It sounds great. I bet you will do it someday, too, Jim."

"I bet you do, too," Honey echoed. "I'd like to go to a camp like that instead of the dull ones I went to."

Jim spread his hands hopelessly. "Well, I've got a long way to go. That's what Jonesy and I fought about mostly. Last summer and this, I wanted to apply at one of those big upstate boys' camps for a job as junior counselor or junior athletic instructor. I'm pretty good at most sports, and when Dad was alive—" He stopped for a second as though it hurt him even to think about his father. "He taught me a lot about woodcraft. But Jonesy wouldn't let me get any job at all. I think he was afraid if I proved I could support myself, I'd run away. So he made me work on his truck farm without pay."

"Boy, he *is* a Simon Legree," Trixie breathed excitedly.

Jim nodded in agreement. "We had a heck of an argument when school closed, and day before yesterday, I guess that was Wednesday, I decided to try to find Uncle James and see if he'd help me. I hitchhiked part of the way and walked the rest, sleeping in the woods, because I didn't have any money, you know. I wasn't sure exactly where my uncle lived, and I didn't dare

ask anybody, but by luck, this morning, as I was walking along the road, I noticed the faded letters on the mailbox at the foot of the driveway. I remembered that Mother had said his place was called Ten Acres, so I came up here.” He grinned. “I tell you, I was pretty disappointed when nobody answered my knock, and I saw how run-down the place was. But I was so tired I climbed in through the window and flopped down on this old mattress.”

“Golly,” Trixie gasped. “Haven’t you had anything to eat since Wednesday?” Honey, who had three meals served to her daily like clockwork, couldn’t imagine such a thing.

He shook his head. “A few berries I found, that’s all.”

Honey scrambled to her feet. She always wanted to help people and she just couldn’t bear the thought of Jim being hungry for one more second. “We’ll go right home now and get you something. You must be starving.”

“I could do with a little something,” he confessed, patting his stomach. “I planned to shoot a rabbit and roast it on an outdoor spit; but, now that you mention it, I’m so hungry I doubt if I could wait long enough to skin and clean it.”

“I’ll be right back,” Trixie declared, starting for the window. “My house is just down in the hollow over there.”

“Hold on,” Jim called out. “How’re you going to get food out of the house without someone getting suspicious?”

“Oh, oh,” Trixie admitted. “I never thought about that.”

“I know,” Honey broke in, excited that she was able to help and come up with a perfectly perfect plan, “I’ll tell Miss Trask we want to have a picnic in the woods. The cook’ll pack up enough food for a regiment, and we can bring it up here and have our lunch with Jim.”

“Wonderful!” Trixie reached into a back pocket and produced a crushed, half-melted candy bar. “Will this keep you going till then, Jim?” she asked, offering the candy.

Jim wolfed down the chocolate and unashamedly licked the paper clean. “Thanks,” he began and then stopped as the neigh of a frightened horse broke the stillness of the outside air. The three of them rushed to the open window, and, over the top of the hedge, they could see Lady and Strawberry rearing and plunging in fright.

Something was crashing wildly in the underbrush, something that was apparently caught in the tangled vines of the thicket. Jim turned back swiftly for the gun and vaulted through the window. Trixie hesitated a moment, then followed. Just as she got near the hedge, whatever it was broke free and dashed away through the woods.

“What was it?” Trixie panted as she reached Jim’s side. “Did you see it?”

Jim had raised the shotgun to his shoulder and was sighting along the barrel. “It was a dog,” he said as he slowly lowered the gun. “Wish I could have shot it.”

“Shot it?” Trixie’s voice was as full of the horror Honey felt at Jim’s words. “You wouldn’t shoot a poor helpless dog, Jim Frayne, just because it frightened the horses?”

Jim shook his head. “It looked like a mad dog to me,” he said soberly. “I’m almost sure I saw foam dripping from its muzzle.”

Just then a child screamed from the depths of the woods. The helpless scream came again, and the three heard someone call Trixie’s name in a high-pitched, terrified voice.

“It’s Bobby,” she gasped. “Bobby, alone in the woods with a mad dog!”

Before Honey could react, Trixie had taken off through the thicket toward the sound of her brother's voice. Jim was on her heels. Honey was completely ashamed, but she could not seem to make herself follow her two brave friends into the woods. Her legs had suddenly turned to jelly and would not listen to the frantic signals her brain was sending to them to run. What if Trixie and Jim ran into trouble and needed her? Then Honey thought derisively, *As if you'd be any help to them anyway! Oh what it must be like to not be afraid all of the time!*

The next thing Honey knew, Jim was coming toward her.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. Honey knew she was probably white as a ghost, but Jim's calm demeanor seemed to release her from the paralysis she was experiencing.

She nodded and tried to smile up at the handsome and supple redhead. "I think so. Is Bobby okay?"

Jim nodded. "Trixie's with him now. Boy, was she brave to go running through the woods after we saw that mad dog."

Honey agreed with his assessment of Trixie and couldn't help but feel that he was looking down at her for just standing there, terrified. "But what if that mad dog comes back?" Honey wanted to know.

"If a dog is mad, it always runs across the country in a straight line," Jim stated. Honey figured that Jim knew about these sorts of things and was immediately comforted. But then Jim's next words alarmed her. "I hope it's not a mad dog, though. If it is it could bite another animal, like a skunk or a weasel or a fox, and then they would get rabies, too. And then those animals would go mad and attack anything or anybody."

Honey shivered and started to say something but then quickly realized that she needed to go order the picnic lunch. "Well, I'd better take the horses back to the stables and then get that picnic lunch." She smiled hesitantly at Jim. "See you in a little bit."

Jim returned her smile. "Thanks, Honey. You're really swell."

Honey glowed at the compliment and mounted Strawberry. She led Lady to where Trixie sat with Bobby. "You don't have to come back to the stable with me, Trixie," Honey said. "Ji—"

When Trixie held up a warning finger. Honey flushed, realizing she needed to keep Jim's presence at the mansion a secret from Trixie's little brother. "I hear that if a dog is mad, it always runs across country in a straight line," she finished. "So we don't have to worry about its coming back."

"Well, that's good." Trixie took Bobby by the hand. "You've got to go home for your lunch now," she told him firmly. "See you later, Honey."

Honey returned the two horses to the stable and flew up the path to her large home. She found Miss Trask giving instructions to the downstairs maid in the elegant dining room of the Manor House.

"Miss Trask, Miss Trask!" Honey practically yelled in her excitement, before realizing her manners and forcing herself to calm down and act in a more dignified manner. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt," the honey-haired girl said contritely.

Miss Trask smiled warmly at her young charge. "No need to apologize, Honey." She briefly turned back to the maid, "That's all, Celia. Thank you." The gray-haired woman turned back to Honey. "It's wonderful to see you so full of energy. What's going on?"

Honey took a deep breath. "Trixie and I wanted to have a picnic lunch out in the woods. There are some wonderful trails to explore and I thought..." Honey trailed off, suddenly shy about asking Cook to prepare a picnic lunch.

"You thought Cook could prepare the picnic lunch for you and your new friend?" Miss Trask said kindly.

Honey nodded.

"I think it's a grand idea," Miss Trask stated and Honey beamed. "I'll go talk to her myself. I suppose being a country girl, your new friend probably has a big appetite," she said, almost to herself.

Honey didn't know what kind of appetite Trixie had, but she thought of poor, starving Jim and wanted to make sure that Cook packed enough food. "Enormous," she stated.

Miss Trask smiled approvingly and hurried away to speak to the cook. Meanwhile, Honey went to her room to change out of her riding habit and into something more comfortable. As she looked through her camp clothes to find something appropriate to explore the woods in, her thoughts wandered to the unhappy red-haired boy that she and Trixie had discovered. *His life is something almost out of a book, like Oliver Twist*, Honey thought. Even though Jim had seemed gruff at first, he had immediately become friendlier when he realized that the girls were not going to tattle on him. Honey could instinctively tell that he was an honorable sort of boy. She fervently hoped that Mr. Frayne would recover and adopt Jim. Then he could live right next door to Trixie. And if she could convince her dad to stay here this winter, she could go to school with Jim and Trixie and Trixie's two older brothers. That would be keen!

But then again, Honey remembered what Trixie had said, that Mr. Frayne wasn't likely to recover. He was an old malnourished miser who was already weakened before he became ill. *What will happen to Jim then?* Honey wondered. She allowed herself to daydream that her father adopted him and she finally had her very own brother. He was so nice and so smart and so neat that Honey found herself caught up in the fantasy of having Jim as her older sibling.

A series of images floated through her mind: Trixie, Jim, and herself riding horseback and swimming in the lake, a mental picture of Jim, Trixie, herself, and two boys (who looked remarkably like her new friend!) on a school bus, laughing and joking, another image of five kids, herself included, dressed warmly and sledding down the Manor House hill. Finally, a very comforting picture of herself sitting at her desk, a handsome red-head next to her, patiently helping his little sister with her math homework, filled her mind's eye.

Honey's thoughts were interrupted by Miss Trask knocking on her door and informing her that the picnic lunch was ready. Honey realized with a start that she had finished dressing and was lying on her bed. What a vivid daydream that had been! And how wonderful, too! Now if only it would come true...

Soon afterward, Honey, carrying a large napkin-covered basket, was skipping down the wooded path that led to Crabapple Farm and met Trixie racing up the hill from the opposite direction.

"I've got a whole roasted chicken and a quart of milk," Honey called, "and a dozen buttered rolls, besides a lemon meringue pie." She giggled. "I told Miss Trask you had an enormous appetite."

"I have." Trixie took one handle of the basket and peeked under the snowy white napkin. "Boy, Jim'll be glad to see all this, won't he?"

As the girls entered the woods, Honey moved closer to Trixie. "Ooh," she murmured, "it's much more scary walking through here than it is riding." The trail was thickly carpeted with pine needles, and the heavy branches of the trees shaded them from the hot noon sun.

Honey jumped as a chipmunk appeared from nowhere and scurried across the path. "Regan told me there were foxes and skunks in these woods," she said with a little shiver. "Do you think one of them will attack us, Trixie?"

"Of course they won't silly. Wild animals never attack humans unless we attack them first." Trixie answered matter-of-factly.

"How about that game hen?" Honey demanded with a nervous laugh.

"That was different," Trixie told her. "She thought we were after her eggs." She sniffed the air. "I smell a skunk right now. Or a fox. Oh," she finished as they came around a bend in the trail, "there's a skunk now. Isn't he cute?"

The little black and white animal stood smugly in the middle of the path, several yards ahead of them.

"Cute?" Honey cringed. "It's a horrible, smelly creature, and it'll squirt that awful stuff all over us."

"Skunks aren't really smelly at all," Trixie told her. "They're very clean little animals, and the Indians in Canada think skunk meat is delicious to eat. Mart had a pet skunk once till Dad discovered it in the chicken coop calmly eating the eggs." She laughed. "They carry that fluid in two little sacs under their tails, and when they jump around that's the time to run. Reddy didn't run fast enough once, and it was days before Mother'd let him inside the house."

"Oh, Trixie, please let's go back," Honey begged. "I'm more afraid of skunks than anything else in the woods." This wasn't entirely true, she was more afraid of snakes, but Honey truly was afraid of the skunk and wanted to get out of the woods right then!

"Well," Trixie said, "we're perfectly safe unless we come too close. I'm going to throw this stone at him and see if that won't make him move."

Honey was not happy with this at all, but she didn't say a word. Instead, she let the basket slip to the ground and got ready to run. The skunk completely ignored the pebble that bounced beside it and unconcernedly rooted through the leaves for a bug. The second stone landed on its back. The little animal stood perfectly still, as though considering the matter carefully, then, after a moment, ambled slowly across the path and into the woods.

"See?" Trixie demanded triumphantly.

"Yes," Honey said doubtfully. "But did you ever hear of a mad skunk?"

"Of course not," Trixie cried in derision. "Where did you ever get such a dopey idea?"

"From Jim," Honey told her in a low voice. "He said he hoped that the dog who frightened the horses this morning didn't have rabies. He said that a mad dog will attack anything in its way, and if it bit a fox or a weasel or a skunk that animal would go mad, too, and attack anything or anybody."

"I don't believe it," Trixie said. "And, anyway, we're not sure the dog did have rabies. It could have been foaming from the mouth because it got so hot thrashing around in the tangled vines."

When they arrived at the hedge, Honey drew back timidly. "You go first," she said. "I'm so jittery I think I'd faint if Queenie even cackled at me."

Trixie laughed and led the way through the thicket, calling out to let Jim know that he didn't have to hide. He promptly appeared at the window and eyed the lunch basket hungrily.

"We ought to have a special signal," he said as they handed him the basket and climbed through the window. "I'll teach you how to imitate a bobwhite; then, whenever I hear that bird call, I'll always know it's you."

By the time they had spread out the picnic on the old mattress, both girls had learned how to whistle, "Bob *white!*" almost as well as Jim did. Honey was thrilled to learn something she considered "woody."

"We really ought to clean up this place," Honey said, looking around the cluttered living room with distaste. "You can't live here like this, Jim. It's perfectly horrible."

Jim shrugged. "It's pretty dirty, but, after all, Uncle James must have liked it this way so we have no right to change anything without his permission." He munched thoughtfully on a drumstick. "I wonder if he'll ever get well. If he doesn't, I'm out of luck."

"Dad is sure to stop by the hospital on the way home," Trixie said, making a thick sandwich out of a buttered roll and a large slab of white meat. "I'll bring you the latest news tomorrow morning."

When they finished lunch, Trixie said excitedly, "I think we ought to start right now searching for the hidden treasure. If Mr. Frayne dies without ever regaining consciousness, nobody'll ever know where it is."

"How do you know there is any hidden treasure, Trixie?" Jim teased. "There's a whole barrelful of bottle tops in the study, if that's what you mean."

Trixie ignored him. "I just have a feeling there's a ton of money or jewels or something hidden around here. Let's start looking." She scrambled to her feet.

"I wouldn't know where to begin," Honey said doubtfully.

"Neither would I," Jim agreed. "Although I suppose that big rolltop desk is the most logical place."

"I don't think we'll find it in a logical place," Trixie said. "If I were a miser and afraid of robbers, I'd hide my treasure in the same room where I slept and in the most illogical place imaginable."

"For instance?" Jim arched his eyebrows unbelievably.

"For instance," Trixie retorted, "this pile of old newspapers. No burglar would have the time or the patience to sort through them all, but between the pages would be a swell place to hide a will or stock certificates or even money."

"You mean there might have been a method in my uncle's madness?" Jim said, thoughtfully staring at the debris.

"I wouldn't go through that pile of filthy papers for anything," Honey said firmly. "It's probably crawling with roaches. I agree with Jim. The desk is the place to look."

But Trixie had already started riffling through the yellow sheets of faded newsprint. Jim and Honey watched her for a moment and then went into the study to search the desk. After a while, they called out that the desk was locked and that the chest of drawers contained nothing but a few acorns apparently left there by squirrels.

Jim refused to break the lock of the desk without his uncle's permission. "I keep thinking those bottle tops may be worth something," he said deridingly as they joined Trixie in the living

room. Trixie worked on and on, and pretty soon Honey felt herself catching some of the spunky blonde's enthusiasm and set to work on another stack, which contained old magazines and pamphlets. After all, if they did find a treasure, maybe Jim wouldn't have to go back to his horrid step-father and maybe, just maybe, some of Honey's daydreams would come true.

"Oh, joy!" Trixie suddenly cried triumphantly. "I'll bet this fits a treasure chest. Now all we have to do is find the chest." Honey stopped her search and eagerly went to look at what Trixie had found.

Jim examined the key carefully. "It looks more like an old-fashioned door key to me," he said. "But I can't imagine why Uncle James hid it under that pile of papers."

They tried the front, back, and side doors unsuccessfully, and in the end Jim dropped the key into his silver mug. "It may fit a closet or something in one of the upstairs rooms," he said. "But we can't go up there. The staircase is boarded up, you know."

"We could climb in through one of the windows," Trixie interrupted, but Jim shook his head.

"I don't like to do that," he said soberly. "This is my uncle's home, not mine. He must have boarded up the top floors for some good reason of his own."

They were all staring at the ceiling, wondering what could be up there and why Mr. Frayne wanted it kept a secret, when they heard the sound of something moving rapidly across the floor over their heads.

Honey gave a little scream and clutched Jim's arm. "I've thought all along this house was haunted," she whispered nervously. For some unknown reason, she didn't mind letting Jim see her nervousness. She just felt like being herself around him, almost as if he already were her brother.

Honey reconsidered her comfortable feeling a moment later when Jim and Trixie started laughing. She was sure she had done something stupid again. "Squirrels, of course," Jim said. "Or field mice."

"Oh, Jim," Trixie said, "I'd like to explore up there."

"Well, I wouldn't," Honey said emphatically. "At this point I'd rather see a ghost than a mad squirrel."

"Silly!" Trixie hooted. "What's the idea, Jim, of scaring Honey half to death with crazy stories about mad animals?"

"They're not crazy," Jim said seriously. "I saw a mad weasel once, and I'll never forget it. I was fishing at a pond in the woods, and it came straight at me, running like fury. Lucky for me, I had hip-length rubber boots on, or I probably wouldn't be here to tell the tale. I killed it with a rock and saved the body to show Dad, who was a naturalist, you know. He said the weasel had hydrophobia. There was a mad dog scare around the countryside that August and Dad said an infected dog had probably bitten the weasel."

Trixie sniffed. "I never heard of such a thing," she declared. "I'll bet you made the whole thing up."

Honey was appalled to see Jim's face flushed with anger, and his green eyes narrow. "There's one thing you'd better find out right now, Trixie Belden," he said evenly, but Honey could tell he was very, very angry. "I *never* make things up. That was one of the reasons why I left Jonesy. He didn't believe me when I told him I'd won a scholarship to college. I didn't bother

to show him the letter from the principal of my high school. I just left.” And without another word he stalked across the room and vaulted out of the window.

Trixie called out, “I’m sorry, Jim. I didn’t mean it.”

There was no answer, and Honey, wanting to make Trixie feel better, said quietly, “Don’t feel so badly, Trixie. Jim’s a very sensitive boy, but he thinks a lot of you. He told me so this morning when he came back after making sure that Bobby was all right. He said it took an awful lot of courage for you to run through the woods right after a mad dog had been there.” Shyly she tucked Trixie’s arm through hers. “I wish I wasn’t such a fraidy-cat. I sat there on the windowsill so scared I couldn’t move and watched you two tearing through the brambles and wondered what it would be like not to be afraid all the time.”

Trixie swallowed again and felt better. “Are you really afraid all the time, Honey? Honest?”

Honey nodded. “Yes, and especially at night. I have awful nightmares sometimes, and when I was sick, I had nightmares all the time. I keep dreaming over and over that I’m in a tiny little sealed room, and a great big, heavy balloon is pressing down on me. It keeps pressing down until I can’t breathe, and then I wake up screaming.”

Trixie squeezed her arm sympathetically. “Gosh, it must be awful. I haven’t had any nightmares since I was a kid.”

“It is awful,” Honey said. “Miss Trask says it’s just nerves, and when I start eating better I’ll get over it.”

“Start eating better?” Trixie stared at her with a look Honey interpreted as amazement. “Why, you ate as much as Jim and I did at lunch today. We all ate like pigs!”

Honey flushed with embarrassment, and she bent down to hide her face as she folded the napkin back into the empty basket. She was feeling shy about telling Trixie the truth—that she was having fun for the first time in her life and how happy she was to have met Trixie and Jim. Finally, she took a deep breath and decided to tell her new friend what she was feeling. “I know I did, Trixie, but I was hungry today for the first time in my life. I guess,” she said shyly, “that was because today was the first time, too, that I ever remember having any fun.” She straightened suddenly, feelings of happiness flooding through her. “I’m glad now that my family moved up here. If they hadn’t, why, g-gosh, I might never have met you and Jim!”

Honey meant every word and she knew, deep in her heart of hearts, that she was going to be closer to the two people she met today than she had ever been to anyone in her entire life. And Honey was very pleased at the thought.