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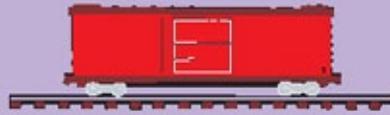
# The Boxcar Children®



## The Haunted Cabin Mystery

CREATED BY GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER





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# **The Haunted Cabin Mystery**

GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER  
Illustrated by Charles Tang

ALBERT WHITMAN & Company, Chicago

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Telegram

Outside in the woods, a cool breeze stirred. Inside the boxcar, the four Alden children were hot from their hard work. Finally twelve-year-old Jessie stood up.

“Now that is what I call clean,” she said, smiling at her two brothers and her ten-year-old sister, Violet.

“And neat,” her older brother, Henry, said. “I’m glad you thought of this,” he added, turning to Violet as she gave the pillows a final pat.

“It’ll be fun to come home from an adventure and find our wonderful boxcar so shiny and nice,” Benny said. “Look, even Watch is hot and tired from our work.”

“Watch is a lazybones,” Jessie said fondly. “He didn’t do anything but watch.”

“That’s his job, but he loved our boxcar from the first,” Violet said, smiling down at him. “Remember how we found him when we came to live here after our mother and father died? Watch is really one of us.”

“Then why can’t we take him on this adventure with us?” Benny asked.

“Come on, Benny,” Henry said, patting his little brother. “Who ever heard of a dog traveling on a paddle-wheel boat up the Mississippi River? Anyway, Watch has stayed home to guard Grandfather’s house before.”

“I know,” Benny said, nodding. “But I’m going to miss him anyway.”

Outside, the children stretched in the cool New England air. “Now we’d better go back to Grandfather’s house and pack,” Henry said. Then he laughed. “Can you believe that once we ran away and hid from our own grandfather because we thought he was mean? I don’t know how we could have been more wrong.”

“Maybe by taking lessons,” Benny said soberly, who thought a lot about lessons and school now that he was six.

Violet laughed. “Who ever heard of taking lessons to be wrong? It’s more fun to learn to be right!”

Jessie said, “Grandfather says his friend Cap Lambert was a riverboat pilot for years. He knows all sorts of wonderful stories about the Mississippi River.”

“And his log cabin where we’ll visit is a hundred years old,” Henry added. “Staying there will be a real treat.”

“Cap Lambert has to be a wonderful man,” Violet said, “to invite us to visit him when he hasn’t even met us. I like him already.”

“And I like the trip up the river to his house, too,” Benny said, breaking into a run. “Let’s go pack!”

That next morning their grandfather glanced at the four brightly colored suitcases in the back of the car. “I wish I could go along on this trip with you,” he told them. “But business is business, and I know you’ll enjoy my friend Cap.”

“I hope he’ll enjoy us, too,” Jessie said quietly. “Didn’t you say he has a son of his own?”

Mr. Alden nodded. "A very nice boy named Jason. Of course he's a grown man by now. But he and his father had a big disagreement when Jason was quite young. They haven't even seen each other for many years."

"What did they disagree about?" Jessie asked.

"Cap wanted Jason to be a doctor or lawyer. Jason only wanted to be a sailor like Cap himself," Mr. Alden replied. "Jason ran away and did what he wanted and never came back."

Benny snuggled against his grandfather. "I'm never going to leave you," he told him.

"Except for adventures," Henry put in, grinning.

"At least you'll fly with us as far as St. Louis, Grandfather," Violet said. "Will you come right back home from there?"

Mr. Alden shook his head. "I have business in the SOUTH. But I'll be in touch with you by phone. Of course, Mrs. McGregor will be here taking care of the house and Watch. I'll call and check on them, too, as I always do."

The Mississippi River was only a quick taxi ride from the St. Louis airport. Benny, holding his bright-red suitcase, stared at the huge paddle-wheel steamer.

"Did you ever see so many flags?" Violet cried. "And listen to the music!"

Her grandfather laughed. "What better way to celebrate the Fourth of July than on America's longest river?"

"And the third-longest river in the world," Jessie added. Then she smiled. "I only know that because I looked it up."

A stream of people were moving up the decorated ramp. At the top, a group of ship's officers stood waiting.

"Can you come aboard with us?" Jessie asked Mr. Alden. "Just for a while?"

"I wouldn't miss it," he said, smiling down at her. "I like being able to imagine where you are in my mind."

Henry, feeling very grown-up for fourteen, handed their tickets to the blond officer at the desk.

"Welcome aboard!" the man said, nodding at the children. Then he turned to their grandfather. "Greetings to you, too, sir. The captain's assistant asked to see you as soon as you came aboard. He has a message for you." He turned to lead the way. The children and their grandfather followed him.

A man in uniform met them as they neared his office. "This telegram arrived for you," he said. "I was asked to see that you got it before you left the ship."

The children watched their grandfather's face as he read the telegram. When he frowned, Benny slid his hand into Henry's.

Mr. Alden looked up and put his arm across Jessie's shoulders. "Thank you again," he told the ship's officer. "I need a quiet place to talk to my children for a moment."



“You’re welcome to my office,” the man said. “I’m needed on deck.”

When the door closed behind him, Mr. Alden looked around at the children. “This is disappointing news,” he said. “It’s from Cap. Let me read it to you.”

“Dear Friend. Stop,” Mr. Alden read. “I can’t tell you how unhappy I am to write this. Stop. I have looked forward very much to having your fine children here. Stop. But I have to ask you not to send them due to an injury to my ankle that makes me unable to get around. Stop. Regards always. Cap Lambert.”

“Why does he keep telling you to stop?” Benny cried. “We don’t want to stop. We want to go there.”

His grandfather chuckled. “That’s just the way telegrams are written. Stop is like a period. Poor Cap! I know he hates having to call off your visit. I’m sure that he’s just as disappointed as you children are.”

“Oh, but, Grandfather,” Jessie said. “If he’s having trouble getting around, that’s an even better reason for us to go. We can take care of him and help him with his work. Remember what a good nurse Violet is? And we can see that he eats right so his ankle will heal. Didn’t you say that he lives all alone?”

“Except for his pet rooster, Doodle,” Benny put in.

“Jessie’s right,” Henry said. “Your friend doesn’t know that we have the best time if

we have real things to do.”

Their grandfather listened thoughtfully.

“You see, Grandfather,” Henry said, “your friend doesn’t know us. He thinks *he’ll* have to take care of *us*. Instead, *we* can take care of *him*. And we’d really like to do it.”

Mr. Alden hesitated, still looking doubtful. “He won’t be expecting you when the boat reaches Hannibal,” he pointed out. “There’ll be no one there to meet you and take you out to his place. His cabin is at least three miles from town.”

“We’ve had worse problems than that,” Henry reminded him. “Remember the time we got snowbound in a cabin? The store was almost that far away from us.”

Violet took her grandfather’s hand and looked up into his face. “Don’t you know that we like doing things for people more than anything?” she asked. “Surely he won’t mind our coming if he knows how much we *want* to help.”

Mr. Alden smiled and caught the four of them against him in a big hug. “You win, and so does Cap. I’ll call him from shore and let him know you’re coming. And I’ll depend on you, as always, to come through with flying colors.”

Within minutes, they were waving from the deck to the tall, white-haired man who saluted them from shore.

## CHAPTER 2

### *The Double Celebration*

The boys got their unpacking done before the girls had finished. “Now can we go and explore?” Benny asked, almost jumping up and down with excitement.

“Go on ahead,” Violet told him. “We’re almost through. We’ll meet you up on deck.”

The cabins were small and shining clean, with two bunk beds in each one. Violet and Jessie unpacked the clothes they would wear on the boat and hung them in a tiny metal closet. After they finished, they went up on deck to look for Henry and Benny.

One of the ship’s officers was going up the narrow stairs in front of them. “Excuse me, sir,” Jessie said. “Have you seen two boys — a tall one and a short one — come this way?”

The man only glanced at them before looking away so his face was half hidden. Then he nodded. “I believe you’ll find the Alden boys on the top deck,” he said with no warmth in his voice.

Violet looked back as she and Jessie climbed the narrow stairs. “How did he know our last name?” she wondered aloud.

“I saw him checking our names off a list when Henry handed in our tickets,” Jessie said. “He looked at Grandfather and us very strangely then.”

“That’s the second strange thing about that Mr. Jay,” Violet said thoughtfully.

Jessie looked at the man who was disappearing into the crowd. Then she laughed. “Now *you* are being mysterious. How did you know his name? And what was the second strange thing about him?”

In spite of Jessie’s teasing, Violet didn’t even smile. “His name is written on that gold-colored pin he’s wearing,” Violet said. “And didn’t you notice how he wouldn’t look us in the face? It was almost as if he didn’t want us to see what he looked like.”

Jessie nodded. “You’re right. He’s not at all friendly.”

Then they were at the top of the stairs. The boys were at the rail looking up at a huge bridge spanning the river.

“I wonder when we’re going to leave,” Benny asked. “I want to see the paddle wheel turn.”

One of the ship’s officers turned and smiled down at him. “First we’ll have dinner and let it get dark,” he told Benny. “You want to see the fireworks, don’t you?”

“Oh, yes,” Benny said. Then he grinned at the man. “But I’m not sure which I like best, dinner or fireworks.”

Their first meal on board was served on long tables where they all could take what they wanted. Violet’s eyes widened at the huge table of beautiful food. She filled her plate with melon and strawberries, along with chicken, cheese and bread. Benny tried to take at least some of everything, but Jessie talked him into stopping when he started piling on the second layer.

When they went back up on deck, a tall man with a red mustache and glasses was standing by the rail. "Here," he said, stepping aside to make room for them. "Take my place. I can see over your heads."

Henry thanked him, then stared up at the bridge that crossed the river. "What a great bridge," he said.

The man nodded. "It's called the Eads Bridge," he said. "It was built back in the nineteenth century."

Jessie looked at him and smiled. "You must read a lot to know things like that."

He smiled. "I do," he said. "But it's my business, too. I write articles for newspapers. I'm always looking for interesting things to write about. I'm Paul Edwards. If you're the Alden children, we'll be having meals together. I saw your names on my table list."

"Look," Benny cried, pointing back toward the city. Fireworks had begun to explode above the tall buildings of St. Louis. Rockets and bright flashes rose into the sky on both sides of the river.

"I wish Grandfather could see this," Violet whispered.

Benny was leaning against Henry by the time the fireworks ended in a giant burst of color that filled the sky. The ship began to move. "I'm thirsty," Benny said, his voice suddenly sad. "And I just remembered that I forgot something important."

Jessie laughed and opened her bag. "It couldn't be this, could it?" she asked, handing him the pink cup he had kept ever since finding it in the dump when they lived in the boxcar.

He smiled, taking it from her with both hands. "Thank you, Jessie," he said softly, his voice happy again.

She hugged him. "Now what do you say we go to bed so we'll all be perky tomorrow?"

"If you say so," he said. "But I'm not at all sleepy." He grinned at himself when a wide yawn caught him right in the middle of his words.



Mr. Edwards was right. He was assigned to their table along with some other friendly people. They all agreed that bacon and eggs had never tasted better than that morning.

Up on deck, they watched a tiny tugboat moving upstream, pushing a huge barge of lumber past them. The sailors on the tug shouted and waved their caps at the children as they passed. Jessie looked down and saw Mr. Jay watching them from the deck below. The minute he saw her looking at him, he turned on his heel and walked away.

“We have a mystery man,” Jessie whispered to Henry.

“What’s the mystery about him?” Henry asked.

“His name is Mr. Jay, and no matter where we are, I see him staring at us,” she said. “But the minute I look at *him*, he gets away as fast as he can. It’s almost as if he were spying on us but didn’t want us to know it.” “He never smiles,” Violet added. “And he’s the only man on the ship who isn’t really polite to us.”

Henry frowned. “That *is* mysterious,” he said. “Be sure to point him out to me the next time you see him.”

That night after sunset, Mr. Edwards led them to the very top of the boat where the pilots worked. “See how they play those beams of light across the water in front of

us?” he asked.

“What would happen without them?” Jessie asked.

“The boat could get stuck on a sandbar,” he said, “and have to be pushed off. In the old days, outlaws often lurked along the river. Sometimes they came aboard and robbed people.”

“Like pirates?” Benny asked. “I know about pirates.”

Mr. Edwards nodded. “About the same,” he said. “Wolf Island up ahead was well known for the bad men who hid there to attack passing boats.”

“Do you write about things like this in your articles?” Jessie asked.

He nodded. “I just published a story about a half a million dollars in gold coins that’s supposed to be buried up there south of Hannibal in one of those valleys.”

“That’s where we’re going,” Benny told him, practically bouncing out of his chair.

Mr. Edwards laughed. “Stories of buried treasure never seem to die away, but nobody ever finds any gold, either.”

There was so much to see and do that the day passed quickly.

After Jessie and Violet pointed out Mr. Jay to the boys, Henry agreed that he seemed to be everywhere.

“Like outlaws along the river,” Benny said.

“Well, not exactly,” Henry laughed, but he wondered. Why would a stranger like that be spying on them and then act as if he were afraid they would recognize him?

“Have any of you ever seen this Mr. Jay anywhere before we got on board?” Henry asked.

“Never,” they agreed, shaking their heads.

Before they knew it, the ship was being towed to shore at Hannibal. Jessie sighed. “This was such fun that I hate to see it end.”

They said good-bye to Mr. Edwards and thanked him for his wonderful stories. Then, their suitcases in hand, they streamed off the boat with the other passengers.

## CHAPTER 3

### Cap and Doodle

After they left the ship, the children decided that they needed to call Cap Lambert the very first thing.

“Can I just sit some place and wait?” Benny asked. “My legs feel funny when I walk.”

“Mine do, too,” Jessie said. “Those are our ‘sea legs.’ We’ll get our land legs back right away.”

The girls and Benny sat on a bench while Henry went to use a public phone. They were barely settled before he was back. “Cap Lambert’s phone has been disconnected,” he said, frowning thoughtfully.

“Oh, that’s not good at all,” Violet said. “If he’s been injured, he needs a phone.”

“And it means that Grandfather wasn’t able to call him to say we were on the boat. He must not even know we’re coming,” Henry said. “It’s not very nice just to surprise him.”

“I know he’ll be glad when he sees us,” Benny said. “Grandfather said it was only three miles to his house. That’s not very far for us to walk.”

“You’re right, Benny,” Jessie said. “But remember, Cap Lambert has been hurt. If he isn’t expecting us, he may not be prepared. I think we should take some groceries.”

Benny jumped up. “That’s a *great* idea,” he said. “They had everything I liked on the ship except peanut butter.”

“Do you have your land legs back?” Jessie asked.

Benny nodded and raced into the store to prove it. The grocer watched them with interest as they picked out things they all liked. Along with the regular groceries, like dried milk, cocoa, spaghetti, and tomato sauce, they bought some treats — cinnamon candy, marshmallows, and, of course, peanut butter, a large jar. While the grocer added up their bill, Henry picked up a lamp and looked at it. It had a funny smell.

“That’s a kerosene lamp,” the grocer told him. “They come in mighty handy where there isn’t any electricity.” He looked at the bags of groceries and frowned. “Surely you’re not aiming to carry all this clear out to Lambert’s?”

“There are four of us,” Henry reminded him.

“No matter,” he said. “I might find you a ride with somebody going that way.”

The children looked at each other, then Jessie smiled at him. “That’s very nice of you,” she said. “But we like walking. But we need to know the way to find Owl’s Glen.”

A little later, as they set off with a suitcase in one hand and a bag of groceries in the other, Henry spoke quietly. “Look back,” he said. “Isn’t that Mr. Jay watching us there by the post office?”

Jessie glanced back, nodding. “You’re right,” she said.

“Where?” Violet asked. But by the time she turned, he had turned away and

disappeared down the side street.

“I don’t like it when people spy on us and I don’t know why,” Benny said.

“None of us do,” Jessie told him. “But we won’t have to wonder about him any more. Our boat will go back down the river to St. Louis this afternoon. He’ll be on it, and we’ll probably never see him again.”

“I do like mysteries, though,” Benny admitted.

The road to Cap Lambert’s was mostly downhill. Tall bushes and trees grew close to its side, shutting off the light. The road crossed a stream that was marked POSSUM CREEK. By the time they saw a log cabin up ahead, it was getting dark.

“Do you suppose that’s Cap’s place?” Jessie asked, stopping. The chimney of the low cabin sent a thin wisp of blue smoke into the sky. The giant pine trees cast such a deep shade that the cabin’s porch was in full darkness.

“I don’t hear any owls,” Benny said, setting down his suitcase and groceries. “But let’s stop and see anyway. My legs are tired of this road. It sure is dark here. Maybe the cabin is haunted.”

Jessie laughed. “Benny! What an imagination you have.”

As Henry unlocked the gate, a sudden screeching came from the porch. With a flash of red and a beating of wings, a brightly colored rooster flew squawking down the walk at them. Benny yipped with delight and ran to meet the rooster.

“Doodle,” Benny cried, kneeling, forgetting his fears.

The rooster stopped with his wings still spread. As he cocked his head at Benny, a gruff voice came from the porch. “Get back here, Doodle, you crazy rooster. What’s going on out there, anyway?”

Before anyone could answer, Benny had run up to the porch. “You must be Cap Lambert,” he said in a rush. “How did you get hurt, anyway? I hope you’re feeling better.”

“What is this?” the old man asked, peering at him from the shade. “Go away, whoever you are.”

The girls looked at each other with wide eyes as Henry stepped forward to join Benny. “We’re the Alden children,” he said.

The man on the porch was sitting in a high-backed chair. His bandaged leg was propped on a stool. A pair of crutches leaned against the wall. He looked terribly old in the dim light. His gray hair stuck out under his cap, and his full curling beard was gray, too. “I guess my message didn’t reach you. That’s a pity.”

“Oh, but it did!” Benny said. “We came anyway.”

The rooster had come back up the walk. He flapped up to sit on Cap’s shoulder and stare at the children.

“You must be Benny,” Cap Lambert said. “Your grandfather told me you were a talker.”



Benny nodded and turned to introduce Henry and the girls.

“You got my telegram and came on anyway?” Cap asked when he had nodded at each of the children. He was frowning a little. “What was that Alden thinking of?”

“It was our idea,” Jessie admitted. “We had to talk Grandfather into letting us come.”

“You should have saved your breath,” Cap Lambert grumbled. “I’ll have to turn you around and send you right back. There’s no one here to care for you, and it’s not safe around here anyway.”

“Oh, but we came to take care of *you*,” Violet said, telling him how they had convinced their grandfather. He listened, still frowning.

“You make a fair case,” he finally admitted. “I’ve been afraid to go out on the rough ground with this bad ankle. I called the mailman in to send that telegram for me and haven’t left the cabin. There was enough feed in the bins to take care of the chickens for a while, and the eggs can wait in the nests. My horse Pilot gets his water from a spring-fed trough and has plenty of hay. The garden and orchard just have to tend themselves.”

“We’re good with chickens,” Benny told him. “And horses, too. We learned out on Aunt Jane’s ranch.”

Cap looked at them and sighed. “There’s nothing to do tonight, I guess. You might

as well take your things inside. We'll worry about getting you back to town tomorrow. I suppose you're hungry, too."

"I'm always hungry," Benny told him, grinning.

"But you don't have to worry about food," Jessie said quickly. "All of us like to cook, and we brought things for dinner. Henry and I will fix it while Benny and Violet help you inside."

Jessie's plan worked perfectly. By the time Cap was installed in his rocking chair by the hearth, the water was boiling for spaghetti, and tomato sauce was simmering on the back of the old wood stove. Violet found a red-and-white-checkered cloth for the round oak table and went outside to look for some flowers for a centerpiece. As she picked a bunch of wild daisies at the edge of the woods, she heard a kitten mew. She stood very still, looking for it, but she never did find it.

Cap Lambert sniffed the air and winked at Benny. "I believe I'm as hungry as you are, Benny," he said. "I've been getting along on cold things I could rustle for myself."

Even though the cabin needed a good cleaning, it looked cozy and friendly with the five of them gathered around the table.

"We were all sorry to hear you were hurt," Henry said. "Tell us about your accident."

Cap Lambert's voice had lost its gruffness as they made friends. His color was better, too, after eating two heaping plates of hot spaghetti. But his voice sounded worried as he tried to explain. "That was the strangest thing ever. I know every inch of this place with my eyes shut. There never had been any deep hole out there by the garden before. But there I was with my foot down in it and my ankle twisted under me. It hurt too much to do anything but hobble back inside. By morning that ankle was as big around as my head, and I've been laid up ever since."

"Are you sure it's not broken?" Violet asked, looking at him with concern.

He nodded. "I can move my foot around. It's just too sprained and swollen to walk on. That's why I asked the mailman to send that telegram to your grandfather."

"That's not enough reason to keep us away," Henry said. "We'll have fun taking care of you and your place."

"But I had other reasons besides that to keep you from coming," Cap said, his voice getting lower and angry again. "Things just aren't the same around here anymore. I feel too far from everybody, and strange things happen that I don't understand, like a hole coming in the ground overnight."

"You must have neighbors," Jessie said.

"I used to," he said. "But just this spring my neighbor Roger Hodges got killed in a car accident. There're only his wife and children left over the hill, and I haven't seen Susie or Ned since summer came." He looked up at Jessie. "I miss those kids. Susie's about your size, I'd guess, and Ned has just turned ten."

"Like me," Violet said, rising to clear the table. Then she paused and glanced over at Doodle, perched on the back of Cap's chair. "Do you have a cat?" she asked Cap.

He looked up and shook his head. "Never in this life," he said. "Why do you ask?"

She smiled. "I was sure I heard a kitten out in your yard. I couldn't find it. But a bird flew out of that same bush. It couldn't have been a bird, could it?"

He laughed. "I'm not much on birds, but I'd say it was a strange bird that would make the noise of a cat."

## CHAPTER 4

### *Weird Noises, Strange Lights*

Benny finished the last of the milk in his pink cup and handed it to Violet. He frowned, still thinking about Cap's accident. "You might feel closer to people if you had your telephone fixed," he said.

"I had that thing disconnected myself," Cap told him crossly. "I was getting calls that didn't make any sense. That phone would ring and when I'd answer it, no one would say anything. I knew there was somebody there because I could hear breathing."

Henry and Jessie exchanged glances. Why would anyone call Cap up and then just breathe?

"I must say it's nice to have your company tonight," Cap went on. "But I'll get you into the hotel in town tomorrow. You'll be safe there until your grandfather comes."

"We've had lots of adventures alone," Benny protested.

Cap nodded, but his frown didn't go away.

Cap was no housekeeper. Although the house had electricity and running water, it was otherwise very simple. Jessie finally found a dishpan and a drying rack. When Henry came to help her and Violet with the dishes, she shook her head. "Maybe you and Violet should check things outside. The chickens will be asleep, but you might check on the horse."

Cap nodded. "I would appreciate your checking on Pilot," he said. "He's probably lonesome and would like a pan of oats."

When Violet and Henry came back from the barn, the tiny kitchen was shining. "My, you are good workers," Cap said. "Everything's done, and it's too early to go to bed." Then he chuckled. "How about you make us up a big bowl of popcorn? We can take it out on the porch and get better acquainted."

Benny clapped his hands. "I love popcorn," he said.

"So does Doodle," Cap told him. "That's why I haven't made any since I hurt my ankle. He can eat it faster than I can get it off the cob and into the pan. I'll tell you where it is, and we'll take this rascal outside until it's done."

The children had never seen popcorn still on the dry cob. Jessie shelled it while Henry heated the heavy pan on the stove. Within minutes the popcorn was exploding under the pot lid while Henry shook it to keep it from burning.

"I've never eaten popcorn this good," Violet said when they were settled on the dark porch. "Where do you get it on a cob like this?"

Cap's laugh was warm and rich. "I grow it right out there in my own garden."

"I love gardening," Jessie said. "Tomorrow I'll go see if it needs weeding."

The crickets sang in the darkness as Cap told them about his life as a riverboat pilot. The children told Cap about their friend from the boat, Paul Edwards. He nodded. "There're a million and one stories about that river to keep a writer going," he said. "I

believe I recognize that name.”

Benny, leaning against Jessie on the steps, fell asleep, dropping his bowl and spilling the last kernels of corn.

“Doodle is dead asleep for the night,” Cap laughed, “or he’d be after that corn in a minute. Let’s turn in. This night has been a rare treat for me. Who would have thought you kids could be such a big help?”

Doodle had his head under one wing on Cap’s shoulder.

“Where does Doodle sleep?” Violet asked.

Cap looked a little embarrassed. “He has a cage in my room. I’ve kept him there since I was hurt. While the foxes can’t get into the chicken yard if the gate is closed, the hawks can fly in. I was afraid he might get carried off. If I cover his cage, he doesn’t crow until I get up.”

Cap’s small cabin was cozy. The living room with its giant fireplace, Cap’s bedroom, and the kitchen formed the main part of the house. The children were to sleep on the screened porch that ran clear across the back. Jessie and Violet had narrow but comfortable cots at one end, with Henry’s and Benny’s at the other.

As they climbed into their cots, Violet asked Jessie, “Do you think he means to let us stay?”

Jessie laughed softly. “We just need to be so helpful that he can’t spare us. Let’s see who can do the most useful things.”

“And who can solve the mystery, too,” Benny said. “*Holes* just don’t dig themselves, you know.”

“You’re right,” Henry said. “Here we were hoping for one mystery and we get a whole bunch of them. Telephones don’t ring and breathe without someone else on the line, either.”

“But who would do a thing like that?” Jessie asked.

“And why would they want to?” Violet added. “Well, we need to find a whole lot of things if we’re going to help Cap.” Violet dropped her head on her pillow. “For that, I need a good night’s sleep.”

Once the lights were out, Jessie fell asleep almost instantly along with the others. When the strange sound wakened her, she sat up, startled. Violet stirred and whispered something in her sleep, but the boys slept on.

With her quilt around her shoulders, Jessie went to the window to stare out into the woods. The barn was a larger shadow against the uneven darkness beyond. She listened to the noisy darkness, the droning of insects, and the thumping of frogs. The sound that had wakened her was different, but more like a whistle than a birdcall. She had never heard a birdcall anything like that.

She was still trying to figure out what it could have been when she saw the light moving back among the trees. Could someone be out there with a flashlight? She saw it shine weakly, then disappear to a glow again a few yards away. It was always at the same height. She tiptoed to Henry’s side. He woke up at her touch and whispered, “What’s wrong?”



Jessie signaled him to silence and pointed to the woods. He sat up and stared out as she had done. When the light appeared, he caught her arm, whispering, “What is it?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Finally the light disappeared behind the barn.

“That’s weird,” Henry whispered. “I can’t figure out how you could make a light move like that unless someone was carrying it.”

“That makes it scary,” Jessie said. “Nobody has any business out there at night.”

“Maybe Cap would know what it was,” Henry said thoughtfully.

Jessie shook her head. “I don’t think we should say anything about it. He’s already too nervous. Remember how he looked when he told us about hurting himself — in a hole that hadn’t been there before? And those spooky telephone calls? If he thought any more strange things were going on, I’m sure he’d make us go stay in town.”

“You’re probably right,” Henry agreed. “Tomorrow we’ll all go explore out there. We’re sure to find some clues.”

## CHAPTER 5

### *Will-o'-the-Wisp*

When Jessie woke up again, she heard a lot of different sounds. The horse whinnied in the barn as Henry talked to it. She heard the chickens fussing in their yard, and a noise like a kitten crying “Mew” over and over. Violet was in the kitchen putting on water to make coffee for Cap.

“What a good idea,” Jessie told her. “Cap probably wants coffee first thing, just like Grandfather does. Oh, and I wanted to tell you. I heard a kitten cry, too.”

“We’ll keep watching for it,” Violet said.

Jessie nodded in agreement. “Now, what can we cook?”

“I found a ham bone in the refrigerator,” Violet told her. “I’ve cut off a bowlful of little pieces. If there are eggs out there, we could have an omelet with toast and jam.”

“Wonderful!” Jessie said. “There’s a wire basket hanging on the porch. I’ll go look for eggs.”

She found eggs in every nest, altogether a dozen plus two. Henry, coming from the barn, opened the back door for her to carry them inside.

The ham sizzling in the skillet and the rich coffee smell brought Cap swinging out of his room on his crutches. Doodle rode on his left shoulder. “I’ve never smelled anything as good as this morning,” he said, peering at the ham before he sat down. “Was there really that much meat on that bone?”

“Sure was,” Violet told him. “With enough left over for soup.” She smiled at him. As she spoke, she whipped six eggs in a bowl with a fork, then added them to the ham.

“I hope that Susie and little Ned are getting on as well as you do,” Cap said. “They have their mother, at least.”

“Don’t they ever come over to see you?” Benny asked.

“Not these past months,” Cap told him. “They must be visiting grandparents off somewhere. I miss them, too.”

The omelet had been divided up and was half eaten when Benny looked at Cap. “What was that funny light I saw out in the woods last night?” he asked.

“Lightning bugs?” Cap asked.

Jessie and Henry exchanged glances. So much for keeping the strange lights a secret from Cap!

“It didn’t dance. It flickered,” Benny said.

Cap’s face darkened, and his voice sounded doubtful. “There’s such a thing as a will-o’-the-wisp,” he said. “They say it flickers in marshy places.”

“Will-o’-the-wisp!” Violet cried. “I love that name.”

Cap shook his head, looking very grumpy. “If you’re seeing such strange lights as that, I don’t want you stepping out of this house after dark. You hear?”

The children nodded and went back to their breakfast. But Jessie caught Henry’s eye. Any mention of strange things upset Cap. She was sorry Benny had seen the light.