



# The Hildebrandt Heist

JEAN PENNINGTON



A PATCH THE PIRATE BOOK

*The Hildebrandt Heist*  
Book Two from *The Willow Valley Kids* series.

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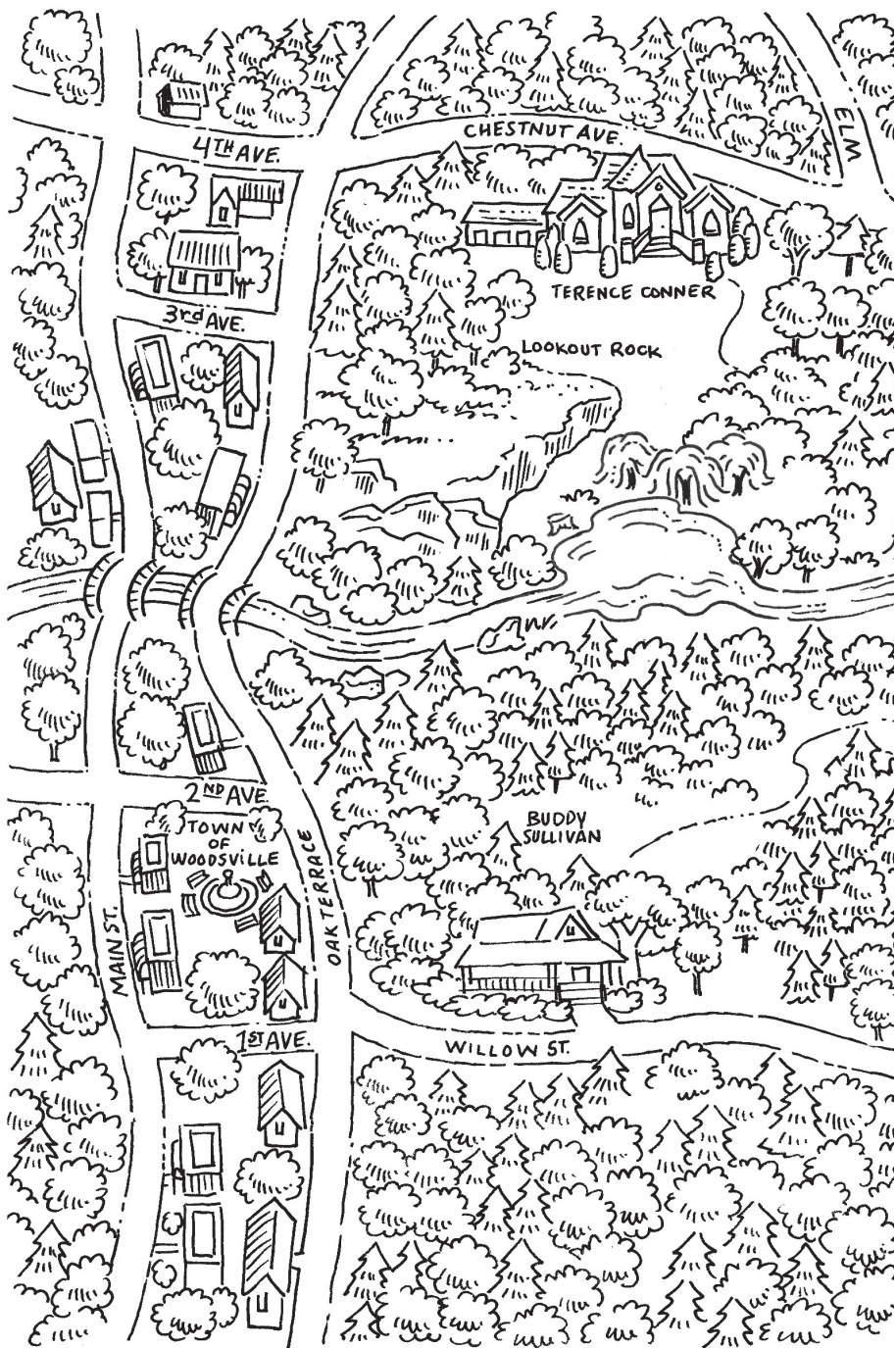
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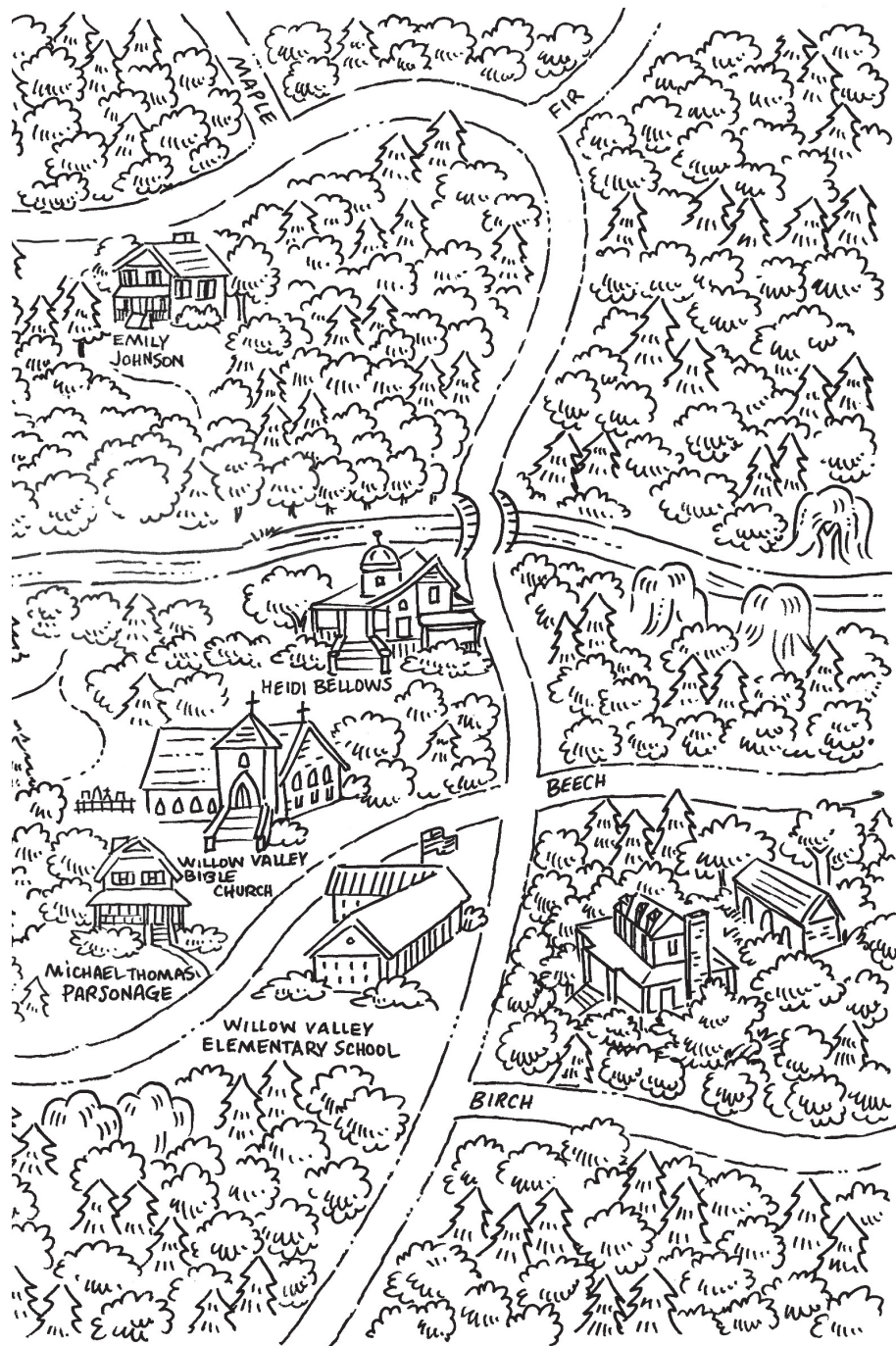
For nearly three decades, Jean Pennington has authored multiple children's stories, devotions, and plays for the international *Patch the Pirate* children's choir club.

Jean is the mother of six children and grandmother of three. She lives in South Carolina with three children still at home, two cats, and one lazy dog. God is her faithful Shepherd (Ezekiel 34:11-12).



Julie Speer has been drawing since she could first hold a pencil. She thoroughly enjoys having a career drawing illustrations for kid's books, textbooks, stickers and games, as well as *Highlights Hidden Pictures*. Julie and her husband have been blessed with four children who also love to draw! Julie and her family live in Greenville, South Carolina.





*To my “crowns”:*

*Olin, Adger, Penni—and all the littles yet to come (Proverbs 17:6)*

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# **Public Notice**

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THE COUNTY PROBATE OFFICE  
IS SEEKING ANY LIVING RELATION OF

**CAMELLIA VESPER HILDEBRANDT**

(BORN OCTOBER 7, 1925),

DAUGHTER OF

**OLIVER AND PRISCILLA HILDEBRANDT.**

IF NO RELATED PERSONS CONTACT THE  
COUNTY PROBATE OFFICE IN DUE TIME,

ON JUNE 15, AT 12:00 NOON,

THE ESTATE OF

**CAMELLIA VESPER HILDEBRANDT**

AND ALL BELONGINGS ATTACHED TO IT  
WILL BECOME THE PROPERTY OF THE STATE,  
TO BE SOLD OR DESTROYED.



# Part one: Newcomers



A torn, weather-stained paper flapped fitfully in the humid breeze, tugging at the staple that pinned it to the trunk of an ancient oak tree. Overhead the old branches groaned against the wind, twisting and leaning, burdened with their load of summer leaves.

At last the paper broke free and rode the wind high into the air. Floating and spinning above the treetops, it crossed the road and dipped down over a beautiful valley tucked between steep hillsides. There the gust of wind began to lose its breath. The paper glided low over the stream where a fringe of long grass reached up to catch it, tucking it safely at the base of a large stone beneath a clump of willow trees.

At the edge of the wind-rippled pond sat a girl with a book. She was dressed for Saturday in a faded orange t-shirt from last year's church camp. A thick honey-colored braid hung from the back of her baseball cap, fastened at the end with a piece of red and green Christmas ribbon. It was summertime (she had reasoned to herself that morning), and matching clothes with hair ribbon just wasn't really that important.

What *was* important, however, was figuring out the mystery in the book she was reading.

"I think the janitor did it, Heidi—I'm sure of it!" she declared to her friend. Heidi Bellows—who clearly had taken a great deal more thought about her appearance—hugged her knees and shook her head, sending her curly black hair tumbling around her shoulders.

"It can't be the janitor," she argued. "He was in the basement getting his mop and bucket."

The girl with the braid leaned forward with an evil grin. "He just *said* he was going to the basement!" she exclaimed dramatically. "But it doesn't say that's what he *did*. See—you have to pay attention to every single tiny detail. That's why I *love* these books!"

"Emily Johnson, you're driving me crazy with these mysteries!" said Heidi. "I don't know how you can read those all day long."

"There's nothing else to do around here," Emily replied, tossing her braid. "Woodsville has to be the most boring place in the world—nothing ever happens here." She picked a long blade of grass and put it in her book to mark her place. "It's about time for

the boys to get here,” she said, reaching for the cloth book bag on the ground next to her.

“The boys” Emily referred to included Michael Thomas who was son of the pastor of Willow Valley Bible Church, Buddy Sullivan who could invent and build almost anything, and Terence Conner, the president of their club because he was—very nearly—a walking computer.

Heidi squinted doubtfully at the sky. “I hope we can have our meeting before it starts raining,” she said. “Those clouds look serious.”

As Emily leaned her head back to look up, something wet and slimy smacked into her cheek. A juicy, purple earthworm fell onto her knee.

She jumped up and spun around, shrieking loudly. “Michael Thomas, I’m going to *kill you!*”

Michael emerged from the bushes, carrying a fishing rod and a container of bait. “Sorry, Em—I was aiming for the rock next to you, I promise!” he said, trying not to laugh. Behind him two boys were doubled over in glee.

“You got her right in the face!” gasped Buddy. “Emily, that was—that was incredible!”

“But not funny at all,” Terence added, managing to straighten his face into its usual serious expression behind his dark-rimmed glasses. “That was very unfortunate. And Michael, you ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I *am* ashamed,” said Michael, gulping down a chuckle. “I’m extremely ashamed.” Leaning on his fishing pole, Michael got down on one knee in the grass.

“Emily Johnson, will you please forgive me for . . . for flinging a worm in your f-face?” He managed to look sincere for a short two seconds before all three boys erupted once more into hilarious laughter.

Emily wiped at her cheek with the back of her hand and glared at them. “All three of you are disgusting!” she declared. “Heidi and I came here expecting a decent, friendly meeting; and all you can do is throw worms and laugh like idiots. Well, we’re going home! Come on, Heidi.”

“Wait, no! ” Michael said, standing up. “Really—I’m sorry, Emily. I never thought the worm would hit you—especially not in the face.”

“We’ll behave now,” Buddy promised.

Terence reached into his pocket. “Here, you can have my handkerchief for your face—it’s clean. And just for the record, Buddy and I had absolutely *nothing* to do with that!” He handed the neatly folded square to Emily.

Emily scrubbed her cheek with the handkerchief, still frowning fiercely. “You owe me ice cream,” she finally said to Michael. “At that new place on Main Street.”

“Deal!” promised Michael. “I’ll buy you anything you want—a banana split, hot fudge sundae—you name it . . . anytime you say. Now do you forgive me?”

Emily handed the wadded handkerchief back to Terence and shook her head. “Not until I’ve eaten the ice cream,” she answered. “But I guess we’ll stay for the meeting.”

Michael set his fishing gear down and sprawled in the grass next to the pond. Buddy leaned against a low branch of one of the willow trees, and the two girls settled nearby. Terence squat-

ted down next to a large stone. Pulling a gavel out of his back pocket, he rapped it on the rock.

“Here, here!” he said. “The meeting of the Willow Valley kids is now called to order.”

“All present and accounted for,” Michael announced, with a lopsided grin. “What news do you have for us, Terence?”

“Any mysteries to solve?” asked Emily eagerly.

Terence unfolded a piece of paper and adjusted his glasses.

“First off I wanted to remind you about the bug collection project we’ll have when school starts back up in a couple months,” Terence told them. “If we start collecting bugs during the summer, we won’t have to worry about it later.”

“I hate bugs!” said Heidi, scrunching up her nose. “But it makes sense to catch them now while they are everywhere.”

“Good thinking, Terence,” Buddy said. “Thanks to you, maybe I’ll actually turn something in on time for once! Hey, and maybe I can even build an automated bug trap, Heidi—so you don’t even have to go looking for bugs. They’ll come to you!”

“That’s easy,” remarked Emily. “Just leave your half-eaten lunch under your bed for a couple weeks. Believe me, the bugs will come!”

“Anything else, Terence?” asked Michael, glancing hopefully toward his fishing pole.

Terence cleared his throat. “No mysteries right now—but I was going to tell you about the Big Apple Ice Cream shop on Main Street. Obviously you girls know about it already. However I happen to have some coupons. They’re giving away free ice cream because of the grand opening this week.”

“Don’t give Michael the coupons,” Emily said, crossing her arms. “He has to *buy* my ice cream.”

Just then, a swirling breeze lifted the hanging strands of the willow tree; and a smattering of raindrops invaded the meeting.

“Well that was short!” said Heidi quickly getting up.

“So much for fishing!” Michael said.

Emily grabbed her book bag. “How about going to get that ice cream right now?” she suggested. “We can finish our meeting there.”

“Wait, you dropped something,” said Terence. Bending down, he picked up a tattered paper and handed it to Emily.

“That’s not mine,” Emily said, pausing to look at it. “It’s a . . . public notice?” She frowned.

Another gust of wind showered them with rain. “We need to run for it!” Michael said.

“What we need is our own club house!” exclaimed Buddy, leaping to his feet as thunder shook the ground.

Emily stuffed the paper in her bag, and the five children took off full speed through the trees toward Lookout Rock and the path that led up out of the valley to Main Street.

## 2

The children managed to outrun the worst of the rain—and just in time. As soon as the door of the ice cream shop jangled closed behind them, the skies let loose and sheets of summer rain came pouring down into the street outside.

“That was close!” gasped Heidi, peering out through the storefront windows.

Buddy was already at the counter, gazing at the display of ice cream flavors and toppings behind the glass.

“Welcome to Big Apple Ice Cream, said a dark haired woman in an apron. “My name’s Stella. What can I getch-ya?” She wore bright red lipstick and big hoop earrings, and her New York accent was an unusual sound for the folks in small-town Woodsville. Next to her, a bald man with big muscles and tattoos on his arms reached for an ice cream scoop.

“I’ll have one scoop of everything,” said Buddy, his eyes shining.

“One scoop of everything, eh?” said Stella, chomping on her gum. “Did-ja hear that, Harry? Better get scooping! All right, young man. That’ll be . . . let’s see, about forty-two dollars and fifteen cents. Sure that’s what-chya want?”

“We have coupons,” Buddy told her confidently.



"Buddy, the coupon is for one scoop in a cone," said Terence, coming up next to him.

"Oh," Buddy said, clearly disappointed. "Well, in that case, I need a few minutes to decide."

Just then the bells on the door jangled again, as a man with a hooded jacket pushed into the shop bringing a warm gust of rainy wind with him. A shaggy beard covered the bottom half of his face, and his loose pants looked shabby with holes ripped in the knees.

"You coming in here for ice cream?" asked the bald man whose name was Harry.



“Just getting out of the rain,” the man replied, without looking up. He slumped into a chair by the door and turned toward the window, the hood of his jacket hiding his face.

Harry’s eyes held a look of disgust. “Getting a job might help,” he muttered, his voice tinged with the same accent as Stella’s.

Stella leaned toward the children. “Keep your eye on that fella, kids. He’s been hanging around here on Main Street and asking folks for handouts. Just a bum, that’s all—and not too good for business, if you know what I mean!”

While the boys ordered their ice cream, Emily and Heidi turned to look at the man in the corner. He ignored them all, slouching low in his seat and leaning sideways against the wall.

“I wonder where he came from and why he doesn’t have a place to live,” Heidi whispered. “I feel bad for him. I wonder if he’s hungry.”

Emily gripped her book bag tightly. Her imagination was skipping along in high speed as she considered all the possibilities. He could be a murderer running from justice! Or an undercover spy from a foreign country . . .

“Your turn, Emily,” Michael said, interrupting her wild thoughts. “Order whatever you want—I’m paying, remember?”

By the time all the ice cream was served up and handed out, the fierce rainstorm had passed and sunshine was breaking through the clouds. The mysterious man in the corner left the shop without a word, and the children crowded noisily around a table to try out their New York-flavored treats.

“It tastes just the same as regular,” Michael declared, shrugging his shoulders.

“No,” said Buddy, closing his eyes and savoring his chocolate fudge and marshmallow cone. “It’s truly amazing—the best I’ve ever had! I can practically taste the Empire State Building.”

Heidi giggled and dipped her spoon into her whipped cream topping. “So, is our Willow Valley Club meeting over, Terence?”

“I don’t have anything else to talk about,” he replied. “What about the rest of you?”

Suddenly Emily remembered the paper Terence picked up under the willow trees.

“Wait—I have something,” she said, pulling it out of her bag and smoothing it on the table in front of her.

“What does it say?” Buddy wanted to know. Emily leaned forward and read it out loud.

#### PUBLIC NOTICE

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LIVING RELATION OF CAMELLIA VESPER HILDEBRANDT  
(BORN OCTOBER 7, 1925), DAUGHTER OF OLIVER AND  
PRISCILLA HILDEBRANDT. IF NO RELATED PERSONS  
CONTACT THE COUNTY PROBATE OFFICE IN DUE TIME,  
ON JUNE 15, AT 12:00 NOON, THE ESTATE OF  
CAMELLIA VESPER HILDEBRANDT AND  
ALL BELONGINGS ATTACHED TO IT WILL BECOME  
THE PROPERTY OF THE STATE,  
TO BE SOLD OR DESTROYED.

“Camellia Vesper Hildebrandt?” Heidi repeated. “Who in the world is that?”

“Well,” answered Terence. “For one thing, she’s dead—otherwise the probate office wouldn’t be looking for her relatives. And for another thing, she was really old.”

Michael drummed his fingers on the napkin dispenser. "Hildebrandt . . . that name sounds familiar."

Buddy, whose mouth was very full of chocolate fudge marshmallow ice cream, suddenly started mumbling loudly and waving his hands.

"Eye-ooooh!" he said. He gulped and wiped his mouth. "By school—that old boarded-up house down the road from the school—that's the Hildebrandt property."

"I've never seen it," said Heidi.

"It's way back in the woods," Buddy told them. "No one's lived there in forever. I saw it once when my mom pulled in the driveway to turn around."

"I want to see it," Emily said eagerly. Her eyes grew big. "It sounds . . . mysterious!"

Just then Stella came over with a cloth in her hand. "Do you kids need anything else?" she asked, wiping off the table next to theirs.

"No ma'am," Terence answered.

"Well, I'm not tryin' ta be rude or anything," she told them. "But I overheard you talking about some old abandoned house down by the school. I just have to tell you, because I'm a nice person, that no kids should be going around old abandoned places. It's just not safe, you know? And some of those places . . ." her voice trailed away, and she shook her head. "Some of them places are just . . . I don't know . . . they have a bad feeling, you know?"

The bells on the door jangled as a man entered the shop. He looked very much like Stella, and Emily wondered if they were brother and sister.

"Stella!" he exclaimed. "I got the job at the cleaners!"

“Cool it, Pete, we have customers,” she answered, but she was smiling. “Now I can get my uniform laundered for free, true?”

The two of them continued to talk as they went into the back room of the shop together, leaving the children alone at the table.

“She was nice,” said Heidi. “I guess abandoned houses can be creepy, like she said.”

Emily shrugged. “She’s just suspicious because she’s from New York City where there is a lot of crime. *I’m* not scared to go there—and that’s exactly what I plan to do.”

By now the ice cream was gone and the sun was sparkling on the wet sidewalk outside. Michael stood up. “Is the meeting over?” he asked Terence. “I think I hear the fish in Willow Valley calling my name.”

As the children walked outside, Michael counted out the dollar bills left over from the money he used to pay for Emily’s banana split. Looking up, he caught sight of the man in the hooded jacket sitting on a bench along the street. The man held a cardboard sign that said “Need help. Will work for food.” He was looking straight at Michael and the money Michael held in his hand.

Michael paused. Should he feel sorry for the man—or just ignore him? “Getting a job would help,” he remembered Harry saying. *He’s right*, Michael thought. *Why should I give my money to someone who won’t even get a job?* Shoving his money into his pocket, he turned away to follow the others.



For the second time that day, Michael walked down the steep path that led from his back yard into the valley behind his house. The path, like all the paths in Willow Valley, was just a narrow foot trail worn down to dirt by the many times he and his friends had traveled along it on their way to and from his house. Winding down and down the hillside, it twisted around the trunks of tall trees, thick bushes of holly and magnolia, and bare shelves of rock that jutted out where the dirt had eroded away.

Toward the bottom of the valley, the ground flattened out into a broad area of long grass, through which a wide and shallow stream cheerfully rushed along toward the pond. Michael followed the trail through the grass to where the children had met earlier. His fishing rod and bait were where he had left them under one of the three willow trees that draped long branches over the water. This trio of large old willow trees was responsible for the name given to the small valley.

The rainstorm of that morning had cleared the sky of clouds, and the midday sun shone down hotly. Michael pulled off his shoes and plunged his bare feet into the clear water where the stream emptied into the pond. He guessed that the fish were probably settled into the bottom of the deepest part, hiding from the summer heat. But as all weekend fishermen know, *catching* fish is not the main goal of going fishing.

Carrying his fishing rod and bait, Michael waded along the shore to his favorite spot, a large flat rock completely shaded by trees. Here he settled, leaning back against a tree trunk, his feet dangling in the water and his fishing rod in his hand. High overhead a red-tail hawk circled, and cicadas buzzed on and off in the pine trees. It was a perfect summer afternoon.

Suddenly, with the cry of a banshee, a large and rather clumsy form burst out of the bushes and plunged straight into the water next to the rock on which Michael was sitting. It was Buddy wearing his blue and white striped swimming trunks. With a tremendous splash, he plopped down so the water came nearly up to his chin and grinned at Michael.

“Aaaaahh! Now *that’s* what I’m talking about!” he said. “I’ve been looking forward to this moment ever since I finished the last drip of my chocolate fudge marshmallow ice cream cone!”

“Buddy, you’re scaring the fish away!” said Michael.

“Aw, the fish are in the bottom,” Buddy replied, splashing water into his hair. “This feels great—you should jump in!”

Michael slowly reeled in his line and leaned his fishing rod against the tree behind him.

“There’s no point in trying to fish with you around,” he said. “Guess I’ll hunt for worms.” Pulling an old spoon out of his tackle box, he began digging in the mud next to the pond, hoping to find worms to add to his bait collection.

“We should look for bugs like Terence said,” Buddy remarked, rolling over onto his stomach in the water. “Hey, here’s a big dead grasshopper.”

“That’s no good,” Michael told him. “We’re supposed to catch the bugs alive and stick them in the freezer so they’ll be fresh.”

Buddy splashed the dead grasshopper away. “I bet there’s all kinds of interesting bugs over at the Hildebrandt property,” he said. “No one ever goes over there.”

“I guarantee Emily will be going there soon,” Michael said. “She and Heidi are probably there right now!”

“We should sneak over and scare the daylights out of them,” Buddy told him. A grin rearranged his summer freckles as the idea took hold.

Michael stopped digging to think about it. “That would teach them not to poke around where they shouldn’t go,” he said. “It would be really easy to scare them, especially after what the lady said at the ice cream shop. Do you really think Emily and Heidi are over there right now?”

“Without a doubt,” answered Buddy confidently, hauling himself out of the water onto the big rock. “You know how Emily is about mysteries.”

It took just a moment longer for Buddy and Michael to decide to act on their idea. Buddy pulled on his t-shirt and shoes.

Soon the two of them were gliding quickly through the trees like wolves on the hunt, moving upstream through the heart of Willow Valley.

“We’ll cut up to the road next to Heidi’s house,” Michael told Buddy as they raced along. Soon the path became steep and rugged, zig-zagging up the hillside under the trees. They traveled along the tall stone wall surrounding Heidi’s back yard and continued on until they came out onto the road in front of her house.

“This way,” said Michael, turning right. They passed several houses and then crossed the road.

“Home sweet home,” Buddy remarked. From the street the Hildebrandt property looked like any other patch of woods—filled with bushes, weeds, and towering trees. But two old brick posts marked the end of a driveway that disappeared around a curve. Summer cicadas buzzed, and a black crow cawed loudly from a tall pine tree.

“Let’s go,” said Michael, grinning.

The boys crept stealthily from bush to bush along the driveway, looking for any sign of the girls. Soon the front of the Hildebrandt house loomed into view behind overgrown shrubs, its brick walls half covered with ivy.

“Wow—look how big it is!” breathed Buddy.

Wide leaf-littered steps rose between pillars to a porch that stretched across the front of the house. Plywood covered the first floor windows, and boards crisscrossed the carved door, guarding the colored shards of the glass that had adorned it. From the second floor, tall old windows with watery panes peered down at them.



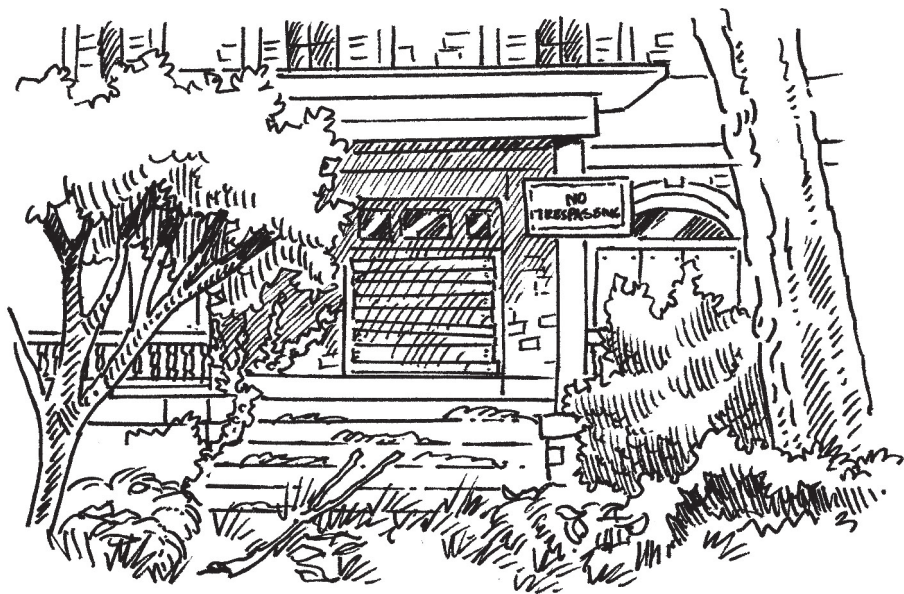
A group of blue jays suddenly erupted into raucous cries that ripped through the thick quiet of the hot afternoon. Buddy and Michael froze where they were, crouching behind the trunk of a huge oak tree. The girls were nowhere to be seen, and suddenly it felt as though Buddy and Michael were the ones being frightened by the old abandoned house.

“NO TRESPASSING!” The metal sign shouted from the doorpost in bold letters.

“Maybe we should go back,” said Buddy.

“Not yet,” said Michael. “Let’s see if the girls are around back.”

Summoning their courage, the boys crept along the side of the house, climbing over fallen branches and bypassing a pile of old tires. A strong uneasiness grew in both of them as they moved further from the road; but even so, they became more curious with every step.



“Wow!” Buddy said in a hushed voice. “This place is huge!”

From the back, the Hildebrandt house looked even bigger, one story higher than the front because of the downhill slant of the ground. Layers of square rooms jutted out, sheltering corner porches. The first-floor windows and doors were boarded up as they had been on the front of the house. But the windows on the second and third floors were uncovered, and offered dim glimpses of high ceilings and the dark shapes of furniture hiding inside.

“This is a mansion!” said Michael. “And look—there’s even a carriage house.” He pointed to a low brick building hidden even further back in the trees behind the house, with three large doors across its front.

Suddenly Michael thought he saw something move in one of the windows high up at the top of the house. He froze and stared at the window. Had it just been a reflection of a bird flitting by—or had he seen something move inside the house?

“What?” whispered Buddy.

“I thought I saw something,” Michael told him. “Up there in that small window at the top.”

Buddy gripped Michael’s arm.

“Did you really see something, or are you just trying to scare me?” he asked, his voice sounding trembly.

Just then a deep noise began to swell out of nowhere and yet was coming from everywhere at once, growing louder with each second. It vibrated around and through them like a great voice, until the woods seemed to shimmer with the sound.

This was too much for Michael and Buddy. Without a word they turned and ran full speed back toward the road. Buddy

chose the flat open path of the driveway. Michael, however, made a beeline through the overgrown yard, leaping over low bushes and careening through the trees.

Suddenly something in the long grass grabbed at his ankles, biting into his bare legs and throwing him to the ground.

“AAHHH!” he yelled. “Buddy, help me!” He tried to pull away, but the more he struggled, the greater his pain became. Looking down, he saw his legs tangled in several strands of barbed wire that had been hidden by the tall weeds.

“Buddy!” he shouted. He caught a fleeting glimpse of Buddy’s blue and white swimming trunks disappearing through the trees.

Michael pulled at the snarl of sharp wire wrapped around his legs, but soon realized he was powerless to free himself. Every movement seemed to press the barbs more deeply into his skin.

He leaned back into the grass, trying not to cry. In his panic, each minute seemed an hour. How long would he be trapped here? “Buddy!” he hollered again. “Help!”

Something was moving toward him through the trees. Michael raised himself up on his arms, half-expecting to see a monster-creature coming from the house to finish him off. Instead, he saw a tall bearded man with a hooded jacket making his way slowly in Michael’s direction.

Another wave of panic flooded Michael’s chest. He had never been so afraid in his whole life.