

This story is from Jim's point of view and includes a little bit of back story of what he experienced living with Jonesy in Albany. I used the 1948 dustjacket edition of *Trixie Belden and the Secret of the Mansion* to plagiarize from...er, as a reference. As I've said before in this uni, a lot of the dialogue is Julie Campbell's creation and not mine, and Random House (aren't they fabulous for republishing Trixie? \*g\*) owns the rights to said dialogue. I use it without permission but with the utmost respect. Thanks to Matt who answered all my questions about guns and snares. And a big, huge Bob-White thank you to Susansuth who is really a wonderful editor (willing to drop everything to meet my deadline!)—and a fabulous friend. You rock, my dear!

## Runaway by Dana

*Wednesday, August 19, 1953*

Tied to the bed as he was—and had been for the last day or so—Jim Frayne had a lot of time for thinking. A lot of good running away had done him. Jim was absolutely disgusted with himself. He had barely made it more than fifteen miles before his stepfather had caught up with him.

Jim knew what his mistake was—stopping at that little market in Wemple. But it was such a hot day, even for August, and he had been so thirsty. What were the chances that that Simon Legree of a stepfather of his would happen to stop in that very same store and hit pay-dirt when the clerk admitted he had seen a red-headed boy come through there not an hour before?

It had been easy for Jonesy to figure out that he would head straight for Sleepyside and his only remaining living relative. It had been a good bet that Jim would follow the straightest route to his great-uncle's house: down Highway 87. Jonesy had been lucky that he stopped to get cigarettes at the very same market where Jim had bought himself a cola. From there, Jonesy could calculate about how far Jim could have made it down the highway from the time the clerk had seen him. Jim hadn't even made it halfway to Ravena before the stoop-shouldered, cigarette-smoking man had found him and dragged him into his work truck.

Jim knew he was in trouble the entire drive back to the truck farm just outside of Albany. Even if he hadn't been aware of how serious his "crime" was, Jonesy's brooding would have given it away. That was the one thing the fourteen-year old red-head hated more than anything. Jonesy's temper wasn't the kind that flared quickly and then vanished. No, his stepfather slowly stoked the fires of his rage over hours until it was white hot and explosive. The entire way back to the truck farm Jonesy had chain-smoked, but had not said even one word. Jim would have preferred screaming and yelling, the normal kind of anger that was allowed to dissipate after an air-clearing argument. But it was almost as if his stepfather enjoyed—actually thrived on—violence and took great pleasure in the brooding foreplay he indulged in.

Jim knew that right this very moment, as he lay helplessly tied hand and foot to the bed, Jonesy was working himself into a lather that Jim just prayed he survived. The young boy wondered how long his stepfather would leave him tied there. How long could he keep him tied up? Would someone miss him and come looking for him? Jim grimaced. Not likely.

Jim knew he would go crazy if he kept thinking like this. As much as it hurt to compare his life now to what it had been like when his father was alive, he knew he had to try to distract himself with happier thoughts. Jim closed his eyes and pictured the Christmas he was seven years old. That was before his dad had gotten sick and lost the farmhouse in the countryside outside of Rochester. The memories of that long ago holiday were so vivid that Jim could

almost smell the mingled scents of Frayne family Christmases: pine, cloves and cinnamon, roasted turkey, and popcorn as his mind drifted to that time.

*It was Christmas Eve and Mom was making the traditional Dutch Borstplaat candy she made every year, just as her mother and her grandmother had done. A wassail bowl was simmering on the stove, an English tradition from his dad's family. Every year they would enjoy the Borstplaat and wassail beverage as they strung popcorn on long strands of thread to hang on the Christmas tree. He had just returned with his dad from selecting and chopping down the tree, another Frayne family tradition. The family settled down to string the popcorn, and as always, he ate more popcorn than he strung. His mom's green eyes sparkled as she pretended to scold him. Dad's blue eyes were full of mischief as he winked at his son and scooped handfuls of popcorn into his own mouth. Soon he and his parents were involved in a lengthy tickle fight before the popcorn was finally strung and placed on the tree. After the tree was decorated, he poured milk into a glass for Santa Claus and prepared a plate of his mother's delicious sugar cookies for the jolly old man to enjoy. He hugged and kissed his mom and dad good-night and scooted off to bed, filled with anticipation.*

*That year he had wanted a Daisy Red Ryder BB Gun more than anything in the world. His dad had taken him hunting for the first time that fall and he wanted to be just like his naturalist father. He wanted his very own gun so that the next fall he could hunt right alongside his father. Despite the fact that Dad wanted to teach him to shoot and thought a Red Ryder was a great gift, he knew that his mother was uncomfortable about the idea. He had overheard his parents' conversation about the subject one night when he got up to get a glass of water. His mom wanted to wait until he was ten. Ten! How could he wait three whole years to get his BB gun? He wanted to be just like his dad now!*

*The next morning, he stole downstairs at the crack of dawn to take a peek. He checked the plate and glass he had left Santa. Empty! Santa had been there! In their bedroom, his sleepy parents grinned ruefully at each other as they heard the excited patter of their son's footsteps running up the stairs. Seconds later their door burst open as he, looking for all the world like a miniature version of his father, entered yelling excitedly, "Merry Christmas! Santa was here! Get up and let's go open presents!"*

*Within minutes, the family had gathered around the tree and his alert green eyes had spied the thing he had been hoping against hope for—his very own Daisy Red Ryder BB Gun. He jumped up and down with excitement and happily took the gun lovingly into his arms to inspect it further. He was surprised that the tag stated the gift was from Santa, he had expected it to be from his dad. Maybe Santa didn't know that his mom wanted him to wait until he was ten. Suddenly, he was torn with indecision. If his mom didn't want him to have the gun and Santa had made a mistake, it wasn't right to keep it. He took a deep breath and turned to the mother he adored. "Mom," he said, trying hard to be brave and do the right thing, "I can put this away until I'm ten if you want."*

*His mom looked startled. "Why would you say that, Jimmy?"*

*"It's just, well, if you think I'm too young and Santa made a mistake bringing this to me, I won't use it."*

*He watched his parents exchange proud glances at their young son's honorableness. "Jimmy, I think it's a fine idea for you to have a gun just like your father." She smiled and hugged him as he beamed with relief. "I think you've proven you'll be responsible with it. Just remember, this isn't a toy and you must only use it when Daddy is around, okay?"*

*He nodded vigorously, happy that he wouldn't have to wait until he was ten to use his Daisy Red Ryder. "I promise! Thanks, Mom!"*

Fourteen-year-old Jim remembered that as his best Christmas. The next Christmas had been subdued because his father was ill and the doctors couldn't figure the cause. The following Christmas was the first in their apartment in Rochester and things were too different. Dad had died two days after the next Christmas.

As the boy lay there in the falling darkness, surrounded by memories, he realized with wonder that his face was wet with tears. Jim knew that to lay there and think of his miserable lot in life would drive him crazy. But to try to think happy thoughts only brought him pain in the end, too. When would this *end*?

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For three days, Jim lay tied to the bed, convinced he would go insane. With the windows and door shut tight, the fetid smell of the room hung heavily in the air. Jim had stopped wondering how a human being could do this to another human being. He had finally come to the conclusion that Jonesy was not human.

It was pitch black when the door to Jim's room finally opened.

"Glad to see me, Jimmy Boy?" The menacing growl could belong to nobody except Jim's stepfather.

Jim did not answer.

"I said, are you glad to see me, Jimmy Boy?" Jim could feel Jonesy's hot breath on his face, but still he did not answer.

Crack!

A blinding pain filled Jim's head and he realized Jonesy had backhanded him across the temple. But, despite the throbbing pain in his head and his desire to cry out, Jim did not make a sound.

*Be strong, Jimmy.* Jim swore he heard his father's voice, but then quickly decided that he was going insane. The blow to the head had stunned him, made him imagine things that could not be. No matter how much he longed to hear his father's voice, he was never going to hear it again.

"Think you're tough, do ya boy?" his stepfather sneered. Jim's nostrils filled with the putrid smell of Jonesy's tobacco and he wanted to gag, but he refused to respond to the evil man before him.

"Well, we'll see how tough you are now." Jonesy's soulless laugh chilled Jim to the core as he felt the ropes being loosened. "Way I figure it," his stepfather was saying, "you're not gonna resist, 'cause you ain't got the guts."

Jim sorely wanted to fight back, but he knew he couldn't. And it wasn't just because he was weak from being tied to the bed with no food or water, but because he had been raised to know better than to hit an adult. He would rather die before sinking to the level of this evil man before him. Hunger, dehydration, and inactivity had made him feeble and Jonesy had to drag him out to the barn.

He lay there, powerless, as the leather of Jonesy's belt dug into his flesh repeatedly. But still he did not make a sound. Jim swallowed the cries of anguish and pain, refusing to let

his stepfather have the satisfaction of hearing him cry out. *One day*, Jim promised himself, *one day I will be free of him*. It was his last thought before a welcoming blackness overcame him.

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Months passed and Jim had devised a plan on how to escape the horrible conditions he was living in. He had been to visit his guidance counselor when school started. Mr. Jenkins had told him that if he did two years in one, he could graduate a year early. Jim didn't particularly like to study, but he was willing to do anything to get away from Jonesy.

The year was an excruciating one for him. It was hard enough to finish his regular schoolwork after laboring all evening on Jonesy's truck farm, but the additional strain of the added classes he was taking—without Jonesy's knowledge—meant that he had to forego sleep most of the time.

Late at night, when Jim's eyes were burning and he was sure he couldn't stay awake another second, he would remember being tied to the bed for three days and he would find the renewed energy to continue studying.

Jim's efforts paid off at the end of the school year. On the last day of school, the principal called the young red-head into his office.

"Mr. Frayne," Mr. Collier said, "I have some very good news for you."

Jim held his breath and looked expectantly at the distinguished looking man before him.

"I have a letter here from State U. They are extremely impressed at the work you have done the last year here at High, and, provided your grades remain high next year, they are happy to offer you a scholarship the following fall."

A fierce happiness welled up inside Jim and he couldn't speak. He could have sworn he heard his father's voice say, "Well done, son," but he knew it must just be the shock of the moment. He exhaled shakily and then a deep laugh escaped his throat. He had done it! He had found a way to escape Jonesy.

Mr. Collier shook Jim's hand. "You should be very proud, son, you've definitely earned it."

"Thank you," Jim said, "thank you so much, Mr. Collier."

Mr. Collier handed Jim an official looking piece of paper. "Here is the letter, son. Have a good summer."

"I will. Thank you, Mr. Collier," Jim said again as he backed out of the office. Once he was outside, he eagerly opened the letter and his eyes hungrily devoured the words on the page.

"Mr. James Winthrop Frayne the Second...outstanding grades...pleased to have you at our university...full scholarship awaits." Jim grinned during the entire walk home.

It never occurred to him that his carefully constructed plan might not work.

"What are you so happy about?" Jonesy sneered as Jim entered the barn and started loading boxes with unusual vigor.

"School's out," Jim replied.

"Unh-unh," Jonesy grunted. "I seen you on the last day o' school 'fore. You're never this happy. You best tell me what's got that cockamamie grin on that ugly mug o' yours or I'll take the greatest pleasure in wiping it off!"

Jim had long since learned to pick his battles, and this certainly wasn't a situation worth fighting about. "I've been accepted to college."

Jonesy let out a guffaw that managed to be completely humorless. "You? Dumb maggot like you, got yourself into college? I don't think so."

Jim's jaw went rigid, but he continued loading boxes into the truck, refusing to take his stepfather's bait.

"Anyway, even if you did get into college, not that I believe that for a second, there's no way you're going."

"Don't worry, I got a full scholarship," Jim said tersely. "I can afford to go."

Jonesy guffawed again. "Yeah, right. But that don't matter anyway. You ain't goin' to college 'cause I say you ain't goin' to college. Dumb gorilla like you'd just fail out anyway. No, boy, yer gonna stay on this farm and yer gonna work!"

Jim's temper flared. "You can't stop me from going to college. I did two years of school in one this last year. All I need to do is keep my grades up next year and I have a full scholarship waiting for me at State."

Jonesy's eyes narrowed to slits. "Don't you lie to me, boy. I know yer too stupid to get a scholarship. I don't like liars. You keep it up and I'll give you a lesson about lyin' you'll never forget."

Jim saw red. *No one* called him a liar. "I am not lying!" he exploded.

Jonesy took a menacing step forward. "Are you talking back to me, boy?"

*Be careful, Jim.* Jim heard his father warning him and, despite the fact that he was beginning to think he was crazy, hearing these words calmed him. He had the letter from his principal. *He* knew he wasn't lying. It wasn't worth picking a fight with Jonesy over—a fight he was sure to lose.

"No, sir."

Jonesy, itching for an excuse to take his belt to his young charge, looked disappointed, but didn't push the issue. "Good. Now stop all of this asinine talk about you and college and load these boxes up!" With that, Jonesy strode from the barn and disappeared inside the house.

Jim continued to load the boxes onto the truck, grateful for the repetitive task that seemed to diffuse some of his anger. *I'll show him*, Jim thought. *I bet Uncle James would believe me!*

Jim thought about his Great-Uncle James. He didn't know exactly where he lived—just somewhere along a road called Glen Road, a few miles outside of a village downstate called Sleepyside-on-Hudson—but Jim knew he had to try to find him, despite the fact that the last time he had tried to run away, it had ended in disaster, Jim *had* to find his only living relative. The only way he had made it through this last year was with the knowledge that soon he would be at college. But now he didn't even have that thought to keep him going. There was exactly one person on God's green earth who could help him—and Jim had to find a way to get to him.

This time he would plan his escape better. This time, he wouldn't get caught.

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*Wednesday, July 14, 1954*

Jim waited until a night when Jonesy had overindulged on whiskey—something that happened about once a week—and grabbed his christening mug, his dad's 16-gauge Winchester Model 12 shotgun, and a few other things, threw them in a large rucksack, and quietly snuck off the farm. He had no money on him this time. After the last time Jim had run away, Jonesy no longer gave Jim lunch money to purchase lunch at school. As a result, Jim had no way of hoarding money here and there. But the young boy was determined that this would not be a problem—his father had taught him well and he could live in the woods indefinitely if he needed to.

Jim's plan was to hitch a ride to as close to Sleepyside as he could and then hide in the woods and make his way toward Glen Road. He was counting on his uncle having a mailbox near the road with his name on it. He certainly didn't want to knock on every door asking if anyone knew James Frayne. He couldn't take the chance that some suspicious neighbor of Uncle James' might call the police. He would then find himself back in Jonesy's clutches—and if Jim was caught again, he didn't know *what* his stepfather might do.

Jim carefully made his way to the highway under cover of darkness and followed the road south. This time, he chose a different route than the one he had chosen last time. Instead of following highway 87, he chose a route with smaller roads. It was nearly 130 miles from Albany to Sleepyside—Jim hoped he would be lucky enough to find someone going that far and willing to pick up a hitchhiker. Traffic was light at that time of night and Jim was starting to think he would have to walk the entire way to Sleepyside. The teen's progress was slow, because he kept checking behind him to make sure he didn't see truck headlights. Anytime he heard a vehicle approaching him from behind, he would turn to inspect the vehicle. If it was a truck, he hurried and hid in the nearest ditch. If it was a car, he put his thumb out and begged for a ride. After two hours' progress, he had hid three times and been passed up by four cars.

The runaway was almost to Castleton-on-Hudson when he heard the approach of a semi-truck behind him. He paused and stuck his thumb out hopefully. Finally! Jim was relieved to see the truck slow down and stop.

"Where ya goin', kid?" A man who appeared to be in his fifties asked.

"Sleepyside-on-Hudson, sir," Jim answered.

"Not goin' that far, but I could give ya a lift to Poughkeepsie. That'll get ya half-way there."

"That'd be swell," Jim said gratefully as he climbed into the rig.

They rode in silence for a while. The truck driver didn't seem to mind the silence, and Jim was suddenly reeling as the full import of what he was doing struck him. Back in Albany, all he could think of was getting away, because Jonesy had called him a liar and said he wasn't going to college. But now that he was putting more and more distance between him and the stepfather he hated, he could think objectively. What if his uncle refused to help him? What if he returned him to Jonesy? The "what ifs" swirled through Jim's mind and suddenly they took Jim in a direction that surprised him. What if his mother had never died? What if she had never married Jonesy? What if his father had never died? What if his father had never gotten sick? On and on the questions went until Jim thought he would go crazy.

"Things that bad at home, son?" The grey-haired truck driver asked.

Jim broke out of his reverie. "Excuse me?"

“Well, you don’t look none too happy and yer hitchin’ a ride in the middle of the night, so I just didn’t figure things were so great at home.” The gentleman looked at him in a not unkindly way. “I ran away myself when I was about your age.”

“I don’t have a home,” Jim said dully.

“Orphan?”

Jim merely nodded.

“Sorry to hear that, son. You got friends in Sleepyside?”

Jim shook his head. “My great-uncle.”

“Sleepyside’s a quaint village. Quiet place, not much excitement. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“Me too,” Jim admitted.

The two lapsed into silence until the truck neared Poughkeepsie. “You want me to let you off in town or you wanna continue along the highway?”

“Along the highway would be great, sir. I appreciate it.”

The truck slowed and pulled to the side of the road. As Jim climbed out, he turned to the driver. “Thank you, sir. I really appreciate the ride.”

“No problem, son. Glad I could help. Good luck with your uncle!” the truck driver smiled and with a wave was gone.

Jim continued his lonely journey to Sleepyside.

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Jim wasn’t able to hitch anymore rides and at dawn, twenty-four hours after he had climbed out of the trucker’s rig, he stumbled upon Glen Road. As his weary brain registered how close he was to his destination, Jim’s entire body suddenly relaxed. He had made it. Surely his Uncle James would help him now. The red-head traveled about a mile more before he saw a mailbox that said “Frayne.” Jim was so happy he could barely contain himself as he started up the dusty lane near the mailbox. But his happiness was short-lived as he rounded a bend and saw the dilapidated structure in front of him. His mother had always told him that his father’s Uncle James was rich, but this unkempt building certainly didn’t belong to anybody with money.

As Jim got closer to the mansion he saw the yellowed and peeling paint, the shutters falling off their hinges, and windows covered with a thick layer of dirt and grime. His heart sank. Could Uncle James have died years ago and Jonesy just never bothered to tell him? It certainly wouldn’t surprise him. For years Jim had been without parents, but in the back of his mind, he had always been somewhat comforted by the knowledge that, however distant, he had one living relative remaining. A depression settled over Jim as he realized he might be the last of the Fraynes.

The teenager took a deep breath and approached the door. When knocking produced no response, he circled the house, peering through the dirt-covered windows to determine if someone might be inside and ignoring his knocks. The stacks of junk Jim was barely able to make out through the grime seemed to confirm his worst fear—he truly was alone in this world.

Bone-weary and exhausted, Jim finally pried open a window and hoisted himself inside the decaying mansion. He found a mattress in one of the rooms and eyed it longingly. But

before allowing himself the luxury of sleep, he pulled his dad's shotgun out of his rucksack and laid it next to him. If Jonesy came looking for him, he would be ready.

Just then, Jim heard the sound of approaching hoof beats. He crept to the window and cautiously peered outside. What he saw made his heart lurch. A red-headed man mounted on a beautiful black gelding was heading away from the mansion. Jim threw caution to the wind and stared openly out the window. How many times had he seen his red-headed dad perched atop a gelding just like that? He slowly regained his senses and realized it couldn't be his father. It was then he noticed the honey-haired girl on a dapple grey mount staring directly at him. He quickly ducked, his heart racing, wondering if his luck had run out and he was about to be confronted. But when he peeked out the window a few moments later, he saw the two riders disappear around the bend.

The young boy sighed in relief and collapsed on the mattress. Jim's fatigued body quickly slipped into a deep, exhausted slumber.

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Jim awoke to a loud crash. He was wide awake in a heartbeat and reacted on pure instinct. Adrenaline coursing through his veins, he grabbed his shotgun quick as lightning and pointed it at Jonesy. Except...it wasn't Jonesy. Two very frightened girls stood before him. He couldn't be sure but one looked very much like the girl he had seen on the horse earlier. His eyes narrowed in suspicion as he glared at them.

"Oh, please don't shoot us!" The honey-haired girl sobbed. "We didn't mean to spy on you. Really we didn't."

Jim frowned and set his jaw. They did look terrified—although the curly haired blond looked as though she was beginning to recover from her fright. A defiant look had appeared in her clear blue eyes. But he was in no mood to deal with two little girls. "What are you doing here?" he demanded sullenly. "You have no business in this house."

To his surprise, the blond responded with a temper. "Neither have you. 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 said very tartly, "seem to have moved right in."

Jim almost smiled at the little spitfire's indignation. He hated to admit it, but he did like her spirit. Then her words sunk in and he slowly got to his feet. "To the hospital? Where and why?"

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

This was news Jim did not want to hear and his shoulders drooped disconsolately. He decided the girls were no threat and carefully laid the gun on the mattress at his heels. "I thought he was dead," he muttered. "When I got here this morning and found the place filled with junk, I figured Uncle James must have died a long time ago."

"Uncle James!" The two girls stared at him, wide-eyed with surprise. "Was—is—Mr. Frayne your uncle?"

That seemed like a dumb question since he had just called him Uncle James, so in answer he merely held out his engraved christening cup toward the blonde girl. She read the words aloud for her friend. "James Winthrop Frayne II."

"My great-uncle. I walked most of the way from Albany to find him. But I guess I got here too late." Although he was dying inside, he refused to let these two girls know what he was

going through. He shrugged as though he hadn't a care in the world. "Well, I'll stick around for a while anyway. There's a vegetable garden in back and plenty of chickens and rabbits and squirrels." Suddenly, he realized these two might tattle on him and he decided to put a scare into them so they wouldn't. "And," he started in his most sullen, threatening voice, "if you girls tell anyone I'm here I'll fix you good."

The blond was indignant at this and didn't seem at all frightened. Jim really was starting to admire her spirit. "We're not tattletales!" She cried in protest.

The quiet one finally spoke up. "But what about your mother and father? Won't they worry about you?"

This one really was naïve! What in the devil did she think he was doing here all alone if he had a mother and father? The subject of his parents was an especially sore one now that his trip had ended in disappointment; Jim became even more sullen. "I haven't any family except for Uncle James. 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 make me slave from morning till night without pay." Without even realizing it, he wound his fingers tight around the silver mug. "I tell you I won't go back and nobody's going to make me. See?"

"Of course you don't have to go back," the honey-haired girl, timid though she seemed, burst out. "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."

Jim could hardly believe his ears and was about to express his disbelief rather rudely, when the spitfire started talking. "Don't be silly. He can stay at our house where he'll have brothers about the same age." She grinned and Jim, in spite of himself, found her grin very appealing. "I've got three of them. The youngest one is an awful pest, but Brian and Mart are swell. And my mother and father are just wonderful."

Jim couldn't take it anymore. These two loony girls fighting over him! He reacted with sarcasm. "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."

To his surprise, the two girls cried in one voice, "I do mean it!" They laughed together and Jim couldn't help but realize that these two were the real deal.

He felt suddenly ashamed. Here were two sweet girls, who had obviously never been exposed to the horrors that he had, so therefore were ready to be nice to anyone, and he was behaving rudely. "I believe you do. 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 was determined to make things right and held out his hand by way of proper greeting. "Shake. My name's Jim. What's yours?"

The blonde, curly-haired girl held out her hand with a solemnness that impressed Jim. "I'm Trixie Belden, and I live down there at Crabapple Farm."

The honey-haired girl shook his hand and added, "I'm Honey Wheeler and I just moved into the large house on the hill."

"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, although drawn to Trixie's exuberance and wanting to believe in the truth of her words, was inclined to agree with Honey. "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 and Jim saw tears of sympathy welling up in her hazel eyes. No one had ever cried for him, and it amazed him to think that this girl sitting before him, whom he barely knew and who barely knew him, could be that moved by his words. He found that he liked this girl's compassion, but it also made him uncomfortable in its unfamiliarity.

"Did he really beat you, Jim?"

"Sure," Jim said, trying to act nonchalant. He didn't want to get into the details of what he had lived through—these girls seemed too pure, too innocent for that. "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, feeling sorrow well up inside him, "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 a quiet voice.

"Yes." He stared out of the window for a minute, trying to collect his thoughts. He didn't want to think about his parents. He wanted to think of something positive so these girls didn't think he was wallowing in self-pity. "You know what?" he asked suddenly, changing the subject away from his past. It was much nicer to imagine a bright future. "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, suddenly embarrassed. "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, feeling a sharp stab of pain when he thought of 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?"

He shook his head. "A few berries I found, that's all."

Jim watched Honey scramble to her feet. "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. Jim noticed that, even though she was rather pale and sickly looking, she was really very pretty when she was excited. "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. He knew his manners must be atrocious, but he was too hungry to care. "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 the girls' mounts 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, but Jim knew better than to mess with a mad dog. "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 Jim could so much as blink, Trixie was tearing through the woods. After a mere second's delay, he was chasing after her. Despite his worry over Trixie's little brother, he couldn't help but be impressed with the spitfire's bravery. He sure didn't know any girls in Albany who would have rushed into the forest with a mad dog on the loose.

Jim came to a screeching halt as he saw Bobby Belden sitting under a tree, smiling angelically as Trixie fussed over him. "You're a bad boy, Bobby," he heard her say, quite affectionately, as he slunk away. There was no point in risking showing himself to Trixie's younger brother as long as the boy wasn't in any danger. Jim headed back toward the mansion to let his other new friend know that everything was okay. When he returned, he found her still rooted to the spot and white as a ghost.

"Are you okay?" he asked Honey.

He was relieved when some of the color came back into her face and she nodded and tried to smile. Jim could tell that she was afraid, but he also saw her try to screw up her courage and be as brave as her friend was. Jim really admired that. Honey may not have had Trixie's fire, but she seemed like a very lovely girl and loyal friend. Jim valued loyalty a lot. "I think so. Is Bobby okay?" Honey asked.

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

"But what if that mad dog comes back?" Honey asked.

"If a dog is mad, it always runs across the country in a straight line," Jim watched the look of relief that passed over Honey's face as more of her color returned. She was nowhere near as healthy and tanned as her friend and he wondered what her story was. She looked as though she was just getting over a long illness. Then he remembered her saying that she had just moved into the house on the hill, and he realized that she probably hadn't had much of a chance to enjoy the country as Trixie had. As much as he hated to scare Honey more, he knew he had to be truthful about what he knew about mad animals. "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."

He watched Honey shiver and was immediately sorry he had told her that. He guessed it hadn't really been necessary. He started to apologize, but Honey was already talking.

"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."

Jim waved at her as she left and suddenly felt a swelling of hope within him. He had just envisioned being adopted by Honey's family and having her as a sister. Trixie, of course, would be the girl next door...

With that satisfying thought, Jim returned to the mansion and looked around at all the mess. He sincerely hoped that Uncle James got better. He started to tidy the place up while he waited for the girls to return, but he realized that it wasn't his place to touch things and simply tried to clean himself up. What a sight he must be! He was surprised he hadn't frightened the girls off!

His mind wandered back to Trixie. She was so spunky and full of life. *Life around her must be exciting*, he thought. He wondered what her brothers were like and if they would like him. He imagined the grand times they could all have if his uncle recovered and agreed to let him stay and go to school here.

His thoughts were filled with pleasant daydreams until he heard Trixie's voice calling out that it was okay to come out. He realized it would probably be a good idea to have some sort of secret signal, like a bird call, so people didn't hear them calling out and get suspicious. Not that there was anybody really close, but Jim really needed to be careful.

He appeared at the window and felt his mouth salivating at the sight of the picnic basket the girls held. He took the basket while they climbed through the window. "We ought to have a special signal," he said. "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. Jim was feeling quite proud to be able to teach them something new.

"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." Jim was very grateful to Trixie for that,

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, loving her spirit of adventure. "There's a whole barrellful of bottle tops in the study, if that's what you mean."

Trixie didn't take the bait and Jim was even more intrigued by her. "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. The red-head was starting to realize just how smart Trixie was on top of everything else.

“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 Jim noticed that Honey seemed to have caught some of the spunky blonde’s enthusiasm as she set to work on another stack, which contained old magazines and pamphlets. Watching the two girls go through this for him made Jim feel very special and it increased his enthusiasm for the job, too.

“Oh, joy!” Trixie suddenly cried triumphantly and Jim felt his heart skip a beat. Could she have really found something? “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 took the key from her examined it 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.

Jim couldn’t help himself, and when Trixie started laughing, he joined in. He saw the hurt look on Honey’s face and immediately regretted it. “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."

Jim felt his temper boiling. He would *not* be called a liar anymore! He had escaped that when he left Albany. He narrowed his green eyes at Trixie. "There's one thing you'd better find out right now, Trixie Belden, 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.

He heard Trixie call out, "I'm sorry, Jim. I didn't mean it," but he continued on, his anger carrying him farther away from the mansion. He walked blindly on, his legs almost moving of their own volition, determined to release the anger flowing through his veins before he returned.

Ten minutes later Jim found himself sitting under a tree, shaking his head with regret. *You idiot!* He told himself. *Trixie isn't Jonesy. She's just a young girl—a young girl who's been nothing but decent to you. She didn't mean anything by what she said and look at how you treated her. She even called after you to tell you she was sorry! But you ignored her. After all she's done for you, after all the kindness she's shown you, you lose your temper and treat her horribly.* He sighed in regret. *Well, go make it up to her, you dolt!* His conscience screamed.

Jim was back on his feet in a flash, heading toward the mansion, hoping against hope that she would still be there. But when he arrived, he found the place deserted. *Of course she's not here, Jim!* That irritating conscience screamed inside his head. *Why would a nice girl like that stick around after you treated her so badly? She'll probably never come back and you can't exactly go down to her farmhouse and knock on the door to apologize to her.* Jim sighed again with regret and climbed through the window of his uncle's mansion.

He was tired and decided to try to take a nap, but he tossed and turned, guilt and regret conspiring to keep him from sleeping. Finally, he decided to take another look for his uncle's alleged "treasure." His eyes fell on the barrelful of caps that he had teased Trixie about. He remembered how well she had taken his teasing and hoped that they could still be friends despite his abominable behavior.

He chuckled ruefully to himself. "If you can't beat 'em, join 'em," he said out loud as he crossed the room to examine the barrelful of bottle caps. Maybe Trixie was right and there was a treasure in that barrel after all. What was the harm in looking? At least it would pass the time.

Afternoon slipped away to evening as Jim looked everywhere he could think of for the money rumored to be hidden in the mansion. He wasn't convinced that there was a treasure here somewhere, but he figured the stories had had to start from some kernel of truth. And besides, Trixie's enthusiasm was contagious and secretly, he was almost as excited at the thought of hidden treasure as the spunky blonde was.

As darkness stole over the house, Jim finally realized how exhausted he was. In the back of his mind, he had been half-expecting that Trixie and Honey might have come back that afternoon. But as the evening progressed, he realized that they must be settled into their cozy

homes for the night. Jim looked around the filthy and depressing mansion and sighed. *Well*, he reflected, *at least it's not a truck farm in Albany.*

For the second time that day, he collapsed on the mattress and soon was in an exhausted slumber. For the first time in a long time, Jim was not haunted by dreams of a stoop-shouldered, yellow-toothed man chasing him while his mother stood helplessly by and cried until it broke Jim's heart and he would stop running and allow himself to be caught by his pursuer. Jim instead awoke refreshed and hopeful, new but welcomed feelings for him.

The runaway was busy preparing a rabbit that he had shot when he heard "Bob *White!*" His heart leapt at the thought of seeing Trixie. *Did this mean she wasn't mad at him?*

Honey appeared just then and Jim quickly realized that she was alone. His heart sank. Trixie was mad at him. But Jim was determined not to let his feelings show, so he smiled at Honey.

"Hi, there!" Jim called. "I see you came through the woods by yourself. That's awfully brave of you!"

Jim watched as Honey flushed and looked pleased at the praise. She really was a sweet girl, just not so confident as her friend, and Jim vowed he would do what he could to help Honey gain confidence in herself.

"Well, thank you for saying so, but I'll never be as brave as Trixie!" Honey went on excitedly, a pretty flush staining her cheeks. Jim realized again how pretty she was when she was like this. "Bobby got bitten by a copperhead yesterday and Trixie saved his life!" Honey said dramatically.

Jim was too shocked to respond to Honey's statement. The young girl hurried on with her story. "Bobby was bit on the toe and Trixie was wonderful! She put a tourniquet on and started sucking the venom out of the bite. She worked and worked until the doctor arrived to give Bobby the anti-venin. Trixie is so brave!" Honey finished her speech breathlessly.

Jim's head was reeling. Trixie really did have a good head on her shoulders. She was obviously able to keep her cool in a crisis and she knew her stuff, too. Jim was finding more and more to like about the blonde spitfire he had just met but already felt as though he had known half his life.

"Is Bobby okay?" Jim asked.

Honey nodded rather proudly. "Thanks to Trixie!"

"Is Trixie okay? She didn't have any cuts in her mouth did she?" Jim waited anxiously for the answer.

Honey was shaking her head, to Jim's relief. "No. Dr. Ferris checked her mouth for cuts and said she was fine." Honey sobered for a minute. "She's awfully afraid you're mad at her."

Jim sighed yet again over his behavior of the day before. "I'm really sorry about the way I acted yesterday, Honey. I...I just let my temper get the better of me." Jim looked down, ashamed. "But I'm not mad, I swear. I think...I think Trixie's a swell girl—and I think you are, too."

Honey smiled so brightly that Jim knew this was not a girl used to hearing compliments. He wondered again what her story was. Jim was about to ask her, when her eyes fell on the rabbit he was cooking over a homemade spit.

"Is that a rabbit?"

Jim smiled at her shocked tone. "It's breakfast now."

Honey seemed to recover quickly. "Oh, that's great that you're able to eat. I brought you some dry cereal and hard-boiled eggs I smuggled from our kitchen."

Jim appreciated her thoughtfulness and said so. Honey looked cute as she blushed with pleasure at his comments.

Honey set down the bag with the food. "Well, I should be heading down to Crabapple Farm to check on Trixie. We'll come up and see you later."

"Great! Hey, wait, before you go, do you want to try some rabbit?"

Honey looked unsure at first, but Jim was happy when she decided to try some. "Wow!" she exclaimed after taking a bite. "This is delicious!"

"Thanks!"

"Well, I'll leave you to your breakfast. See you later!" Honey waved as she headed back down the path to Trixie's.

Jim finished his breakfast and started exploring the grounds around the mansion. He wanted to familiarize himself with everything in case Jonesy ever came looking for him and he needed to hide. While he explored, his thoughts inevitably strayed to Trixie. He imagined her clear blue eyes, which always seemed to sparkle with excitement and a sense of adventure, and smiled as he thought of her unruly blonde curls. Several times the day before, he had resisted the urge to impulsively reach out and tug on one of those charming curls.

Once again, Jim felt that unfamiliar feeling of hopefulness rise within him. Oh, how he wanted his uncle to get better so that he could stay in this pleasant village and go to school with his new friends. He pictured growing up living next door to the attractive little house in the hollow. He was contemplating this picture when he heard an out-of-control horse heading up one of the paths. He hurried toward the sound and figured that even if the pounding hoof beats weren't from a runaway horse, the rider was probably headed for a nasty spill.

Jim positioned himself behind the hedge, ready to help if necessary. He was shocked to see it was Trixie flying along the trail on a beautiful black gelding much like the one he had seen yesterday from the window. He couldn't blame her for riding a horse that she was obviously not ready to handle—he longed to ride the splendid horse himself.

Jim watched in horror as a game cock appeared in front of the black horse, which in turn stopped dead in his tracks. Trixie flew over the horse's head and landed in the bushes. Jim hurried from the hedge and grabbed the reins while the gelding was still stunned.

Trixie sat up and Jim was relieved to see that she was okay. The horse was prancing around nervously, so Jim tried to calm him. "There, boy," he said in a soothing voice, "it's all right, boy. Nobody's going to hurt you." And without changing his voice he added to Trixie, "You're a little fool to let a horse ride like that on such a hot day." *Now why did I say that?* Jim wondered. He wanted to make amends for yesterday, not goad Trixie further! He decided to go back to talking to the horse—it was safer! "There, boy." He said as he patted the gelding's neck.

"*Let him?*" Trixie said in that indignant tone Jim had come to associate with her intense spirit. He was gratified to see her leap to her feet—she was definitely going to be okay! "He let me stay on his back but that's about all I had to do with it."

Jim grinned at her mettle. "I heard a horse pounding along the path and it sounded like a runaway to me so I slipped into the bushes to watch. I figured that even if it wasn't a runaway whoever was riding the horse was going to have a nasty spill when the horse took the downhill

fork.” Just then the horse nuzzled Jim and a wave of longing crashed over him. “Gee, I’d like to ride this fellow. Is he yours, Trixie?”

Trixie shook her head. “No, he belongs to Honey’s father. I had no business getting on his back at all. I’m just learning to ride, you see, but he’s so beautiful I couldn’t resist it.”

Jim found that it gave him a sense of peace that this spunky girl appreciated the same things he did. “I don’t blame you,” he said as he handed Trixie the reins. His ears told him company was coming. “Someone’s coming along the trail on horseback now. Sounds like two horses. I’ll duck into the house. Whistle when it’s safe for me to come out.” And with that, he disappeared into the hedge without a sound.

He didn’t have long to wait before he heard “Bob *White!*” He quickly grabbed a carrot from the nearby garden and climbed through the bushes where Trixie and Honey stood with a docile-looking dapple grey mare. He patted the mare and fed her the carrot. “I may sound like I’m boasting, but I bet I could ride your father’s horse. Dad had a big black gelding like that and I could manage him when I was only five years old. I learned to ride bareback with nothing but a halter rope to guide him.”

“If you’re smart, you’ll never touch Jupe without a curb bit,” Trixie said, ruefully. Jim was glad to see she didn’t seem mad at him.

“I wouldn’t. Not until he got used to me anyway. Gee, do you think you could fix it so I could ride him sometime? I haven’t ridden anything but Jonesy’s big old farm horses since dad died. That’s not really riding.”

“I’ll fix it somehow,” Honey promised impulsively. Jim smiled at how eager she was to please. It was refreshing to see someone who truly wanted to make other people’s lives better. For so long he had been with someone who was miserable and wanted everyone as miserable as he was. But Jim resolved not to think of his stepfather as Honey went on, planning. Jim noticed the sparkle in her large hazel eyes as she brainstormed. “I tell you how we can arrange it. Regan always has Sunday afternoons off and Miss Trask always takes a nap after Sunday dinner. Mother and Dad are leaving tonight for Canada, so I’m pretty sure I can lead Jupe up here for you to ride tomorrow as soon as Regan leaves.”

Jim couldn’t believe the luck he had in meeting these two wonderful girls. “Gosh, Honey, that would be swell. Thanks.” He was sure that he had found the best two friends a guy could ever have. Thinking along these lines reminded him how impressed he was with Trixie. “How’s your kid brother?” he asked her. “Honey told me he was bitten by a copperhead.”

He watched Trixie shudder and was almost sorry he brought it up. “I can’t bear to talk about it. But he’s all right now.”

“It’s a good thing you know your first aid,” Jim told her. She rewarded this comment with a wonderful smile that reached her bright blue eyes. He found himself smiling back and, gazing at her fondly, knew this was going to be the beginning of a very special friendship.

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