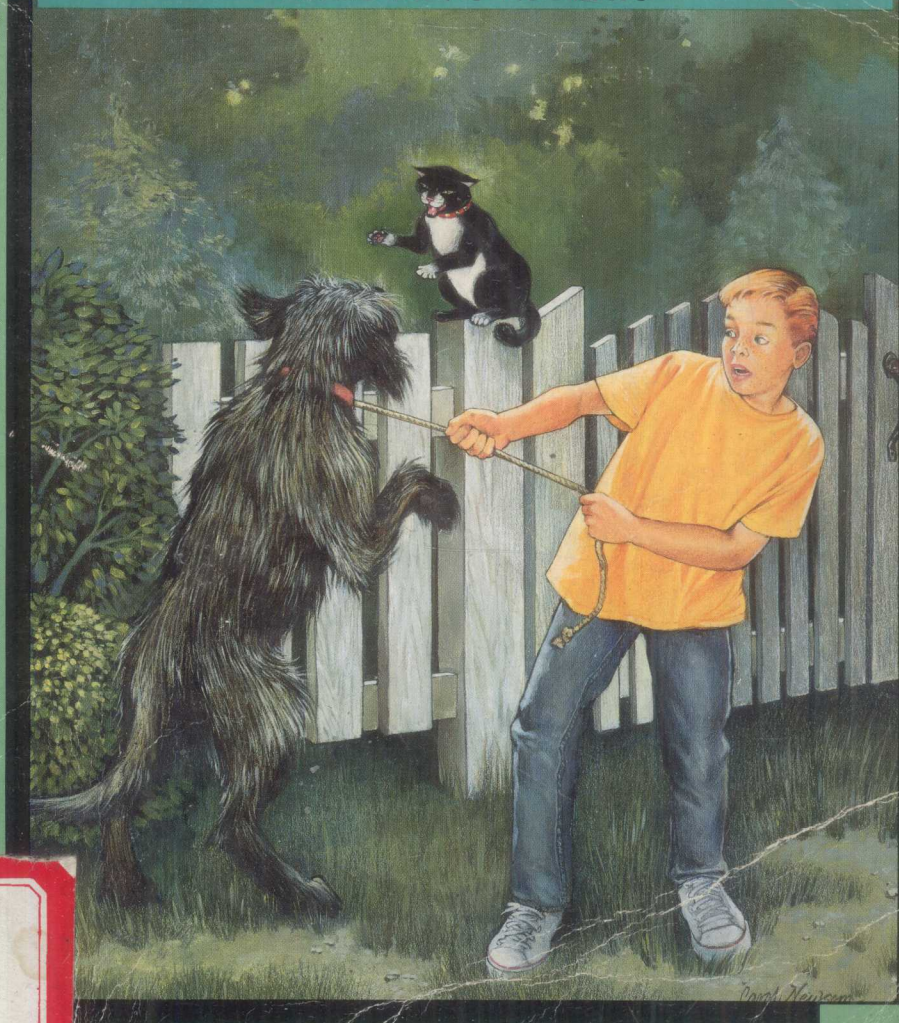
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THE MINDEN CURSE STRIKES AGAIN — WITH CATASTROPHIC RESULTS!

MORE MINDEN CURSES

WILLO DAVIS ROBERTS



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**MORE
MINDEN CURSES**

1

School started two weeks late in Indian Lake that fall. It wasn't late enough for me. I never wanted to go in the first place, any more than I wanted to stay behind with Aunt Mattie and Gramps Minden when my dad went off to take pictures in Ireland for *On the Spot Magazine*.

Gramps turned out to be pretty neat, for an old man, and there was the bonus of having Leroy for a dog, even if he did get me into quite a bit of trouble. But I didn't look forward to going to that goldanged old school. Goldanged is one of Gramps' swear words, and even I can say it in front of Aunt Mattie without making her eyebrows go up.

Actually, living in Indian Lake hadn't been as bad as I'd expected. With Leroy's help I'd gotten involved in all kinds of adventures, including a mystery,

and after I got over being scared half to death, it was interesting to write to my dad about it.

The day school started, though, I figured the mysteries were all over—after all, how many mysteries can you have in a town with only about two thousand people?—and from then on it was going to be just boring, boring, boring.

If it hadn't been for the Minden Curse, I don't suppose I'd have found another mystery. There were quite a few kids in town who had lived there all their lives, and *they* didn't get involved with the Cat Ladies.

Aunt Mattie's mouth goes flat and tight whenever anything happens that she thinks is caused by the Minden Curse. I only found out about it when I came to stay with her and Gramps, but Gramps says Leroy and I have it, too. I guess we do, or I wouldn't have been mixed up in so many weird things from the time I got there.

It isn't really a curse, exactly. It just seems to work out that those who have it are always around when anything interesting happens. Like when the bank is robbed, or the mayor's wife falls off the ladder at the church and breaks her leg, or when there's a kidnapping. That kind of thing. The sheriff said he'd never seen such a crime wave as there was after I came to Indian Lake and had the curse, too.

Anyway, it didn't occur to me that the curse was

working when I set out for school that first morning. It was just plain life. I got up and had pancakes and sausages for breakfast. Aunt Mattie makes good pancakes. That morning I wished I hadn't had them though; they felt like a brick sitting in my stomach. Heavy, even though the pancakes themselves were as light and fluffy as they always were.

"You're not nervous about going to school for the first time, are you, Danny?" Aunt Mattie asked when I was ready to go out the door.

Why do grown-ups ask such stupid questions? How else could I be, but nervous? Even C.B. Hope was nervous about going to a new school, and she'd been going to schools all her life.

I knew better than to admit it, though. Aunt Mattie means well, but as Gramps says, she gets carried away sometimes. She'd have told me all the reasons why I didn't have anything to be nervous about. So I just said, "No, of course not," and took my lunch sack and my new notebook and went out the back door.

The back door faces the road, at our house. That's because all the houses along the lake have their front doors facing the lake. Leroy was sitting on the steps, that fool way he does, as if he's a person, with his rump on the top step and his front feet a couple of steps down. He got up, wagging his tail, sniffing my roast beef sandwiches through the paper bag.

“No,” I told him. “You can’t go this time. You’ll have to stay.”

Leroy looked at me, and his tail almost stopped wagging. Leroy is part Irish wolfhound, and he’s one of the biggest and homeliest dogs I’ve ever seen. He’s smart, though. He’s rescued little kids from fires and drownings and outwitted some kidnappers.

“Stay,” I said.

His tail drooped. In fact, Leroy drooped all over.

“I’ll be home this afternoon,” I said. “So you just stay, right?”

You never saw a sadder looking dog. But he stayed there on the porch as I went down the steps and onto the road.

I could see C.B. Hope walking up ahead of me. I could have yelled at her to wait and we’d walk together. Something told me maybe, at least that first day, we’d be better off if we didn’t arrive together.

C.B.’s real name is Clarissa Beatrix, only she doesn’t like it if anybody calls her that. She had always gone to a big fancy school in the city, but this year her family was staying in Indian Lake, so she was starting at a new school, too.

There was a school bus to pick up the kids who lived more than two miles from school. That didn’t cover C.B. and me; we had to walk. I wondered what it would be like in the winter when there was snow on the ground.

I must have been over half a mile along the road, going past all the cottages and houses that were closed up until next summer, when intuition made me turn and look back. Intuition is that funny little thing inside of you that tells you something without your ever knowing why you know it.

And there, in the middle of the road, was Leroy. He stopped the minute I turned around, dropping his head in a guilty way. The end of his tail wagged, just once, and then he waited.

I glared at him. "Go home! Go on, go home!"

Leroy wilted, like a lettuce leaf when you accidentally run hot water on it instead of cold. He didn't move, though, except to sink closer to the ground.

"Go home, Leroy! I'm going to school, and they don't allow dogs at school!"

He tried to press himself into the gravel and pretend he didn't hear me.

I didn't know much about schools, never having been to one before, but I was pretty sure they wouldn't allow a dog there, especially not one the size of a Shetland pony.

I didn't have a watch, so I couldn't tell how much time I had. I'd left early, though, so maybe there was time to take him back, if I ran.

"OK, come on," I told him, and started to jog back toward the house. Leroy leaped up then, with his

tongue hanging out and his ears flying back in the wind. It was all a big game to Leroy.

Aunt Mattie came out onto the porch when we trotted into the yard. "What's the matter? What did you forget?"

"Nothing. Only Leroy followed me. I guess I'll have to tie him up," I said.

She told me where to find a length of clothesline, and I knotted it through his collar and left him fastened to one of the clothesline posts. He looked so forlorn I almost felt sorry for him, except that now I had to hurry, if I expected to get to school on time.

I slowed down to a walk when I got to the edge of town. I could see a few other kids walking in the same direction, so I figured I must have enough time left. I decided I'd better take the shortest way, though.

I passed the sheriff's office, with the fire hydrant in front of it that Mrs. Trentwood had driven over, and Ben Newton was there, in his tan uniform with the badge on his pocket. He waved, and I waved back.

Then I cut through on the street that went past the Community Church, where Aunt Mattie sang in the choir every Sunday, and over past the house where Paul Engstrom lived, toward the school. I was alongside an old house set back in some trees when I realized two things: there was a great big black cat sitting atop the gatepost at the front of that old house, and Leroy had sneaked up behind me.

Actually, I wouldn't have known the dadratted (that's another one of Gramps' swear words) dog was there except for the look of that cat.

He was huge already, but when he started to swell up, the way cats do when they're threatened by dogs, he was enormous. Even if it was just his hair standing on end, it was enough to make mine do it, too.

He sat there on the post, with a fancy collar around his neck, looking down with amber-colored eyes that were mean as mean can get. His hair stood out, and he spat.

Naturally, since I was almost alongside him, I jumped back and nearly trampled on Leroy. He had the grace to look mildly ashamed, and he was trailing a bit of clothesline around his neck where he'd chewed himself loose. Before I could even say anything, though, Leroy forgot he was in disgrace and made a lunge at that cat.

When Leroy sits down, his head is almost high enough for him to lick me in the face. And when he stands on his hind legs, he can easily look over a six-foot fence.

The gatepost wasn't anywhere near six feet tall.

Leroy went after the cat just about the time I got my wits together and grabbed for the trailing rope. I hauled him off just before he got his face scratched, because that big black cat wasn't giving an inch; as it was, he made a swipe with one white-tipped paw

that couldn't have missed Leroy's nose by a quarter of an inch.

"Stop it, you fool dog!" I yelled, hauling back on the rope. "It would serve you right if I let him scratch you! Maybe you'd learn something! Sit!"

Leroy sat, grinning at me in that way he has when he's having fun, with his tongue lolling out.

The cat made a leap for the lower branches of a big oak tree and from that point of safety looked down at us with the most malevolent eyes I had ever seen. He looked really mean.

Leroy looked back, accepting defeat as gracefully as he did everything else, and thumped his tail on the sidewalk.

"What am I going to do with you now, you dumb old dog?" I felt like kicking him. I didn't because there was a lady on the porch of the huge old house watching us. "If I take you home again, I'll be late for school. Maybe you've made me late already. And if you go along to school, you'll just cause trouble."

Leroy's tail wagged a bit slower, though he was still grinning at me. There was enough rope left attached to his collar so he could be tied up again, maybe to a tree near the school grounds, only what would be the use? He'd just chew through it again.

I took off what was left of the rope and stuck it in my pocket. "OK. You're on your own. I'm going to pretend I don't know you," I said and took off walking as fast as I could.

Even so, I was late. The confounded bell was ringing as I went through the front doors. (I learned a lot of words from Gramps.) The hall was empty except for a statue of an Indian chief right in the middle of the front end of it.

I swallowed hard. I wasn't even sure where to go. Paul Engstrom had said he'd meet me inside the front doors, but I guessed he hadn't been able to wait.

A man came out of a door and looked toward me. He was a smallish man with thinning hair and he wore glasses. "You're a little late," he said mildly.

I guessed maybe he was Mr. Pepper, the principal.

"Yes, sir. My dog followed me, and I had to take him back home."

"Oh, yes. Leroy," he said, and then I *knew* he was Mr. Pepper. Leroy had rescued his little kids when one of them set a fire in the Pepper kitchen. "Well, let's see. You're going into the seventh grade, isn't that right?"

"Yes, sir," I said, and those pancakes now felt like *two* bricks in my stomach.

He took me along to a classroom and opened the door. There was a teacher at the front of the room, a little dried-up lady with gray hair. She turned and looked at us, and so did all the kids in the room.

"Miss Twitten, this is Danny Minden. He's going to be in your class this year," Mr. Pepper said.

"Well, come in and sit down," Miss Twitten said. She didn't sound particularly pleased to meet me.

"There's an empty seat right there in the front row."

I guessed Paul was in there, somewhere. I didn't have a chance to look. I felt very strange with all those faces turned in my direction, and I slid into the seat she'd indicated.

"I will expect everyone," she said, looking right at me, "to arrive for class *on time*."

My ears felt so hot I figured they were about as red as my hair.

After the first couple of minutes, though, it wasn't so bad. She was making up a list of our names and assigning seats. I felt a little better when she put me in one about halfway back, on the outside row. She had a yardstick she carried around all the time, to point at things, and sometimes she smacked someone over the knuckles with it. Although she didn't do it that first day, I kept expecting her to hit me.

"Hey, Danny!" A hoarse whisper drifted across the aisle. "What happened to you?"

"There will be no *talking* while I assign the seating," Miss Twitten said, so I didn't dare answer. I was glad that Paul was sitting right across the aisle from me, though. Paul was the only local kid I'd met so far, besides C.B. Hope, who wasn't really local. We hadn't started out too well together, but after we got acquainted we liked each other all right.

I didn't get to talk to him until recess. They didn't call it recess, they called it break time. We all went

outside, and some of the kids went racing for balls and bats and stuff. When I stopped on the edge of the yard, Paul and three other kids came over right away.

"Hey, Danny, how come you were late?" Paul demanded. He was bigger than I was, being a year older, and so were the other guys. Because I'd studied with my dad, I was a year ahead in school for my age, which I didn't think was going to be an advantage.

"Leroy followed me. I took him back once, and then he caught up with me and tried to jump at a big black cat on a fence post. There was an old lady on the porch, so I didn't think it was a good idea to let him do it."

They all looked at each other as if I'd said something significant.

"Yeah? Where was this cat and the old lady? What did the house look like?" Paul asked.

"A great big house set back in the trees. Red, dark red color, with the paint sort of peeling on it. It has some towers or something, like an old wooden castle."

They all looked at each other again.

"Did Leroy tangle with Killer?" Paul asked.

"Who's Killer? The cat?"

"Big black devil with a white patch on his chest and two white front feet. Wears a red collar with jewels on it."

"Yeah, that's him. Is his name really Killer?"

“Well, I think the Cat Ladies call him Chester, but everybody else in town calls him Killer. There’s not a dog in Indian Lake he hasn’t licked.”

“He hasn’t licked Leroy. Not yet, anyway. Maybe it’s a good thing I pulled him off when I did.”

Paul licked his lips. “Did she say anything to you? The old lady?”

“No. Her cat was OK, he jumped up into a tree.”

One of the other kids was about my height only a lot heavier. In fact, he was fat. “Did you see anything?” he asked.

“See anything? Anything like what?” I wanted to know.

“At the old house where the Cat Ladies live. Like a face in the upstairs window, or anything?”

“I didn’t have time to look at the upstairs window. Why? What should I have seen?”

“Tubby saw a face there once, in one of the towers,” Paul said. “That’s Tubby Zazorian, you know; his dad is the manager of the bank.”

I’d met Mr. Zazorian. I was in his bank when it got robbed, and Leroy and I recovered the money. We didn’t get a reward, but we got our pictures in the paper.

“The house is haunted,” Tubby said. I could see why they called him Tubby. He sure didn’t look as if he missed very many meals.

I looked around at the other faces, wondering if they were putting me on. Come to think of it, the