

THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE

The Mysterious House

A Fox Mystery



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Sunflower Footsteps

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All events and occurrences in this work are fictitious. All characters are entirely fictional, as are their lives, and do not bear likeness to any individual, living or dead.

**“Oh, no!” whispered Sheila.
“Someone is coming inside.”**

THE MOONLIT SHADOW advanced. In the shadow's hand was a large flashlight. It flashed over the barn before it fastened on the trap-door handle on the floor. The barn door slammed shut and once again the inside of the barn lay in darkness. The sole light came from the flashlight outlining the trap door. As the figure neared the trap door where Jimmy lay hidden, Sheila's fingers gripped Mary's shoulder. Mary, hiding the terror she felt, put a reassuring hand over Sheila's and gave it a squeeze. Mary's teeth were tightly shut, and her jaws ached as the scream rising in her throat was swallowed. Her thoughts were of Jimmy, trapped in the underground space, who was soon to be exposed by this figure with the light.

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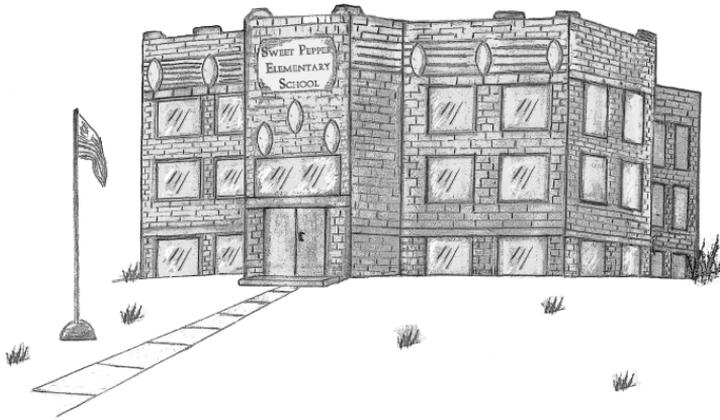
CHAPTER 1



The Beginning

THE MORNING was cool and crisp, not unlike any other fall day in the small town of Sweet Pepper, Ohio. The air was full of Monday morning sounds. Traffic was brisk but not busy. Kids were dropped off or walked to school. Sixth-grade school safety patrols were on duty. This Monday, however, was not an ordinary Monday. The feeling of a mystery was in the air.

Mary Samuels, grabbing her favorite blue jacket, ran out of the house after hurrying through breakfast. She reached school out of breath. Bending over, she twisted the tops of her bobby socks after tucking her pink blouse



into her blue tight-skirt. The sidewalk leading to the Sweet Pepper Elementary School was empty. Looking around for someone in red, Mary saw her best friend, Sheila Smith, waiting for her. Her friend, standing on the playground, was wearing a red jacket and a red skirt; undoubtedly, a red blouse would be underneath. “Hi, Sheila,” Mary said, “are you waiting for me?”

“Yes!” Sheila said, pulling her long blond hair from her face. “I’ve been waiting forever. What took you so long to get to school? I wanted to know if you noticed anything strange at that old, vacant house.”

“What house is that?” Mary asked.

“You know, the one the old man, I think his

name was Johnson, lived in until several months ago.” Mary shook her head. “Everyone said he had caged animals in the barn.”

“Oh...” replied Mary, a light of recognition coming into her eyes. “No, I got up late, and I ran all the way to school.”

“Well,” Sheila started, lowering her voice to a whisper, “there was smoke coming out of the chimney, but no lights were on and no curtains were up at any of the windows.”

“That’s strange,” Mary said, wrinkling her brow. *Could a Fox Mystery be brewing?* she thought.

The last bell rang as Mary and Sheila rushed inside to their seats in the fifth-grade room. Permed, short graying brown hair and sequined glasses topped the small, neatly dressed figure of Miss Brimshaw. She was taking attendance as Sheila and Mary took their seats. Their friend, Jimmy Alexander, sat in the front of the class. He was looking at Mary and Sheila and using hand signals. He was tapping the bridge of his nose with the first two fingers of his right hand. Mary, catching the Fox Mystery sign, scratched her head with the little finger of her right hand. This was the return signal. Jimmy nodded his

head. They had just planned to meet after school.

Mary rushed down the walk and saw her two friends deep in conversation. "Hey, guys, what's going on?" Mary asked, startling them.

"You have to hear what Jimmy has been telling me!" Sheila urged. "I've got goose bumps. Go on, tell Mary."

Jimmy's brown eyes gleamed. His brown hair was neatly parted and combed except for one piece which hung over his forehead. His blue-striped sports shirt had three buttons, two of which were unbuttoned. One hand was jammed into khaki pants. "Before dark," began Jimmy, "Mom sent me to the bakery for some bread. On the way back I took the shortcut and passed down the alley behind that old, vacant house. You know, the one Sheila said that had smoke coming out of the chimney this morning." Jimmy paused as Mary nodded. "I was surprised by an old blue pickup towing a horse trailer and had to jump to one side to get out of the way. It sped down the alley and stopped at the rear of the old house. When I passed the house, I heard a strange sound and saw a hairy creature running toward the back door. There

was a bright sort of blue light coming out of the back door. The hairy creature entered and then the door was pushed shut. I hurried home but couldn't stop thinking about what I had seen. I kept wondering about the creature and the noise. I'd like to go back and have a closer look tonight. How about it?" asked Jimmy, looking at the girls. "I think this could be the beginning of a Fox Mystery!" he said, a smile lifting up the corners of his mouth as he waggled his eyebrows up and down.

Sheila shrugged her shoulders, but Mary's short brown hair bounced with excitement as she nodded her head. "Count me in," she said.

"Oh, okay, me too," added Sheila with no enthusiasm at all.

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