

The Fox House Secret

A Birchwood Mystery



It was almost startling how many people in town did believe that the old Fox House was haunted. In an age where men have walked on the moon and people routinely fly around the world, most of humanity would scoff and smile at such a notion. Still, one might be hard pressed to find a citizen of the town of Birchwood, Maine (population 8,136) who would be willing to spend a night there. This is why the place now interested Jimmy Bradford.

Jimmy Bradford was a young boy who attended the local middle school. He was a bit rotund in figure but had a mind as sharp as a tack. He had been the founder and the leader of the school's puzzle club, back when there was a puzzle club.

The idea of the club was to write and solve mysteries, solving them being the primary goal. And that had been the real trouble. The only thing tougher than solving a good mystery was writing one. Jimmy had come up with a few good ones, but the other members of the club, including Jimmy's best friends, Tawnya Hershey and Donny Jimenez, had quickly run out of ideas. Lacking purpose, the club had broken up, which left Jimmy puzzling away on how to find a new puzzle.

And so, the latest incident which hit the local paper immediately caught Jimmy's eye:

Another Fox House Incident

For years, a large amount of people in town have been convinced that the old Fox House on the outskirts of town is haunted. Yesterday, a new incident occurred to add some fuel to the ghost house fire.

Two homeless men drifted into town and decided that the abandoned Fox House would be the perfect haven against the elements. They "broke into" the house, which is not really locked, and laid their bedrolls down on the littered living room floor in order to get a good night's sleep. It should be pointed out that the men had first gone into town to the local liquor store and acquired a bottle of whiskey to help "keep them warm" through the night.

The Fox House was, in its day, a grand place. It stands four floors high with over twenty-four rooms. A grand staircase curls down from the second floor to the expansive living room on the first floor. The last owner, William Fox, took his own life many years ago, and the place has lain abandoned ever since. Why? It's a huge, cumbersome "white elephant" of a place that would cost more in upkeep than it is worth. Built well over a century ago by a family of fabulously rich eccentrics who saw themselves as "Maine aristocracy," it now stands as a ruin and an eye sore. Even the land it sits on is worthless, too far away from anywhere practical to be worth anything, and that is why it has sat, untouched, unmolested, after all of the valuables had been removed, to this very day. The Fox family themselves are not remembered fondly. They were said to be a snobby, churlish bunch who thought of themselves as better than anyone else. There was also rumored to be a strain of madness which ran through the family, infecting each and every member.

After William's death, the place was taken over by the town. Since there were no heirs to be found, the valuables were auctioned off. The house itself was put up for sale, but no one has ever expressed any interest. Aside from the obvious liabilities of the property, there were also the stories.

It is largely maintained that the place is haunted. People have complained of shrieks and mournful cries that come from the residence at night. Others who have tried to examine or study the house have left complaining of head-aches, nervous conditions, and the horrible sense of something "wrong" with the place. Worthless in every other way, the place has become a favored, popular legend. What town wouldn't want to sport a haunted house?

Which brings us to our two homeless gentlemen. According to them, after consuming their bottle of whiskey, they threw some trash in the fireplace and lit a fire to keep warm. They then lay down and went to sleep. Sometime in the night (neither man carries a watch) they were awakened by a shriek that they described as male which sounded like someone in excruciating agony. Sitting up, they saw before them the corpse of an unknown victim, torn open by what they described as claw marks. The next instant, they heard something (not someone, "something" they insist) plodding down the hall. They describe the sound of claws scratching along the walls as well as a gibbering sound that may or may not have been laughter. There was moonlight coming in from the window, and in it they beheld the shadow of some humpbacked person or thing moving down the hallway toward their room.

The two men could stand no more and fled. They spent the night out in the town park and when they were picked up for vagrancy by the sheriff, they told their tale. The police went out to the house but found no dead body, no blood, no hunchbacked thing. All they did find was the remains of some burnt trash in the fireplace, two bedrolls, and an empty whisky bottle.

Whether evil spirits came out of that house last night or out of a bottle is anybody's guess. Meanwhile, another chapter has been added to the mysterious Fox House.

Jimmy had been reading the article aloud. He was sitting in an overstuffed chair in the clubhouse. The clubhouse was an abandoned one room log cabin that Jimmy and his friends had found out in the woods the previous summer. They had immediately claimed it as their headquarters and had fixed it up reasonably, supplying it with the overstuffed chair, a couch, and a table with three chairs they had gotten cheap at a garage sale.

Concluding the article, Jimmy looked up at his friends.

"Well, what do we think?"

Tawnya sat on the couch her long legs splayed over the arm. She was a tall, athletic girl who played center for the girls' basketball team at school.

"Kinda obvious," she shrugged, not looking up from the book she was leafing through, *The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot*, book two of the friends' favorite book series. "They got a snoot full of whiskey and hallucinated the whole thing."

“A “snoot full?” asked Donny. He was a small, studious boy who loved to read. He had just set aside his copy of *Great Expectations* in order to take a comic book break but had still heard every word that Jimmy had read.

“That’s what my dad says about people who are drunk.”

“Possible, but not likely,” responded Jimmy. “Legally distilled spirits should not cause hallucinations, and even if so, why would both men hallucinate the same thing?”

“Then they made it up,” suggested Donny.

“To what purpose?” Jimmy persisted. “It wouldn’t gain them anything.”

“They’re *homeless* guys, drifters,” insisted Tanya. “Many of them are mentally ill. They probably see things like that all the time.”

“Their psychosis might even feed off one another,” offered Donny.

“Very likely,” admitted Jimmy. “Still, as investigators, this is something we should look into.”

“We’re investigators now?” asked Tawnya, looking up from her book. Donny also raised his head.

Jimmy grinned, “Why not? Our puzzle club was a bust; I think it’s time to turn our energies to being investigators.”

“What’s to investigate in Birchwood, Maine?” asked Donny.

“To start with, the old Fox House. Maybe you’re right, maybe there’s nothing to it. But as investigators, that will be our first job to determine. I believe we can certainly do a more thorough job than the local authorities or the press. They don’t take ghost stories seriously.”

“And we do?” frowned Tawnya.

“Being kids, and on school break, we have more open-minded curiosity and opportunity to investigate this.”

“You mean we have time on our hands,” smiled Donny.

“If you want to put it that way,” scowled Jimmy. “The newspaper did not give a very detailed history of the Fox House, and they overlooked one curious error.”

“What’s that?”

“On the night of the supposed incident, there was no moon, and the sky was overcast, ruling out starlight. The newspaper reports the two men having claimed,” Jimmy picked the newspaper back up and reread, “‘There was moonlight coming in from the window, and in it they beheld the shadow of some humpbacked person or thing moving down the hallway toward their room.’ Since there couldn’t have been moonlight, if these men did see a shadow, it must have been cast by some alternate light source.”

“Which goes right along with my idea that they dreamed the whole thing up,” concluded Tawnya.

“Or made it up,” added Donny.

“Still worth investigating,” persisted Jimmy. “I propose that we begin at the library where we can look up and document all the news stories and history of the Fox House, the Fox family, and the reports of so-called ghosts. After that, we will make a visit to the house itself in the daylight, get a good look at it. Then, we will return at night.”

“Night?” asked Tawnya, her eyes widening as, for the first time, she started taking this business seriously. “We’re gonna go into that spooky old place at night?”

“It’s at night when all of the phenomena have been reported,” explained Jimmy. “If we want to see a ghost, we’ll have to investigate at night.”

“Who says we want to see a ghost?”

“If your theory is correct, and it’s all imaginary, we won’t. But if we do, our job will be to either disprove it or record it in some way. I’ll bring my video camera. We will film and, if possible, interview the ghost or ghosts.”

“We’re going to interview a ghost?” cried Tanya.

“If we’re lucky.”

“Actually, I’m going to be at the library pretty much all day tomorrow,” offered Donny, starting to get into the idea. “You know my mom works there, and she wanted me to help her move some stuff into storage. I could look up the Fox House when I’m done.”

“Perfect!” beamed Jimmy. “And while you’re doing that, Tawnya and I can ride our bikes to the place and have a look around.

“Isn’t that trespassing?” asked Tawnya.

“Technically, but no one actually owns the house now, and to be honest, nobody cares.”

* * *

The next afternoon, while Donny was at the library, Jimmy and Tawnya pedaled their bikes up the long hill towards the Fox House. Halfway up they dismounted and started walking the bikes.

“Whew,” gasped Jimmy, wiping sweat from his brow. He was a bit stocky and not as athletic as Tawnya. “At least the ride home will be easy.”

“Yeah, and quick,” offered Tawnya, “in case we need to make a fast getaway.”

“No phenomena have ever been observed in the daytime,” Jimmy reminded her, “so there shouldn’t be any need for a ‘fast getaway.’ I brought the video camera just in case, but we’re not likely to see anything unusual. We’re just here to scout out the setting for our mystery.”

“‘Setting for our mystery?’ You planning on writing a novel?”

“Maybe, or maybe just a story for the Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine.”

All at once, the pair rounded a curve of thick fir trees and the Fox House suddenly appeared. Just as the paper had described, it stood four stories high. It was white or had been white once upon a time. Most of the paint had peeled and faded. Some of it still clung to the structure, curled, cracked remnants on rotted shingles. Green moss and blue lichen grew out of the chinks and cracks. The windows were shuttered, their black paint holding up a bit better than the white, but still cracked and flaking. There were gables on the top floor and even a ‘widow’s watch,’ popular in old Maine homes. The place looked mournful and not at all welcoming. Quite the opposite. Even in the bright summer sunshine it appeared to have a heavy gloom about it. It looked like some place where nothing good had ever occurred or was likely to ever occur.

“Whoa!” gulped Tanya. “That place is huge!”

“According to the paper, it has over twenty-four rooms, which I think qualifies it as a mansion.”

“Like the Haunted Mansion at Disneyland?”

“Yeah, like that.”

The two stood and stared at the structure for a long moment.

“Well, we didn’t ride up this hill for nothing,” Tawnya finally said. “Let’s try the door.”

The two kicked down their kickstands and stood their bikes on the edge of the road against the tall, un-mowed, weed-ridden yard of the house. A cobblestone walkway, completely overgrown with weeds, lead up to the porch, dominated by huge pillars that stretched the height of the house. Double doors with brass handles, green and worn with age stood between the pillars. Three stone steps gave access to the porch which was clapboard gray pocked symmetrically with rusted nail heads.

“This place looks like something out of *Gone with the Wind*,” commented Tawnya.

“I think that was the point. The Foxes considered themselves to be aristocracy.”

“Where did they get all their money?”

Jimmy shrugged. “We’ll have to wait for Donny’s report.”

“Well,” said Tawnya with resignation. Reaching out, she grasped one of the brass handles and tugged.

It resisted at first, but then, with a wrench of warped wood, came loose and pulled open. The hinges gave out a long, protesting screech.

The two walked in.

Jimmy frowned.

“We should’ve brought flashlights. I didn’t think it would be this dark.”

Because the windows were shuttered, the interior of the house was dim. It was not completely dark; most of the shutters were broken, worn, and missing slats. The result was haphazard slants of light, crisscrossing crazily at bizarre angles, filled with floating dust motes. They appeared to be in a foyer, a small entrance room where guests could be greeted. There were doors to the left and right and straight ahead an open double doorway that let into an expansive room. The two walked forward into the large room. Due to its size and number of windows, it was easier to see here. On one wall was a massive fireplace. The back of the room was dominated by a grand staircase that curled down from an upper floor. The red carpet was stained and frayed with age. The bannister, which still looked somewhat magnificent in structure, leaned askew. Jimmy walked up and grasped it. It swayed back and forth in his hand.

“Dry rot,” he stated.

Tawnya looked about on the floor. It was littered with dirt, flakes of paint that had fallen over the years from the ceiling, and what she uncomfortably supposed to be rat dung. A spot near the fireplace looked to have been recently cleared.

“This must be where the two homeless men put down for the night,” she commented.

“Yes,” agreed Jimmy, coming up beside her. “And the fireplace.” He walked up to it and sniffed. “It’s been used recently.”

“Well, that accounts for our two friends.”

“So...” Jimmy backed up. “That must be the hallway the hunchbacked thing was coming down,” he observed, pointing to a hallway that led into darkness to the right of the fireplace. “And that window,” He crossed to the opposite side of the fireplace where a window with a broken shutter allowed in a large slant of sunlight. “was where the alleged moonlight came from to cast the shadow.”

“Only there was no moon,” supplied Tawnya. “Could the shadow have been cast by the fire?”

“Unlikely,” answered Jimmy. “The men had been asleep for a while, and no one was tending the fire. Let’s check the hallway.”

This proved disappointing. The hall had no windows and was very dark. Also, there were several footprints in the dust and debris, which could have been made by the homeless men or the police who later came to investigate.

“It’s... cold in this hallway,” whispered Tawnya. She was dressed in a tee shirt, and now she rubbed her bare arms.

“Old houses are often drafty,” answered Jimmy, who was straining his eyes down the dark hall.

“But... it’s hot outside,” countered Tawnya, “and... it’s *really* cold!”

Jimmy turned to pay attention to his friend, and in so doing suddenly came to the realization that she was right. It was freezing.

“Let’s go back to the main room.”

The two were more than happy to leave the freezing cold hallway, but when they entered the main room, Jimmy stopped short.

“Something’s wrong,” he stated.

“What do you mean?”

“Something’s... different,” he said shaking his head and looking around. Jimmy was known for his keen observation. It took him a minute, but then he put his finger on it.

“The double doors we came through. One of them is closed now.”

He pointed. And as the two children watched, the remaining door silently closed as well.

The two ran over to the doors and grasped the knobs. The doors held fast.

And then, a moaning sound echoed down from the hallway they had just left. And then came the sound of... something plodding down the hall. The plodding sound was joined by the sound of something scratching along the walls. And then came a gibbering sound that may or may not have been laughter.

As one, the two kids each grabbed a doorknob and began to yank frantically. The doors refused to budge as the gibbering thing grew nearer and nearer. The two paused for a second to throw one terrified glance back and saw, clearly silhouetted against the entrance to the hallway, the shadow of some humpbacked thing or creature. Before either of them could cry out, Tawnya’s door suddenly burst open, and the two children ran through the foyer, out the door, and across the yard through the warm sunlight. Jumping on their bikes they were off and down the hill, pedaling as fast as they could away from the old Fox House.

* * *

“You can’t be serious!” bellowed Tawnya. “No way are we going back to that creepy old place!”

It was the next day, and the three friends were back in their clubhouse. A wide-eyed Donny had been listening to his friends’ account of their adventure, when Jimmy had, almost casually, mentioned their next visit.

“We’ve yet to establish if the residence is truly haunted,” responded Jimmy in the formal language of constant book reading he liked to use.

“I’m plenty convinced it’s haunted!” objected Tawnya.

Jimmy frowned.

"I'll admit, of course, there's *something* going on in that house, but I'm not at all sure it's supernatural."

"Ghosts are supposed to cause cold areas in haunted places. That hallway was freezing."

"That effect could be achieved a number of ways."

"What about the doors and... and that thing?" gulped Tawnya.

"Automated doors are an easy trick, and we never did actually see the thing itself."

"We saw it's shadow; that was enough for me!"

"That's what bothers me, but we'll get back to that. Right now, let's hear Donny's report. I trust you found some interesting information."

"Did I ever! And a lot of it goes right along with what you two saw, the hunchback, the gibbering —"

"Start at the beginning, Donny," instructed Jimmy. "Give us a full report."

Donny slapped down the composition book he had used to record his findings. Opening to the first page, he began to read:

"The Fox family made its money in whaling. They owned several whalers that went out of Nantucket. They had gotten into the business early and were one of the most successful companies; so successful, they ended up just hiring managers to do all the real work for them. They sort of retired and became, like, 'gentlemen whalers.' They built their mansion here where the land was cheap. They wanted to be seen as aristocracy, people who are just too wealthy and important to work. Well, as you might guess, if you don't watch your books, people are likely to take advantage of you. Sure enough, one dirty manager after another began robbing them blind. Between that and the demise of the whaling industry, within a few generations the 'aristocrats' became paupers.

"But for a few generations, they really did live as aristocracy, over and above everything and everybody, and that ended up turning against them."

"How so?" asked Tawnya.

"Well, they were snobby to everyone, and as a result, most people didn't want to have anything to do with them. Also, there was rumored to be madness in the family. Jeramiah, one of the children from the first generation to be born in the house had to be kept locked up. He was arrested once for assaulting a little girl. The records.... didn't give details. The family paid a hefty fine to the girl's family to satisfy them, and Jerimiah was never seen around town again. The Fox family claimed he went back to Nantucket to help manage the business, but the general consensus was that he was kept locked up in the house and would moan and scream trying to get let out.

“The family kept very much to themselves, hiding their secrets and disdainful of what they considered to be the ‘common folk.’ There are reports of incest in the family. But the worst story was the story of Dorcus.”

“Dorcus?” laughed Tawnya.

“A name from the bible,” supplied Jimmy. “It was somewhat popular in the eighteen-hundreds, not so much so today.”

“Dorcus was rumored to be a very pretty girl, but the family, being so to themselves and disdainful of others, wouldn’t let her associate with the ‘common folk.’ There’s a story, not completely confirmed, that she was forced to marry her own brother, William.

“Eww,” said Tawnya.

“Incest was not uncommon in some aristocracies,” explained Jimmy. “Especially xenophobic, narcissistic ones such as the Foxes appear to have been. Continue Donny.”

“There was a picture that was supposed to be her, taken from an old family album. She’s standing in a wedding dress with a full veil, only in the picture, her hand had swept the veil away to show her face. She looked pretty, but very, very sad. It’s said that people have seen her ghost wandering around the interior of the house, dressed in her wedding dress,”

“Dorcus had a child, Benjamin. He was born deformed, hunchbacked. And... he was completely mentally disabled. The old records use less polite words. He couldn’t even talk, he just drooled and gibbered. The family kept him hidden away. Dorcus committed suicide, she hung herself. All that was left was William, his brother Daniel, and the gibbering son. According to the stories, William and Daniel kept the boy locked up, but sometimes he got away and terrorized the area. It was said that he had long nails, like claws, and that he would prey upon children. But I couldn’t actually find any reports of murders or child deaths reported in the official records.”

“Probably just wild stories and gossip then,” concluded Jimmy.

“But the records do say that William found his brother Daniel dead, within the family living room, clawed to death as if by some animal. The son, Benjamin, had vanished and was never seen again. William claimed that his brother had been killed by a bear, and the coroner’s report agreed. There are still some bears around here, and back then there were more of them. But most people believe that Benjamin killed him, and that he still haunts the house waiting for another victim.

“Alone and bankrupt, unable to pay taxes on the house, William hanged himself a year later, like his sister, Dorcus had done. And that was the end of the Fox family. Since then, there have been numerous reports of eerie cries and strange apparitions at night around the Fox house.”

“Only at night?” asked Jimmy.

“Yeah.”

“Wow,” gulped Tawnya, “so that was Benjamin we saw.”

“Or someone who wanted us to think so; someone familiar with the family history,” returned Jimmy. “Either way, we can now conclude a great deal.”

“Such as?”

Jimmy drew his portly self up in as dignified a way as he could.

“We can conclude that the two vagrants did not imagine what they claimed. Their experience was not the result of too much whiskey. Tawnya and I observed some of the same phenomena. We can also conclude that someone, supernatural or not, does not want anyone within the Fox House. Whoever they are, they have gone to a great deal of trouble to keep people away, capitalizing upon the Fox House legend.

“It is either a ghost or ghosts intent upon privacy or else some human factions intent upon hiding something. I, therefore, propose that we return to the Fox House tomorrow, all three of us, in force.”

“In force? We’re just three kids.”

“But this time we will be armed.”

“Armed? You mean like with weapons?”

“Not weapons, equipment. We will be armed with flashlights, the tape recorder, a camera, stops —”

“Stops?”

“Wedges, to put in the doors in order to keep them from closing on us. We will also have each other.

“So far, the only weapon the Fox House has brandished is fear. Fear is greatly reduced in the company of others. Between the three of us, we should be able to resist panic long enough to see more than just shadows where shadows should not be. Three companions, on guard and ready, make for a formidable force.”

“Formidable?” bleated Donny. “We’re just kids, nerdy kids at that. Tawnya’s probably the toughest of us!”

“And I’m a girl!”

“With the heart of a lioness,” smiled Jimmy. Tawnya couldn’t help but blush.

“The police and local authorities don’t care about this,” continued Jimmy, sobering. “Tawnya suggested we report to them what happened yesterday, but I advised against it. They wouldn’t take us seriously because we’re just kids. They’d say we made it up.

“But we didn’t. We were there. We saw. We can spend the rest of our lives pretending we didn’t, and as we grow older, we may even convince ourselves that we imagined it all, but we didn’t!

“The only ones who can solve this mystery is us. It has to be us!”

Perhaps he was a nerd, but when Jimmy rose to the occasion, he could be very convincing. His words brought courage to the team.

“I want to see this place for myself,” agreed Donny.

“I like the idea of the doorstops,” added Tawnya. “If there is danger, as long as we can get out, reach our bikes, and zoom down that hill, nothing can catch us!”

“Then it’s settled,” beamed Jimmy, “Tomorrow we make our final assault upon the Fox House.”

* * *

The morning sun sparkled in the crisp Maine air as the three friends walked their bikes up the steep grade that led to the Fox House. They were weighted down with the equipment they needed, and Jimmy was giving a final debriefing.

“I said yesterday that we need to stand firm long enough to see more than just shadows where shadows should not be. I already explained that there was no moon on the night that the two homeless men saw the shadow of the hunchbacked gibbering thing. Also, Tawnya, we saw the same shadow, cast by what?”

“The sun coming in through the slats in the shutters.”

Jimmy shook his head.

“It was late afternoon. The sunlight was slanting down, not across the room. It should not have cast any shadow.”

“You noticed that while we were trying to get out of that place?”

Jimmy’s face colored.

“No, I was too scared at the time. I panicked. If I hadn’t, I would have waited until the person or creature appeared and caught it on film. But I was in full panic, not thinking. It was only later that I realized that the sunlight’s angle could have cast no shadow. My first inspection will be to see if I can locate some alternative light source.”

“Don’t feel too bad,” offered Tawnya, “I was in full panic myself.”

“Which is why we must resolve ourselves not to surrender to our panic today,” affirmed Jimmy. “I’m also curious as to why we encountered phenomena in the daylight. According to Donny’s report, we are the only ones to experience that.”

“Guess we’re special,” grumbled Tawnya as the three friends rounded the corner that brought them within view of the house.

Parking their bikes, the trio checked to make sure they had everything and then walked up the weed-riddled cobblestone walk.

Reaching forward, Jimmy grabbed the ancient brass handle and tugged.

The door wouldn’t open.

Frowning, he tried again.

“It sticks,” explained Tawnya, and grabbing the handle, yanked with all her might.

The old but stout door would not budge.

“It must be locked,” proposed Donny.

“It wasn’t locked before.”

“I observed one of the side windows was broken before,” offered Jimmy. “Let’s try that.”

Walking through the tall, neglected grass, they reached the side of the house. Sure enough, a large window was missing one shutter. The glass was broken in two panes.

Taking care not to cut himself on the jagged glass, Jimmy reached through and undid the latch. the window, which was nearly as tall as they were, swung inward.

The three kids scrambled through to find themselves in a small room, well lit due to the missing shutter. The walls were lined with wooden pegs as well as some iron hooks.

“The cloakroom,” guessed Donny.

Striding over to the door, they stepped out into the foyer entranceway that led into the large living room.

Jimmy turned to examine the front door. Two ancient brass bolts had been moved so as to lock it securely.

“Someone locked the door after our visit,” he said to Tawnya.

Jimmy pulled the bolts back and pushed the door open. Taking a wedge of wood, he stuck it under the door in order to keep it open.

“Now open one of the doors to the living room and wedge it,” he instructed. “We’ll keep a clear line of retreat should it become necessary.”

“It probably will,” grumbled Tawnya. Opening one of the doors to the living room, she gazed in and looked around. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. The littered floor, grand staircase, and slants of daylight all looked normal even if eerie enough. Donny shoved a wedge under the door and kicked it in tightly.

All three took out their flashlights and snapped them on. The beams cut through the haphazard light illuminating the room better.

“We’ll inspect this room thoroughly first,” instructed Jimmy, “since this is where all the haunting seems to occur. Spread out, but don’t lose sight of each other.

Tawnya crossed to a huge ruined pipe organ, its velvet stool frayed, its keys yellowed with age. Donny began to slowly climb the stairs. He took the handrail, then pulled his hand back when he realized how shaky it was.

“Careful, Donny,” cautioned Tawnya. “There’s a lot of dry rot around. Those stairs may not hold your weight.”

Meanwhile, Jimmy had entered the darkened hallway where the gibbering apparition had come down. Before, he couldn’t see to the end due to the inky darkness. Now, he shown his flashlight down and saw that it terminated about twenty yards further with a door on the far end. He then turned his light on the hallway entrance flanked by the huge fireplace. He played his light on the stone structure, up and down and back and forth, until his light found something that brought a satisfied grin to his face.

“Guys, come look at this.”

Donny scrambled down the stairs and Tawnya crossed the room to join them.

Jimmy nodded to the spot his flashlight was trained upon

Attached high up on the fireplace side facing the hallway, nestled between two stones so as to be difficult to spot, was a glass lens.

“A light,” gasped Tawnya. “A modern looking light.”

“Which can obviously be activated from some other location,” provided Jimmy. “And it is angled in such a way as to cast the shadow of anyone walking or standing just within the entrance to the hall.”

“So, you wouldn’t have to see the actual person,” supplied Donny. “From that angle, the shadow would loom out huge and distorted.”

“Adding to the terror,” concluded Jimmy. Raising his camera, he zoomed in and snapped a picture of the light.

At that moment, they all turned to the sound of a slow creaking sound behind them.

Through the open door they could see the side door, the one that led to the cloakroom where they had entered, slowly creak open.

All three gulped.

“Don’t panic,” cautioned Jimmy. “Come on.”

Cautiously, the trio crossed back across to the door and from the foyer stared into the cloakroom.

Hanging upon one of the iron hooks was the wide-eyed corpse of a man dressed in the clothes of a previous century. He was covered in blood and looked to have been clawed to death.

The three children stared for a long moment, and then the door to the cloakroom slammed shut by itself.

Jimmy blinked, then seized the doorknob and tried opening it.

It was locked tight.

“We should have used our wedges on this door,” he said, shaking his head.

“We don’t need it. We have a way out,” answered Donny, gesturing to the open front door. His voice was tinged with panic, and it looked as if it was all he could do not to dash out the entrance.

Jimmy continued to stare at the cloakroom door.

“Someone is playing games with us.”

“That guy didn’t look like he was playing games,” retorted Tawnya. “That guy looked very, very dead!”

“I think we should get out of here and call the police,” stated Donny, still gazing longingly out the entrance.

“They won’t believe us any more than they did the homeless men,” responded Jimmy. “We need more!” He looked disgustedly down at the camera hanging around his neck. “I should have photographed that, but I was too...” He let it go.

“Startled?” offered Tawnya, gently.

“Scared,” confessed Jimmy.

A hideous scream came down from what sounded like the upper levels of the house. Jimmy pointed to Donny who was holding the tape recorder, but by the time he was able to activate the device, the screaming stopped.

“Camera and recorder at the ready,” said Jimmy. “Let’s go.”

Cautiously, the trio walked back into the living room. They crossed to the darkened hallway and shone their lights down it.

The door at the end slowly opened by itself revealing utter darkness beyond.

The three friends looked at one another. Jimmy slowly began to walk down the hallway. Tawnya and Donny followed.

Halfway down the hallway they began to hear a gibbering sound, like someone with a lot of water or saliva in his mouth giggling or babbling. Jimmy raised the camera and nodded at Donny who turned on the recorder.

Ten feet before they got to the end of the hall, the door slammed shut by itself.

The three friends ran up to it and Jimmy grasped the knob. It would not turn.

“Locked,” he said.

“Hey, I got the gibbering thing on tape,” said Donny, holding the recorder up. “We can take it to the police and –”

But Jimmy was shaking his head.

“Not enough. They could say we made it up, or that it was anything.”

“There’s another door on this side,” pointed out Tawnya.

She tried the door, and it opened.

The room was dark, since there were no windows in this portion of the house. The three flashlight beams swung back and forth revealing counters, old fashioned stoves and tables, and some ancient pots and pans hung from hooks over the counters. Cupboards with some broken pieces of dishes and tarnished flatware stood against one wall.

“The kitchen,” stated Tawnya.

Crossing the room, they came to two other doors. One led out into a huge dining room with a long table. The table was littered with debris along with broken plates and ruined candelabras. The entire thing was festooned with dust and cobwebs.

“Looks like Miss Havisham’s table,” observed Donny.

As if in answer, the door on the far side opened. Standing in the doorway was a figure in a wedding dress, heavily veiled.

Tawnya and Donny jumped, but Jimmy stepped forward.

“Dorcus, is that you?” he asked in a sympathetic tone.

The figure moved a gloved hand and swept the veil away.

Beneath it was a grinning skull.

Jimmy’s camera flashed, and the door across the room slammed shut.

“Wedge this door,” ordered Jimmy. “We’re going after her!”

“Do we have to?” asked Donny as Tawnya jammed a wedge into the door leading back to the kitchen. “You got the picture. Together with my tape recording, we should have enough now to go to the police.”

“Just one more piece of evidence,” promised Jimmy as he led them across the room.

The door where the skeleton bride had stood was locked tight.

“Let’s try the other door from the kitchen,” directed Jimmy.

This one opened to reveal a narrow staircase leading steeply up.

“The servant’s stairs,” guessed Donny.

Tawnya kicked in another stop for the door.

“We’re down to just two more of these left,” she informed them, holding up the wedges.

“Then let’s hope we find something at the top of these stairs.”

The stairs creaked and groaned loudly beneath the three youngsters’ feet as they ascended. There was some light at the top and when they stepped out through the doorway, they found themselves in a large room. A huge, cobwebbed chandelier hung from the ceiling.

“This was the ballroom,” deduced Jimmy, “where they would hold fancy parties.”

“Not many,” commented Donny. “Remember, the Fox family kept to themselves. I’ll bet this room got very little actual use.”

“Now where to?” asked Tawnya.

“We’ve penetrated pretty far into this house,” responded Jimmy. “If someone or something is trying to keep us out –”

He was interrupted by an object flying up the stairs, barely missing him. It clattered upon the floor before them.

The three stared down at it.

It was a wooden wedge, the one Tawnya had just pushed under the door below them. At the bottom of the stairs, the door slammed shut.

“That door didn’t have a lock,” stated Tawnya, leading the charge back down. The stairwell creaked with protest once again, and above that came a heavy scraping sound.

When they reached the bottom, they pushed against the door, but it refused to open.

“Someone’s holding it closed,” said Tawnya, straining against the door.

“Someone or something,” corrected Jimmy. “I believe that scraping sound we heard was one of those cupboards being pushed against the door. They’re likely solid oak, so we needn’t bother trying to push our way out.”

“Then we’re trapped!” cried Donny.

“For the moment,” mused Jimmy.

The three went back up the stairs. Looking around, they first went to the windows.

“We could break a window and try to climb down.”

“With what? We didn’t bring any rope, and that’s one heck of a drop.”

“We’ll have to try one of these doors,” concluded Tawnya.

And now the three adventurers made a mistake. Had they chosen the doors upon one side of the ballroom, they would have come out to the upstairs landing of the grand staircase which would have led them down to the massive living room and freedom. But at this point they were confused and not a little frightened and had lost their bearings within the sinister maze of the Fox House, and so, mistakenly chose the doors on the other side.

These doors all led into a hallway with another staircase leading up on one end. But at this point the trio were not interested in going further up; they wanted down and out of this place. Three doors along the hallway led into simple chambers. The door at the far end of the hallway was locked, which left only the stairs.

“Or we could go back to the ballroom,” suggested Tawnya.

Just then, there came a thumping sound from the staircase. Someone or something was walking down. There was a horrible gasp that sent shivers up the children’s spines, a scratching sound as of claws scratching the walls, and a gibbering sound that may or may not have been laughter.

“Let’s go!” cried Donny, starting for the door back to the ballroom.

“Wait! Hold your ground!” commanded Jimmy raising his camera.

A light from somewhere on the side of the stairwell slowly faded on, revealing in its beam the shadow of some huge, hideous, humpbacked thing lurching down the steps. Jimmy snapped a picture of the shadow, and then held his camera at the ready.

The lurching sound continued, the shadow seemed to loom closer and closer, but still nothing came into view. Tawnya’s nerve finally broke.

“Alright!” she cried, losing her temper in her terror. “We know how you play the shadow game. Now come out and show us what you really are!”

The lurching steps halted abruptly. The mysterious light faded and with it the hideous shadow. The trio played their flashlights across the stairwell entrance, straining their eyes.

And then from behind them, the door at the other end of the hall opened silently.

“Alright,” came a voice with a thick accent.

The three spun around.

Standing in the entrance was a man with thick black hair, a beard and mustache, and olive skin. He wore ear-rings, colorful clothing, and a bandanna.

And in his hand was a revolver leveled straight at the three children.

* * *

The window of the tiny room within a gable at the top of the mansion looked out over the widow's walk. Within the room, Tawnya and Donny sat in chairs, tightly bound by ropes securing their wrists and ankles. Upon another chair that creaked and groaned beneath his portly form, Jimmy was sitting as the woman who had joined their captor finished tying him down.

The woman was elderly, but spry. She was dressed in gaudy colors like her companion with ear-rings and a matching bandanna. She cackled as she finished securing the last prisoner. The entire time her companion had kept the revolver leveled at them.

"I give you full credit," she cackled as she stood up straight. "You children do not scare easy, much to your misfortune." Her accent was the same as her companion's. Donny was guessing it was something eastern European.

"This is kidnapping!" challenged Tawnya, her eyes flashing. "Do you know how much trouble you could get into?"

"And you were trespassing," cackled the old woman.

"You don't own this house," objected Donny.

"Gypsy do not care for owning," answered the man darkly. "We are here, it is ours, and so is the treasure."

"What treasure?" asked Jimmy.

"The Fox House treasure," crowed the gypsy woman. "Hidden within this house by the last of the Foxes."

"There is no treasure," retorted Donny. "The last member of the Fox family died a pauper. He couldn't even pay the taxes on his property."

"That's what you think!" And both gypsies laughed sinister laughs.

"Gypsies learned the secret long ago," began the gypsy woman. "A great treasure was hidden in this house. But it was hidden well. It took time to find it."

"We scare away everyone," picked up the gypsy man. "And we search until we find it. We scare away everyone, except for you."

"You were too smart for your own good," grinned the gypsy woman holding up their camera and tape recorder. "And now it has spelled your doom."

"Magda and I leave now with the treasure," continued the gypsy man. "And you stay here forever. No one comes here. No one will find you. You solve Fox House secret, but never tell anyone. Too bad."

“This is the end of you meddling kids,” cackled the one called Magda. Sandor and I leave now with treasure. You stay here and enjoy the view. Don’ worry, you won’t starve. You’ll die of dehydration first.”

With that, she threw back her head and gave out an insane cackle. Then Magda and Sandor went out the door and closed it behind them.

After thirty seconds, Tawnya barked out an exasperated laugh.

“‘Meddling kids?’ What, does she think she’s in a Scooby-doo cartoon?”

“It *was* a cheesy line,” agreed Jimmy. “Which goes right along with their cheesy costumes and cheesy accents.”

“There is no Fox House treasure,” asserted Donny.

“Of course not,” agreed Jimmy. “This is just another game, another attempt to scare us away.

“We are kids. And the two of them see us as kids and are treating us as kids, because, for some reason we have yet to ascertain, they want to scare us and keep us away from the Fox House.”

“But they’ve imprisoned us in the Fox House,” pointed out Tawnya.

“Leaving us with an easy and obvious way of escape,” answered Jimmy. “This chair is practically falling apart. I’m... obviously the heaviest of us...” His face colored. “Even if I didn’t try to break up the chair and escape, which I would have to be an absolute fool not to, it would probably break apart pretty soon by itself.

“As to your ‘Scooby-doo’ line, he obviously said it for effect, thinking, as kids, he would make an impression upon us.”

“You mean ‘she.’ That was Magda,” corrected Tawnya.

“No, *he*,” returned Jimmy. “Although the make-up and voice inflection were nearly perfect, he forgot to disguise his hands. Those were burly man-hands that bound us.

“We are dealing with two very accomplished charlatans, masters of disguise and illusion, capable of impersonating men, women, gypsies, corpses, ghost brides, and gibbering monsters. They have done a masterful job of maintaining a very credible haunted house. But they’ve made one serious error.”

“What’s that?” chorused both Tawnya and Donny.

Jimmy rocked forward, stood up, and came crashing down, shattering the chair and freeing himself.

“Underestimating us,” he replied, pulling away the ropes and pieces of chair still clinging to him.

* * *

Within minutes, Jimmy had freed his two companions. Cautiously, they exited the only door. They found themselves in an empty hallway lined with doors that stretched back into the depths of the house. The door nearest them was open, revealing a staircase leading down.

“Maybe that’s the way out,” said Tawnya, hopefully.

“Undoubtedly,” agreed Jimmy. “And I don’t think we’ll encounter any resistance. It’s obvious our two friends want us to escape.”

“Why?” asked Donny.

“Why not? They took all our evidence. And in their little charade they clearly indicated that they had ‘found their treasure’ and were leaving. If we were to be as gullible as they hoped, we would go home, convinced we had solved the mystery and that the ‘ghosts’ had flown the coop. And can you imagine if we went to the police with that ‘Scooby-doo’ story?”

“Not to mention the police have already come to this house on one crazy report and found nothing,” added Tawnya.

“Exactly, but right now, we have to do some play acting of our own. Let’s run down these stairs, tear out the front door, grab our bikes and take off like three desperately frightened kids who have ‘barely escaped with our lives.’ I’m sure our friends will be watching and expecting that kind of show. I don’t think we should let them down.”

Grinning, the three friends ran and stumbled down the stairs in noisy, convincing terror. The staircase rounded at every floor before emptying into a stairwell with an open door admitting into the front foyer. The two men had left a wide and clear escape path for their prisoners.

Pushing open the door, Jimmy cried “let’s go!” back to his two companions, then pretended to stumble in his panic and fall. Picking himself up, the trio raced across the yard, grabbed their bikes, and took off down the hill and away. Rounding the thicket of fir trees that shielded the Fox House from view, they skidded to a stop.

“That should convince them,” laughed Donny.

“Certainly,” agreed Jimmy. “Now let’s hide the bikes within these trees.”

“Why?”

“Because we’re going back, of course.”

“Back?” Both Tawnya and Donny gaped.

“We have yet to solve the Fox House secret.”

“Yes, we have,” objected Tawnya. “It was those two guys doing it all.”

“But who are they, and to what end?” persisted Jimmy.

“Whatever it is, it’s obviously illegal,” argued Donny. “They were kind enough to offer us escape the first time. What if they catch us again and decide not to be so generous?”

“That performance we just witnessed has convinced me that we are not dealing with dangerous characters,” stated Jimmy. “They only seem interested in scaring people away. Our own performance should have convinced them that they’ve succeeded. They are not expecting our return. And if my plan works, they won’t see us coming.”

It was useless arguing with Jimmy once his mind was made up. Grumbling, Tawnya and Donny led their bikes into the trees and made certain they were hidden. Jimmy then led the way through the wooded thicket until they could see the Fox House through the branches. Stopping, Jimmy motioned them to squat down within cover of the trees. They were not facing the front of the house but the side with the gabled room that had been their prison.

“It is obvious that the front is being watched, probably by some hidden surveillance device,” Jimmy explained. “But it’s a large house, and the back faces miles and miles of forest. There’s no reason to believe anyone would approach from that direction. If we make our way around to the back and enter from there, I doubt we’ll be observed.”

Retreating back out of sight, the trio made their way through the trees to where they calculated the back of the house must be. Sure enough, when they approached the tree line, they could see the back of the Fox House.

Jimmy held a finger up to his lips, motioning his friends to follow him. Stealthily, they made their way to a back door. Jimmy quietly tried the knob, but it was locked. Donny pointed.

A tall back window, much like the one they had entered through earlier, was missing a shutter and had one broken pane.

The kids entered the Fox House the same way they had before. Now they found themselves in a chamber filled with bicycles.

“Huh?” asked Tawnya.

“Bikes?” echoed Jimmy.

Donny walked up and examined a few of the bicycles.

“Some of these are expensive,” he reported. “Carbon fiber bodies, racing bikes. Some of them are worth ten thousand dollars or more.”

“So, we’re dealing with bicycle collectors?” asked Tawnya.

“Maybe not collectors,” answered Jimmy.

The next room revealed tables with watches, jewelry, and fancy knives. The three then found another room filled with television sets and other electronics.

“They’re fences,” smiled Jimmy.

“Fences?” asked Tawnya.

“They buy stolen property and store it until they can sell it.”

“But fences usually just rent storage units,” argued Donny.

“Which costs money,” countered Jimmy. “Think of it, an abandoned house with over twenty-four rooms. No one ever comes here. It’s out of the way. No one would see a truck coming or going at night. It’s the perfect safe house. It even comes with a reputation for being haunted, a reputation easily reinforced by two obviously talented actors and masters of disguise. It’s perfect!”

Just then, the door rattled as someone turned the knob. The three friends ducked down behind some crates where they could peek through a crack without being seen.

Two men walked into the room. They were dressed in work clothes. One went up to a row of electronic devices with a clipboard and started writing down numbers. The other stood behind him looking nervous.

“I still say we load the truck with what we can carry and high-tail it out of here,” said the nervous looking man in a voice the three kids instantly recognized as ‘Sandor’s’”

“No need,” assured the second man, not looking up from his clipboard. “Those kids aren’t coming back.”

“And what if they tell the police?”

“Tell ‘em what? That they were captured by two treasure-hunting gypsies? Even if they do believe them, so what? They come here, find nothing in the front of the house. Go up to the room where we tied those kids up, find nothing, since we removed all the evidence. Just like last time with those two bums.”

“Yeah, I guess...” answered “Sandor,” not sounding totally convinced.

“Hey,” the man with the clipboard turned to his companion and grinned. “Did you see those kids run?”

The second man laughed.

“Okay, the best part,” he responded, “was when the fat one fell down and rolled over!”

Both men broke into hysterics.

Jimmy’s face colored, but he remained silent.

“Okay, lets go through these crates,” said Sandor, slapping the crates the trio was hiding behind, raising a cloud of dust around them.

The three friends’ eyes went wide.

“No need,” responded the other man. They have packing slips.”

Tawnya and Donny relaxed.

But Jimmy began to tremble. He was prone to allergies, and the dust kicked up had surrounded him. He tried valiantly not to sneeze. But then...

“Huh-ummf”

Holding his nose and his mouth shut, he sneezed as silently as he could.

The two men appeared not to have heard.

“Alright, let’s go check the bikes,” said the one with the clipboard, and the two turned to go.

“Huh-ummf”

The two men paused at the door.

“Huh-ummf”

The men spun around. In two quick strides they rounded the crates and were glaring down at the three children.

* * *

The man who had called himself Sandor led the procession up narrow stairs. Behind him, in single file, walked Jimmy, Tawnya, and Donny. Behind them, barring any means of escape, walked the second man. They entered a small, windowless room. The man who had called himself Magda looked down at Jimmy darkly.

“I’m starting to get the impression you’re the leader of this crew. What’s your name, kid?”

“Jimmy Bradford, what’s yours?” answered Jimmy in a level voice.

The man grinned.

“Let’s just leave it at ‘Magda’ and ‘Sandor.’”

“What are you planning to do with us?” asked Donny.

“That’s what we’re going to figure out right now,” answered Magda. He and his partner left the room, closing the door behind them. There was the sound of a key in the lock.

“So, they’re not dangerous, huh?” glared Tawnya at Jimmy.

Jimmy looked down before answering.

“Well, they’re still concealing their real names; that’s a good sign.”

“Yeah, if they were gonna kill us, they wouldn’t care,” offered Donny, hopefully.

“Any ideas?” asked Tawnya, looking over at Jimmy.

But the leader of the team just furrowed his brow in concentration as he attempted to puzzle them a way out.

Several minutes later, the key rattled in the lock and the door opened. The two men were standing in the doorway. Sandor was once again holding the pistol, leveled at them.

“We’ve decided,” said Magda with a grin that was not at all pleasant. “It’s unfortunate, but you should have taken the hint.”

“Now move,” ordered Sandor, gesturing with the pistol.

“Where are we going?” asked Jimmy.

“Outside. This’ll be messy.”

All three children paled but had no choice but to walk forward.

“You... don’t have to do this...” stammered Jimmy.

“We won’t tell...” tried Tawnya, realizing how lame that sounded, even as she said it.

“Too late,” replied the one called Magda. “You should have run and ‘not told’ when you had the chance.”

The group came to the top of the grand staircase. Sandor ordered them down. The ancient stairs creaked beneath the weight of so many. Donny was bringing up the rear with Sandor and his pistol right behind him. Like his friends, he was valiantly trying to fight back tears.

And that is when the next step, with a sharp snap of dry-rotted wood, collapsed as he put his weight on it, and Donny instantly disappeared through the hole that had suddenly appeared. There was a second or two of silence and then a sickening thud from below.

“Oh man! Hey kid!” cried Magda, all menace vanishing from his voice. Crouching down over the hole, he snapped on a flashlight, one that he had taken from the children earlier, and played its beam down and around.

“Hey kid! Are you alright?”

There was no answer from below. The flashlight beam showed that the drop had been nearly fifteen feet. At the bottom lay Donny’s body, very still, one leg bent at an unnatural angle.

Both men were sweating profusely now, and they had both gone even whiter than the children.

“Donny! We have to get him out of there!” cried Tawnya.

“No, no,” answered Sandor. “We shouldn’t move him. He needs an ambulance.”

Both Jimmy and Tawnya stared up at the two men who a moment ago seemed intent upon killing them.

Sandor had dropped the gun, and now Tawnya snatched it up.

“Forget it kid, it’s not even loaded,” said Magda. “We need to get help. You two stay with your friend, don’t try to move him, even if he wakes up.”

And with that, the two fences ran down the stairs and outside. A few moments later, Jimmy and Tawnya heard the sound of a truck starting and, with a screech of tires, barrel down the hill.

* * *

It was a week later that the three friends were sitting in their clubhouse. Jimmy was in the overstuffed chair, Tawnya was at the table, and Donny, his leg in a cast, was reclining on the couch.

Twenty minutes after the two men had fled, Sheriff Cranston had arrived followed by an ambulance. The medics were able to extricate Donny and set his leg. He was then taken to the hospital where he spent a week for observation. He was diagnosed with a minor concussion and a seriously fractured leg that would remain in a cast for another three weeks. He would then have a limp for most likely a few months, but eventually would be good as new.

The two men had gone directly to the sheriff’s office. They supplied two names that turned out to be false and said that they had gone up to the old Fox House out of curiosity. And it was a good thing they had, because they had seen three kids going into the house and then heard a crash. One of the kids had fallen through the staircase and was badly hurt.

When the ambulance left, Jimmy and Tawnya told the sheriff the entire story of their investigation. They then brought him to the rooms which held the stolen merchandise. Sheriff Cranston had been very impressed with their work but warned them about sticking their noses in danger. They had been lucky that the two felons they had encountered had turned out to be not so dangerous.

There had been a big write up in the local paper, front page, of how three local youths had busted up a fencing ring.

And that would have been the end of the story, had it not been for the letter Jimmy Bradford had received that day in the mail. A letter he now shared with his friends.

Dear Mr. Bradford,

This is from your two friends from the Fox House. As you've no doubt figured out, we're crooks. Actually, we're actors, but it's hard breaking into the business, and in the meantime, we have to make a living. Just to set the record straight, we're crooks, but we're not killers. You already know the gun we used didn't have any bullets. The plan was to take the three of you outside to "kill you;" then my partner and I would get into an argument that would turn into a fight, and with any luck, the three of you would have the good sense to run away and escape. That's why we had to act so serious about rubbing you out.

That was a sweet deal while it lasted. We scared away everybody, except for you. I guess you are better investigators than we are actors. We hope your friend is alright. We honestly never meant for anybody to get hurt. Maybe if we get caught someday, you kids could put in a good word for us.

And if you should ever see us in the pictures, no hard feelings.

Your friends,

Magda and Sandor

"Well, can you beat that? They're our *friends* now!" laughed Tawnya.

"They're pretty good sports considering how much we cost them in all of that stolen merchandise," offered Donny.

"I hope they break into the movies soon," added Jimmy. "They're better actors than they are crooks. I don't think their hearts are really in it."

Jimmy set down the letter and picked up the book Tawnya had been paging through earlier, *Alfred Hitchcock and the Three Investigators in The Mystery of the Stuttering Parrot*.

"Now, however," he proclaimed, "we need to start considering our next case."

"Next case!" cried Donny, slapping his cast. "I barely survived the first one."

"We're *not* the three investigators," stated Tawnya, indicating the book.

"Aren't we?" returned Jimmy. "This series has been out of print for years, and I don't see anyone else stepping up for the job."

"We're just kids!" persisted Tawnya.

"Kids who just solved the mystery of a haunted house and busted a fencing ring. Despite Donny's mishap, we're off to a good start."

Rising out of the chair, Jimmy walked over to the table and stood before it. Then with great flare and exaggerated drama cried out: "I proclaim this the very first meeting of the new Three Investigators!"

Tawnya scowled.

"You're as bad as Magda and Sandor."