



FINDING
BLACK
BEAUTY

Lou Kuenzler

Part One

Summer's
Place

For Review Only



Chapter One

The last time I saw Father, he was standing in the doorway at Summer's Place, wearing his scarlet hunting coat.

"Don't go! Why can't you just leave the poor fox alone?" I said.

"Josephine Judith Green, I never knew you were so soft-hearted," he sighed.

"I'm not soft-hearted," I said.

Nanny Clay snorted with laughter on the stairs behind me. "Begging your pardon, sir. You could describe your daughter as many things ... but soft-hearted isn't one of them," she said. "Stubborn maybe. Or spoilt. Or rude. Or ..."

"I'm sure you're right!" Father gave Nanny Clay

a little bow. She was his nanny too when he was a boy. Neither of us are ever brave enough to argue with her properly – not even Father, though he’s a grown-up and Lord of the Manor with the finest horses in all the county. “Josie might be jolly rude to people,” he teased, “but she is daft as a duckling when it comes to animals.”

“I’m not a duckling. I just feel sorry for the poor fox!” I thumped my fists against the banister as I heard the hounds baying in the paddock outside.

“Watch your temper, young lady!” warned Nanny Clay.

But Father just smiled.

“I’m sure you would feel differently if you came hunting with me,” he said, stepping out the door.

“Oh, may I?” I leapt down the last stairs in a single bound, almost tripping over the hem of my frock. “Thomas could have Merrylegs saddled in five minutes flat.”

All thoughts of the poor fox vanished from my mind like a snuffed-out candle. All I could think about was leaping ditches, crouching flat on Merrylegs’s neck as we thundered over the fields with the hunt.

“We’ll keep up with the pack,” I promised.

“I know Merrylegs is small and tubby and I’ve outgrown him . . . but we’ll gallop like the wind.”

“I’m sure you would.” Father shook his head. “But I’m sorry, Josie – you can’t come. I was only teasing. You know I promised your mother I would never let you hunt. She always said it was too dangerous.”

“Why? What does she care what I do – she isn’t here to stop me!” Mother left us when I was a baby and never came back; it was still the talk of the county after all these years. “You don’t care what I do either, Father,” I cried. “You care more for your fancy new hunter than you do for me.”

I saw a look of hurt come into his eyes and he took a step back.

“Enough, young madam!” Nanny Clay shook her finger. “There is no call to speak to your poor papa like that. Him, who has done his best to raise you on his own ever since your flighty mother danced off to London without so much as a backwards glance.”

“Keep Mother out of this!” I snapped. It broke my heart that she had left, but I hated the way other people always tried to blame her.

“I’m sorry, Josie.” Father turned towards the door. “The subject is closed. But you’re right about one

thing. Little Merrylegs is too small for you now. I'll talk to Thomas. We'll find you a nice quiet mare."

"I don't want a silly mare. I don't want anything. Go off and kill your fox. I hate you!" I spat.

Of course, I wish I had never said it now.

I wish I had told him to be careful.

I wish I had told him I loved him.

But I never got the chance.

They carried Father's body into the house on a plank of wood. I couldn't see his face; it was covered with his scarlet hunting jacket. There was a dark stain all down one side, darker than the bright red coat.

I screamed. But I couldn't cry. It was as if everything was in a fog.

I knew Father's broken body was underneath that coat. But I couldn't bear to think about him being dead. All I could think was how strange it was to see old Thomas the groom and his stable lad inside the house. I had only ever seen them outside or in the stables. They put him carefully on the floor and someone – Thomas, I think – told me a doctor had been sent for. But I knew it was too late, there was no saving him.

"Sir Charles was dead the minute he hit the

ground,” I heard Thomas murmur quietly to the stable lad. “First time out on the new hunter and he took the ditch too fast. Never felt a thing, I shouldn’t think.”

The fog in my brain got thicker.

“Mind you go out through the servants’ hall,” I told them sharply. Somebody had to take charge – that was my job now.

“Yes, Miss . . . and our condolences.” Old Thomas bowed, his cap bunched up in his hands. “Come on, lad.”

The stable boy – I had forgotten his name – gave me a nod, and then they both left.

Nanny Clay laid a hand on my arm.

“You poor child,” she sobbed. Tears were streaming down her plump pink apple cheeks. “Come away while the doctor does his work.”

I shook off her attempts at comfort.

“No. I will stay with Father – it is my duty,” I said, trying to sound firm even though my knees were shaking and my voice was little more than a whisper. “I am mistress of Summer’s Place now.”

But I was wrong about that. By the time Father was buried in the family plot in our little church

beyond the meadow, his lawyer, Mr Hadaway, had come to read the will. "I'm not sure how much your father told you about how the estate was left, my dear," he said, and I shook my head. "It is customary," he explained, "for inheritance to avoid the female line."

"What does that mean?" I asked, staring at him. "That I get nothing, because I'm a girl?"

"Not nothing," said Mr Hadaway quickly. "When you marry you will receive an allowance."

"But I'm only twelve. I won't get married for years. . ." None of this made any sense. My head was spinning. "Who will own Summer's Place? The land? The horses?"

Mr Hadaway coughed. "Your – ah – second cousin Eustace has been named heir," he said.

"Eustace?" I couldn't bear it. The last time Eustace had been here all he had done was pull my hair and bully the kitchen cat. "He is greedy. He is lazy. And he cannot even ride!" I cried.

"Have a care. That is the new master of Summer's Place you are talking about," said Mr Hadaway.

But I was already running across the hall and out of the door towards the stable yard.

"Oh, Merrylegs," I sobbed, dashing into his stall