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# The Mystery of Hidden Village



ANNETTE  
TURNER

COMPLETE  
AND  
UNABRIDGED

## MYSTERIOUS QUESTIONS . . .

Haunted Rusty and Nick Jerrold on their high trail to adventure—

- Who is Bob Clayton?
- Why was Marcia thrown from a horse?
- Who wrote this in Rusty's diary—  
*"Why don't you ask your Prince Charming about the Hidden Village?"*
- What did Dr. Fundy know about Hidden Village?
- What was the secret of the Indians?

**"Suspense and atmosphere."**

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**"An exciting story."—Library Journal**

**"Plenty of action."—New York Times**

**The  
MYSTERY  
of  
HIDDEN  
VILLAGE**

Annette Turngren



A BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOK  
Published by BERKLEY PUBLISHING CORP.

**to my niece, SYLVIA**

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***Originally published by  
Thomas Nelson & Sons***

**BERKLEY EDITION, NOVEMBER, 1959**

***BERKLEY MEDALLION BOOKS are published by  
The Berkley Publishing Corporation,  
145 West 57th Street, New York 19, New York***

**Printed in the United States of America**

## A MESSAGE FROM CY

### Chapter I

*IT WAS* like being a stranger in your own rumpus room, Rusty Jerrold thought, looking about her at the gay calico dresses of the girls, the bright plaid shirts and blue denims of the boys lining up for the square dance.

"It's as if a part of me were already on the way to Arizona to join Pops and Cy, and the rest of me were here at home in Minneapolis with Aunt Ede and Nick and the gang. It's awful!"

Not that she had been neglected, of course. The farewell party was being given in her honor, hers and Nick's. And everyone was doing his best to make the occasion one they'd remember a long time.

Rusty hadn't wanted a farewell party, and neither had her brother Nick. "But you can't be rude about it," Aunt Ede had said. "Ann and Barry and the others would feel terrible if they couldn't give you a sendoff."

Barry was coming across the floor now, seeking her out, and Rusty put on a bright smile.

"You were looking as if you'd lost your last friend," Barry said, pulling her to her feet. "What's the matter? Got cold feet?"

"Well, how'd *you* like to have to go to Arizona?" Rusty asked with a laugh. "How'd you like to have to live on a dude ranch, go swimming and riding every day, eat nothing but steaks and fresh strawberries—"

"Hey!" He held her off at arm's length and looked at her hard. Rusty shook back her chestnut braids and gave him a saucy grin.

"You can't fool your Uncle Barry," he said, soberly. "You're worried about your dad and Cy, aren't you, Rusty?"

Rusty's smile faded. "I guess I am," she admitted. "Pops, particularly. He's well now, but—why haven't they come home? It isn't like Pops to stay away from his patients, though Dr. Lowe *is* taking over for him. As for Cy, digging up half the state of Arizona, by the sound of his letters, and Pops feels his *digging* is so important he lets him miss a whole half year at the university."

Barry led her out to where the set was being formed for the dance.

"If Cy's going to be an archaeologist, I suppose his *digging* *is* important," he said. "But I'll bet your dad just delayed coming home so you and Nick could take this trip."

"And Aunt Ede," Rusty said, accepting Barry's theory almost too readily. "She's the one who loves to travel."

Opposite them in the set were Rusty's younger brother, Nick, and her best friend, Ann. Joe picked up his guitar and shouted, "Honor your partners!" Rusty turned to Barry, made a graceful curtsy, then at Joe's command, "Honor your corners!" she faced the "gent" on her right and repeated the gesture. Joe struck up something that sounded vaguely like *Turkey in the Straw*, and they were off, swinging, sashaying, promenading, allemanding right and left.

In a chair near the door Aunt Ede, her foot keeping time with the music, smiled and nodded as Rusty and Barry swung by. "Have a good time," she seemed to be saying.

"And I would," Rusty thought, "even though I have to say good-by to them all when it's over. It's just that if something's wrong with Pops, and he and Cy are keeping it from us—"

What had been intended as a six-weeks' convalescence for Dr. Jerrold after a stiff bout with pneumonia during the Christmas holidays had lengthened into a six-months' stay. Rusty's older brother Cy, who had dropped out of

his first year at the university to travel south with his father, had stayed on, too.

"Pops is his old self again," Cy had written as long ago as March, and Rusty had begun looking for them to return then. But they hadn't come home. Almost blithely, it seemed to Rusty, Pops had shrugged off all responsibility, claiming that Cy could learn more with a spade than a book, in his opinion.

But that wasn't like Pops. He and Rusty were alike in so many ways, Aunt Ede often said, and especially in their feeling responsible for everyone and everything.

"A couple of worry warts, that's what you are," Nick would tease. And Rusty would retort that they'd got that way living with him and Cy and Aunt Ede, who didn't worry *enough*.

"That's all!" Joe shouted, and laid aside his guitar.

The set broke up, and Barry ushered Rusty back to a chair beside Aunt Ede. Ann took the floor. She had a sheaf of typewritten programs in her hands.

"It's time for the entertainment," she announced, her cheeks glowing. "Maybe everyone would rather dance, but we've worked on this show for weeks, and you're going to have to sit through it."

"It isn't that bad," Barry assured them as he handed out the programs. "But don't try to leave. We've got men stationed at all doors."

It was really rather good, Rusty thought, as she clapped vigorously for an encore to the first number, a piano duet by "The Sixteen Flying Fingers and Four Thumbs." And what a wonderful gang they were! She wondered if in all of Arizona one could find such grand friends as these.

It was during the second performance—once hadn't satisfied the gang—of a skit entitled "*Rusty and Nick Discover the Deep West*, starring Marian Haight and Joe Wilson in the title roles," that the doorbell rang. Joe had just embarked on his sobbing guitar and vocal version of *Little Nick, the Wrangler*, words by Barry. He stopped.

"Thought I heard a bell," he said. "Somebody at the door upstairs, Rusty."

"I'll get it." Aunt Ede, wiping tears of laughter from her eyes, rose from the couch. "But ad-lib until I get back, Joe. I don't want to miss a word of that terrible song."

Joe's ad-libbing was just as funny as the song. He held them spellbound with his drawling tale of shooting "mesquites" with his "eight-shooter—I was the only cowpoke that toted one of them."

"It's a shame Aunt Ede's missing this," Rusty thought. "What's taking her so long?"

Then she forgot her anxiety again when Marian, coming to the aid of her valiant co-star, began reciting something she called *The Fall of the Alamo*.

"Not *here*, Marian!" voices shouted. "That's Texas! You can't move the Alamo to Arizona!"

"But I don't know any poems about Arizona!" Marian protested. "Texas is out West too, isn't it?"

Just then Rusty saw Aunt Ede in the doorway. She was beckoning frantically, her plump face agitated. Rusty slipped out of her chair and, circling the group facing the improvised stage, made her way to the door.

Aunt Ede pulled her out into the hall and closed the door.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "You'll have to cancel everything. And those presents. I know they brought presents, all those packages. Oh, dear!"

Rusty caught her breath. "What's happened? Aunt Ede, what is it?"

"Your father!" said Aunt Ede. "It's because of the car, you know. Isabel Fundy's car. And you can't let her down, Rusty. Why, I went to school with Isabel Fundy, only she wasn't Isabel Fundy then. Isabel Burton, she was. And now, well, you'll have to send them home, Rusty. Tell them there isn't going to be any party."

Any other time Rusty would have found Aunt Ede's higgledy-piggledies, as she called them, more amusing than annoying. But now she was frightened.



"What's happened to Pops?" she broke in, sternly.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing at all. You'd think Jim would have thought about this before we made all the plans. But I suppose he didn't know she wanted the car, though why she'd want an old car like that—and your lovely gray traveling suit, dear. You can't wear that, not if you drive."

"Aunt Ede," said Rusty firmly, "if you don't tell me this instant what it's all about, so help me, I'll—I'll scream! I will!"

Aunt Ede looked more flustered than ever. "I've been trying to," she said unhappily. "I don't know where to start."

"Start with the doorbell," Rusty prompted in a clenched-teeth tone.

"Oh, yes, that. It was Mrs. Muller with the ice cream. She made it, you know, it was supposed to be my surprise. For the party. Only now—"

"Uh-uh!" Rusty held up a warning finger. "No going off the track, now. So Mrs. Muller brought the ice cream. Then what?"

"Then the phone rang."

"And it was Pops?"

"No, Cy. And I guess he wanted to talk to you."

Rusty couldn't keep from grinning. How Cy must have groaned when he had to give an important message to Aunt Ede. She always got rattled and garbled them up.

"And what did Cy have on his mind?" Rusty asked.

Aunt Ede prodded a dimpled cheek with her forefinger and tried her best. "He said not to call you away from the party because it would bring on questions and this was strictly—strictly—"

"Hush-hush?"

"No-o-o. Strictly—*entre nous!*" Aunt Ede finished triumphantly.

"Same difference," said Rusty. "And then what?"

"He said there wasn't a minute to lose. We can't take the train. Oh, and the reservations, Rusty. You'll have to cancel them right away!"

"Yes, darling," said Rusty. "But why can't we take the train Saturday morning as we'd planned?"

"Because you have to find the car, Isabel Fundy's car. Isabel's down at the Lazy-K Ranch too, you know. And four years ago, after Professor Fundy died, she sold her car and now she wants you to find it and drive it down for her."

Rusty stared. "Now, Aunt Ede, you know that can't be right! Try to remember what Cy said, darling!"

"But that's it!" Aunt Ede was all pink and pretty indignation. "You'd think I wasn't in my right mind the way you and Nick always—"

"Of course you are!" Rusty gave her aunt a quick hug. "Only you're such a lovable rattlebrain. Are you *sure* Cy said we were to find the car? Where? How?"

Aunt Ede twisted her plump fingers together. "He must have said—where to look for it. I'm sure he did. Oh, Rusty, I do get things mixed up so!"

"Never mind," Rusty said, but her tone was anxious. "You'll think of it, Aunt Ede. Did he mean whoever has the car now would just let us use it?"

"Oh, no! You must buy it back from the man. Isabel wants it desperately, Cy said. Only I can't think of the man's name—and now all that ice cream—"

"Don't worry about *that!*" Rusty said, suddenly remembering Joe and the waiting audience beyond the door. "Come on back to the party, Aunt Ede. When you least expect it, the man's name will come to you. If it doesn't, we'll just have to phone Cy and get it." To herself she added, we'll just have to phone Cy in any case. This is the wildest thing I ever heard.

Aunt Ede reluctantly allowed herself to be ushered back into the noisy room where Joe was still trying against great odds to hold his audience. Hank Weaver and Estelle were playing Ping-pong at a table in the back of the room, and others of the gang had broken off into little groups of two or three, buzzing with conversation. But when Rusty and

Aunt Ede came in, the Ping-pong paddles were dropped and everyone raced back to his seat again.

"All right, Joe, let's go!" someone shouted, and Joe obediently raised his guitar and began to sob out once again the sad story of *Little Nick, the Wrangler*.

But it wasn't the same. Aunt Ede sat with a fixed smile on her face, and Rusty could see that she wasn't listening.

"I suppose she's trying to think of that man's name, poor dear!" Rusty thought. "But even if she does think of it, we certainly can't go scouting for an old car, and buying it, and driving it to Arizona on the strength of that perfectly idiotic phone call. I wonder what Cy really *did* say? I'll have to wait until after the party's over to call him."

When Joe had finished his song, Aunt Ede rose, all graciousness, and thanked him.

"It was wonderful, Joe," she said, and hesitated.

"Oh, dear," Rusty thought. "I hope she doesn't embarrass him by saying any more."

"You mustn't mind if I didn't laugh as hard the second time," Aunt Ede went on. "I've just had a disturbing phone—Jackson!" The last was almost a shout, and Aunt Ede turned triumphantly to Rusty. "Jackson!" she cried again.

Somebody laughed, and Nick drawled, "Hey, Aunt Ede! You giving us jive talk?"

"That's the man's *name!*" Aunt Ede protested. "Oh, I'm so glad I thought of it! Andrew Jackson, and Cy said he was in the phone book."

Across the room Nick threw Rusty an amused and bewildered look. Rusty gave him back a shrug of resignation and a grin that said, "Don't worry. It's not as crazy as it sounds."

He had to be content with that while the noise and hubbub lasted, for Aunt Ede's announcement started everyone talking and laughing. Someone turned on the record player. Ann and Marian dashed off to bring in the sandwiches and cold drinks. Mysteriously a table appeared, and on it, a dozen packages of various sizes and assorted wrappings.

"Surprise! Surprise!" Ann shouted, and the others took

it up, more in fun than anything else, for the secret plans for the party had leaked out long ago.

Rusty, opening packages with Nick at the table, her cheeks under the bright chestnut hair flushed with excitement, her brown eyes glowing, looked up to see Barry studying her with an amused grin.

"Are you surprised, Rusty?"

Rusty's flush deepened. "I certainly am!" Surprised and all at sea over these new developments. A little jittery, too, and you couldn't fool Barry.

Not until after the sandwiches had been devoured and Aunt Ede had brought in the homemade ice cream—freezer and all, because she said the boys would get more fun dishing it out and licking the dasher than eating—did Nick have a chance to corner Rusty and ask her what was up. Rusty's story, got out between bites of chocolate cake and numerous interruptions from the rest of the gang, sounded almost as disjointed as her aunt's. But Nick seemed to think it made sense. At the idea of driving to Arizona instead of going by train, his face lit up.

"That means we can take Crink along!" he exclaimed.

Having to leave the cocker spaniel behind had been a matter neither Rusty nor Nick wanted to think about.

"Oh, Nick! So we can! We won't have to leave him with Mrs. Muller after all."

"I'm sold," Nick said. "When do we go looking for Andrew Jackson?"

"First thing tomorrow," Rusty said hastily as she saw Barry and Joe heading for their corner.

When the time came to say good-bye, Barry said, "Can't tell, I might get down to the station Saturday morning to see you off."

Rusty drew in her breath quickly. They'd have to tell him, but how? Nick said quickly, "Any day you get up that early, my boy, especially during vacation, *you'll* be the one that's off!"

"Well, *I'll* be there," Ann said stoutly.

"Oh, I'll see you before then," Rusty assured her.

Joe strummed a few bars of *How Can I Leave Thee* on his guitar as he went away, but all in all, it wasn't too sad a leave-taking.

"There are loads of sandwiches over," Rusty said in a bleak voice, as she looked about the empty recreation room afterward. "We should have sent some home with them."

Nick began putting away the chairs, but Rusty lingered at the table where the gifts were still nestling in their gay wrappings. She touched the green satin pajamas, Ann's gift, with caressing fingers. Tomorrow she'd try them on. Her bags were all packed, there wasn't anything left to do tomorrow except—

Except go out and buy a car. Not just any car. A very particular car that maybe didn't exist at all except in Aunt Ede's imagination. If only she had talked to Cy herself!

"And I think I'd better do just that right now," she told Nick as they went upstairs. "I know it's an extravagance, but this whole thing's much too queer."

Aunt Ede had gone up to her room, and Rusty kept her voice low as she talked to the operator. It was a person-to-person call, and she waited expectantly as she heard it relayed along the trunk lines. She even heard the ranch answer, and a man's voice say, "Jerrold? There's no one here by that name!"

"But of course there is!" Rusty told the operator when she repeated the message. "There's some mistake. My father and brother are both there!"

"I'll try them again," the operator said. "I'll call you when I have your party."

Nick and Rusty looked at each other blankly.

"Some dimwit who doesn't know anything must have answered," Nick assured her.

But ten minutes later Rusty got the same report again. "No such person at that number." She hung up in despair.

"Call her back," Nick said. "Tell her to keep trying. Tell her it's a matter of life and death."

But even this urgent message produced nothing.

In bed, some time later, Rusty went over and over the whole fantastic incident. Suddenly she sat bolt upright in the dark.

"But—but how could I have been so stupid!" she thought. "None of us can drive a car, and Cy knows it! I wonder who *did* talk to Aunt Ede."

She snapped on the light, scrambled out of bed, and tiptoed into the hall. A light still showed under Aunt Ede's door, and Rusty knocked softly.

"Come in!" Aunt Ede called. She was sitting up in bed, her soft brown hair in two plaits over her silk-clad shoulders. She was reading—of all things! Rusty thought—a cookbook. "What is it, dear? I've just found the nicest recipe for watermelon pickles," she said happily, pushing her glasses up on her forehead and making room for Rusty at the foot of the bed.

"But you won't be here to make watermelon pickles," Rusty said.

Aunt Ede sighed. "They do sound good."

Rusty took a deep breath. "Aunt Ede, are you sure it was Cy on the phone this evening?"

Aunt Ede blinked. "Why, of course. Rusty, I'm not *that* stupid! Now you've really gone too far."

"I didn't mean it the way it sounded, you little goose!" Rusty assured her hastily. "It's only—how did Cy ~~think~~ we were going to get that car to Arizona? We can't any of us drive, you know."

"No, I suppose we can't." Aunt Ede still looked hurt. "I suppose we could learn."

"In a day?" In spite of her contrition, Rusty's voice sharpened. "Aunt Ede, it takes *weeks!*"

"Oh, does it, dear? Then, well, then perhaps we'd better not. Why, Rusty, I don't know. I suppose Cy must have said, but I can't remember. Perhaps—perhaps we could hire someone to drive us. You don't suppose Mr. Jackson would?"

"Mr. Jackson!" Rusty groaned. "Aunt Ede, do you really think there *is* a Mr. Jackson?"

"Oh, yes, dear. Of course there is. You'll find him tomorrow. He's in the phone book, you know."

"Yes, I know," Rusty said resignedly. She got up. "Well, good night, Aunt Ede. Sweet dreams." She popped a kiss on her aunt's cheek and went out.

In the hall she hesitated, then snapped on the stairway light and shuffled softly down the carpeted stairs. The phone book was on the little table in the entrance hall. Quickly Rusty thumbed through the *J's* until she found the *Jacksons*. Over and over again her finger traced down the page. Finally she closed the book and straightened up.

There was no Andrew Jackson listed.

## THE CHASE

### Chapter II

*BREAKFAST* in the Jerrold household had never had much sense to it, Rusty reflected the next morning, as she tied back her thick mane with a blue ribbon and slipped a cool gray linen dress over her shoulders. Even when Pops and Cy were home, Pops as often as not would be called away to the hospital at the crack of dawn. Why did people always need a doctor at the crack of dawn? And Cy would have his nose in a book as soon as he got his long legs under the table. Oh, the times she'd been exasperated by that!

But right now she'd give a whole lot if she could go down to the breakfast room and find the "old fossil," as Nick called his brother, hunched over his plate, a book open beside it. Would she have questions to fire at him!

This business of the non-existent Mr. Jackson, though the name Cy—if it was Cy—had given Aunt Ede over the phone might be almost anything. And who had answered at the ranch last night and insisted the Jerrolds weren't

there? And what had Cy meant by telling them to drive the car down to Arizona when he knew they couldn't drive?

"Riddles, riddles!" Rusty brushed vigorously at her gray suedes, and, leaning one hand on the dressing table, slipped her feet into the pumps. She'd have to wait for the answers to most of her questions until she saw Cy, but the question of Andrew Jackson couldn't wait.

Nick wasn't anywhere around when she came down to breakfast. Aunt Ede, pretty as ever in a gay pink housecoat, was sitting alone at the table in the breakfast room.

"Nick's playing tennis," she informed Rusty, beaming at her over the toaster. "And darling, I've just remembered something else Cy said."

Rusty choked over her orange juice. "What, Aunt Ede?" She waited.

"It's for after you get the car, dear," Aunt Ede explained. "Cy said you mustn't let anyone overhaul it. Don't let any garageman get his hands on it, he said. Does that make sense, Rusty?" Aunt Ede drew her pretty brows together in a frown so sweetly helpless that Rusty had a hard time to keep from laughing.

With the corners of her mouth twitching she assured her aunt: "It makes just as much sense as the rest of it. The whole thing is simply wild. Why shouldn't we have the car overhauled? Suppose it breaks down on the way to Arizona—always supposing we *get* the car—supposing there *is* a car. Oh, Aunt Ede, honestly!"

"I know, dear." Aunt Ede's voice was contrite. "I'm so sorry I was so stupid. If only I'd let you talk to Cy!"

"Oh, Aunt Ede, it isn't you I'm wrathful about!" Rusty burst out, "It's the whole thing! Why couldn't everything have gone off according to the plans? I don't know where I'm at!"

But her cheeks were burning. She *had* been thinking how much better it would have been if she had answered the phone.

"I don't know what we can do unless we can reach, I



mean, unless I call Cy," she added. "There's no Andrew Jackson in the phone book. I looked."

"In the St. Paul directory?" Aunt Ede asked. "Cy said in the St. Paul directory."

"Oh!" It was a groan of anguish, but Rusty couldn't help it. Much as she loved Aunt Ede, who had been like a mother to them for eight years, there were times when Rusty wanted to shake her. When Pops was home she'd just look at him, and the twinkle in his gray eyes would make Rusty chuckle too. He had always thought his younger sister was amusing, but without Pops or Nick there Rusty sometimes couldn't see anything funny in Aunt Ede's scatterbrainedness.

She got up and stalked out to the hall. Minneapolis and St. Paul, the Twin Cities. Why hadn't she thought of looking in the other book? And there it was—Andrew Jackson, the man she'd have to visit as soon as she'd downed her breakfast and corraled Nick.

Today of all days Nick had to be late coming home from the courts. By the time he'd had his breakfast, fed Crinkles, and got himself cleaned up, it was nearly ten. Rusty hardly let him finish dressing, she was so anxious to be on the way, and once they were on the Selby-Lake car, trundling away to St. Paul, she was in a fever of haste to get there. She looked at her watch so often that Nick said at last, "Calm down, sis. This isn't a plane."

"Don't I know it!" Rusty cried. "I never in my life rode on a pokier car."

Her mind kept running ahead, clearing the morning traffic with fantastic leaps. By the time they reached the Lake Street bridge over the Mississippi, she had already imagined the interview with Mr. Jackson over, the car purchased—oh, a dream of a car, really—and herself behind the wheel, speeding toward Arizona. Behind the wheel? Well, of course, she couldn't, she didn't know how to drive. And who, on a minute's notice, could they get to drive the car, supposing they found it?

"We're almost there," Nick said. "What was that number again?"

Dazedly, Rusty fumbled in her purse and brought out the address she'd jotted down from the phone book.

"What about that call to Cy? Any report this morning?" Nick asked as they walked along after getting off the streetcar.

Rusty shook her head. "The operator's still trying, she said."

"Oh, well," said Nick cheerfully. "We'll worry about that later. At least we can tell him we have the car when we do get him."

Mr. Jackson's street, when they found it, wasn't prepossessing, and Mr. Jackson's house was one of the shabbier ones in the block. Quickly Rusty revised her picture of the dream of a car. Maybe it wouldn't be a robin's-egg blue. That color hardly seemed to fit in with the shabby porch, the screen door that needed mending, the little wren of a woman who came to answer the bell.

"Mr. Jackson?" the woman said. "You'll find him out back somewhere, weeding. Just go around the side of the house there. The dog won't hurt you."

The dog sunning himself on the walk was an old brown fox terrier who wagged a friendly tail when Nick stooped to pat him. Then he followed them, still wagging, as they rounded the corner of the house. In the little garden at the back, aflame with poppies and roses, a man in blue overalls was kneeling, loving attention fixed on a bed of daisies. He looked up as Rusty and Nick approached, anchored his glasses more firmly on his nose, and got slowly to his feet.

"Looking for me?" he asked.

"You're Mr. Jackson, aren't you?" Rusty waited for Nick to say something, but when he only drew his black brows together in an embarrassed scowl and stooped to pat the dog, she decided the interview was up to her.

"That's right."

"Do you—you bought a car from Mrs. Fundy, about

four years ago?" It was harder than she had thought it would be, going to a total stranger with this fantastic request. Especially when the stranger kept staring at her in such an odd manner.

Mr. Jackson rubbed his hands on his overalls. "That's right."

"Well, we—we're supposed to buy it back from you, Mr. Jackson." Why didn't Nick come to her aid? "Mrs. Fundy wants it back."

Mr. Jackson gave another rub to his hands and said slowly: "You're about three years too late, young lady. See that empty garage? Been that way a long time. Eyesight got too bad to be driving, so I sold the car."

"You—sold it!" Not once had Rusty thought of such a thing. Even Nick raised up sharply, his interest in the dog forgotten.

"Yep," said Mr. Jackson. "Never was too comfortable for Mrs. Jackson anyway. She always sat in the back."

"Oh," said Rusty. "You—you wouldn't remember who bought it, would you?"

"Yes, I would. Fellow by the name of Hanson, over in Minneapolis. Runs a bakery. I can get you the address if you want it."

"Oh, would you?" Rusty's knees felt weak and she sat down on a white bench among the flowers to wait while Mr. Jackson went slowly up the back steps and into the house.

"Hanson," said Nick glumly. "There must be fifty Hansons in Minneapolis."

Rusty didn't answer. All this must be a dream, she thought. If she opened her eyes, she'd wake up and find none of it was real.

It was when Mr. Jackson came out and gave her the address that the dream began to take on a nightmare quality.

"Funny you should come asking for that car," Mr. Jackson said, slowly filling his pipe and lighting it. "You're the second one today's been after it."

Rusty gasped. "You mean, someone *else* came to buy it from you? *Today?*"

"Not more than half an hour ago," Mr. Jackson said. "Young fellow, light-colored hair. Sandy, I guess you'd call it."

"You—you gave *him* Mr. Hanson's address, too?" Rusty stammered.

"Certainly. Any reason why I shouldn't?"

"No, no, of course not!" She threw Nick a wild look.

"Come on!" Nick cried. He grabbed Rusty's hand and pulled her after him toward the walk.

"Just a minute!" said Mr. Jackson. Rusty turned.

"Oh, thank you, thank you!" she gasped.

But Mr. Jackson shook his head. "Didn't mean that. What I meant was, I put Mr. Hanson's phone number on that slip of paper I gave you. That's more than the other fellow got."

"I don't understand—" Rusty began, bewildered.

"Neither do I." Mr. Jackson shrugged, and for the first time there was a hint of a smile on his face. "But if I was you, I'd phone Hanson. You go tearing off to Minneapolis, you'll never get that car."

"Oh, you dear!" Rusty cried. Except for Nick's tugging at her, she would have run back and thrown her arms about Mr. Jackson.

In the drugstore on the corner, Rusty insisted that Nick stand by the half-opened door of the phone booth while she called Mr. Hanson. "Just for moral support," she pleaded.

The brusque voice that answered her ring sent her heart down into her shoes. Even if they were in time, a man with a voice as gruff as that "Hello!" wouldn't listen to her story. She knew it.

When she had stammered out her question, only silence came back over the wire.

"Mr. Hanson! Are you there?" Rusty's voice rose in an anxious treble.

"Don't yell. I'm listening."

"But do you have the car?"

"No. Sold it. Wait a minute. Someone just came into the bakery."

"Please, Mr. Hanson!" There was no answer.

It seemed ages, and it *was* long enough for the operator to ask for another coin, before she heard Mr. Hanson pick up his phone again.

"All right, now. What kind of game is this?"

"Game?" Rusty echoed.

"I'm busy. If you young people haven't anything better to do than go on treasure hunts when you could be in school, or working—"

Rusty was so startled she almost giggled.

"Treasure hunt?" she said. "But—"

"One of your gang just came in for the name of the fellow I sold that car to. You can ask him. Now don't bother me any more."

"Mr. Hanson!" Rusty almost shouted it into the phone. "You *didn't!* Why, why, he's on the other *side!*" Just for a minute it seemed real, the treasure hunt. "Oh, please, Mr. Hanson, I asked you first!"

There were sputtering noises at the other end. Then in a resigned tone, Mr. Hanson gave in. "Fellow by the name of Opperdink bought it. Lives in St. Paul somewhere. Now don't bother me again, do you hear?"

"Opperdink!" said Rusty. "I mean—thank you, Mr. Hanson."

But Mr. Hanson had already hung up.

Feverishly, she and Nick skimmed through the directory. "St. Paul! We're in luck!" Nick chortled. "Here it is. Selby Avenue. Why, Rusty, we can walk!"

"We aren't walking!" cried Rusty. "We're taking a cab. Even if it's only two blocks! We'll see who gets there first *this time!*"

It was eight blocks. During the brief ride, Rusty turned to Nick with a puzzled frown on her face.

"Nick, what if it's just a huge trick someone's playing

on us? Last night, when Aunt Ede went up to answer the door, where were Barry and Ann?"

Nick glowered. "Are you nuts?" he asked. "What would anyone want to play tricks on Aunt Ede for? She never hurt a fly!"

"Oh, not *hurting* tricks! They might have phoned her and said it was Cy just to play a joke on *us*. I know it sounds crazy, but Nick, how do you account for someone else trying to buy that car?"

A snort from Nick. "And I suppose this sandy-haired character who's running ahead of us trying to buy the car before we get there is *Barry*?"

"I don't know," said Rusty in a tired tone. "He does have light hair, I guess it could be called sandy."

Another snort from Nick. "Don't see any point to it. Look here, Rusty, nobody would pull a stunt like that. Not Barry, certainly. Telling Aunt Ede to cancel the reservations—"

"Oh!" Rusty clapped a hand to her forehead. "I forgot to!"

"Never mind," said Nick. "Maybe Aunt Ede will think of it."

Rusty tried to comfort herself with that. The taxi had halted outside a barber shop, and the driver turned ~~in~~ his seat.

"That's the number," he said.

Rusty and Nick climbed out. There was no one on the street, no sandy-haired character, no car that might conceal a sandy-haired character. But when they entered the barber shop, they got a severe jolt. In one of the three chairs, in the midst of having his hair cut, sat a blond young man.

"Oh, he couldn't!" breathed Rusty. "He couldn't possibly, unless he flew! He was talking to Mr. Hanson just a minute ago!"

"Haircut?" The barber, a short, bald man with oversize mustaches, looked quizzically at Nick's dark crew cut, at Rusty's glowing mane. Nick grinned.

"Nope. Not today, I guess. You Mr. Opperdinck?"

"Yes, that's my name." He went on snipping, while the young man in the chair turned interested eyes on the newcomers.

"We just wanted some information," Nick said.

Rusty was speechless, her eyes on the man in the chair.

"Information?" Mr. Opperdinck's shoulders moved in a tiny shrug. He nodded toward the chairs along the wall. He didn't say, "Sit down and wait until I've finished," but he might as well have said it.

Then Rusty came to.

"But this can't wait. Mr. Opperdinck," she said. "We've got to talk to you right away, and alone!"

The young man in the chair turned his head. "Go ahead, Willy," he said. "I'll wait." He smiled at Rusty. "Get more for my money that way."

In the back room to which Mr. Opperdinck reluctantly ushered them, Rusty again told her story. Mr. Opperdinck, clippers in hand, leaned back in a chair and listened.

When she had finished she waited, breathless, for Mr. Opperdinck's answer. And when it came she nearly fell off her chair.

"Yes," said Mr. Opperdinck. "I have the car. It's right out in back."

When she had recovered from her surprise, Rusty asked the next question in a voice not quite steady. "And you'll sell it to us?"

Mr. Opperdinck smiled, his round face creasing. "Just like that?" he asked. "You don't ask to see it, you don't know is it a good car or a bad one, you don't ask to drive it around the block, even, to see if it runs."

"It doesn't matter," Rusty blurted out without thinking. Then, "Oh, of course it does, I didn't mean that, but—"

"But?" said Mr. Opperdinck. He smiled again. "It's lucky you come to Willy Opperdinck, one honest man. That car, it's not much good. Why that woman you talk about wants it back—well, that's her business. One thing

I know, I don't want it. Not if I can get a good cash price for it. You of age?"

"I'm sixteen," said Rusty. "And my brother's fifteen."

Mr. Opperdinck threw out his hands and shrugged.

"Business. It can't be done with minors."

"But I've a check signed by my aunt," Rusty said. She began to grope in her bag. "All I have to do is fill in the amount."

Mr. Opperdinck shook his head. "So your aunt will have to come and buy the car. Tomorrow, tomorrow you bring your aunt to see me."

"Oh, no!" Rusty bit her lip. They had been so close to victory, and now—

Mr. Opperdinck got slowly to his feet. "Sam!" he called. "Come here a minute."

The blond young man who had been in the process of having his hair cut appeared in the doorway. The white apron was still about his shoulders, the towel around his neck. One side of his head was shorn, the other still untouched.

"Willy, for gosh sake! What is it?" He didn't sound cross, just amused.

"You run a garage," Mr. Opperdinck said. "You can help us. These young folks want to buy my car. What we have to do now, Sam?"

"Look, can't a guy even get his hair cut without having to fix up a little deal for you?"

The bell on the front door jangled and Mr. Opperdinck looked anxiously toward his shop.

"Customer," he said. "Sam, you fix up this thing. Then I fix you up."

Afterward when she thought of it, Rusty could go into peals of laughter at that scene—the half-shorn young man with the towel around his neck, protesting, and Willy Opperdinck waving the clippers and wheedling.

"How much you asking?" the blond young man wanted to know before Willy vanished into the shop.



"You look it over, give 'em a fair price, Sam. I don't want they should be cheated."

"Oh, yeah, you old pirate!" Sam called at his retreating back. Then he turned to Rusty and Nick. "I'm only kidding," he explained. "They don't come any finer than Willy. Suppose," he whipped off the apron and towel and flung them on a chair, "we take a look at the old wreck. Then if the price is right, and you want to close the deal, we can go down the block to my garage and make out the papers."

What would be a fair price for an old tub like that? Rusty thought in dismay when she saw the old car squatting in the sun back of the barber shop. She hadn't the remotest idea it would even run, it looked so—so moth-eaten. She turned to Nick. He was walking around the ancient maroon wreck, sizing up the weather-beaten paint, the old tires, the lumpy and peeling leather seats, the out-moded instrument board, the cracked windshield.

"Thirty-two?" he asked, turning to Sam.

"You're an optimist. Twenty-eight."

"Think it'll run?" Nick asked.

"How far?"

"Arizona."

The blond young man whistled. "Downhill all the way?"

"I don't know," Nick said. "Anyway, I guess we're stuck with it. What's the verdict?"

The price was better, Nick told Rusty afterward, than he had expected. Any price, Rusty said, seemed too much for an old ark like that.

"Ought to be completely overhauled," Sam said when they had agreed on the price.

"Oh, no!" Rusty cried. "It—we can't—"

"That's all right," Sam said quickly. "I wasn't bidding for the job. We're weeks behind on our work now. But you shouldn't start out on the road without having it gone over."

Rusty nodded. She and Nick had argued that out thoroughly while they had been waiting. They'd have to

take their chances. Unless they got hold of Cy and could talk some sense into him.

Just then Willy Opperdinck joined them in the back yard.

"Wasn't a customer," he said, and his shrewd eyes went from Rusty to Nick and back to Rusty.

"Too bad, Willy," said Sam cheerfully.

"Yes," said Mr. Opperdinck. "Was a young man. He, too, wanted to buy my car."

In the silence that followed his words, Rusty could hear her heart thumping against her ribs.

"A—a light-haired young man?" She brought the words out somehow.

"Crew cut," said Mr. Opperdinck. "So it's too late, I told him. The young lady and her brother—poof! They have driven off in it, just like that!"

"You—you told him *that*?" Rusty's voice was almost a whisper.

"Saves trouble," Willy said genially.

"And what did he say?" Nick asked.

Willy Opperdinck threw out his hands. "He doesn't like it. He says, 'Those infants? They can't drive!'"

## AUNT EDE HAS A CALLER

### Chapter III

*IT WAS TRUE.* But how could the blond young mystery man know it? Rusty and Nick stared at each other. Whoever he was, he knew them, and now he knew who had got the car.

Crew cut, Mr. Opperdinck had said. Then it wasn't Barry, Rusty knew. His reddish blond curls, the bane of his life, wouldn't be called a crew cut.

"Look here," Sam interrupted her thoughts. "This

whole deal sounds plenty screwy. If there's anything wrong with your getting this car, how do we know what Willy'll get into?"

The color deepened in Rusty's face. "There's no danger to anyone but us," she said slowly.

Danger. Now she knew what it was she had felt when Mr. Jackson had first told them someone else was after the car. It was like a nightmare that you kept trying to wake from. She'd only tried to make herself believe it was Barry or one of their other friends. She'd known all along that this was no game. It was serious. Someone else wanted Mrs. Fundy's car. Maybe that person would go to any lengths to get it. And yet when she looked back at the old car, it didn't seem possible that anyone could want it, even Mrs. Fundy. It should be in an antique show, not on the highway.

"It's all so *insane!*" she faltered.

Sam gave a wry twist to his lips. "Anybody in St. Paul who could identify you two?"

Rusty was about to shake her head in despair when Nick spoke up. "Sure. Barry Johnson's father. He's in the Capitol. Something to do with Motor Vehicles."

Mr. Johnson was out to lunch, a secretary informed Rusty when she got the Capitol on the wire. But as soon as he came back, she'd give him the message.

The choice of Mr. Johnson—he did show up, soon after two o'clock—was most fortunate. Though he thought they were out of their minds, and said so, to buy that old wreck, he gave them the help they needed. And at four-thirty Rusty and Nick, wedged into the front seat beside a man from Sam's garage, slowed to a jerky halt outside the Jerrold house. Crink came wagging to the curb, sniffed at the garageman's legs as Nick tried to pay the man for his trouble, and wagged even harder when the man refused to take any money.

"Glad to help you kids out. Besides, a nice drive on a day like this isn't half as bad as lying under a greasy

truck in the garage." He started away, then turned. "Anyhow, Sam said it was on the house."

Before they went up the steps, Rusty and Nick turned for one last look at the old maroon car.

"I can't believe that we actually got it," Rusty gloated.

Nick rubbed his ear. "Well, we're not there yet. Arizona, I mean."

"No," said Rusty soberly. "We haven't even started." The words had an ominous sound. They had got the car, but what had they got themselves into?

Aunt Ede was nowhere about when they entered the house. The door to the sunroom was closed, and beyond it Rusty could hear the low murmur of voices.

"Aunt Ede has a caller." That was a disappointment. It would have been fun to see Aunt Ede's astonishment when they drove up in the Ark. "Well, I'm for a shower." She started up the stairs.

"Me, too," said Nick, following. "After you, of course, my dear Gaston, and don't you splash too long."

It was while she was under the needle spray that Rusty suddenly remembered the reservations to be canceled. Maybe, just maybe, Aunt Ede had taken care of it. And maybe, too, there had been a message from the operator who was trying to reach Cy. Abruptly she turned off the water, jerked off her shower cap, toweled herself briskly, and flung on her robe.

"Yours, Nick," she called as she hurried down the hall.

She stopped abruptly at the head of the stairs. The caller was just leaving. She couldn't see him, but she could hear a pleasant voice saying: "Thanks a lot, Miss Jerrold. And I'll be here, bag and baggage, in the morning. Eight o'clock too early?"

"Not a bit, Mr. Clayton. That will be perfect." Aunt Ede's voice was excited. "And do say hello to Nell Remington for me when you write her."

When she heard the door close, Rusty flew down the stairs.

"Aunt Ede—"

"Oh, Rusty, you're home!" Aunt Ede came to meet her.

"About those reservations, Aunt Ede—"

"Oh, I canceled them, dear. Right after you left. Did you get the car?"

Rusty nodded. "Just take a look out that window!" She drew Aunt Ede forward to the living-room windows and pointed. Then she drew in her breath sharply. A blond young man, with a crew cut, was standing, his back to them, studying the old car.

"Gracious!" said Aunt Ede. "Not that! No wonder Mr. Clayton seems to be fascinated. After all, if he's to drive it—"

"Drive it? You hired that—that man to drive the car for us?"

"Oh, that sounds very mercenary, dear. He isn't going to be paid for it. He's very glad to drive in order to get to Arizona. Sit down and let me tell you what wonderful luck I've had."

Rusty didn't need any second invitation to sink into a chair. Her knees were suddenly as weak as water.

"Just imagine," Aunt Ede glowed, her dimples dancing, "I was so worried, Rusty, about who would be the right person to drive. You know, you can't just ask *anyone*. And all of a sudden, the doorbell rang."

Rusty wet her lips. "Go on, Aunt Ede."

"Dear, aren't you feeling well? You simply can't come down with something now, not when you're setting off on a trip at eight o'clock in the morning because that's when Mr. Clayton said he'd be here, bag and baggage. And I hadn't heard from Nell Remington in years, not since that time at Lake Louise when she missed the train and—"

"Aunt Ede," said Rusty faintly. "This man came to the door."

"That's right. And Nell Remington had asked him to look me up when he was in town. She's teaching in Cleveland, but of course she's on vacation now, and goodness

knows when he'll see her again, but anyway—"

"And you asked him to drive us to Arizona?"

"Well, Rusty, don't look so solemn about it. I'm sure we couldn't find anyone nicer and he knows all about cars. Only I didn't ask him, really. I guess he asked me."

"You told him we were going?"

"Of course. Otherwise there wouldn't have been the slightest excuse for not inviting him to dinner, and since he's only in town for a short time, it did seem a little unfriendly not to mention dinner. So I explained, and then he said, 'Arizona! But that's where I'm trying to get to!' or something like that, and I asked if he was driving and he said, 'Wouldn't I like to!' and then—"

"And then you said, 'Hop in!'" Rusty's laugh was tear-choked.

"Well, practically. Isn't it perfect, dear? A friend of Nell Remington's and everything. He'll be so reliable, I shan't have to worry about you at all."

"Worry about *me*?"

"Well, you and Nick."

"There's plenty to worry about," Rusty began, and then thought better of it. Burdening Aunt Ede with her own fears was selfish. "He didn't by any chance mention what he'd been doing all day before he came to call on you, did he?"

"Why, no. Oh, I believe he did mention lunch. He'd had lunch with a friend in St. Paul. On the campus, he said."

Some of the tension went out of Rusty. "On the campus" suddenly made the whole thing seem different. Maybe Cy knew him, you never could tell. There were so many young men on the University of Minnesota campus even during the summer session, and ever so many blond crew cuts.

"I thought you'd be so delighted," said Aunt Ede in a small voice. "It seemed so perfect."

Rusty sprang out of her chair and ran to hug her aunt.

"I *am* delighted, little funnyface!" she cried, rumpling

the soft brown hair. "And I'm delighted you canceled the reservations. Nick and I had a hard day, that's all, and we've such loads to do if we're to leave at eight in the morning."

"Tell me how you found the car," Aunt Ede said.

The version Rusty gave her aunt was carefully edited so that Aunt Ede wouldn't worry. In fact, the whole thing sounded more or less of a lark. "And now I've got to get at that packing. Now that we're going to drive, I'll need my playsuits and shorts, and oh, since we're taking Crink, there'll have to be a basket. I'll tell Nick to fix that up!"

She flew up the stairs, her heart light, the trip once more something to look forward to.

It was after six before she had repacked her things, not nearly so compactly as before, because now space wasn't at a premium. Then she had to call Ann and tell her they wouldn't be going by train after all, and if she saw Barry—

But at last she and Nick tore down the stairs demanding food in loud voices. They'd expected to eat in the kitchen tonight, there wasn't time for ceremony. But Aunt Ede had set a table on the porch, and was pouring frosty lemonade into ice-and-mint-filled glasses,

"Oh, gorgeous!" Rusty cried. "But you shouldn't have done it, Aunt Ede!"

"There's watermelon, too," Aunt Ede said when they'd devoured the salad and salmon loaf and hot biscuits. "I know it's not your favorite dessert, Nick, but just this once? I want the rinds, you know."

Nick's eyes opened. "What for? You can't cart them clear to—"

"Oh, no, dear. I'm going to make pickles. I found the most wonderful recipe."

"*Tonight?*" demanded Nick. "Aunt Ede, are you having a brainstorm? You can't make pickles tonight."

"Oh, not tonight. Tomorrow will be time enough."

"Tomorrow, you little utnay, you're leaving for Arizona at the crack of dawn!"

Aunt Ede flushed. "*You are,*" she said, looking down at her plate. "*I'm not.*"

She had her stubborn look on, but Rusty scarcely noticed it, she was so astounded by her aunt's words.

"Say, what *is* this?" Nick asked, half laughing.

Aunt Ede raised her head. "I'm not going," she said. "You two will be all right. Mr. Clayton's awfully nice, and—"

"Aunt Ede, have you gone out of your mind?" Rusty didn't mean to sound so harsh, but fear made her throat tight.

"Rusty, please, not that tone! I know it wasn't right to let you keep on thinking I was going, and I *was* going, but then when Mr. Clayton came and I saw I didn't have to— And then when I told Jim—"

"You've talked to *Pops*?" Rusty and Nick shouted in one voice. "When?"

Aunt Ede nodded. "While the salmon loaf was baking. You were both busy upstairs and—"

"Did you call *him*? You got through to him?" Nick asked.

"Why, yes. I didn't have any trouble." Nick threw Rusty a look.

"And he said it was all right for you not to go?" Rusty asked.

"Oh, well, he knows Nell Remington wouldn't recommend anyone that wasn't perfectly all right. And I thought Jim ought to know you'd found the car and he was so relieved. He said Isabel would be so happy and he's proud of you two. And when I told him what the dentist said—that I ought to have a lot of work done this summer—"

"That's the first time I've heard you were having trouble with your teeth, Aunt Ede," said Rusty in a calm voice. But she didn't feel calm. "As for your not wanting to go to Arizona, you know you've always been dying to



travel, your room is stacked with travel folders and *National Geographics*." She broke off abruptly.

Aunt Ede looked as if she were going to cry.

"I can't explain," she said defiantly. "It's *right*, what I'm doing. And it's *all right*, only I can't tell you what I mean. Some day you'll know."

## ARIZONA BOUND!

### Chapter IV

*THE EVENING* sunset sifted across the porch, casting a rosy glow over the table, the frosted glass she held in her hand. But to Rusty it seemed as if the gloom of night had fallen. Aunt Ede not going. Then she'd stay home, too. No, she couldn't. Pops and Cy were expecting them, Mrs. Fundy was waiting anxiously for her car.

"I'm going upstairs for a bit, Aunt Ede," she said. "I'll be down to help with the dishes."

"And I've got to feed Crink," Nick said, and bolted toward the kitchen.

It took a lot of adjusting, sitting on her bed with a handkerchief knotted in her hand, for Rusty to get used to the idea. Gradually she began to accept it. Now that she thought of it, Aunt Ede had never once said "we" when she'd talked about the trip by car. It was always "you." Actually, from the time she'd talked to Cy, she'd been planning to stay home. That cookbook, last night. She didn't read cookbooks just for the fun of it. She'd been planning how to fill her days when Rusty and Nick were gone.

But why, why, why?

It was all right, she'd said. And Rusty felt, now that the ache in her throat was leaving, that it *was* all right, though why Aunt Ede insisted, and what it was she knew,

Rusty had no idea. Something Cy had told her, maybe that was it. Something that had rattled her so completely that she'd garbled the message more than she usually did. Aunt Ede wasn't good at keeping secrets, yet this one she was hanging onto grimly, even at the risk of having both Rusty and Nick feel that she'd betrayed them.

At least they'd heard from Pops, he was all right, and the message about the car had been on the level. Someone else had been answering the phone at the ranch today, evidently, or Aunt Ede never would have got through.

"I'd better cancel that call to Cy," Rusty thought.

She climbed off the bed, turned on the light, and patted powder on her nose.

"At least," she thought as she surveyed her freckles in the mirror without remembering to be dismayed over the fresh crop of them springing up right across her nose, "now that Pops has said it's all right, I shan't worry any more about Mr. Clayton. He's probably a lamb."

*HE WAS.* But not a very prompt lamb. It was eight-twenty the next morning before he appeared in gray slacks and blue polo shirt, his blond crew cut looking as if it weren't quite dry from the shower, a twinkle in his blue eyes as he saw Aunt Ede, Rusty, and Nick on the porch waiting for him.

"I'm late, I apologize. We shall have to make up those twenty minutes on the road, somewhere between here and Albuquerque."

Rusty and Nick warily said nothing, but Aunt Ede bustled forward and clasped Mr. Clayton's brown hand in her two soft pink ones.

"Rusty, Nick," she said, "*this* is Mr. Clayton!"

"Were you," thought Rusty for one fleeting moment as Mr. Clayton crunched her hand in his, "just twenty minutes late yesterday, too, getting to Mr. Opperdinck's?"

But the next moment she was thoroughly ashamed of herself. He was sweet. He couldn't have been involved in

any shady plot to get the car. And when he smiled she could only think, "Oh, boy! Would Ann ever love to be in *my* shoes!"

"The name is Bob," Mr. Clayton said. "And I never answer to anything else, though you'll probably be tempted to call me both this and that before we get to Arizona."

Ann had rounded up a sleepy Barry, Joe, and Marian to see them off. They appeared just as Bob Clayton was stowing his bags in the car, and Ann's eyes *did* pop.

"You're not *going*, Miss Ede?" she cried when she heard the new plans. "But—but who's going to chaperone?"

"Rusty," said Aunt Ede confidently, "chaperones me, Ann."

"You're not kidding," Nick said, laughing.

"Well!" said Ann. And aside to Rusty, "But he's so—so dreamy!"

"Poof!" said Rusty. "All that glitters, et cet."

"Hmmm." Ann looked thoughtful. "Just the same, don't you forget the boys back home." She gave Rusty's green-striped playsuit and fat pigtails an appreciative glance and sighed. "You're no Mrs. Dracula yourself in that outfit. Would that I were going with you! Well, have fun, Rusty, and don't—don't—forget us!"

That plea of Ann's haunted Rusty long after the car, groaning with luggage, with Nick and Crinkles in the back seat and Rusty up front beside Bob, had pulled away from the curb. She was silent as they threaded their way through the morning traffic to reach the city limits. Her throat ached, and behind the blur she tried to blink away from her eyes, she kept seeing Aunt Ede, Ann, Barry, Joe, and Marian lined up at the curb, waving and shouting farewells. Forget them? What could Arizona possibly offer that would erase that picture from her memory?

"Stop sniffing and give the map a chance," Bob said suddenly.

Rusty looked at him, startled. What a thing to say, especially on a half hour's acquaintance.

Then he laughed, and looked down at her. "You didn't ask whose map."

"Should I have?" Rusty asked in what was meant to be a frosty tone, but was slightly blurred.

"That's the spirit," Bob said cheerfully. "Getting mad always stiffens the upper lip, you know."

"I wouldn't," said Rusty coldly—and clearly, this time—"have dreamed your upper lip had ever been anything *but* stiff."

There, I guess that takes care of him, she thought. But when Bob snorted with suppressed laughter and began whistling *Somebody Loves Me, I Wonder Who* she wasn't so sure. All she did know was that what she'd said to Ann about all that glitters was evidently true. He seemed to be a most offensive young man. She turned her head away, and watched the scenery.

But oddly enough she didn't feel like crying any more. The lump had gone out of her throat, and she noticed for the first time how fresh the morning air was, how bright the sun, how the smell of new-mown hay drifted toward them, how the wild roses bloomed along the highway.

There was one advantage, Rusty had to admit, to traveling in an old car. You couldn't go fast, so you saw everything. Which was fine at first, while they chugged along through Minnesota farm lands. Rich farms, poor farms, farms she'd have loved to live on, farms where she felt only sympathy for the women who trudged to the house with milkpails, for young boys who walked bare-foot behind old-style cultivators, for skinny small girls who drove the cows to pasture and stopped to stare at the passing car.

"Just the same," Rusty mused, "even if they have to work hard, I'll bet they can tell you right off where the biggest violets are in the woods, and what a lark sounds

like, and what trees grow butternuts. There *are* compensations."

They had a second breakfast at a roadside diner and, refreshed with country eggs and bacon and a good stretch, climbed back into the car. Then there were more farms, more small towns, country schoolhouses, bridges, filling stations. The newness was wearing off. Rusty twisted in her seat to talk to Nick.

"Want to sit up front, Nick?"

"You couldn't manage the junk back here and Crink, too. He gets restless. I don't think he likes riding much, at least not in the Ark."

Rusty grew sleepy and took a cat nap. She woke, not refreshed, but cross. Farms, schoolhouses, bridges. Imagine jolting along like this for days and days and days with a total stranger. No matter how dreamy he looked—she stole a glance at his profile—he wasn't making the least effort to get acquainted. How *could* Aunt Ede have sent them off alone with this—this man, about whom they knew nothing?

"I suppose I could try to find out something," she thought. "After all, I *was* rude. But he seems to like his own thoughts better than my chatter."

She'd try it anyway. "So you know Miss Remington?" she began.

Bob blinked, and started. "Talking to me?" he asked.

"I was trying to." Oh, why did she have to be so snappish? "But if you'd rather brood—"

"I wasn't brooding, my dear Rusty. There is a process known as thinking. I was engaged in it."

Rusty's temper flared. "A sweet traveling companion you're going to be!" she cried. "At least if you can't be interesting, you might be courteous!"

"And which side of the bed did you get out of this morning?" Bob asked with a grin. "Or do you leap over the footboard? Speaking of courtesy—"

"Hey, you two!" Nick spoke up. "Is this a duel or can I get in the brawl too?"

“Woof!” said Crinkles. And again, “Woof!”

Then they all began to laugh. Rusty laughed so hard she had to dig out her handkerchief again to wipe her eyes.

“Boy! I feel better after that!” she said, and began chattering away as if she and Bob had known each other for years.

When she thought it over afterward, however, she decided she hadn't really learned much about Bob Clayton. He had been all over the world, or so it seemed to Rusty, to whom geography was something of a mystery. But why he had traveled so much Bob didn't say. By piecing together the meager facts, she decided he must be in his early twenties. When Nick chimed in to ask him if he'd been in the service, Bob answered with a brief “Yes” that didn't encourage any further questions on that subject. As to why he wanted to go to Arizona, Bob laughed and turned the question neatly. Wasn't it supposed to be quite a state? The travel books said so.

So far the car had behaved remarkably well. It was noisy, it was slow, and other cars passed them by, sounding their horns imperiously as if to say, “Why don't you park that old wreck somewhere?” One in particular, a snub-nosed gray convertible with a Colorado license, passed them with siren bleating, although there were no other cars in sight. Insulting, thought Rusty.

But the Ark ran. It “pinged” on the hills, its radiator leaked, it had no pickup, it ate gas and oil and spewed them out in dark clouds from the exhaust. But it ran. That was more than they had expected of it.

They crossed the line into Iowa early in the afternoon. The northern route, through the Black Hills and Yellowstone and down the coast, was really something to see, Bob said. But of course they couldn't have taken the time, even if the Ark hadn't been fit for a museum.

A museum? Was that why Mrs. Fundy wanted it? Because it was so old it was a rarity? Rusty wondered. There must be other cars on the road even older. And

what was this business of not having it overhauled? Surely in the four years since Mrs. Fundy owned it, it must have been overhauled a number of times.

They were nearing Sioux City when they had their first trouble. A flat tire. Fortunately there was a spare, but it took forever, Rusty felt, to pry the old tire off and get the none-too-new spare on the wheel. She walked up the road with Crink, came back, and found Bob and Nick still struggling with the jack. She took Crink into a near-by field and threw stones for him to chase. At last she heard Nick call. The tire was on and Bob was wiping his hands on a bit of waste cotton.

"The next one's Rusty's," he said with a grin. "From now on, every other flat is up to you."

The next one came eight miles farther on. This time there was no spare. There was nothing for it but to hail a passing car, and for Bob, and the tire, to ride in to the nearest town.

It was dusk before he returned. His good humor seemed not to have decreased at all, and he whistled as he hammered the tire back onto the wheel.

Rusty had never felt lonelier nor more homesick than when they started on their way again. Not that she actually wanted to be at home, but it was so desolate not knowing where they'd spend the night, not having any of the familiar things to go by. Lights came on in the farmhouses along the way, and they made her think of families, snug and happy and secure, gathered around the supper table. It would be time to draw the shades at home. What would Aunt Ede be doing? And Ann and Barry and the rest of the gang?

"Tonight," Bob said, "soon as we've stowed away a few steaks, we'll take in the sights of Sioux City. Ought to be a movie we can go to, or there might even be a carnival, who knows?"

Rusty brightened. "He's uncanny," she thought. "He must have been reading my mind."

The hotel where they stopped was gay with lights and

people. Rusty was so excited over her room—she'd never before had a hotel room all to herself—and getting out of her playsuit into her navy and white dress with the sailor collar, that she forgot how hungry she had been before they reached Sioux City.

When she joined Bob and Nick in the hotel lounge, her eyes were dancing. Bob made whistling sounds.

"You grew up," he said admiringly. "Went upstairs in pigtails and came down a young lady."

"You sort of shifted the scenery yourself," Rusty retorted, laughing.

Bob whisked them off to the hotel dining room, where he ordered and got three beautiful sizzling hot steaks, tender as butter. They fell to ravenously, and for a time Rusty was too busy to even notice the other people in the room.

At the table near the door a man sat staring at them. Rusty quickly looked away, but when she turned her head again the man's eyes were still on them. At another table not far away, a lone woman read a book while she waited for her order to arrive. But she seemed to find the three at the other table more fascinating than her book.

"We must look terribly interesting," Rusty said to the boys. "Now, who are we, exactly? You're the Crown Prince of Slobodia," she nodded at Bob, "and you," she turned to Nick, "are the world-renowned detective. Let's see, your name is—Nick Crazy. While I—" She hesitated.

"Let's see. You can be Dimples Dalrymple, the famous coloratura soprano, whose voice isn't all it's cracked up to be," Bob finished for her.

Rusty giggled. "But why are we traveling together? Ogle-eyes over by the door has been trying to figure that one out for the last twenty minutes. And that woman over there—don't look now, she's looking—has given up reading her book. No use, with us around."

"You've stolen the crown jools," Nick said. "I'm hot on their trail."

"But the Crown Prince?" Rusty asked.



Without being obvious about it, Bob was turning his head to look at the door. Then he, too, looked away quickly. For a moment Rusty thought there was panic in his face, but he said quite calmly: "The Crown Prince, believe it or not, has kidnapped you both. He's a desperate character. Try to work your way out of that one, Detective Crazy."

Nick laughed, but Rusty sat in puzzled silence. Bob must have recognized the man. Why else would he have looked so queer? Or was she just imagining things again?

"Care for dessert?" Bob asked, looking at her.

Put that way, she couldn't very well say yes. Bob looked as if he were in a hurry to leave. She shook her head.

When they rose to go, Bob looked around as if he'd forgotten something.

"You run along," he said. "I'll meet you in the lounge. I see somebody I know back there." He was looking toward the back of the room. "I just want to say hello. Be right with you."

Silently Rusty and Nick made their way out of the dining room. At the door, Rusty turned and looked back. Bob was still standing at their table, following them with his eyes. The man near the door was talking to the waiter, and didn't even glance up as they went by.

"Well!" said Rusty, when Nick had found chairs for them in the lounge. "That was odd, wasn't it?"

"What? Bob wanting to speak to a friend? Don't see anything odd about that."

"There wasn't any friend," Rusty said. "He didn't want to walk past that man at the door. At least not while we were along."

"Why wouldn't he? Jeepers, you can get the craziest notions!"

Rusty's chin lifted. "If I'm right," she said, "he'll come out of that dining room with Mr. Ogle-eyes. Then they'll part company just this side of the dining-room door, and Bob will come over to us *alone*."

They waited. But when Bob came out, there was no

one with him. Rusty turned to Nick with a sheepish grin. "All right, smarty!" she said.

The next moment Mr. Ogle-eyes came through the door, threw them one last curious glance, and turned toward the elevators.

"Well, Miss Dalrymple, or may I call you Dimples? What's the next order of business?" Bob was breezy as a college sophomore.

"Your Highness," said Rusty, smiling, "you promised to show us the town."

"So I did! And what about that royal hound, Crinkles the Terrible, that we left captive up in Room 402? Think we should release him for a while?"

"Good idea," Nick said. "I'll get Crink."

When Nick had gone, Rusty turned to Bob with a mischievous smile.

"Nick and I were guessing you'd come out of the dining room with that man who stared at us," she said, her heart beating ridiculously fast at her daring. "Or rather, I was guessing. I thought you looked as if you recognized him."

Bob's face held no expression at all. "Did I?" he said.

"Did you come out with him? No, you didn't."

"Disappointed?" There was a hint of laughter in his tone.

Rusty flushed. "I can't think why I should care one way or the other," she said with a shrug.

"As a matter of fact," Bob said, "I did recognize him. Ogle-eyes, as you so disrespectfully dubbed him, was once my commanding officer."

Rusty gulped.

"But he wasn't, actually, the reason I stayed behind in the dining room," Bob went on. "His wife and daughter were at another table in the back, and my curiosity got the better of me."

So did Rusty's. "They didn't even sit together?"

Bob chuckled. "Oh, it wasn't a fight. Ogle-eyes had expected to have dinner with a business acquaintance, and he hadn't shown up. Mrs. Ogle-eyes and Helen came down

later. They'd just started on their soup. All clear now?"

He was having his revenge, Rusty thought, but she had it coming. She managed a laugh.

Nick's appearance with Crink was a welcome interruption, and by the time they were out in the street, weaving their way in and out of the Saturday night crowds, she had forgotten her embarrassment.

There wasn't any carnival, but when they had returned Crink to the hotel, they found a good movie, and after the late show they followed the crowd to a confectionery where the sundaes were extraordinary. But Rusty could hardly finish hers. She was yawning before they reached the hotel.

She said good night to Bob and Nick at her door, sleepily turned the key in the lock, and snapped on the light.

She had stepped in and closed the door, making sure the night lock was on, before she glanced down. A white envelope had been pushed under the door. Startled, Rusty bent down and picked it up.

## *A NOTE FROM NOBODY*

### Chapter V

*THE ENVELOPE* had been sealed. There was no name on it. Rusty dropped her purse on the dresser, and frowning a little, tore the letter open. A single piece of paper fell out.

The message on it was printed in capitals, as if a child had written it.

*If you find your trip dull, why don't you try asking your Prince Charming about the Hidden Village?*

Rusty stared at it. She read it again.

“Why, how crazy!” she said aloud. “This can’t be meant for *me!*”

With the note in her hand, she started for the door, not quite knowing what she meant to do. Should she tell Bob and Nick about it? Try to find the person it *was* meant for?

Then she stopped with her hand on the doorknob. The message had such a snide tone to it, it didn’t deserve to be delivered. Whoever it was meant for wouldn’t want it, she was sure of that. That reference to *your Prince Charming*, for instance. It had such a jealous sound. And it wasn’t signed. Well, she had her opinion of anonymous letters. The only thing to do with them, Pops had said once, was to burn them up and forget all about them, before their poison had a chance to work into your system.

She couldn’t burn it up, of course. But she tore it into small pieces and marched into the bathroom. When she had consigned it to the care of the plumbing, she scrubbed her hands vigorously and proceeded to think of something else, hard.

Let’s see, better hang out the shirt and pedal pushers she planned to wear tomorrow. Or would the blue playsuit be cooler? Let’s see, write a card to Aunt Ede, one to Ann, Barry, maybe Pops and Cy. Let’s see, toothbrush, brush, brush, one hundred strokes. No, that was her hair, not her teeth. Her hair, which she wouldn’t wear in pigtails any more, not on the trip anyway.

It wasn’t any use. She couldn’t forget that stupid note. *If you find your trip dull. . . .* Lots of people right in this hotel were on trips. It didn’t have to mean her. But that *Prince Charming!* If she hadn’t made up that silly nonsense at dinner, calling Bob the Crown Prince of whatever it was, it probably wouldn’t have bothered her so much. Could the note possibly *have* been meant for her? And if it were, who could have put it under her door? Ogle-eyes? His wife or daughter? Why, that was ridiculous!

And the message didn’t have any meaning. *Ask your Prince Charming about the Hidden Village.* All right, she’d ask Bob tomorrow. She’d say, “What about the Hidden

Village?" And he'd blink and stare and say, "Hidden Village? Whatever are you talking about?" And she'd say, "I don't know. It was supposed to liven up the trip, in case I found it dull." And Bob would say, "All right, if you want to play guessing games, what about the forgotten flower pot?" or something like that. No, she couldn't ask him. And she wouldn't tell him about the note. She wouldn't even tell Nick. She'd never hear the last of that Prince Charming business if she did. She'd put the whole thing out of her mind, and right now!

This time she was a little more fortunate. The shower was hard to regulate, and by the time she'd danced out of the way of the too-hot water and almost howled with shock when the cold spray struck her, her thoughts had gone off on another tangent.

The minute she saw Bob and Nick early the next morning, the phrase *Hidden Village* popped back into her mind. But then there was a discouraging hunt for some place to eat breakfast, as the hotel didn't begin serving nearly that early. When finally they set off again with the sun drying the morning dew on the grassy banks of the highway, Rusty had thrust the unpleasant incident from her mind for what she hoped was the last time.

There weren't many cars on the road at this hour on Sunday. A few families driving in to an early church service, a few tourists, cars laden with luggage, heading north to Minnesota lakes. Rusty and Nick vied with each other in calling off the licenses of the various states and naming the makes of cars.

As the sun rose higher, more and more cars joined the southbound cavalcade. A few sounded their horns, or swept past, often taking hair-raising chances to get by before an oncoming truck claimed the right of way.

Bob didn't let any of the horn-sounding bother him. "Sorry, but if you can't pass us," he'd say as though he were addressing the impatient driver behind them, "you'll just have to play Follow the Leader and like it."

Once Nick reported that there were at least eight cars

trying to pass the old Ark, all of them apparently outraged that such a slow vehicle should be allowed to clutter up the road. They shook off a tail of a dozen or more irate drivers by turning off at a roadside eating place for their "second breakfast."

"It's true, a slow driver *is* a menace on the road," Bob said when they were finishing their doughnuts. He smiled at the surprised looks the other two gave him. "Not in himself—he's probably darned careful—but because all the other drivers take such chances in their urge to pass him."

"As if they were going to be any happier afterward," Rusty said. "There's just something else up ahead, a truck, or something, that they have to pass then."

"And they couldn't tell you a blamed thing they saw along the way, either," Nick chimed in.

"Just the same," Bob said, "if we could get more speed out of the Ark, I would. Not much more, but a nice easy speed that would make even the back-seat passengers feel safe and relaxed."

"Nothing relaxing about the Ark's back seat!" Nick grinned. "I know how Mrs. Jackson felt."

"Mrs. Jackson?"

Rusty gave Nick a startled glance. "Just a woman we know," Nick mumbled. "Didn't like to ride in the back seat."

Rusty let out her breath slowly. For a moment she'd thought Nick might blurt out the whole story about the Ark and Mrs. Fundy. She'd caught his eye just in time.

"But I *trust* Bob," she thought. "Maybe I've only known him a day, but I'd trust him in everything, I think."

It was nearly noon when Nick called out, "Here comes that gray job from Colorado again. We won't shake him, or I guess it's a *her*, before we hit Denver, I'll bet."

This time the gray car stayed behind them, though there was ample room for it to pass on the highway. Mile after mile Nick would report, "Colorado's still taking it easy," then, "Nope. Iowa's got in between us. But no, Colorado's

edged up. Hey, she likes us! Why doesn't she pass?"

"Well, if it's the Ark's handsome figure that attracts 'em, let 'em look! I wish it could leap up and clap its heels to oblige," Bob said.

"I guess all the Ark could do is sit down and cross its wobbly old knees," Rusty said, laughing. "If I could draw, I'd show you what I mean."

"It could have a flat," Nick said, and the words were scarcely out of his mouth before the Ark obligingly did just that.

This time, however, they weren't to suffer without sympathy. The Colorado car braked to a screeching stop behind them, then drew discreetly out onto the shoulder of the road.

The lone occupant of the car was a woman, a very modish thirty or so, Rusty judged, in a smart gray linen suit with red pumps and a matching bag, and a Chinese red scarf over her dark hair. She stepped out on the grass and came slowly up to where Bob and Nick were putting the jack together. She smiled at Rusty, who was holding Crinkles on his leash.

"Oh, dear!" Her voice was full of dismay. "Any way I can help?"

Bob glanced up. "Thanks a lot, but we're getting in practice. We'll have it changed in no time."

"You're sure your spare is all right?"

"It should be. We had it fixed last night."

"You don't mean—you had a flat yesterday, too?"

Nick grinned. "Two of them, that's all."

"What rotten luck! Do you have far to go?" She looked at Rusty.

"Arizona," said Rusty. "If we get there."

"Not really! I'm headed that way myself. Of course when there are three of you, the road doesn't seem so long. But when you're alone, as I am—"

There was a wistful note to her voice. "Well, perhaps we'll see each other again on the way." She hesitated. "I

suppose, Arizona's so large, there's no chance you'd be going to the same place I am?"

Bob jerked at the tire and said nothing. It seemed to be up to Rusty, so she began, "Why, I don't know. We're going to—"

"The Grand Canyon," Bob broke in. "Hand me that spanner, will you, Bro?" He motioned to Nick.

Rusty's eyes widened, but she tried not to show her surprise.

"Oh, too bad," the woman said cheerfully. "Well, if you're sure I can't be of any help, I'll be on my way. Good luck."

The gray convertible sailed by them with a saucy *beep-beep* of the horn.

"So we're going to the Grand Canyon," Rusty said slowly as she watched the car disappear around a bend in the road. "Bro and I hadn't heard of it."

"Oh, you might get to the Canyon." Bob looked grim. "First rule of the road, Rusty, is 'Don't be too expansive with strangers.'"

"She wasn't being nosey!" Rusty cried. "Isn't it natural for people to want to know where you're going?"

Bob shrugged. "Just as natural as it is for a woman to stop and offer help when there are two able-bodied males already solving the problem quite capably, thank you."

Rusty flared up. "I'd hate to be as suspicious of everyone as you are! And as ungrateful. Some people are naturally generous, maybe. Don't you agree, Bro?"

"Where do you get that *Bro* stuff?" Nick growled.

"From Bob. He's so cautious he won't even call us by our right names when a stranger's around. Wonder what name he'd think up for me?"

Bob's eyes twinkled. "Miss DeMeanor might be good, and don't say you didn't ask for it."

"Or Miss Guided," Nick volunteered.

"And then there's always Miss Spentlife," added Bob.

"Very funny, very funny!" Rusty tossed her head. "All



the same, I hope we do meet Colorado again, and I hope she makes you eat your words."

But when all the rest of that day and the following day they saw nothing more of the gray convertible, Rusty decided that her judgment of their friend of the road had been far more accurate than Bob's. And frankly, she was a little relieved. Not that she could see any harm in telling strangers where they were going. *She* had nothing to hide.

They asked for mail, hopefully, at the General Delivery window in Colorado Springs on Tuesday. For Rusty there was a card from Ann and a thin little letter from Aunt Ede. Rusty quickly devoured Ann's card, but she saved Aunt Ede's letter to read as they started off again on the broad, sweeping highway toward the west.

Aunt Ede's kindly concern for her and Nick, and that nice Mr. Clayton, was like sinking back into soft, downy pillows. What was it Pops once said? "There isn't a grain of malice in your Aunt Ede!" It was true, too. To Aunt Ede people were always good and honest and worth knowing. If someone seemed to be nasty and unkind, "I'm sure he has troubles we don't know anything about, Rusty," Aunt Ede would say.

"And things have been happening since you left," Aunt Ede wrote. "First of all there were the kittens. Mrs. Muller's, you know. I mean her gray cat's kittens, of course. I don't know why she'd want to, she had a perfectly good place on Mrs. Muller's porch, but the minute Crink gave up ownership of our back porch, Mrs. Muller's cat Delilah came over and made herself very much at home. So much so that when I went out to look Sunday morning, there she was in Crink's basket, with four of the most adorable little kittens you ever saw. Two all gray, and two gray with white spots. So now Mrs. Muller and I are quite *at sea* because instead of her taking Crink to board as she had expected, here I am boarding Delilah and her four young ones."

"Well," Rusty thought, "she isn't lonesome. Or if she is, she isn't going to let on."

“Also,” Aunt Ede went on, “Sunday evening Mr. Sanford Johnson dropped in to visit. He’s Barry’s father, and a very nice man. He wanted to know how you were making out on the trip, but of course I hadn’t had so much as a postcard from you then. And we began talking about all the places there were to travel to, and Mr. Johnson means to retire some day and just do nothing but travel. So I sent home a jar of watermelon pickles with him, and I do think we should have Barry over to dinner more often, Rusty.”

Rusty chuckled. “You wouldn’t be matchmaking a little, Aunt Ede?” she thought. “Barry’s just the boy who sits next to me in school. No romantic hero, even if he does get *A’s* in French.”

There was more. Aunt Ede had evidently culled news from the younger set to relay to Rusty. Rusty could just see her aunt strolling along Lake Street doing her morning shopping, and waylaying every young person she met to see if she couldn’t pick up a few little tidbits for her letter. There had been a beach party on Saturday night and Joe had cut his foot on a shell. Walt Hanna was home from college and had asked about her and Nick. Marian did get a permanent after all, and it was so becoming to her.

But it was the postscript, written hastily just before Aunt Ede had mailed the letter, that brought Rusty up with a jolt.

*Oh, dear! Aunt Ede wrote. I got to thinking about Nell Remington, so I wrote her Saturday. I’ve just had a wire from her. Rusty, she never heard of Bob Clayton! Oh, what have I done, sending you and Nick off with a perfect stranger!*

## BOB SENDS A WIRE

### Chapter VI

*SLOWLY* Rusty folded Aunt Ede's letter and returned it to its envelope. She sat staring at it a moment, wondering what to do. Then without a word she passed it over her shoulder to Nick.

She waited. Nick must have finished reading it by now. Why didn't he say something? She turned in her seat to look at him. Nick had a puzzled scowl of his face, and the look he gave Rusty seemed to say, "What's it all about?" Rusty raised an eyebrow at him and then, with a determined lift of her chin, she turned to Bob.

"Didn't you tell Aunt Ede you were a friend of Nell Remington's?" she asked, trying to keep her voice casual.

Bob took his eyes from the road for a second, glanced at Rusty, then back to his driving.

"So I am. Known her for years."

"Well!" said Rusty. This was going to floor him. "She *never heard of you!*"

Instead of Bob's being startled, his only response was a low chuckle.

"It isn't funny," said Rusty reprovingly. "She wired Aunt Ede. Aunt Ede's frantic."

Bob didn't answer for a moment, then he said quietly: "I'm sorry about that. Perhaps you'd better wire your Aunt Ede that everything's all right. There's nothing to be frantic about."

"Isn't there? When Nell Remington never heard of you?"

It seemed to Rusty that Bob was playing for time. They had him cornered and he didn't have any ready answer.

But he said easily: "Oh, Nell's heard of me. She's a poor hand at names. Maybe we'd better jolt her memory a little.

Just to set your mind at ease, when we stop for the night I'll send her a wire. Then when she answers, we'll send another to reassure your Aunt Ede."

He sounded so confident that Rusty said in a relieved tone: "Oh, would you, Bob? I guess we could take your word for it, but—"

"Why should you?" Bob asked. "That wouldn't be smart."

It seemed to Rusty that the hours had never dragged more slowly. Of course she was interested in the scenery, in the more and more signs that they were really "out West," but— Well, some day she'd have to make this trip again, with nothing on her mind but enjoying it! No worries about Pops, no uneasiness about the car and its strange purchase, no doubts that the driver was the person he pretended to be!

At last Bob announced that it was time to hunt a home for the night. They were far from any city. It would have to be a motel, and they'd be lucky to find one in the next thirty miles.

On the outskirts of the next town they found a clean, modern motel, set back from the highway in a grove of aspen. This time Rusty had a cabin, complete with bath and a view of the distant mountains. Bob and Nick in the adjoining cabin were separated from her by the partial garage that housed the Ark.

While she was changing into her brown shantung, Rusty looked searchingly at her face in the mirror. Had she changed in the last few days? What was the matter with her that she wasn't indignant with Bob? Here he might be an *impostor*, and all she could think of was how terrible it would be if Nell Remington's answer didn't clear him! She couldn't stand it if it didn't! Ever since she'd read Aunt Ede's letter, there had been a nightmare quality about the day, about the trip, the Ark, and its occupants. The very road had seemed lonely and eerie. That's what doubting someone can do to you, she thought, as she slipped her

long string of ivory beads over her head and looped them into a knot.

At the telegraph office on the main street of the little town, Rusty and Nick waited by the door, making conversation about the people going by. But Rusty was painfully aware of Bob at the counter, writing out his message to Nell Remington.

"I want you to read it," Bob said when he'd finished, and he handed them the yellow blank. "Just so everything will be in the clear."

He hadn't counted words:

*Remmy darling, how could you say you never heard of me? I once carved my initials on Demosthenes' dome. Love. Bob Clayton.*

Rusty handed it back without comment. "Now we'll have dinner while our friend Nell thinks up a fitting comeback," Bob said cheerfully.

Rusty could hardly taste the food in the hot little café they found after walking around the town. She kept looking at her watch, wishing it were time to go back for the answer.

But Bob and Nick seemed to enjoy their dinner and while Rusty was silent, they discussed baseball and tennis and football, and even launched into a hot argument over the Olympics.

At last Bob spotted the big clock on the wall. "Nell should have been able to answer by now. What say we go back?"

Suppose she wasn't home to get the wire, Rusty thought as they hurried back to the telegraph office. Suppose there was no answer, and they'd have to go on like this, not knowing?

But the answer was there. Bob didn't even glance at it. He handed it to Rusty. Nell Remington hadn't counted words either.

*Bob Clayton—Remember you very well. My prize pupil. Will wire Edith immediately. You are a rascal but I love you. Nell Remington.*

Rusty looked up from the yellow paper in her hand. She couldn't say anything for a moment. Then she laughed. "You pass," she said. "With an *A* plus."

"You mean it? That's the best mark Nell ever gave me!"

"Was she really your teacher?" Nick asked. "What was that stuff about Demosthenes' dome?"

"It's a long story," Bob said. "It wasn't my proudest achievement, but it brought me fame, of a sort." He read the message unconcernedly. "Good girl! I knew she wouldn't let me down."

Rusty was in the mood for celebrating. There was a movie in the town, but they'd seen it. They stood uncertainly on the street corner, not knowing what to do with the evening ahead. It seemed too bad to just go back to the motel and go to bed.

They walked around the next block, and suddenly heard honky-tonk music.

"A carnival!" Rusty cried. But there was no sign of Ferris wheels or merry-go-rounds. Yet the music grew louder as they neared the end of the block.

"It's a roller-skating rink, an open air one," Nick cried, pointing down a side street. "Do you suppose they'd have skates to rent?"

"Could be," Bob said.

The floor was rough, the skates not of the best, the music tinny and harsh. June bugs and gray moths fluttered about the lights strung overhead. But Rusty and Nick had a wonderful time. Bob, too, seemed to be enjoying himself, though often Rusty would see him standing at the side just watching the skaters race by. Once she missed him altogether. He was gone for a long time.

"Do you suppose he went back to the cabin?" she asked Nick.

"Maybe got worried about Crink. We ought to be get-

ting back ourselves." But Nick sounded reluctant to leave.

And suddenly Bob was back again, swooping down the floor, rounding the corners with an easy grace. He came up to Rusty and Nick skating together, tapped Nick on the shoulder, and grabbing Rusty's hand, raced away with her before she realized what had happened.

"You—disappeared!" she panted when they stopped for breath.

Bob didn't answer, and Rusty looked up at him questioningly. He seemed to have something on his mind, and when she suggested that perhaps they'd skated enough, he readily agreed.

There were lights here and there in the motel courtyard when they returned. Somewhere a radio was playing softly, and overhead a young moon hung like a piece of orange peel in the sky.

Bob unlocked Rusty's door for her, and gave her the key.

"Better try it from the inside to make sure it locks, before we leave you," he suggested.

Maybe it was that little hint of Bob's, maybe because it was their first night in a cabin camp, but Rusty felt uneasy as she showered and later wound up her hair on rags. She had abandoned the pigtails after that night in Sioux City. There wasn't any reason to feel nervous, she told herself. But it would have been nice to have Aunt Ede there, or Ann. She'd write to them, even though she was sleepy. And Barry, too. They would reach their destination tomorrow night if they made good time, and after that, she probably wouldn't have time to write.

And now her diary. Rusty yawned as she reached for the blue leather book in which she was keeping a record of the trip. She turned the closely written pages, smiling as she read over a passage here and there. "Bob let me drive today. I was awful, but at least I didn't wreck the Ark." On another page: "Pike's Peak will just have to be rated a bust on this trip. Bob said we couldn't risk it, even if we hadn't been in a hurry, and Crink, at least, was glad

of it. He gets so carsick, poor fellow." And again: "Miles and miles of what I thought was desert, today. Bob said I hadn't seen anything yet. He started a guessing game to keep our minds off the heat. But Nick and I got so exasperated because he always guessed what character we were pretending to be that we were hotter than ever. Had to stop for sodas to cool off." That last had been part of yesterday's entry. The next page would be blank. But not for long.

She turned the page, and gasped. In a hand not her own was written:

*Did you ask him about the Hidden Village? If not, ask him now—tonight.*

With a frightened sob, Rusty threw the book from her and covered her face with her hands. She was too shocked to think who might have written the words, or what they meant. She wanted only to shut out everything, not to feel anything. But little by little the sounds of the cabin began to penetrate. The tap in the bathroom dripped, the walls creaked, there was a rustle at the window. The cabin seemed alive with sounds. Her heart pounding, Rusty slipped out of bed, grabbed up her robe, fumbled for her slippers, and ran to the door.

Out under the stars she caught her breath and tried to calm herself. There was a light on in the boys' cabin. She knocked.

"Just a minute!" She heard Bob's voice. When he opened the door, he had an old blue robe pulled about him, and his hair was wet, as if he'd just come from the shower. "What's up, Rusty?"

Rusty was speechless. Nick's voice from inside the cabin roused her. "What's cooking, Bob?"

"I—I—" Rusty heard herself giggle. "Could you let me have—"

"A cup of sugar?" Bob grinned. Over his shoulder he



said, "Nick, it's that woman next door. Wants to borrow a cup of sugar."

"I wanted—Crink. That's what I wanted. To borrow Crink."

Bob sobered. "You aren't afraid, Rusty?" he asked in such a kind tone that she felt her lips begin to tremble again.

"I'll—I'll be all right with Crink. I wouldn't have to take the b-basket."

Bob said quietly, "Something frightened you. What was it?"

"It—wasn't anything." Rusty choked the words out, and pulling Crinkles after her, ran back to her own cabin.

She wouldn't put the light out. She didn't dare. After a few exploratory rambles, Crinkles yawned and settled himself cozily on the foot of her bed. He was soon asleep, but Rusty lay there listening.

Why hadn't she asked Bob about the Hidden Village? She'd meant to, when she ran out of her cabin. And then, with his hair standing up damp that way, and the way he grinned at her, how could you ask anyone you liked such a stupid question?

But there was another reason. She might as well face it. Who else but Bob could have entered the cabin and written in her diary? He'd locked her door for her when they went to find a place to eat, and he'd slipped the key into his own pocket. She hadn't thought anything of it. Why should she? But he'd been gone from the roller-skating rink a long time, time enough to come back to the cabins. And who else had been in Sioux City? Still, he hadn't left her and Nick for a minute there. He couldn't have slipped that note under her door. But what about that time in the dining room? He could have given the note to Ogle-eyes, or his wife or daughter.

There was a crunch of gravel on the walk outside the door, and a moment later, a soft knock. Rusty sat up in bed, her heart racing again.

"Who is it—Nick?" she asked.

A woman's voice said something, and Crink roused himself enough to say "Woof!" Rusty padded across the floor, pulling on her robe as she went. "Who is it?" she asked again.

"It's Marcia Hollis. Are you still up?"

Rusty unlocked the door and opened it a crack. Then she threw it wide. "Oh!" she said in a relieved tone. "Come in, won't you?"

"Colorado," as Nick called her, was in white tonight, the shoes and bag were green, and huge green loops hung from her ears.

"Oh, you *had* gone to bed! I'm sorry. I saw the car and guessed you were here. But I won't stay."

"Please do," Rusty said. If she couldn't have Aunt Ede, it was still a comfort to talk to another woman. And Marcia Hollis seemed so sympathetic. "I was a little scared, but I'm not now."

"Just for a second, then. I hope *I* didn't frighten you?"

"Oh, no," Rusty said, smiling. "It was—it wasn't anything."

Involuntarily, her eyes went to the blue diary, still lying on the floor where she'd thrown it. Marcia Hollis' glance went to it, too, and she looked a little surprised. Sheepishly, Rusty bent down and picked it up.

Marcia Hollis perched on the arm of a chair. "I've a big favor to ask of you," she said. "I find I'm getting terribly bored traveling alone. Since we're going the same way, at least we will be tomorrow, would you mind very much riding with me part of the time?" When she saw the look of consternation on Rusty's face she added quickly: "You don't have to answer tonight. Think it over, and if you want to do it, I'm down in that cabin at the end of the court. You'll see my car. If I don't hear from you, I'll know you went on with your brothers."

"I—I'd like to think it over." Rusty didn't know why she hadn't refused the offer. Right now everything was so mixed up. If she decided Bob had written that message,

maybe she'd go with Marcia Hollis. But then she'd be abandoning Nick.

"Good! Hope you'll decide in my favor," Marcia Hollis said. "And now I'll run along."

When she had gone, Rusty turned out the light and lay staring into the dark. She wasn't afraid now. Tomorrow—no, she wouldn't go with Marcia Hollis. She'd ask Bob that question.

They were up with the sun the next morning. While they were packing their things into the Ark, Rusty looked more than once down to the end of the court where the gray convertible with the Colorado license was parked. Bob and Nick didn't even notice it.

There were many Colorado cars on the road now, New Mexico cars, too, and many with Arizona license plates. From the very first, in spite of the shadow of the night, Rusty felt an excitement in the air. They didn't stop for their customary second breakfast, they lunched in the car as they drove, Bob with a sandwich in one hand.

Half a dozen times Rusty had the words on the tip of her tongue, "What is the Hidden Village?" But she didn't say them, and each time she failed to bring the question out, she was provoked with herself for being such a coward. And finally, when she forced herself to blurt out the words, it couldn't have been more awkward. Bob simply took his eyes off the road for a moment to stare at her, then he laughed.

"You know what I thought you said?" he asked. "I thought you said 'What's a *higgleditch*?' Didn't it sound like 'higgleditch' to you, Nick? Come on, now, back me up. Don't they teach kids to enunciate any more?"

"I didn't say 'higgleditch,'" Rusty protested hotly. "I said—"

But she didn't go on. The moment was lost. And now she couldn't try it again. Bob would just gleefully bring up the "higgleditch" business if she did, and her question demanded a serious answer.

Now and then they had to stop. Crinkles was carsick

when the mountain grades were steep, the Ark needed re-fueling, they had to ask directions at a desert filling station in order to strike the cutoff which would carry them to Chatfield.

Tonight, Rusty thought hopefully, as mile after mile went by without mishap, tonight she would see her father and Cy. Tonight she would present Mrs. Fundy with the Ark, and what a relief *that* would be. Tonight whatever Bob had or hadn't done could just be checked off as unsolved, and she'd never give it another thought. After tonight she'd wear her hair in pigtails, and she'd be mysterious, too. Only she probably wouldn't see any more of Bob after tonight.

As they drew closer and closer to Chatfield, Rusty's excitement mounted. She could have run ahead of the car, she felt. She could have leaped over canyons and gulches, vaunted mountains, just to get there! How could Nick be so calm about it, so interested in juniper and sagebrush and the strange new flowers they saw along the way? How could Bob be so patient every time they had to stop, how could he be so unconcerned and relaxed about his driving? Rusty would have leaned over the wheel, urging the Ark to more and more speed. She sat on the edge of her seat, and more than once Nick caught her biting her nails.

"Re-lax, Rusty!" he said. "Good thing Pops can't see you chewing your nails."

And Rusty flashed back, "Relax! Do you realize we're only fifty miles from Chatfield? That's only a little more than an *hour*, even at the snail's pace we're going!"

"So your pushing your nose through the windshield won't make the Ark travel any faster," Nick said. "Just make your nose turn up more."

"Oh, pooh!" Rusty sank back then, but a minute later she was leaning forward again, straining to reach their destination.

The sun was setting when they finally pulled into the sleepy little town and Bob brought the car to a stop at the curb.

"Mind if I leave you for a mo'?" he asked. "I'd better get some directions."

Rusty watched him disappear into the drugstore down the block.

"Nick," she said, bouncing around in the seat to look at him. "I've a good mind to phone the ranch. Should I?"

"Why not? Tell 'em to save some grub. I'm starving."

Rusty dashed out of the car and raced back to the drugstore. She looked about for Bob but couldn't see him. There were three phone booths down at the end of the store. She got some change hurriedly, looked up the number of the ranch, and ducked into a booth.

The line to the ranch was busy, the operator told her. Rusty eased the door of the booth open a trifle to get some air, and waited.

In the next booth a man was talking. At first Rusty couldn't make out any words. Then suddenly she sat up straight, listening with all her might. The man was Bob, and he was talking about her and Nick!

## *DANGER ON THE TRAIL*

### Chapter VII

*RUSTY* bolted out of the drugstore into the late afternoon heat of Chatfield's main street, her ears tingling. She blinked against the brick-red sun, sighted the car at the end of the block, and raced toward it.

Suppose Bob came out of the drugstore, saw her, and guessed that she had followed him? It would be pretty hard to make him believe that she had gone not to spy, but because she'd had the sudden impulse to call the ranch. Suppose Bob knew she'd heard him in the next booth saying:

*No, they don't suspect a thing. They know me as Bob Clayton. . . . Of course I'm taking a chance. But with Mrs. Fundy gone, getting the car should be simple. If I could lose the Jerrold kids somewhere on the way down, I'd be safe enough. . . . You'll fix it? . . . Just below the two-mile turn. Good!*

What could it mean? Bob—who was he if he wasn't Bob Clayton? And Nell Remington's telegram said he *was!* Bob didn't know anyone in Arizona to telephone to, but of course if he wasn't Bob, then all that stuff he'd said about always wanting to see Arizona wasn't true either. And Mrs. Fundy's car, he *was* after it! He *was* the one who had almost beaten them to it that day in St. Paul. And when he couldn't get it, with the most colossal nerve he had gone to visit Aunt Ede and—

With a swift look over her shoulder, Rusty flung herself at the car and wrenched open the door.

"Nick!" She fell into the front seat. "Something awful's happened. Bob isn't Bob, and— Oh, Nick, where *are* you?"

"She's been nibbling the fatal loco weed," said a muffled voice from the back seat where a portion of Nick was just visible under the tower of boxes, bags, cameras, tennis rackets, and battered golf bag he had insisted on bringing. "Goes to your head every time," he mumbled, and emerged with Crink under one arm.

"Nick, it isn't funny! Oh, please listen!"

Rusty pulled herself to her knees in the front seat and gave her brother a hand, feverishly bracing the tumbling luggage until Nick sat upright again and glared at her from under tangled black brows.

"So it isn't funny!" he exploded bitterly. "I ask you, haven't I suffered enough? All the way from Minneapolis in this cockeyed old car, who sat in the back seat and fought with this pile of junk? Rusty Jerrold? Not on your life! And I ask you, who practically had his back broken time and time again when we went over a bump—"

"Oh, please keep still and listen! We haven't time to

fight now." Rusty's tone was anguished. "Nick, I couldn't get the ranch on the phone, the line was busy. And Bob was in the next booth, talking to someone about *us!* Only he isn't Bob Clayton at all, and he said we didn't suspect a thing, and if he could get rid of us, he'd have the car and and he'd be safe. And whoever was on the other end of the line said he'd fix it at the two-mile turn."

Nick's mouth had been opening slowly. "How do you know what the other guy said?"

"Oh, it doesn't matter! He did, and I didn't wait to hear any more. Oh, don't you see? It *was* Bob who was after the car back in St. Paul, and now he's planning to make off with it."

A slow grin broke over Nick's face. "Well, if it weren't for Mrs. Fundy, he could have it and welcome. Whoever dreamed up this back seat could make a fortune building torture racks."

Rusty sank back against the windshield and looked at her brother with complete discouragement.

"So you aren't going to take it seriously."

Nick brushed his hand through his black crew cut and said sheepishly, "Aw, women. Bob's been swell to us. I don't care who he is. Why, if he hadn't offered to drive us out here, where would we have been? What would he want to dump us somewhere for? Wake up, Rusty. You took a nap and had a nightmare in that phone booth!"

Rusty wanted to say something withering, but you couldn't wither Nick. You just had to work on him slowly, and there was no time to be lost. She leaned out and anxiously surveyed the street. Only brown, sun-glazed buildings, a few dusty-leaved trees, a cowboy in sombrero, chaps, and high-heeled boots who leaned against the wall of a store building, an Indian family in a wagon that creaked along behind two thin little ponies, and the late afternoon sun about to disappear far away under the edge of the parched desert. No sign of Bob. She turned back to her brother.

"Nick, listen," she said earnestly. "I know you're fond

of Bob. So am I. But there are some things I haven't told you. I can't explain now. There isn't time. But they don't look good. Even that wire to Nell Remington didn't really clear him. Sure he let us see it, but it *was* double talk, you've got to admit that. So was the answer. And when you asked him if he went to school to Nell Remington, what did he answer? Put you off with something about its being 'a long story.' Nick, he's been like that about everything. He *says* he lived in Minneapolis once, he *says* he's been here, there, and everywhere, but when you try to pin him down to one single solitary fact, he slips out of it just like that." Rusty snapped her fingers vigorously. "And now he isn't Bob Clayton, and he's after the car, and he's plotting to get rid of us before we reach the ranch! I heard him say so on the phone."

The look of doubt which had been creeping over Nick's face gave Rusty a faint hope.

"He wouldn't have to drive us way to Arizona just to steal the car," he said cautiously. "He could've pushed us over a cliff in Colorado."

"All right." There was a gleam in Rusty's brown eyes now that she saw Nick cracking. "But maybe it didn't fit in with his plan. Remember, he was talking to someone. He has an accomplice. Nick, we're in danger. We can't just sit here!"

"Look," said Nick. "I don't say you haven't got something. But jumping Josephine, Bob's been a right guy so far."

"Nick, he's coming!" Rusty burst out in a frightened whisper. "What shall we do? We've got to think of something, hurry!"

"Sit tight and keep our eyes open," Nick said quickly. "If anything funny comes up—"

Rusty had just time to turn around and tug her green playsuit down to her bare knees before Bob's pleasant voice said at her side: "Sorry I was so long. Everyone in town seems to want to give us advice on how to reach the ranch."



Bob slid into the front seat. "Tired of waiting?" he asked as he turned on the ignition.

"No," said Rusty in a choked voice.

"Yes," said Nick.

Bob laughed. "Get unanimous, you two! Or can't brothers and sisters ever agree?"

Rusty shook back her hair. She said, her tone a trifle chill, "In a crisis, Nick and I always stick together."

"Good!" said Bob. "Let's hope we have a crisis all the way down to the ranch. All set, Nicko? Is Crink all right?"

Nick's voice sounded strange to Rusty as he answered: "Sure. Just because Crink gets carsick once in a while doesn't mean he's a softie. He'll murder anybody who touches Rusty or me."

Bob chuckled. "Oh, come now! I've been working on that fierce pooch of yours. Got him eating out of my hand."

Rusty couldn't resist a quick look over her shoulder at Nick. What she saw wasn't reassuring. Nick was cautiously easing a mashie out of the golf bag. He motioned to Rusty silently and tapped the tennis racket, as if to say, "In a crisis, you grab that. I'll use this." Rusty's heart thumped as she turned back to watch the road.

The road down into the canyon wasn't a very important highway, she decided, or there'd be more cars on it. Black, laced on either side by fringing pine, it stretched bleakly off into the setting sun. A lump lodged in Rusty's throat. It would be dark soon, and then they'd be all alone, rattling along in the Ark, just Nick and she and the stranger who had once been friendly amusing Bob Clayton, but now sat silent and remote, with his eyes on the road. She stole a look at him, and noticed with a sinking heart how firm his jaw was, how strong his lean brown hands looked on the wheel. In a crisis, maybe she and Nick could run away somewhere. Bob couldn't handle both of them. But he had an accomplice!

"We turn off here onto the canyon road," Bob said quietly. "It's plenty rough."

"How do you know?" Nick asked sharply.

Bob glanced down at Rusty with a surprised frown. Then his face cleared.

"I heard that in the drugstore," he said. "What's the trouble, Nicko? Don't you trust me?"

"Well, rats," Nick said lamely. "We don't want to take any chances."

Bob maneuvered the Ark skillfully around a jutting boulder.

"Have to, sometimes," he said. "Lucky to *get* a chance once in a while, too."

The canyon road was like all canyon roads, built on optimism and not much else. It clung doggedly to the steep side of the cliff, and twisted and turned to avoid shooting off suddenly into the pine-studded deep that yawned below. Gloomy shadows plunged at them from behind each huge boulder, from the dark nests of scraggly juniper, as the road dipped in toward a safe wooded stretch and then came out again on a sharp curve to skirt the precipice. Bob snapped on the lights and the weak beams pancaked against the cliff ahead, straggled off and fell limply out over the vast well of pines below. Crink began to whimper and dug his silky head into Nick's ribs.

"Crink's carsick again," Nick announced, but Rusty was peering ahead into the gloom, too tense to turn her head.

Bob braked to a stop. "Want to get out, Nick?"

"There isn't room," Nick said. "If I opened the door, the whole back seat would fall out into—down there."

"Maybe he'd feel better up in front," Bob suggested.

"He'll be all right." Nick's tone was brusque.

The descent was sharper now. Bob shifted into second, and braced himself more firmly against the back of the seat, his foot hovering over the brake.

The two-mile turn. The two-mile turn. Every revolution of the wheels said it over and over again in Rusty's brain as she waited, muscles tense, for the ominous spot on the trail where something would happen. But when it came,

and Bob began to push and pull every gadget on the instrument board, Rusty didn't at first understand what it was all about.

"That's odd!" he said in a worried tone. "Fine time for the motor to be acting up!"

And then she knew.

Bob put on the brake, and Rusty, her throat tight, looked over her shoulder at Nick. Nick's face in the gloom was dark and tense. Through the back window Rusty could see far up on the dark skyline the flickering lights of another car approaching slowly. She braced herself in the seat, watched Bob raise the hood of the Ark, tinker with something, and climb back behind the wheel with a shrug of his shoulders.

"Lucky we aren't way off in the desert somewhere," he said. "Someone may come by and lend us a wrench. The fuel line must be clogged."

A wrench. There'd been plenty of tools up to now, Rusty was certain.

"There's a car coming." Nick's voice was hard.

"So there is. We're in luck."

The car behind drew up slowly, its lights casting long beams that lit up the windows of the Ark. Out of the night a man walked toward them. Crink growled fiercely. The dark figure was at Bob's side now, the face hidden by the huge sombrero. Rusty crouched against the door, her eyes on the stranger.

"*Como esta, amigo?*" she heard a throaty voice say.

"Not so good," Bob answered. "Motor's kicking up. Have you a wrench?"

The stranger shook his head. "No, I am sorry. No tools at all. You are on your way to the Lazy-K Ranch?"

"That's right," Bob said.

"I am going that way. If you wish, I will tell them your car is stalled on the trail."

"Well, thanks," Bob answered. "But in may take hours to fix it, and these kids are anxious to get there. If you have room in your car, maybe you'd take them?"

"No!" Rusty whispered her protest through stiff lips.

There was a swift movement in the back seat. Rusty felt the handle of the tennis racket jab into her side. She turned. Nick, his face set and fierce, was half out of the seat, the mashie grasped in both hands.

"No, you don't," his voice quavered. "No, you don't. You d-don't lay a finger on us or you'll get it! Right between the eyes, you will!"

*TRICKED!*

## Chapter VIII

"*NICK!*" Bob's voice was sharp. "Put that club down! Nobody's going to hurt you!"

For a moment Nick wavered. Then he raised the mashie again.

"Yeah?" His chin shot out. "We're not going with him. That's flat!"

With a swift movement Bob wrenched the mashie from Nick's grasp.

"Don't be a dope," he said curtly. And to the man beside the car: "Seems to be a little misunderstanding. Maybe you can give me a push. I can coast down."

There was a moment's silence, then the throaty voice said quietly: "Very well. I will wait by the bridge, in case you have more trouble."

"The bridge. Right."

Rusty heard the footsteps receding into the night, and then the sound of a motor. The car behind bumped the Ark gently, and it jerked forward as the motor caught, and moved away under its own power. A miraculous recovery, Rusty thought. She wanted to burst out laughing. Her cheek burned, and she put her hands up to her face to cool it. Her hands were icy.

Bob turned. "All right, you two. Let's have it."

No answer.

Bob picked up the tennis racket and dropped it into the back seat.

"A little quick on the trigger, aren't you, Nick? What's back of it?"

Nick sputtered, "I didn't trust him!"

"That's odd. He offers to help us and you fly at him with a golf club. That's going pretty far, don't you think?"

Rusty couldn't bear the hard note of anger in Bob's voice, and Nick getting all the blame. She said soberly, "I didn't trust him either."

"Rubbish!" Bob said curtly.

- Rusty mustered up all her courage. "Do you—know him?"

"Look," said Bob. "I'm not exactly a dimwit. Ever since we left Chatfield, there's been an icy atmosphere in this car that would freeze a hot tamale. It's obvious something went wrong back in Chatfield. What happened when we stopped there?"

For the life of her, Rusty couldn't get the words out to tell him about the telephone call she had overheard.

"Aw, forget it, Bob," Nick grunted from the back seat. "Maybe Rusty and I had a fight. We get in each other's hair once in a while."

Bob didn't answer. They were nearing the bottom of the canyon, and Rusty could hear the gurgle of a mountain stream foaming over its rocks. Bob eased his way carefully down the trail which twisted through dark pines.

"We're down." He broke the silence at last. "The ranch is only three miles farther on." And with a sudden return of his old friendly manner, he tossed over his shoulder to Nick, "And I heard that in the drugstore, Nicko!"

"We're forgiven!" Rusty thought with a heady lightening of her spirits. Somehow it didn't matter that Bob was really the one at fault. For the moment they were friends again, they were nearing the ranch, soon all the questions

would be answered and she could ease the burden of responsibility off her shoulders.

She began to babble excitedly about the trail and the stream which they crossed again and again, about the spicy odor of fir trees and flowers, the tinkle of the cottonwoods as the car brushed by them, the enormous boulders with dusty hues turning to bronze and saffron as the lights struck them. The danger on the trail seemed unreal now. She was getting more and more excited, the nearer they came to the ranch.

“Oh, Nick, do you suppose Pops will know you? You’ve grown inches since January! And Cy. I bet he’ll go simply mad when he sees Crink! He won’t even notice *us!*”

The trail turned over a small bridge and the car lights revealed a rustic gate, with log posts and an overhead crossbar on which were burned the words, “Lazy-K Ranch.”

“Here it is,” said Bob, while Rusty and Nick let out a whoop of joy that set Crink to yelping.

Beyond the gate a narrower trail wound through cottonwood and birch to emerge in a large open space. In the center of this sprawled the huge, brightly lighted ranch house, flanked by a half dozen other big buildings, and by orchards and gardens. Lights from a number of cabins studded the groves surrounding the enclosure, and away to the right were other barnlike buildings where dogs barked shrilly and Rusty could see the shadowy forms of horses and men moving about.

Bob brought the car to a stop in the wide circle before the ranch house, and Rusty and Nick scrambled out. The next few minutes were so exciting that Rusty never did know exactly what happened. There was a wild yell and Cy burst out of the house and across the yard. He caught up Rusty and swung her off the ground, and then pummeled Nick to a pulp in his delight at seeing them.

“Where’s Pops?” Rusty cried as soon as she could get her breath.

“Gone on safari. To the desert,” Cy said. “It all came

up suddenly and he thought he'd be back in time to welcome you to the Lazy-K."

"And Mrs. Fundy?" said Nick.

"Ditto. Gosh, is it good to see you!"

There was Toby Whitman, who seemed to be about Rusty's age, and who she learned later was the son of the absent owner of the Lazy-K. There was Toby's younger sister, Muff, and Mr. Ireton, the ranch foreman, and everyone was saying, "What a shame your dad went off to the desert. He'll be so disappointed." There was Rusty's own disappointment at finding Pops away, and Cy exclaiming, "Gee, Rusty, you look mighty good to me!" and Toby and one of the cowhands carrying in the luggage, and everyone talking and laughing at once.

In the confusion Rusty forgot all about Bob Clayton and the incident on the trail. But as she gave the Ark a last look to make sure all the luggage had been carried in, her responsibility for the car flashed back into her mind. She reached into the front seat and with a swift movement pocketed the car keys.

It was only when she stood in the great main room of the ranch house that she realized someone was missing. Pops, of course. And Bob. Where was he? She turned to Cy, who was squatting on a bearskin rug in front of the huge stone fireplace, renewing acquaintance with Crink.

"Where's Bob Clayton?"

Cy peered up through his thick glasses. "Bob Clayton? Oh, the fellow who drove the car, you mean? I don't know. Didn't even get to meet him yet. Nick, you ought to see the hounds they have around here. They could swallow Crink in one gulp."

"But surely he came in with us, didn't he, Nick?" Rusty persisted.

Nick looked puzzled. "Gee, I don't know. Everybody was yelling and— I'll go see if he's out with the car."

"I'll go with you," said Muff.

Nick turned to stare at the skinny little girl who made this sudden overture of friendship. Muff was at the stage

of being all arms and legs. She swung her blond pigtailed, hooked her thumbs in the tops of her blue levis, shoved out her bright plaid chest, and returned the stare with frank unconcern.

"Just so you won't get lost," she said.

"Well, I guess I couldn't get lost that easy." Nick scowled.

"You could," said Muff serenely, "looking for Bob Clayton, you could, because if he's the man that drove the car and acted like he didn't want anyone to see him out there, well, you won't find him in a hurry because he came back and tried to start the car and when it wouldn't start, he got out again and beat it up the trail the way you came from, but *fast!*"

Toby, his boots clicking sharply on the stairs as he came down from putting away the luggage, interrupted. "Muff, put the act on ice, will you?" He gave Rusty a friendly smile and drawled, "I reckon you'll have to learn to put up with Muff. She's not so bad when you get to know her."

"Oh, yes, I am," said Muff. "I'm spoiled. Mrs. Fundy—your father drove her and our Mom off to the desert somewhere to meet some scientists and look at some old ruins or something, but—"

"Watch it!" Toby said with a glare. "Come on, Rusty and Nick, you must be starved. I'm official ranch-house boss while Mother's off on this expedition. Can't tell when they'll be back, but let's hope the provisions hold out. I've asked the cook to rustle up some supper for you."

But Rusty stared past him. "The bridge," she said softly. "He waited at the bridge."

"What's this about a bridge?" Cy stood up, Crinkles in his arms.

Rusty shook her head. "Nothing. Toby, can we put the Ark away somewhere, lock it up?"

Toby grinned. "That precious car Mrs. Fundy's been stewing about, eh? I'll drive it into the garage your dad uses and lock it up tight as a vault."



Rusty dug into her pocket and handed him the keys. "I want them back," she said, smiling. "I—I've a reason," she added as she saw Toby's eyebrows go up. "And Cy, I have to talk to you."

Leaving Muff and Nick in a fierce argument over where Crink was to sleep, Rusty drew Cy with her up to the room she had been given next to the one Nick and Cy were to share. She gave a hurried but pleased glance at the pine-paneled walls, the maple dressing table and bed, the soft yellow lamps on the low tables, the fluffy white rugs.

Cy threw himself into a low chair, and crossed his long legs in their dusty boots.

"What's the mystery, Rusty? Is there something wrong?"

"I don't know. I mean, there is one, but I don't know what it's all about. But tell me about Pops first. Is he really all right?"

"Right as rain. Why?"

"But—it's not like him to stay away."

Cy shrugged. "Maybe you think I didn't have a battle to keep him here. He kept insisting he had to get home, but when I wrote them the truth at the hospital—he needed this rest more than anything, Rusty—they *ordered* him to stay away. He's improved a lot since then, so you can stop worrying about him. So what else is on your mind?"

"Plenty!" Rusty closed the door and sank down on the edge of the bed. "Wait till you hear!" And she poured out the story of the purchase of the Ark, the altered plans, the journey, the telephone call, and the encounter on the trail.

"As far as I can gather," she finished, "Bob wanted to get rid of us so he could make off with Mrs. Fundy's car. Though why he'd want that old wreck I can't imagine. But he isn't going to get it."

She had been afraid that Cy would scoff at her story as Nick had done earlier, but he didn't.

"That's plenty queer, Rusty," he said. "And I've a feeling it ties in with what's been happening here, though

I don't know how. I've been digging, you know, Indian relics, and I've found a few things. Nothing any museum would look at, just a few sherds so far. But digging is sort of in the air around here. Toby's dad and mother are both scientists, and even though they aren't archaeologists, they kind of make you feel things like digging are important. Well, you can imagine, when Mrs. Whitman could talk Pops into this desert trip when he knew you might be arriving any day. Well, I got Mrs. Fundy interested, and now she digs, Pops digs, my little Hopi friend, Masi, digs. Oh, it's great stuff. Only . . ."

"Cy, who *is* Mrs. Fundy? Oh, I know she went to school with Aunt Ede, but who is she, really?"

"She's the widow of Dr. Fundy, an archaeologist from back home. He fell four summers ago when he was digging down here, and was killed. Mrs. Fundy wasn't with him, I guess nobody was. I don't know where it happened. Well, at first she didn't want to hear about my digging, but then she got interested. Then the funny stuff started. Like the night Masi and I saw the ghost, and the night the spades were stolen. There's something queer about the whole business, and the worst of it is, no one will talk about it. You can't get a word—"

"Do you like her, Cy?"

Cy nodded. "Pops likes her."

Rusty caught her breath. "So it's like that? Oh, Cy, I couldn't bear it—I mean, I want Pops to be happy, of course, but what if she isn't—"

"It takes a while to get used to the idea," Cy said. "She's full of fun, not silly or anything, but they laugh a lot. After all, Rusty, it's not such a weird idea. Pops is pretty young, really, and Mother's been gone eight years."

"I know," said Rusty. "I always told myself I wouldn't be selfish about it if—if it happened, but Cy, what if she's up to something with this car deal and what's been happening at the cave?"

"What could she be up to?" Cy got up and began to pace the floor. "I figured maybe she thinks because I've

found a few sherds—pieces of broken pottery, you know—I'm on the right spot, and that was why she wanted me to quit. She used to go with Dr. Fundy on all his expeditions, and he'd been hunting for several years for this buried Indian pueblo village. The Hidden Village, they call it."

"The Hidden Village!" echoed Rusty, but Cy was too absorbed to notice.

"Suppose I were to find it?" he demanded. "She wouldn't want a nobody like me to find it and have the honor of turning it over to the government, or whatever you do with lost villages."

"Here's Toby with the keys," Rusty said as a knock came at the door, and Toby's dark head and bright yellow neckerchief appeared around the edge of it. "At any rate we've got the car safe," she added as she stood up.

Over their belated supper, Toby and Muff introduced Rusty and Nick to some of the mysteries of a dude ranch, and particularly those of the Lazy-K. Length, breadth, and boundary lines meant little to Rusty. She would have to see it for herself before she could grasp the vastness of the Lazy-K. But when Toby, with Muff's able help, talked of horses and trails and the trips the dudes made up the canyon and out to the desert, she pictured herself riding with them.

"Dad's in Washington a good part of the time," Toby explained. "And Mother sort of shuttles between here and Washington. When she's with Dad, she's sure we're in mischief, and when she's here, she worries about Dad forgetting to eat and if he has a clean shirt."

"We do all right," Muff said. "Cook feeds us and Mr. Ireton manages us *and* the ranch."

"The ranch, anyway," Toby corrected. "If he managed you, I'd be all for him."

There were almost no guests at this season of the year, Toby explained. But there were always a few who stayed on. Those who hadn't left were away this evening, enjoying a barbecue down in the canyon. During the "season," the place was cluttered up with them and there was some-

thing going on every minute.

"Too many women, though," Toby observed with a wry grin. "What a fuss they make over the cowpunchers! Hope your friend, Bob Clayton, turns up. We could use him. If he's good-looking, particularly."

At the mention of Bob's name, Rusty's mind went veering off. Had he gone back to meet the stranger in the sombrero, at the bridge? She was certain of it, just as certain as she was that if Nick and she had allowed themselves to be transferred to the stranger's car, the Ark would never have arrived at the Lazy-K.

"Where's the bridge, Toby?" she interrupted him.

"Why, you came over it, on your way in from the trail," Toby said.

"I—couldn't we go back there, now?" Rusty faltered. "Something may have happened to Bob Clayton."

Toby looked plainly astonished. "What makes you think he'd be at the bridge?" he asked.

"I don't know." Rusty was suddenly vague. "Never mind, I guess it wasn't a very good idea."

"Oh, he'll show up," Toby said confidently.

But the chances of Bob's returning seemed more remote than ever to Rusty by the time she was back in her cozy bedroom. She unpacked sleepily, pausing now and then to lean out the window and listen. Several times she heard hoofbeats, and laughter, and voices calling good nights, as the dudes came riding back from their barbecue. Once a group came in singing, and Rusty heard the twang of a guitar. But Bob didn't come back.

She lingered over brushing her hair. When she simply couldn't give the red-brown curls one more stroke, she slipped a green robe over her pajamas and settled herself on the cushioned window seat.

"I'm not going to bed until I know Bob's back," she told herself. But the long and strenuous day had been too much for Rusty. Her head began to nod almost at once. On the third yawn, she gave up her vigil.

She had been asleep for hours, it seemed, when something woke her.

"Rusty!" a muffled voice called urgently.

She switched on the lamp and sat up blinking.

"Rusty!"

Snatching up her robe, she groped for her slippers and hurried into the hall. She tapped on Cy's door, heard Crinkles answer "Woof!" and went in. The room was dark.

"Nick! Didn't you call?"

Cy jerked up his head, turned on the light, and stared. Nick was in the other bed, apparently sound asleep.

"What's the matter?" Cy asked.

"Cy Jerrold! Up to your old tricks again!" Rusty said in an exasperated tone, laughing in spite of herself. "And you, too, Nick. Honestly, won't you two ever grow up?"

Cy reached for his glasses. "What's up? I was asleep."

"Too bad," said Rusty. "Well, one of these times when you *really* want something, you can yell your head off and *I'll* be asleep! I'm not like Aunt Ede, easy to fool. Good night, smarty, and serve you right if you have a walloping good nightmare!"

She sailed out, ignoring Cy's protests. Back in her room again, she stopped short. She hadn't left her purse on the bed. And what was the pillow doing on the floor?

"Oh!" Rusty clapped a hand to her mouth. "Bob Clayton!" she gasped. "The keys! He's taken the keys!"

## THE DIG'S ON FIRE

### Chapter IX

*RUSTY* was across the room in a flash, certain that the thief must have entered and left by the open window. She could see nothing, hear nothing in the inky blackness below. She raced back to the door and flung it open, to find

Toby tiptoeing down the hall. He turned and saw her.

"You still up?" he asked.

"The keys! Someone took the keys to the car!" Rusty whispered fiercely. "Did you see anyone?"

Toby came back slowly, looking as if he were trying to make up his mind about something.

"I—yes, I saw him," he said. "I heard someone prowling around, and—look, you don't have to worry about it. He wasn't a prowler, as I thought at first."

"I don't care what he is!" Rusty's whisper rose. "He's trying to get away with Mrs. Fundy's car! And he will, too, while we just stand here!"

"That's crazy," said Toby stubbornly. "You didn't see him, but I did. Go back to bed and forget the whole thing. It'll be all right."

"You saw him," Rusty repeated. "You *know* him, Toby Whitman. You're *helping* him!"

She jerked away from him and rushed back into her room, closing the door in Toby's astounded face. With trembling fingers she hurried into shirt and slacks, then slid her bare feet into a pair of moccasins and tiptoed into the hall and down the stairs. Once outside, she started to run blindly in the direction in which she thought she would find the garages, only to stumble and collide with a low hedge. She felt someone seize her arm.

"Look here, dope!" Toby said fiercely. "Do you want to break your neck? If you've got to go tearing around at night making trouble for everybody, you could at least carry a flashlight!"

Rusty tried to pull away, but Toby's grasp was firm.

"I thought you'd try something like that," he said with a short laugh. "I'll go with you to the garage, but if Bob—if this fellow is as sharp as I think he is, I reckon it will be too late to do anything about it."

Seething with anger, Rusty had no choice but to let Toby pilot her toward the dark row of garages. They had almost reached the first one in the row when from behind one of the doors farther down, a starter whirred. There

was the sound of a motor sputtering, and a car without lights crept quietly out of the garage, gained speed, and moved swiftly away down the trail past the cottonwoods. Only when it neared the gates did the driver turn on his lights.

Rusty stared after the car in outraged despair. She caught her breath in a half-sob.

"It's all your fault, Toby Whitman! You *wanted* him to get away! You didn't even lock the garage when I asked you to!"

"Didn't I?" Toby sounded hurt. "Let me show you."

Rusty held back, but Toby made her walk with him to the door from which the car had come. He flashed his small torch over it, and Rusty saw the padlock, its staples wrenched loose, hanging crooked. It was still locked.

"I'm going to call the police," Rusty said determinedly. "You *do* have police out here, don't you?"

"Sure do," Toby drawled. He seemed in fine spirits now that the crime had been satisfactorily committed. "Reckon I wouldn't, though, if I were you."

"Why not?"

Toby grinned and ran his hand through his hair. "They wouldn't thank you for sending them on a wild-goose chase. Like as not, that car will be back here by morning, just about the time the sheriff shows up. Then what will you say?"

Rusty didn't answer. Her talk of police was more for effect than anything, because she hadn't made up her mind about Bob. If she could believe with her whole heart that he was a thief and—but she was so mixed up. There were two Bobs, the one who had been such fun on the trip, and the stranger who had tried to get rid of her and Nick. For that stranger she had no sympathy at all. If she could bring him to justice and get the car back, she would, Toby or no Toby. But the trouble was, the two Bobs kept shifting. Was it possible that there could be some explanation, but how could you explain outright theft of a car? But police, no, not yet. Not until she could think straight.

As Toby lighted the way back to the house he said quietly, "I don't know what this is all about, but maybe you'll tell me, if you're over being sore."

Rusty wavered. She liked Toby's crooked grin and his friendly gray eyes, but she had liked Bob Clayton, too, and what a mistake *that* had been!

She swallowed, and said stiffly, "Maybe I will, sometime. Right now I guess I'd better go to bed. It's been a long day."

Getting to sleep once she was back in bed was another matter. She'd evened the score with Toby a little by her coolness, but she wasn't happy about it. She liked Toby, and yet, to whom had Bob telephoned in Chatfield? The line to the ranch had been busy. Could it have been to Toby, and was the man on the trail, the man with the throaty voice, only an innocent passer-by? But if Toby were working with Bob, he wouldn't have brought back the keys. Except that he knew she'd ask for them, of course. The little trick to get her out of her room—had that been Toby's doing, or Bob's? How could either one of them know that Nick was famous for calling out in his sleep when he had bad dreams, and that she'd go in and wake him?

And how was she going to face Mrs. Fundy when she returned from the desert? Granted that the car was an old rattletrap. It was important to Mrs. Fundy, or she wouldn't have had Rusty trace it and buy it back. It was important to Bob, too, but why? Was there something special about the Ark, something no other car had? Rusty beat the pillow, turned it over to find a cool spot, and fell asleep at last.

The next morning Rusty was the last one down to breakfast in the sunny patio. Most of the ranch guests still remaining were already out at the corral, waiting for horses. Cy, a book propped open beside his plate, was finishing a muffin when Rusty joined him.

"We're riding out to the dig today," he informed her. "Now you're really going to see something. Seven miles of



the swellest canyon trail, and then a neat cave. And if you're good," he waved a spoon at her, "I'll let you dig up a toe bone."

"Think of that!" Rusty laughed. She had guessed that there would be riding today, and had dressed in a bright green shirt and brown jodhpurs. "I thought Pops said your digging was important."

"Maybe it isn't yet," Cy looked grieved, "but I might find something that would throw new light on the whole conception of early civilization in this country, if I'm digging in the right spot."

"Would a toe bone do that?" Rusty asked mischievously.

"Look," said Cy. "Read a book once in a while. Now this one," he brushed crumbs from the open page, "tells about the way the Indians built their villages. If you kept on digging through one layer after another, you'd learn all about how they lived. Why, you could piece together their whole history just by the things you'd find buried in a cave."

"But how do you know there ever was an Indian village around here, or where it's buried?" Rusty asked. "How would anyone know?"

"I'm just a rank amateur, and a pretty green one at that," Cy said patiently. "But Dr. Fundy was as sharp as they come, I've heard. Queer, secret sort of chap, but he made friends with the Indians, and spent summer after summer studying this section right around here. Masi, my Hopi friend, says Dr. Fundy lived with the Hopis for weeks on end. My guess is that they told him. Old Nakwatiwa, Masi's grandfather, would know if there was a buried Indian village within a hundred miles. He knows everything. But when I try to ask him about it, I get brushed off."

"You mean you've actually talked to a real Indian chief, Cy?" Rusty's voice was full of admiration. She wanted to get a chance to tell Cy about the car, but he was so wrapped up in his subject, she hated to cut him short.

"Oh, I've been to visit Masi, of course. It isn't far to the

Indian villages. And Nakwatiwa comes to the dig now and then. But is he closemouthed!"

Rusty dug at her grapefruit. "How did you happen to pick the spot you're digging in now?"

Cy grinned. "The professor, Dr. Fundy, had built a cabin up on the mesa not far from this cave the summer before he was killed. I went down there one day with Mrs. Fundy, saw the cave, and decided there ought to be a village under it." He chuckled. "I saw that someone had been digging in the cave earlier, actually. Hunting for the Hidden Village, I'm pretty sure."

"Cy," said Rusty, "have you figured out what those messages about the Hidden Village meant? And why Bob Clayton would leave them for me?"

Cy shrugged. "I've been figuring on it," he said slowly. "My guess is this Bob Clayton needs investigating."

"You're so right!" Rusty agreed. "I haven't told you the latest!"

She gave scant attention to the rest of her breakfast while she brought Cy up to date on the events of the night. He didn't say very much until she had finished eating and they were on their way out to the corral.

"Somebody from here is in it," he agreed when Rusty wound up her story. "But don't go jumping to conclusions."

"Conclusions! You mean, don't go suspecting Toby. But Cy, he admitted he *knew* Bob. That gives him an awfully black eye, seems to me."

"Black eye?" Cy grinned. "He looks in the pink right now. If I were you, I'd pretend nothing had happened. You might be glad you had when we *do* find the answer."

"Oh, I'll pretend, all right!" Rusty tossed her head.

Toby, resplendent in a bright yellow shirt and blue levis, was perched on the corral fence, doing fancy things with a lariat. At Rusty's approach, he whirled the rope and dropped it neatly about a dignified brown shepherd dog that sat observing the cow hands at their work of bringing up the horses. The dog gave him an injured look, stepped out of the coil of rope, and seated himself at a safe dis-

tance. Toby rubbed an ear and grinned at Rusty. Rusty grinned back as if nothing had happened.

Muff was already astride her piebald pony, and Nick and a brown horse named Escapade eyed each other distrustfully.

"He's gentled!" Muff shrieked. "Just get on him, Nick, and show him you're the boss! Or do you want to change with me? Want to ride Shoofly?"

"Naw. That old nag!" said Nick scornfully.

Charley, the corral boss, took Rusty's measure with a practiced eye and assigned her to a mild-mannered little black called Cinder. Rusty took a few turns about the corral on Cinder to try him out. As she returned to the gate, she saw Toby talking with a swarthy, handsome man, an Indian, who looked her way as she approached.

"Been having any more trouble with that little black's foreleg, Charley?" the man asked of the corral boss, nodding his head toward Cinder.

At the sound of his voice, Rusty started, and jerked Cinder's rein so hard that the horse reared. She couldn't be mistaken! She'd know that throaty voice anywhere. The man at Toby's side, who seemed to be someone in authority at the Lazy-K, was the man who had stopped to help them last night on the trail!

"Who was that man you were talking to, Toby?" she asked as they started off on their ride. Nick was up ahead with Cy. She hadn't had a chance to ask him if he'd noticed the man at the corral. In fact, she'd had scarcely any chance to talk to Nick except for a brief moment when they were mounting, when she had told him only that Bob had got the Ark after all, and cautioned him not to say anything about it.

As the best rider, Toby was entrusted to carry Crink on his saddle. He trotted his horse up beside Cinder, and Rusty repeated her question.

"That's John Revere," he said. "He's an Indian, you know. Swell fellow. College graduate. Studied to be a veterinarian, and I reckon there isn't a thing he doesn't

know about animals, especially horses. Dad's been trying for years to get him to come and manage the ranch for him, but he'd rather spend his time driving around doctoring animals wherever they need him. He sort of belongs to the ranch, though. People have taken to calling here when they want to get hold of him, even though he has an office in Chatfield."

Rusty was silent, busy with her thoughts, as they rode single file along the cool, damp trail, soft with pine needles, edged with fern, which followed the rushing river. After a mile or two the gorge widened, and Rusty could see sheer cliffs towering in brilliant sunlight toward a piercingly blue sky, across which snowy puffs of white cloud drifted lazily. Halfway up the craggy slopes stretched dark wedges of fir and juniper. Higher still, above the timber line, jagged rocks emerged russet, gold, and bronze, streaked with brighter layers of crimson and magenta.

As the gorge curved slowly northward, Rusty saw a stream of smoke pour out of the yellow cliff. Cy saw it, too, and let out a shout that rang back along the trail.

"The cave! It's on fire!"

Toby, riding behind Rusty, called reassuringly: "There's nothing in it to burn. Take it easy!"

But Cy urged his horse on at a gallop down the trail, and the others followed. Rusty, whose riding experience hadn't included anything like this, had a hard time keeping up.

They tethered the horses hastily by the river and, with Crinkles in hot pursuit, began scrambling up the zigzag footpath toward the overhanging sandstone ledge from which the smoke was now billowing in surging puffs. The entrance to the cave was completely blocked. Cy, coughing and sputtering, his eyes streaming from the smoke, was all for dashing in to see if his precious dig was safe. But Toby held him back.

"Smells like dry leaves," Toby said. "Some more mischief."

"Look! There's someone skulking on the mesa," Muff shouted, pointing upward.

"That's Nakwatiwa, and he isn't skulking," said Toby indignantly. "He's signaling to us."

Cy scrambled up the path to the mesa to meet the old Hopi, and they stood there silhouetted against the skyline, talking earnestly. When the Indian moved away, Cy came back looking thoughtful.

"That was pretty decent of him," he said. "Rode all the way over here on his burro to warn us. Masi's been taken sick, and the old chap says the cave is full of evil spirits. He's afraid we'll get the sickness, too. Masi's probably caught cold or something, but Nakwatiwa is kind of superstitious, and thought we ought to be warned."

Cy had no intention of heeding the warning, however. He paced impatiently up and down on the ledge beside the entrance to the cave, waiting for the smoke to clear away. Rusty and the others stood around helplessly, looking out over the canyon, not talking much. If only Cy would give up all this stupid digging, Rusty thought. But of course it wasn't stupid to him. And maybe she'd be just as enthusiastic if she'd found a few things, as Cy had done.

"Masi!" exclaimed Muff suddenly, and they all looked up to where a slight, black-haired boy had flung himself from his pony on the canyon's edge, and was scrambling down the cliff to join them. "Your grandfather said you were sick!" Muff added as Masi approached.

"Nakwatiwa has been here?" Masi looked uneasy.

The boys and Muff tried to explain about the smoke, the old chief's visit, and his warning.

"My grandfather imagines many things," Masi said at last, gravely. "Last night he saw a ghost, the ghost of the professor's car. Tomorrow night the festival begins in our village, and my grandfather fears that the spirits of his ancestors will appear to him and avenge themselves on him. His conscience troubles him." Masi flashed them a quick smile, and then added more soberly: "But why he came here this morning, I cannot understand. I sneezed

when we were in the fields together, but it was not an evil spirit but a grain of dust that was to blame."

At last the smoke had died down so that they could enter the cave. Cy and Masi went ahead, eager to see if any further mischief had been done. Rusty, last to enter, heard Cy's roar of anger, and ran to join them. All the dirt which the boys had dug and carefully sifted during the past weeks had been returned to the hole, the surface packed down and smoothed over as if no spade had ever turned it.

But it was something else which drew all their eyes. On top of the dig rested the whitened skull of a small animal, and coiled about it, with the head raised as if to strike, was a dead rattlesnake.

"This I understand!" said Masi in a low voice.

With a quick movement he snatched up the skull and the dead snake, and tucked them under his arm. Then, without a word to the others, he plunged through the entrance, scrambled up the rocks to the canyon rim where his pony was tethered, and rode away at break-neck speed over the mesa.

## PUZZLE IN FOOTPRINTS

### Chapter X

*AFTER* Masi had disappeared, the others continued to stare up at the mesa as if they expected something more to happen. Muff was the first to turn away.

"Well, there goes the evidence!" she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I wouldn't let him get away with it."

"What would *you* do, fire-eater?" There was amusement in Toby's voice. There would be, Rusty thought. He probably knew what this was all about, just as he had known about the theft of the car.

"Follow him," Muff said. "See what he does with it. There's no point in staying here, not unless you're going to dig some more." She looked at Cy.

But Cy wasn't listening. He sat on a rock, head lowered, breaking a sherd of crude pottery between his fingers. There was a dejected droop to his shoulders, Rusty noticed. A fine thing, she thought indignantly, that a fellow couldn't be allowed to putter around in an old cave if he wanted to.

"You can't get anywhere with the dig until you find out who's trying to stop you, Cy," she said. "I think Muff's right."

"I didn't want to stay here anyway," Nick said cheerfully. "Those evil spirits are getting in my hair." He gave a mournful cough.

Cy threw down the sherd and got slowly to his feet. "All right," he said. "We'll call it a day as far as the dig is concerned. But it isn't funny and you can stop making cracks about Masi." He glared at them through his thick glasses.

"You mean me," Muff said. "I'm the only one who made any cracks."

"All right, I *do* mean you. That stuff meant something to Masi. Either he beat it because he was scared, or he took it away to show to someone. Just because you don't understand it you don't have to be flip about it."

Surprisingly enough, Toby came to Muff's defense, his easy drawl breaking in on Cy's hot words.

"Simmer down, Cy," he advised. "If we're going to get at the bottom of this, we'd better keep cool about it. John Revere's back at the ranch. He belongs to Masi's clan," Toby explained to Rusty and Nick. "Not very welcome there any more, since he left it. At least, not with the older members. The young ones, like Masi, don't figure quite the same way." He turned back to Cy. "So how about going back to the ranch? If John's still around, we can tell him what happened and see what he makes of it."

Cy agreed gloomily. "Get out and stay out is probably all it means. But John would know."

"Cy," Muff gave him a timid smile, "I didn't really mean that about Masi. I mean I did mean it, but not in a mean way. I guess that's an apology, isn't it?"

Cy looked embarrassed, then he laughed. "You win," he said.

It was a relief to leave the murky cave behind and to be in the sunlight again, clambering down the rocks to the river. Nick and Muff raced ahead, and it was Muff's shrill shout from somewhere below that warned the other three that something else *had* happened.

Before they were close enough to see the thicket where they had left the horses, they caught sight of Muff scrambling back up to meet them.

"The horses!" she called, stopping and waving her arms. "Toby, they're gone!" When they reached her she was pointing to the river and panting. "There's not a sign of them!"

Below among the trees that lined the stream they could see Nick prowling back and forth, parting the bushes. Muff cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted down to him: "No use, Nick! I can see from up here. No horses!"

Rusty caught the swift look that passed between Toby and Cy.

"Maybe we didn't tie them very well," Toby said.

Cy snorted. "We sure did," he said. "We might have slipped up on one, but not on five."

Rusty looked from one to the other in bewilderment. "Is this some more 'mischief'?" she asked.

Toby gave one of his characteristic shrugs. "We'll probably have stronger names for it by the time we've tramped back to the ranch."

"But the horses? Do you suppose someone stole them?"

"They'll show up," Toby said. "But before we start back, let's take a look around."

Taking a look around didn't solve anything. There were tracks in the soft mud. They might have been made by a pair of high-heeled cowboy boots.

"And we've all got flat heels," Cy said, "so they weren't



made by any of us tramping around. But try and find who *did* make 'em!"

The seven miles of canyon trail which they had covered so quickly on the way out to the cave seemed interminable to Rusty as they trudged back to the ranch. If only she'd worn dungarees and moccasins and a wide-brimmed hat, as Muff had. It was hot and close in the canyon, and so still that when they weren't talking, they could hear all the quiet little wood sounds. Sometimes the trail was so narrow that they had to walk single file, and Rusty always found herself lagging behind the others.

"I'm a tenderfoot, all right," she thought ruefully, when she had to stop more than once to rest. "But I'm getting initiated fast."

And there were consolations. From time to time when they came close to the rippling canyon stream, when she stopped to sniff the bracing odor of the pines, when she caught sight of the towering russet bluffs or the brilliant blue sky above them, Rusty felt it was all so breathtakingly beautiful she didn't mind if every one of her toes—and her nose—were one huge blister. And, too, there was time to think again, something she felt she hadn't had a chance to do since that moment in the drugstore in Chatfield. Ever since then, she thought, they had been racing pellmell to do something, to keep something from happening, running around like squirrels in a cage. Tonight, perhaps, or surely tomorrow, Pops would return from the desert. And with him Mrs. Fundy. And there wasn't any Ark to present her with. Neither Cy nor Nick seemed to share Rusty's concern over *that*. As for Toby, would there ever be an explanation of what had happened?

Someone was determined to stop Cy from digging. Someone who wanted the honor of finding the Hidden Village himself, or herself. Mrs. Fundy was certainly the logical one for that role, but then where did Bob come in, and the Ark? And she'd been away from the ranch when Bob had telephoned to his accomplice.

"Oh, now I'm really getting confused," Rusty thought.

And what should they do first to clear up the mystery? Find the car. But that meant notifying the police, and Cy had said to go slow on that.

"I have a feeling Mrs. Fundy wouldn't like it," he had said. "Though what reason Toby has for thinking the car will be returned—well, I can ask him, but I don't think it will do any good."

Rusty hoped that was what Toby and Cy were discussing so earnestly up ahead, while Nick and Muff and she tried to keep them in sight along the trail. But when the three laggards caught up to the boys and found them resting on a huge rock beside the trail, Rusty couldn't learn a thing from the look on their faces. There was puzzlement on Cy's, a stubborn scowl on Toby's.

"Fine introduction to the Lazy-K," Toby said, looking at Rusty. "Pull up a hunk of rock and rest your tired self."

Rusty sank down beside them, grateful for the chance to rest her aching feet. "You mean you don't always walk seven miles after breakfast?" she asked.

"You probably use your feet a lot more than we do," Toby said with a laugh. "From house to horse and from horse to house is about the only chance we get to use ours. But cheer up. Another mile and you can see the ranch buildings."

That last mile stretched and stretched unbelievably. "If it was less than four, I'll eat the next horse I see," Rusty muttered when they finally dragged themselves back to the corral.

"Don't," said Muff, scrambling up on the corral fence. "Because the first horse I see is Shoofly!"

"Sure enough!" Toby cried. "They're all here."

He turned on Mr. Ireton who was just coming out of his office in one of the buildings. Rusty hadn't had a good look at the tall, thin ranch manager the night before. Now she perched on the corral fence and watched the little scene.

"How'd they get here?" Toby jerked a thumb toward the corral.

Mr. Ireton paused, pushing back his wide-brimmed hat

and revealing a balding forehead. There was an amused twinkle in his blue eyes beneath the heavy, graying brows as he looked from one to the other of the dusty young travelers. "I assume you mean your horses?"

Toby only scowled, but Mr. Ireton went on cheerfully: "You've lived in the West longer than I have, my boy. But it seems there are a few things still that you have to learn about the cow pony."

"Good for him!" thought Rusty. "Toby's so sure of himself."

"Such as?" Toby's tone wasn't even civil, Rusty thought.

"The cow pony, one of the more intelligent breeds of horses—" Mr. Ireton began.

"Look," Toby interrupted. "If you're trying to tell me that a cow pony can undo a good sound knot, it won't wash. We *tied* those horses up at the cave."

Mr. Ireton's smile faded. "Up at the cave—you didn't expect anything else, did you? The place is jinxed, I've told you that."

Muff hopped off the fence. "The jinx wore boots," she said. "There were footprints in the mud."

Mr. Ireton turned to her with an indulgent grin. "Oh, come now! Maybe somebody did play a trick on you, and a mean one, I'm not denying that. But if you're trying to pin the blame on someone just because he, or she, wore boots— Why, even I wear boots!"

Muff, unabashed, studied Mr. Ireton's glistening brown footgear. "Only yours aren't muddy," she said. "Unless you polished them again."

Mr. Ireton threw back his head and shouted with laughter.

"Atta girl!" he cried, giving one of Muff's pigtailed a playful yank. "When I need a detective, I'll send for you. Always there with the answers, aren't you? Well, I'm sorry you had to walk home, and honestly, if I'd known what a spot you were in, I'd have driven around by the mesa to get you. Ought to have a walkie-talkie when you start for the cave, you know. Then you could yell for help,

and seems like you can use a little." As he started off toward the bunkhouse, he called over his shoulder, "Good hunting, for the boots, I mean."

"Oh, yeah?" Toby said under his breath.

"He's taking it all as a joke, isn't he?" Rusty said to Cy who had perched himself on the rail beside her. "Mr. Ireton, I mean."

"He and Toby don't hit it off, as I guess you've noticed," Cy remarked.

That was what Muff told Rusty, too, when the two girls went back to the house.

"I kind of like Mr. Ireton," she confided. "But he bores Toby. All that 'my boy' stuff. But he *is* the boss when Daddy's away, which is an awful lot of the time, and I suppose that's the real reason Toby can't stand him. And then Toby wants John Revere to manage the ranch, and Mr. Ireton finds John Revere unsufferable. Or something," she added hastily, when Rusty laughed.

"I'll join him on that," Rusty said. "Just between you and me, I find John Revere a little 'unsufferable' too." She was sorry the moment the words were out, for Muff gave her a surprised look.

"Why, you don't even *know* him!"

"I was joking," Rusty said hastily. "Oh, brother, will it feel good to shed these boots!"

Muff chuckled. "New, aren't they?" Rusty nodded.

"Want a bit of advice?"

"Mmmm, yes," said Rusty.

"Got a pair of levis?"

"What are they?"

"Oh, you know." Muff indicated her own faded blue jeans.

"So that's what you call them. No, I didn't bring any. I wear them a lot at home, but I thought on a dude ranch everybody would be dressed up."

"Then," said Muff, "you'd better buy some. Got a pair of moccasins?"

"Fooled you," said Rusty. "Yes!"

"Well, that's it. All you need, except for a shirt, of course. Those fancy pants," she pointed to Rusty's smart whipcord jodhpurs, "well, nobody wears them. Reckon you haven't been out West before."

Rusty thought ruefully of her wardrobe and how Aunt Ede and she had shopped for days to complete it.

"We'll go in to Chatfield tomorrow when they go to get the mail," Muff added, "and you can buy some levis. Or maybe Toby'll drive to the trading post this afternoon."

Rusty nodded. "I guess you could give me a lot of advice," she said humbly.

"I reckon I could," Muff replied. "Just ask me."

Rusty thought a minute. Then, with a grin, "Well, what would you do if someone had trusted you to deliver a certain—article to someone, and before you could deliver it, you found—it was missing?"

"I'd wait until Mrs. Fundy gets back," said Muff promptly. "Any more questions?"

"No," Rusty answered hastily. What was it Toby had told them last night? You just had to get used to Muff? You certainly did, and, Rusty added to herself, you shouldn't make the mistake of thinking Muff was just a kid. She was a very self-contained little sprite, with an uncanny way of guessing what you were thinking.

When they reached the house, Muff disappeared to see what was on the menu for the noon meal, and Rusty wandered through the deserted lounge on her way up to her room. In a room off the lounge someone was playing Chopin, but when Rusty stuck her head around the door, the music had ended. A girl got up abruptly from the piano, and as Rusty watched, fascinated, did a handstand on the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace. Then she flopped right side up again. She was tall and straight as a young larch, and just as graceful, Rusty thought. She smoothed her shining black bangs back from her eyes, wriggled her levis straight, tucked in her purple checked shirt, and stared back at Rusty.

"Hi!" she said. "You're new, aren't you?"

"I came last night. I'm Rusty Jerrold."

"So Dr. Jerrold's family finally got here!" the girl said softly. "I'm Thea Summers, and no cracks, please."

"Why, I—I can't think of any," Rusty stammered, surprised.

"You will. Your precious brother will put you onto any number. 'Thea Summers, what do you do in the winters?' and 'I wouldn't mind the Thpring if I could only Thea Thummers!'"

"How awful! And there's not much you can do to get even, is there?"

"I'll think of something yet," Thea said confidently. She gave Rusty a shrewd look. "You picked a poor time to come to the Lazy-K."

"Oh, I know it's not the season, but—"

"I didn't mean that. After all, *I'm* here, and I don't have to be. I mean if I were eighteen I wouldn't have to." Thea shrugged. "But there won't be any fun any more. Not with the trouble at the dig and everybody going around suspecting everybody else."

Rusty's eyes widened. "Is everybody—suspecting—"

"Oh my, yes. I thought Cy'd told you. It's made things sort of poisonous. Either you wonder if the other fellow's been up to something, or you wonder if *you're* under suspicion. It's gruesome."

"I did hear something," Rusty admitted uneasily. She wasn't sure she should be discussing it with Thea.

"Well, I keep out of it as much as I can," Thea said. "I wish Cy would drop the whole thing, but he's terribly stubborn. He'll keep right on digging until somebody bops him the way they did the professor."

"I thought Dr. Fundy *fell*," Rusty said slowly.

Thea gave her a quick look. "Who knows?" she said. "I've got to run. See you at lunch." She was out of the room, racing across the patio, before Rusty had recovered from her surprise.

"Cy's just got to stay out of that cave," Rusty thought as she went slowly up the stairs. "The Hidden Village can

jolly well stay hidden. If Thea's right, and Dr. Fundy was *murdered*—"

She tackled Cy about that when he came, on the heels of the lunch gong, to escort her to the dining hall in the low log building adjoining the ranch house. But as she had expected, Cy was noncommittal about the danger of what he was doing. He didn't deny that Dr. Fundy might have been murdered—didn't know anything more than he'd been told, he said—and after all, *he* wasn't Dr. Fundy, so it didn't follow that anything but annoyance was going to overtake him.

In the dining hall Rusty looked about her curiously. Long tables with benches, where cowhands and the few remaining guests were already seated. Checked or plaid shirts, bright neckerchiefs, sun glasses, deep tans. She had a few things to catch up on, she decided, and was glad she'd changed to a shirt and pedal pushers. At least they didn't look as out of place as her morning outfit must have.

Across the room Mr. Ireton nodded to them pleasantly and motioned to the empty bench across from him. But Cy shook his head.

"Thanks, but the gang's waiting for us," he said.

"Youth calls to youth, eh?" Mr. Ireton winked at Rusty.

At a table near the back of the room Toby, Nick, and Muff were already seated. Thea appeared a moment later and slipped into the place beside Nick.

"Thought I'd never get away from the Dragon," she announced with a wry smile.

"She's *back*?" Cy shot Thea a significant look.

Thea nodded. "Drove in about midnight, and came over to the Shelby's cabin to get me. She's having her lunch sent down. Says she's going to sleep a week and doesn't want anyone to disturb her."

"That explains why Ireton's being so sociable," Toby said with a laugh. "Wants someone to take the Dragon's place at his table." He turned to Rusty. "Thea's from Chicago," he explained. "And the Dragon—just what *is* the Dragon to you, Thea?"

“Sort of a cousin, I guess,” Thea answered. “I don’t know, really. She came to Chicago when Grandfather died. The trustees or somebody arranged for her to look after me.” She made a face and laughed. “So what did you do all morning?” she asked.

With each one adding his bit, the story of the morning’s adventures grew and grew, even began to seem rather funny. Until Muff said suddenly, “I’ve found out who untied the horses.”

They all turned to stare at her. Muff tossed her pigtails. “I took the liberty,” she went on calmly, “of inspecting the boots around here. The only pair with mud still damp on them were on the porch of one of the cabins.”

Muff paused dramatically. She was looking at Thea, waiting for her to say something.

“Oh!” Thea gasped. Then, “So that’s why you were buzzing around on your bicycle!” She stared at Muff a moment, then turned to Cy with such distress on her face that Rusty felt instantly sorry for her.

“I didn’t do it!” Thea protested. “Somebody else wore my boots. I saw the mud, too, but I haven’t worn them for ages. Anyone could have taken them.”

“Of all the screwy ideas!” Cy flared, glowering at Muff. “Of course Thea didn’t do it! For corn’s sake, it’s getting so we’re stabbing everybody in the back around here.”

Thea threw Cy a grateful look, and then her eyes turned to Rusty. “She’s afraid,” Rusty thought. “If she didn’t do it, she knows who did, and she’s afraid.” She found herself shivering a little. Noon, and a hot June day in Arizona, and she felt as if a cold, dark fog were sifting into the room.



## BAD LUCK FOR MARCIA

### Chapter XI

*IF IT* hadn't been for Toby, who at times showed surprising tact—maybe to make up for Muff's lack of it—there might have been more said. Because Thea's denial wasn't at all convincing, at least to anyone but Cy. Rusty was pretty sure Thea knew who'd worn the boots, if she hadn't actually worn them, and by the scowl on Nick's face she could tell that he had doubts, too. But Toby burst out laughing.

"Well, that was fun. What'll we play now?" He lifted Muff's pigtails and wigwagged them at the others. Muff looked as if she'd suddenly acquired donkey's ears and were flapping them. Cy looked less serious, and some of the strain went out of Thea's face.

"He's acting," Rusty thought, watching Toby. "But it's good."

"We'll elect you the world's dizziest detective, Muff," Toby went on genially. "At least a hundred pairs of boots at the Lazy-K, you look at one pair and bingo! Case solved!"

Muff began to protest, but Toby wrapped the braids over her mouth. He turned the conversation to his unsuccessful hunt for John Revere. "We'll have to wait until he gets back to find out what Masi had on his mind when he raced off," he said.

After lunch the boys, with Crink following, went off to pitch horseshoes, and Thea excused herself to hurry back to her cabin. Rusty and Muff wandered off to the swimming pool in the hope that it would be cool there, even though they had to wait a while before going in.

"I suppose you fell for that line of Toby's?" Muff

asked when they were sitting on the edge of the gleaming green pool. She leaned forward, watching the still water, her chin on her hand.

"I did not," said Rusty. "But it was all right, you know. I mean, even if you did find damp mud on Thea's boots, or somebody's boots, it wasn't exactly tactful to blurt it out that way."

"Mmm, I s'pose not," Muff agreed. "But I didn't say they were Thea's. They could have been the Dragon's. Only she's going to sleep a week."

"Or somebody could have worn Thea's," Rusty said. "Even a man could have, by squeezing his feet a little."

Muff thought that over. "Well, if it was a man, it would have to be someone with small feet. I guess John Revere could have if he tried real hard. But he wasn't around when Toby looked for him. Anyhow, he'd have to have a *reason*."

Rusty didn't answer. She had no intention of letting Muff know what reason John Revere had, and maybe he wasn't the one. Bob could have squeezed his feet into a pair of girl's boots, she supposed. And then there was old Nakwatiwa. He'd been up on the mesa, but he'd have had to pass them to get down to the river.

"Besides," Muff volunteered, just as though Rusty had spoken, "Nakwatiwa doesn't wear boots with heels. His are more like moccasins."

Rusty wasn't even surprised. Muff seemed to always know what she was thinking.

She turned and looked out over the enclosure that held the buildings of the Lazy-K. Beyond the garages was the trail to the cabins. The trail down which Thea had disappeared. Pepper trees hid the bend in the road, but she could see the roofs of the cabins rising from a wooded hollow beyond.

"Are they all occupied now?" Rusty turned to Muff again.

"Oh, no. There's almost nobody left now. The Flints, Thea, the Shelbys, Miss Sevaris and that other lady, I

never can think of her name." Muff counted them off on her fingers. "But," she added, "I don't think your Mr. Clayton would be hiding in any of them, because Mr. Ireton or somebody would have seen him. And Toby has Daddy's keys, only he doesn't let Mr. Ireton know that. He never used to until this last time Daddy had to go to Washington, and I guess Toby being nearly eighteen and everything, Daddy thought it would make him feel more responsive."

"Responsible," said Rusty, without thinking.

"I guess so," Muff said.

She got up. "Too bad we just ate. It would be nice to go in. Let's go see what gives in the recreation hall," she suggested.

The hall was deserted, except for Mr. Ireton, who was behind the counter at one end over which the Post Office sign hung. He was smoking a pipe and reading the paper, and he looked up and nodded when the girls came in. Muff jiggled the soft drink machine, and Rusty tinkled the piano keys a little. They played a game of Ping-pong, and Rusty looked over the books on the shelves. It was hot and dusky in the long room, and very quiet, as if everyone at the Lazy-K were indulging in an afternoon nap. Mr. Ireton yawned and laid aside his paper.

"Find those suspicious-looking boots yet, Muff?" he asked, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He stretched, tipping his chair back.

"Yup," said Muff.

Mr. Ireton's chair came down. Not really!"

"Sure. It was easy."

"Well, well. And whose were they?"

Muff giggled. Mr. Ireton gave her a triumphant look. "I thought so. Didn't look over the boots in *my* cabin, now, did you?"

"Nope," said Muff. "Didn't have to. I knew it was you all the time."

Rusty gave a little gasp at Muff's daring, but Mr. Ireton only threw back his head and laughed. "You're quite a

girl. Quite a girl." And then, as if he felt he had indulged Muff's impudence more than was wise, he said in a soberer tone, "Yes, quite a girl."

He got up and came out into the room, locking the half-door in the counter behind him. He took some coins from his pocket, and to Rusty's surprise, slipped them into the coke machine and presented each of the girls with a cold bottle. Then he got one for himself.

"Sleepy weather," he said, waving away their thanks. "Think I'll take a little shut-eye myself. Be good." And he went off, yawning.

"Bet you planned on this coke all along," Rusty remarked as she put her empty bottle into the rack.

"Not exactly." Muff chuckled. "But it wasn't a bad idea, was it?"

"Is everyone at the Lazy-K as bighearted as Mr. Ireton?"

Muff snorted. "Are you kidding? In all my life, and he's been here six years, he never bought me a coke. This was for *your* benefit. He wanted to make an impression on you."

"On *me*?"

Muff gave her braids a toss. "Oh, well, I suppose you're what they call pretty. Or maybe you've got glamour, or something."

Rusty laughed. "Well, hardly. He probably was trying to buy you off so you wouldn't tell he wore the boots." But she couldn't resist a quick glance into the mirror over the coke machine. The sight of her red hair and freckles wasn't exactly inspiring. Her eyes were rather nice, or so Barry had told her once in an unguarded moment. Honest eyes, he'd said. Not beautiful, of course.

"Mr. Ireton didn't wear the boots," Muff said. "I was just trying him out, trying the boots on for size, sort of. Like in Cinderella."

"I know," said Rusty. She inspected the ridge of freckles over her nose. If she'd only worn a hat this morning!

"Well, gorgeous." Rusty whirled at the sound of the

mocking voice. "If you can tear yourself away from your reflection for a moment, how about a trip to the trading post?"

Toby was in the doorway, and Rusty knew by the amused twinkle in his eyes that he'd been watching her. Probably thought she'd been admiring herself. She couldn't think of a fitting retort, either, so she pretended she was retying the green scarf about her hair.

"Sounds like fun," she said indifferently. "You mean all of us, don't you?"

"Sure. Cy's gone to get Thea. Nick and Crinkles are waiting in the bus."

The "bus" was a handsome new station wagon, and Toby was not a little proud as he handed the girls into it. They crossed the bridge and turned right to follow the road that led on into the canyon and wound up onto the mesa into flat, desert country. There were long, long stretches of uninhabited wasteland, where only tumbleweeds and an occasional cactus broke the monotony, except when they caught a distant glimpse of a shepherd and his flock or an Indian on a pony.

Thea recovered her gayety, and everyone was in high spirits. Rusty felt almost as if she were with her own gang back home. Some little remark of Toby's would remind her of Barry, and once when Thea sang out, "Oh, a mirage! Look, Rusty, wouldn't you swear that was a lake up ahead?" it sounded just like Ann.

At the trading post Rusty was first disappointed. It wasn't at all like the shops she'd been used to at home. Then she was intrigued by the curios, the silver rings and bracelets with their turquoise settings, the interesting designs of the bright rugs, the baskets and pottery. Counters were piled with levis, sombreros, leather goods, and the canned goods and other groceries were all mixed in with hardware, infants' clothing, men's plaid shirts and gay bandannas.

"Better get those levis," Muff reminded her. Toby had a list of things to buy for the "boys" at the Lazy-K, as well

as a few things for the kitchen. None of it seemed very important, and Rusty suspected that the trip to the trading post was more a pleasure than a necessity.

When they piled into the station wagon again for the trip home, they were all loaded down with packages. Rusty swung a huge straw hat by her side.

"You'll need it," Muff had said.

The desert shimmered with heat at this hour of the day. Rusty thought about the cool lakes of Minnesota, and wondered how anyone could grow to love this wasteland. Toby talked of trips they'd take when the last of the season's guests went home, and they could relax a bit. The Grand Canyon, the Painted Desert, the Petrified Forest, Montezuma Castle. It all sounded impressive. Nick wanted to visit Tombstone, but Toby thought that might be a little far, unless they made a safari of it. Listening and watching the road made Rusty drowsy. She felt almost hypnotized by the dun monotony of the mesa.

It was cooler in the canyon, and Toby relaxed his speed. On both sides of the narrow road, the canyon walls pressed in, their majestic crags flaming with color. Rusty looked up at them with awe. How secret they were, and how serene. Millions and millions of years they had held their own counsel, given nothing away. How they must laugh at us, Rusty thought, hacking and digging and trying to learn about the life of those long-ago people who once lived in this canyon. Why, even the greatest archaeologist must look like a kid to them, a kid with a pail and spade in a sandbox.

Thea's sudden, startled cry jerked Rusty back to the present. Toby slammed on the brakes. Almost before the car had come to a stop, Cy had the door open, and the boys were scrambling out.

"What *is* it?" Rusty cried.

Thea didn't wait to answer, but Muff called over her shoulder, "There's a woman lying in the road up ahead!"

Rusty thrust her packages aside and climbed out at Muff's heels, racing with her to where the boys were

stooping over someone in a red satin blouse and levis.

She heard Thea cry out, "Oh, no!" and saw Toby turn the crumpled figure over. Then she saw the woman's face.

"Why, it's Marcia Hollis!" Rusty exclaimed.

"Colorado!" Nick cried.

Toby looked up at them, a worried scowl on his face. Muff said, "The Dragon!" in a hushed voice.

"She's not dead," Toby said in a relieved tone. "I suppose we shouldn't move her, though."

But Thea was on her knees, trying to raise Marcia Hollis' limp shoulders.

"Take it easy, Thea," Cy said. "Toby's right. She's probably just knocked out by the fall from her horse, but you never can tell. Let's get some water from the river."

There wasn't anything to carry water in, but Rusty remembered the big straw hat she'd bought. It would be better than nothing. She raced back to the car for it, and Nick went with her to dip water from the near-by river.

"Her horse isn't anywhere in sight," Nick said as they scrambled up the bank again. "Imagine, finding Colorado in this canyon!"

"And finding she's Thea's Dragon!" Rusty answered. "Now I'm certain—" She broke off, and when Nick gave her a puzzled look, she shook her head. "Crazy coincidence, that's all," she added lamely.

They wet handkerchiefs in the water and bathed Marcia Hollis' face. It was then that Rusty noticed the two red welts across Marcia's shoulders. Angry red streaks that the torn blouse couldn't conceal, and that looked as if they had been made by a whip, brought down with such savage fury that it had cut the flesh.

## WAIT UNTIL IT'S DARK

### Chapter XII

*WHEN* Marcia's eyes opened, they looked straight at Rusty, but there was no recognition in them, only bewilderment and pain. She pushed Toby's hands away and sat up.

"Don't!" she said. "Go away, all of you!"

"Marcia! It's Thea. Are you all right?" Thea couldn't keep the fright out of her voice.

"Of course I'm all right." Her hand groped for her shoulder, and Marcia winced as the fingers found the bruised skin. "Stupid horse!" Marcia mumbled. "Don't stare at me like a—a rabbit. I'm all right. Find my horse."

She *is* a dragon, Rusty thought. But she didn't talk like that when we met her on the way to Chatfield. Then she was all sweetness.

Marcia got to her feet, shook off Toby's hand, and started forward unsteadily. But Toby seized her elbow.

"The car's back this way, Miss Hollis," he said. "Don't worry about the horse. He'll show up."

Marcia shook her head dazedly, and then to Rusty's surprise, began to cry. "That beast!" she sobbed, covering his dirt-streaked face with her hands. "That unspeakable beast!"

Toby said a little crisply, "Horses do bolt, you know, when they've been frightened."

But Rusty found a different meaning in Marcia's words. Was she railing against the horse, or against the man—Rusty was sure it was a man—who had struck her with his whip? Had Marcia been riding alone on this canyon trail, or had she met someone, or had two riders set off from the Lazy-K? And where was the other rider now?"



Rusty looked about her for hoofprints, but the ground had been so trampled over that it was impossible to tell whether one horse or more had been there.

Not until they were in the station wagon and Marcia was leaning back against Thea's arm, her tears over, did she look at Rusty again. Then her eyes opened wide.

"Oh!" she whispered, and with a hurried glance at the other occupants of the car, she turned and stared out the window.

Rusty, Muff, and Nick got out at the ranch house. As they watched the station wagon roll away across the enclosure and disappear on the road toward Thea's cabin, Nick let out a low whistle.

"Who does she think she's fooling, I wonder," he said with a nod in the direction of the car. "I suppose falling from a horse made those welts on her shoulders?"

"So you saw them too?" Rusty said.

Nick shrugged. "She could have ridden under a branch or something, I suppose," he said in a tone of voice that indicated he didn't suppose any such thing.

Rusty glanced at Muff. If she was listening to the conversation Muff gave no sign. She was standing with her hands in the pockets of her levis, staring off across the yard toward the stables. There was a mysterious little smile on her face. Suddenly, without a word, she bounded away down the road to the corral.

"This place is cockeyed," Nick said disgustedly. "Ever since Aunt Ede got that crazy phone call from Cy, nothing's been right. Do you think Bob knew Colorado was trailing us all the way from Minneapolis? He wasn't very glad to see her, you know."

Rusty took a deep breath and let it out slowly. She was remembering the trip down, the note she'd found in her room in Sioux City, the words written in her diary.

"I don't know," she said despondently. "Maybe he suspected something—he wouldn't tell her where we were going. Remember?"

The thought of Bob and how he'd betrayed their trust

in him filled her with such gloom that she wanted to go off by herself somewhere and cry her eyes out. But that wasn't the answer. They ought to organize themselves, Nick and she. Yes, Muff would be helpful, too. For the first time she consciously faced the fact that Cy was playing a lone hand, if he wasn't actually in league with Toby! For all the help he'd been in getting the car back, you'd think saving Bob's skin was more important than fulfilling a trust, and yet it was just as much Cy's business to see that Mrs. Fundy got that car as it was hers.

"Well, I don't like it," Nick said. "I can't reach Cy at all. He used to be someone to depend on."

"He's in love," said Rusty lightly.

Nick's only answer was a snort.

"Wait until it happens to you," Rusty said.

"Don't be a comic," said Nick. "Catch me falling so hard for a girl I couldn't see what was happening around me."

"You can't tell what you'd do, Nick," Rusty said, and then, "I wish Aunt Ede were here."

"Ditto," said Nick fervently.

When Nick had wandered off to the tennis courts, Rusty went upstairs to her room. It was time she sorted out a few facts, made a few decisions. Maybe Marcia Hollis' accident would force Toby and Cy to take some action, or would they pretend that that, too, was something that wasn't of much importance, like the theft of the car? They made her so *mad!*

Muff came down the hall and popped her head in at the door. "It wasn't anyone from the ranch," she said. "I asked Mr. Ireton. She went out alone."

"Then she met someone," Rusty said.

"Yes," said Muff. "Only, what would anybody be carrying a whip for? I never even *saw* one."

"You're right," Rusty said admiringly. "So maybe she didn't meet anyone after all. Maybe it *was* just an accident."

"Maybe," said Muff. She turned away, then paused at

the door. "Toby said we might go square dancing tonight. They're having a hoedown over at the Trail's End Ranch. I hope you brought something you can wear."

Rusty smiled. "I'll dig up something," she promised.

But after dinner Rusty had other things on her mind than the proposed trip to a neighboring dude ranch. For Thea, when she hurried into the table, slipped a little gray envelope to Rusty. It was marked *Private* and Rusty was so impressed that she didn't even dare to open it at the table. She pushed it into her pocket, and as soon as the meal was over, she made an excuse to leave the others and ran up to her room.

The note was from Marcia Hollis, and Rusty had to read it twice before she could believe her eyes:

*I must see you, and alone. Wait until it's quite dark, and then come to my cabin. Be sure no one sees you. Do take care. No one must know you're coming here.*

Rusty's first reaction was one of bewilderment. "What a deal!" she murmured, and thought, "Marcia's been seeing some Grade-B movies. People don't *write* notes like this in real life."

But in spite of her scorn for Marcia's dramatics, her heart began to thump. She found herself glancing hastily at the open windows of her room. Suppose someone had seen Thea slip the note to her? How could she get away without being seen? How would she find Marcia's cabin in the dark? She didn't even know which one it was.

"But I've got to go," she thought. "This isn't just a silly fancy of Marcia's. She's frightened—and frankly, so am I. Whatever she has to tell me, I've got to find it out."

She jumped when she heard a creak on the stair. A moment later there was a soft tap on her door. Rusty shoved the note back into her pocket.

"Who—who is it?" she quavered.

"It's me, Toby."

Rusty walked stiffly to the door and opened it. Toby was grinning, and she thought with relief how nice his smile was.

"You dashed off in such a hurry," Toby said. "Anything wrong?"

Rusty shook her head. She felt as if the note must be making a big bulge in the pocket of her calico skirt, and she pushed it down with a hasty movement. The paper crackled.

"You look kind of upset," Toby said. "Don't let that business of this afternoon bother you. Miss Hollis gets kind of excited."

Rusty swallowed. "I'm all right," she said.

"Well, look, we were thinking of going square dancing. I thought maybe you'd—I mean, would you like to go?"

She'd forgotten all about the square dancing. But she couldn't go now, she had to visit Marcia. And what would the others think of her if she didn't go?

"I've got kind of a headache," Rusty tumbled the words out. "I guess it's the heat, or the altitude, or something."

Toby's eyebrows went up. "Altitude? Well, I guess you have had a pretty big day. Reckon I should have thought of that. Well, there'll be other dances. Maybe we'll just skip this one."

"Oh, no!" Rusty cried hastily. "I'm sorry, I'd like to go, but—you go anyway. All of you."

Toby frowned. "And leave you here alone? I don't call that much of a deal."

"But I've got to—I'll feel terrible if you don't go, when you'd planned on it."

Toby shook his head and turned away. Then he stopped abruptly and looked at her. "I wouldn't blame you for turning me down," he said with a self-conscious grin. "I guess you think I'm pretty much of a heel after last night."

Oh, if she could only explain! If only Toby would understand and help her! Rusty opened her mouth and closed it again. What was she thinking of? She didn't dare confide in Toby or anyone. But she couldn't let him think she was

turning him down because of last night.

"Toby," she began again. Then she thought of the note. "It isn't like that at all," she said miserably. "I just can't go."

"That's all right," Toby said quickly. "Anything I can get you?" And when she shook her head, "I'll tell the others."

She watched him go down the hall and disappear at the turn of the stair. She wanted to run after him and say: "I'll go, Toby. As soon as I've seen Marcia. If you'll wait for me—" But no, it couldn't be done. She turned back, angry with Marcia, angry with herself.

No one came upstairs to dress, and Rusty, sprawled on the bed and wishing she were back home in Minneapolis, waited for the dark to settle. They must have decided not to go to the dance. But where were they all? Outside somewhere, enjoying the evening air. In the pool, maybe, or on the tennis court, or sitting on the corral fence. She could hear someone singing, and the soft plink of a guitar. One of the cowhands, probably, down by the bunkhouse.

The dark was beginning to creep into the room. Thick shadows made the dresser, the dressing table, the gay little chair indistinct shapes. Rusty felt herself getting sleepy, and sat up. She mustn't fall asleep. It was almost time now. But how to get out of the house? If the others saw her, what excuse could she give?

When the dark outside was quite as black as the room, Rusty groped her way to the windows, closed the blinds, and turned on the lights. She'd need a light of some kind, at least until her eyes got used to the dark. She found a book of matches in the desk, slipped it into her pocket, threw her green jacket over her shoulders, and tiptoed out of her room.

There was no one in the living room. Rusty thought she heard a murmur of voices from the patio. That was where they must be, then, now that it was too dark for outdoor games. And if she moved quietly, she could escape without being seen. She opened the door and stepped out into the night.

## THE WARNING

### Chapter XIII

*IF THERE* was someone watching her, Rusty didn't know it. But every bush, every tree, every building that she could see vaguely, once her eyes grew accustomed to the dark, was a threat, speeding her on. Useless to tell herself she must be calm, she mustn't run like a frightened colt, shying at every noise. There was no safety anywhere, there was nothing familiar or comforting. So she ran, stumbling along the road, guided only by the deeper dark of the grass at its sides.

When she saw the cabins ahead, she slowed down, panting, reassured by the lights in some of their windows. Which one was Thea's? What if she knocked at the wrong door, and let some stranger know she was looking for Marcia?

The third cabin looked deserted at first. But that vague flicker in the window must mean that someone was sitting before a fire in a darkened room. Would that be Marcia? Rusty decided to try it. She stumbled on the walk, reached the small porch, and tiptoed to the door. Her hesitant knock went unanswered. She knocked again, and heard someone inside push a chair aside. There were footsteps, and then a bolt was drawn and the door opened a scant inch.

"Who is it?" a woman whispered.

"Rusty."

"Oh. Come in." The door opened wider, and Rusty slipped through into the firelit room. Marcia's face in the shadows seemed white and strained.

"No one saw you?" she asked, putting the bolt on the door again.

"I don't think so." Rusty was still breathing hard.

"Come and sit down. I'm not turning on the lights. Not after— Sit down, Rusty."

"Your note," Rusty began.

Marcia came back to the fire. They were both speaking in low tones, as if the walls might hear.

"Yes," said Marcia. She leaned back in her chair, and the firelight gleamed on her silver bracelets as she pushed them back and forth on her wrists. "I suppose you've wondered what it's all about. The less I tell you, the better for you, I think. I want to know something. And believe me when I say you *must* tell me! Otherwise someone's going to get hurt."

Rusty's heart began to thump again. Marcia's voice, though low, was so intense that she felt herself shivering.

"I—don't know," she faltered.

"Wait!" Marcia whispered sharply. She listened for a moment, her head up. Then she sank back in her chair and fixed her gaze on Rusty.

"Rusty, do you know where the car, Mrs. Fundy's car, is?"

In the breathless silence that followed, Rusty could hear her pulse beating in her ears. "I don't, Marcia," she managed to say.

"I think you do," Marcia said flatly. "I think your Mr. Clayton took it away and hid it. But you must tell me where."

Rusty shook her head numbly. "Marcia, I don't *know!*" she said. "It's gone, that's all I know. And so is he."

Rusty felt as if Marcia's eyes were boring through her.

"Have you tried to find him?"

Rusty admitted that she hadn't. She supposed she should have called the sheriff or somebody.

"No!" Marcia said sharply. "Not that. Not that, whatever you do. But you must find him, and when you do, bring him to me right away, but don't let anyone know. And keep the car hidden. Whatever happens, don't let that car reach the ranch."

"I thought," said Rusty slowly, "it was the Hidden Village you wanted to know about."

Marcia's eyes narrowed. "So you do know about it. You did ask him, after all."

"No," said Rusty. "I only heard about it from Cy. Someone's trying to keep him from finding it."

Marcia brushed that aside with a wave of her hand. "I know all that. I've been here for months. Cy will never find it."

Rusty felt a rush of resentment at this dismissal of Cy and his project. "If the cave isn't the site of the Hidden Village, why is someone determined to stop him?" she asked.

Marcia sighed. "You wouldn't understand," she said. "But for your sake, and for Cy's, let me warn you. You're mixing into something that's much too big and dangerous for you."

Rusty didn't answer that. There was a little wait, and then she said, "You trailed us from Minneapolis, didn't you?"

"No," said Marcia. "I was on my way to Minneapolis, but I turned around and came back. To Sioux City."

"And you put the note in my room and wrote in my diary," Rusty added softly.

Marcia's look didn't waver. "Of course," she said. "Everything would have been quite simple if you'd—" She broke off. "That doesn't matter now. What you've got to do now is find the car, and get word to me. But remember, the car mustn't get back to the ranch. Do you understand?"

Rusty nodded. Her lips were stiff, her throat dry.

"And now," Marcia got to her feet, "you'd better go. Not a word about this to anyone, remember."

Out on the dark road again, Rusty tried to tell herself it was all Marcia's phony dramatics. Sitting there in a darkened room, trying to scare information out of her.

But dramatics or not, Marcia *had* scared her. Whatever this ugly web of evil was that Cy and his digging had got



them into, there was danger in it. What had happened to Marcia on the trail must have convinced her of it, and she had felt she had to warn them.

Rusty ran stumbling down the road toward the ranch house. If she could only find Bob, and tell him *not* to return the Ark to the ranch! But maybe that would be playing into Marcia's hand. Wasn't it her duty to get that car back before Mrs. Fundy returned? It was, but she must find Bob in any case. Find Bob, find Bob. She slipped on the gravel and fell, sprawling, picked herself up again and ran on. Suppose Bob came back to the ranch, with the car, before she could warn him? But no, she mustn't pay any attention to what Marcia had said. If Bob brought the car back, why, that was what Mrs. Fundy wanted. But what if Bob were in this thing with Marcia?

Rusty reached the enclosure at last and slowed down to a walk. The recreation hall was dark. She could see the lights in the ranch house ahead. She was safe. No one had seen her go, no one was around to see her return.

Then a hand reached out of the dark and grabbed her arm. She was jerked back into the thicker shadows at the side of the recreation hall, and before she could scream, a large hand closed over her mouth.

Rusty struggled, pounding with both fists against the man's chest. She kicked and tried to wrench herself free, but he pinned one arm against her side. With her free hand she tried to wrench away the fingers closed over her mouth, but it was useless. She tore at his rough jacket, felt something rip loose in her hand. Then as suddenly as he had seized her, her assailant let her go with a shove that sent her reeling backward to the ground. He snatched up her jacket and fled into the shadows.

Rusty had no breath left with which to scream. She scrambled to her knees and tried to stand up. Just then someone came running around the end of the recreation hall.

"What's going on here? Who's here?" It was Mr. Ireton. He lifted Rusty to her feet. "Why, it's the little Jerrold girl!

What happened to you? Are you hurt? I thought I heard a scuffle out here. I was in the recreation hall."

Rusty leaned against him, too weak to do more than sob.

"You're not hurt?" he asked again, his arm about her shoulders.

"I—don't think so," Rusty answered. "Oh, Mr. Ireton!"

"Who was it? Which way did he go?"

"I don't know. He took my j-jacket."

Even as she said it, she knew that wasn't important. The note was in her jacket pocket. She'd been afraid to leave it in her room. And now, whoever the man was, he would know that she had been to see Marcia.

Mr. Ireton led her across the enclosure, his soothing voice reassuring her at each step. "I should be chasing down the scoundrel, but it's more important to see that you get home safely. Whoever stole your jacket won't get away with it. I'll see to that. I'll make short work of him, too, I can promise you that. Here we are, little lady. I can't tell you how sorry I am about this. I knew we had a—at least one shady character around, but I never thought he'd try anything like that."

Her gratitude to Mr. Ireton filled her throat, and when he left her on the steps she could only mumble a damp little, "Thank you for rescuing me."

Mr. Ireton patted her arm. "Don't you thank me, my dear. I only wish I'd got there sooner. I might have caught the fellow."

Rusty got upstairs as quietly as she could. Some kind of game was under way on the patio. She could hear Muff's shrill laugh and Nick saying, "I'm out. It's your turn, Thea."

In her room again, Rusty sank into a chair and shuddered. If she scrubbed a million years, she'd never wash away the feel of that coarse hand over her mouth. She looked down at her own hands, saw the bruises on them and on her wrists, and discovered she was still clutching whatever it was she had ripped from the man's coat. A

gray corduroy pocket flap. She flung it from her, raised her hands to her face, and as suddenly pushed them away from her again. She stood up, swaying, and went to turn on the shower. It was only then that she remembered she must find Bob.

The steaming shower did Rusty a world of good. She felt the tightness go out of her, and her fuddled brain began to function again. She even felt vaguely optimistic. She would find Bob. And she would find the man who had taken her jacket and the note. When she got back to her room, she'd put that gray corduroy pocket flap away. That was evidence, and tomorrow she'd have a look at every gray corduroy jacket on the ranch. She wasn't going to let Marcia scare her into hiding in the dark.

When she came back down the hall from the bathroom, she met Muff.

"You feeling better?" Muff asked.

For a moment Rusty was startled. Then she remembered she had spoiled the square dance for everybody by pleading a headache. She nodded. "Lots," she said.

"You don't look so hot," Muff said. "Want me to get you some rubbing alcohol or something?"

"No, why?" Rusty gave a guilty start.

"Your knee," Muff said, and pointed. Rusty gave a hasty tug at her yellow beach coat.

"Oh. I stumbled."

"Yeah?" said Muff. "Well, take it easy. Have a good sleep." She sauntered off down the hall.

"Hmm," Rusty thought. "Cool little number. They didn't *have* to stay home just on account of me. If that's what's eating her."

Her towel over her arm, she hurried on to her room.

There was something not quite the same about her room. She couldn't think what it was, at first. Then she saw it. Her green jacket was on the chair.

And almost at once she saw something else. The gray flap of corduroy wasn't on the floor.

She hurried down the hall to Muff's room. "Were you in my room when I was in the bath?" she asked, before she realized how it sounded.

Muff gave her a curious look. "I wasn't," she said. "But somebody else was."

"I know," Rusty said. "But who was it?"

"Mr. Ireton, I suppose," Muff said warily. "At least he was looking for you. Said he had something for you. I guess you really have got glamour."

Rusty flushed. "Oh, what a silly idea!" she exclaimed. "He was bringing my jacket back. I—I lost it, earlier."

"When you were out getting your knee skinned?" Muff asked innocently and then burst into a laugh. "You thought you had us all fooled, but I went up to see if you didn't want to come down on the patio—it's much cooler there—and you weren't in your room. Toby's furious. You've got some explaining to do."

"Oh, how awful!" Rusty cried. "Muff, Toby doesn't think—"

Muff chortled. "You're in the doghouse," she said happily. "Even Nick thinks you went out to meet somebody. And no one mentioned that Mr. Clayton who stole the car, but—"

"Bob? Oh, but—" Rusty stopped. Let them think she'd stolen out to meet Bob if they wanted to. That was best. Then she'd have no explaining to do.

Muff grinned. "Don't worry about Toby. He'll get over it. Nick's the one who feels he hasn't a friend left in the world. That's why I came up to get the Chinese checkers, to cheer him up. And of course to see what Mr. Ireton was bringing you. Only it didn't do me much good. He'd been and gone."

"Well." There wasn't anything she could say. Tomorrow she'd have to convince Nick she hadn't forgotten the trouble they were in, as Cy seemed to have done. As for Toby, let him think what he pleased. Some day, when everything was cleared up, she'd tell Toby, if he wasn't involved in it himself.

So Mr. Ireton had returned the jacket. Maybe he'd picked up the pocket flap, too. He'd want to know who had lost it, if he guessed how it came to be in her room. She could leave it to him to find the man.

Not that it should be very hard, she thought. If the man in the dark had spoken, she'd have known for sure. You couldn't mistake that throaty voice.

## THROUGH THE TUNNEL

### Chapter XIV

*THE NEXT* morning was hot but Rusty discovered that the atmosphere could be decidedly chilly. Toby was brusque and businesslike when he met her in the hall on the way to breakfast, Muff was enjoying the whole thing with a kind of mischievous glee that infuriated Rusty. Nick and Cy were provoked with her, and Nick, especially, acted as if he were disgusted with everything.

It was no better on the way to the dig, where Cy insisted on going as soon as breakfast was over. Rusty would have liked to stay home. More than anything else she wanted to talk to Mr. Ireton. But the affable ranch manager was nowhere to be seen when they went out to the corral, and with Muff's eagle eye on her, Rusty didn't dare ask for him. Nor did she have the courage to mention such a thing as not going to the dig. She'd done all the "staying home" she dared, now that her deceit of the evening before had been discovered.

Riding single file along the canyon trail was no time to talk to Cy or Nick, and even if it had been, she couldn't have told them what had happened to her. As for begging Cy to do something about finding Bob—

When they reached the dig, to their great relief they found it undisturbed. The boys set to work as if there were

nothing more important in the world than turning over a spadeful of dirt. Rusty watched them, picked up a sherd or two without any real interest, and waited for a chance to talk alone with one of her brothers.

She was more discouraged than ever when she found that Muff had packed a huge lunch in the saddlebags.

"We're not going to stay here all *day*?" Rusty groaned.

Cy looked up in surprise. "We've just got here."

"It's nearly twelve," Rusty consulted her watch, "and surely you want to swim and play tennis and things?"

"Not me," Cy said firmly. "There'll be lots of time for that."

Toby threw her a sharp look. "You don't have to stay in the cave if you don't like it here," he said. "Why don't you and Muff go down to the river, or up on the mesa?"

"And leave you in peace," Rusty added. "Nick, why don't you knock off work for a while and go exploring?"

"And have these guys say I'm a lazy good-for-nothing?" Nick protested. "Guess you should have stayed home, Rusty."

There was a barb in that, Rusty thought. Well, she'd just have to dawdle around here all day, wasting precious time. Even now Bob might be returning to the ranch, though it wasn't likely. And the only way she could see to find him was to enlist Mr. Ireton's help. But how was she to do that when she had to stay at the dig?

The lunch, though it looked delicious, tasted flat to Rusty. She chewed her sandwiches as though getting them down were a grim duty.

"I don't know as I'll be able to dig after that meal," Nick said when he'd polished off his second strawberry tart. He put his arm around Crink's silky neck. "Crink and I may just have to take a little nap."

"Oh, yeah?" Toby said. "What's the matter? Don't you sleep nights?"

Rusty looked at Nick hopefully. She'd get him to one side while the others were digging. He'd help her figure out a way.

"But I guess my bones might stiffen up if I did," Nick added, ignoring Toby's taunt, and got reluctantly to his feet.

Rusty tried to tell him he ought to stay out in the sun to work up the kind of tan the other two boys had, but Nick postponed his tempting nap hour after hour, kneeling hopefully beside the excavation at intervals to sift the dirt for potsherds. Muff finally wearied of watching.

"Come on, Rusty," she said. "It's getting late. If we're going to explore or anything, we'd better start. We could go look at that old cabin on the mesa, the one Dr. Fundy used to stay in, you know."

"All right," said Rusty. It didn't matter what they did, the day was lost now anyway.

Since Crink was pretending that he was unearthing a bone, the girls set off alone. They climbed up the rocks until they stood with their backs to the canyon and could look ahead over the barren waste that stretched far into the afternoon sun. There seemed to be no life at all on the mesa, no movement. In the midst of a brush thicket stood Dr. Fundy's deserted cabin. As the girls walked toward it, Muff chattered away at great length about the professor and his peculiarities.

"Of course I don't remember him much," she said, "but even though I was only seven, I had a terrific crush on Mr. Crombie, his assistant. He stayed at the ranch, but the professor only came over once in a while. It was all such a big secret. Even the accident, no one would talk about it!"

"Muff!" said Rusty suddenly. "Did you see something move in the brush?"

Muff stopped short. "Yes, I did," she said slowly. "It—it's moving right now. Someone skulking again. Let's not go any farther, Rusty."

But Rusty, her eyes narrowed, had caught a glimpse of something bright in the bushes near the cabin. Maybe it was nothing, but for a startled moment it had almost seemed to her as if it might be a car. She began to hurry.

"There he goes, inside the cabin!" Muff whispered, grabbing Rusty's arm. "Do you suppose Nakwatiwa was right? Do you suppose it's a—a spirit?"

"Nonsense!" said Rusty, moving closer to the shining object. "Muff, it's the Ark!" she cried, as a sudden break in the brush revealed the old car. Rusty turned to her small companion with a triumphant smile. "It's Mrs. Fundy's car! Oh, what luck! Look, Muff, this time we aren't going to lose it! I'll stay here on guard, and you run back to the cave and get the boys."

"What if the spirit comes out of the cabin?" Muff asked.

"It isn't a spirit, darling! I know who it is, and he's *not* going to get the car again! Is that the only door to the cabin?" Muff nodded. "Well, then, I'll keep one eye on the door and one on the car. You scam!"

Muff scrambled. Rusty could hear her running back over the trail as fast as her legs would carry her.

Edging nearer, crouching low behind the brush until she was almost beside the car, Rusty raised her head cautiously. The keys *were* there! Now if only the boys would hurry! Somewhere to her left there was a rustle in the underbrush, and Rusty's heart jumped into her throat. She parted the bushes soundlessly and peered through. A gray and shaggy burro stared back at her, let out a fearful bray, and went on nibbling at the leaves. Choking with frightened laughter, Rusty sank back on her heels.

It seemed as if ages had passed before Toby spoke cautiously from the other side of the brush.

"You there, Rusty?"

Rusty bobbed her head up, a finger on her lips. Cy and Muff were with Toby. Rusty joined them, asking, "Where's Nick?"

"Asleep on the ledge," said Cy dryly. "Crink stayed behind too, thank goodness. He'd be barking his head off. Is the ghost still in the cabin?"

"Must be." Rusty nodded. "And the keys are in the car! What should we do? Drive it away first and then—"

"And leave the chap stranded out here?" Toby asked



quickly. His eyes met Rusty's. "Leave it to me. I'll go in and talk to him."

"I'll go with you," Rusty said, coloring. "I know what you're up to, Toby Whitman! Well, this time I'm not going to be talked out of it! He's no *right* to this car! It's Mrs. Fundy's!"

Toby started to say something, thought better of it, and turned away with a shrug.

"Muff and I'll watch the car," Cy said, with a grin. "At least *we* don't fight—much. Do we, Muff?"

Rusty tried to match her steps to Toby's long stride.

"I'm only trying to do what's right, Toby," she said earnestly. "Mrs. Fundy trusted me to bring that car to her. I don't see how you can be so stubborn."

"All right, all right," Toby answered. "You'll get the car back, so let's quit arguing about it. As for this Bob Clayton, let me handle it. Unless you've found out—"

"Found out what, Toby?"

"Nothing. Skip it."

They had reached the door of the cabin, and Toby knocked, listened, then turned the knob and went in. Rusty was at his heels. There was no one in the outer room, but Rusty thought she had a movement in the back part of the cabin. Racing ahead of Toby, she came to a halt on the threshold. Nobody there. Only—only that hanging back of the big leather chair in the corner swayed a little, as if someone had brushed by it in flight.

Toby joined her. "Must have been a ghost after all," he said in a relieved tone. "Muff says it was."

Rusty didn't answer. Her eyes moved from the chair to the battered brown sofa, the old desk covered with dust, the little smoking stand. No place where one could hide. And the windows looked as if they hadn't been opened for ages.

The hanging was steady now. Rusty stepped toward it suddenly, and pulled it to one side. Behind it was a door. She nodded to Toby.

"He's in there," she said in a low voice.

And all at once, she didn't want to go on with the chase. She remembered how Bob had taught her to drive on the prairie stretches, how he'd stopped for ice cream and cokes whenever he thought Nick or she or even Crink looked hot or thirsty. Up to now it had seemed the most important thing in the world to find him and get the car back. Well, they had him now. But she didn't want to open the door.

"We're going to have it out with him right now!" Toby said, as if he knew why she hesitated.

He brushed her aside and opened the door. A narrow stair led down to a darkened cellar, and though they could hear footsteps somewhere below, they could see no one.

"Come on," said Toby.

Rusty followed slowly. The cellar was dark, with a damp, earthy smell. Toby flashed his tiny torch on the sandstone walls. Ahead of them somewhere, the footsteps grew fainter, and suddenly it dawned on Rusty that the cellar was remarkably long and narrow, like a passageway tunneled through the earth.

"Toby," she whispered, "I don't think this cellar is *ever* going to end!"

"I don't think it is a cellar," Toby answered. "Looks like a cave to me."

"A cave! Under the cabin?"

"We're way past the cabin's boundaries now. It's a cave, all right. Next thing is, does it have another opening except the door in the cabin?"

"Suppose—suppose it isn't Bob?" Rusty said in a low voice. "We didn't see him. We'd be kind of—of reckless going after someone who—"

Toby stopped and looked at her. "What's the matter? Getting cold feet?"

Rusty's chin quivered. "I don't know," she said. "I—I guess we'd better go on. Mrs. Fundy wants her car, that's all I know."

When, after a number of twists and turns, the cave began to widen and gradually grew lighter, Toby snapped off his

torch and turned to Rusty with a look suspiciously like triumph on his face.

"There *is* another opening, and he's got out through it. We'd better go back to the cabin."

"First let's see where the cave comes out," Rusty said, not quite sure whether she was relieved or sorry that Bob had eluded them.

The cave opened into a labyrinth of ruined walls and passages. Always Rusty had the feeling that someone else was there, behind that wall, just around that low archway, listening and moving away soundlessly, as they came nearer. At last, following the light that sifted in from somewhere, Rusty and Toby climbed through an arch and stepped out on a narrow shelf of rock hidden from the canyon below, as well as from the mesa, by a group of huge boulders.

"Out at last! Do you suppose it's miles from the dig?" Rusty asked, climbing up on one of the rocks to peer over into the canyon.

"It's almost directly above it, I think!" Toby cried excitedly. "And we never guessed there was a much larger cave up here behind these tremendous boulders! But Dr. Fundy knew. This must be the *real* cave, Rusty! The Hidden Village!" He leaned over the rock parapet beside her. "Look down there! There's the ledge we ate our lunch on, and there's—"

"Nick!" Rusty cried. "It's Nick, but what's the matter with him, Toby?"

On the ledge some distance below them, Crinkles stood beside Nick, who sat rocking back and forth, his hands gripped about his leg. Crinkles kept up a steady, shrill barking. Again and again he flung back his head to look up the side of the cliff where the boys had disappeared after Muff's excited message.

"Hello, below!" Toby shouted, but Nick didn't hear. He cupped his hands about his mouth. "Hello, Nick! What's wrong?"

Crinkles stopped barking and looked up. Nick kept up

the curious rocking motion.

"He's hurt!" Rusty cried, grabbing Toby's arm. "Toby, that big rock! It wasn't on the ledge this noon! It's rolled down! Maybe it hit Nick!"

Toby shouted again, a veritable bellow, and this time Nick looked up. He answered something, but the sound was carried away down the canyon. He motioned to the rock, and to his leg. Crinkles broke into furious barking, dashing back and forth like mad on the ledge.

Getting down from the upper cave was a maddening puzzle because of the crevice that separated the two great crags. Rusty and Toby scrambled over the rocks, slid down to perilous footholds in the cliff's side, only to find they would have to climb up again.

"There has to be a safe way down somewhere," Toby said. "The Indians lived up here ages ago, and they must have had a path down to the river. Just give me time. I'll find it."

"But Nick's hurt!" Rusty said desperately. "Look over there, Toby. If you could swing yourself over to that other rock, you could get down the other side."

Toby leaned over and looked down into the deep fissure that parted the two great jags of rock. He studied it a moment, then made a face.

"Swing?" he said. "Leap, you mean. Well, maybe. I reckon a mountain lion could do it. But what about you?"

"I'll be right on your heels!" said Rusty recklessly.

She closed her eyes when she saw Toby brace himself, crouch, and jump. When she opened them again, he was standing upright on the other side, a crooked grin on his face.

"Whew!" He mopped his brow.

"Was it awful?" Rusty asked.

"No need for you to try it," Toby said. "You chase back to the cabin. Bring Cy along when you get there. I'll go down to Nick."

"That isn't fair," Rusty said. "I made *you* jump."

"Nuts!" said Toby. "Be seeing you."

Turning back, Rusty found it a slow and nerve-racking task to retrace the dark passage without the aid of Toby's flashlight. They hadn't seen Bob after they came out of the cave. Where had he gone? She felt her way along the walls, and at last her hands touched the rough steps leading up to the door. She scrambled up them hastily, and turned the knob. The door was locked.

There was nothing for it but to return through the cave to the opening, and get down the way Toby had done. Either someone had entered the cabin from the mesa and locked the door, Rusty thought as she groped her way back along the sandstone wall, or Bob had hidden in the passage and returned to the cabin while Toby and she were trying to reach Nick.

She was back in the lighter part of the cave now, where the single passage opened into many others, confusing her. She stopped suddenly to listen. There it was again, the sound of someone moving just around the corner. And then across her path, grotesquely slanted by the rays of the sinking sun, Rusty saw the shadow of a man, a man in a wide-brimmed sombrero. As she stared at it, too frightened to move, the shadow glided slowly forward.

## *NIGHT ON THE MESA*

### Chapter XV

*RUSTY* found her voice at last. "Bob?" she asked, and in a steadier tone, "Is that you, Bob?"

There was a low grunt from the other side of the wall. The shadow stopped, then moved away silently.

Rusty had no intention of following. She crept forward, darted across the empty passage, and fled toward the opening. Once outside, she took a hasty look over the rocks at the ledge below. Muff was there now, and Toby

seemed to be sending her back up to the mesa. Rusty clambered down the rocks until she stood by the crevice.

"It isn't very wide," she said, straightening her back and swallowing the way she did in school when she had to make a speech. "Toby jumped it. If there were a floor under the thing, and I were jumping from one rug to another, it wouldn't be too far."

She tensed her muscles, ready to spring. She looked down. Not so good. The second time she made ready, she jumped. Safe on the opposite rock, her knees shaking, she took another look down into the fissure.

"Mountain lions!" she muttered. "I'll bet they never did!"

Rusty reached Nick at the same time that Cy, with Muff at his heels, scrambled down the path from the mesa. He had already heard Muff's excited story, and he looked especially owlish and grave as he knelt beside Nick, examining the swollen and bruised ankle with cautious fingers.

"I don't know, Nick, but I think it's broken," he said, looking anxiously at his brother's grim face. "Can't be sure until we get you to a doctor, of course."

Rusty, breathless from running, fell on her knees beside them. "What happened, Nick? Was it the rock? Oh, does it hurt terribly?"

Nick made a face. "Aw, don't get excited! Serves me right for falling asleep on the ledge."

Rusty turned to Toby. "Was it the rock?" Toby nodded. "Did it just roll down by itself, or did someone—?"

"Look," said Nick. "Haven't I trouble enough figuring out how I'm going to ride home on that brown devil, Escapade, without trying to guess how that rock got loose? It fell, that's all, and I was just half awake. I saw it, but I didn't move fast enough, that's all." His eyes met Rusty's, and fell. "Anyhow, that isn't important," he mumbled.

"Lucky we have the car," Cy said. He dangled the keys before Nick's eyes. "The Ark. Imagine. Hidden up by the cabin. I had sense enough to grab the keys even though

Muff was yelling at me to hurry. And it's lucky you don't weight over a ton, Nick. It's quite a hike up there."

"What happened to you?" Toby turned to Rusty.

"Too long a story," Rusty said quickly. "I'll tell you later. I'd better go with you in the car, Cy, and keep Nick from jolting around too much. That is, if Toby and Muff can get the horses home without help."

"Easy. We'll ride herd on 'em," Toby promised. He wasn't concerned now with leaving Bob stranded in the cabin, if it *was* Bob.

As the boys made their way carefully up the steep slope with Nick between them, Toby added: "Sure you can follow that trail across the mesa, Cy? Don't mean to scare you, but it's a little tricky. You're all right if you stick to the tracks."

"It isn't too dark yet," Cy said. "If we get a little speed out of the Ark, we should be almost home before dark."

But it took time to get Nick comfortably deposited in the back seat. Toby's last words as he watched them start off were: "If you're not in by the time Muff and I get home, I'll start out to meet you. You might need help."

Rusty had only a vague idea in which direction the Lazy-K lay. She sat beside Nick and watched over him anxiously while Cy drove as fast as the Ark would travel. At first, while the trail was joined by one that Cy said came from the Hopi villages farther north on the mesa, the road seemed fairly distinct. Then the tracks grew fainter.

Rusty tried to stem her growing anxiety. Cy *didn't* see distances well, but maybe here where everything was sand and sagebrush, it wouldn't matter so much. If only Pops by some miracle might have returned by the time they reached the Lazy-K. If he hadn't, it meant another long wait before Nick's leg could be taken care of. And though Nick wasn't complaining, she knew every minute counted. She strained her eyes ahead over the dun-colored wasteland.

"All right so far?" Cy asked over his shoulder.

"It's okay," Nick said gruffly. "Some old tub we came out here in, isn't it?"

"Think if it hadn't been up there on the mesa!" Rusty burst out. "I don't know *what* we'd have done!" She bit her lip and said in a steadier tone, "How far is it by the road, Cy?"

"About twelve miles."

To keep Nick's mind off his troubles, Rusty began telling the boys what had happened after she and Toby had entered the cabin, and about the cave they had discovered, which Toby thought was the real one, the Hidden Village, because it was much larger than Cy's cave and held remnants of walls.

Cy got so excited he could hardly keep the car on the road. He bombarded Rusty with questions, made her describe the cave in detail. "It could be!" he exclaimed. "Boy, wait till Mrs. Fundy and Pops hear this!"

But when Rusty told about her adventure with the shadow, Cy was more puzzled than ever. "But then, this fellow's stealing the car and hiding out in Dr. Fundy's cabin is just plain crazy in the first place," he decided.

"Nick," said Rusty, "did you see anyone on the cliff?"

Nick grunted. "Saw you and Toby."

"I mean before, when the rock fell."

Nick rubbed his ear and twisted uncomfortably. "Sure, spirits," he said with a laugh. "Or maybe one of those wild burros. Confidentially, I think it was probably the Headless Horseman."

"No, he'd have to have a head, to put a hat on," Rusty said quietly.

She looked at her brother thoughtfully. Nick *had* seen someone, she was sure of it. If it were Bob, Nick wouldn't tell it. But if Bob had rolled a rock down on Nick, even if he meant only to scare him, she'd never forgive him, never!

Cy said uneasily, "Pretty rough traveling. This track is so faint you need a spyglass to pick it out."

Rusty felt a wave of panic roll over her. If he couldn't see the trail, it would be better to stop right there and wait



for Toby. But she knew neither of the boys would welcome that suggestion, and Cy would just deny that he couldn't see as well as the next one.

They bumped along a mile or two farther, while the swift-falling dark settled closer and closer about the car. Time and again Rusty started to ask, "Are you *sure* you're on the trail, Cy?" but thought better of it.

Cy had been driving more and more slowly. He finally brought the car to a jolting halt. "We must have got off the mesa somehow," he said unhappily. "I can't see the sign of a trail, and it feels as if we'd been going down into a wash. Might be an old arroyo. Rivers run crazy in this country, you know, and then disappear. I'll get out and take a look. Maybe I can spot the trail up ahead."

Rusty was too worried to answer. Nick said, "Oh, you'll find it. Don't get excited."

Cy disappeared with Crinkles at his heels. Rusty could hear his footsteps grow fainter in the thickening dark. She swallowed.

"Seems as if we stopped in a hole or something," she said. "The back wheels are lower than the front."

Nick didn't answer. A moment later Rusty felt the car give and settle still deeper into the sand.

"Nick," she said. "Didn't you feel it sink just then?"

"Well, if Cy's right and it *is* an old river bottom, I suppose it would sink some. Funny thing about those arroyos."

"We don't want to get stuck in the sand," Rusty said.

She eased herself carefully out of the seat so as not to disturb Nick. She opened the door and looked down. She could see almost nothing, but she felt of the ground with her hands. The back wheels were down in moist sand to the hubs!

Climbing into the front seat hurriedly, Rusty started the motor and stepped hard on the gas. The Ark made a desperate effort, the back wheels spun furiously, then settled even deeper. Again and again Rusty jammed down the clutch, let it up, and the Ark lunged forward and

dropped back into the hole. The acrid smell of gasoline filled the night air.

"It's no good, Rusty," Nick said. "We're only getting in deeper. Better sound the horn for Cy."

A few minutes after the Ark's clarion had screeched out into the night, they heard Cy returning.

"What's up?" he called.

"Car's sinking," Rusty cried breathlessly. "It's down to the hubs."

"Quicksand!" Cy burst out in a horrified tone.

He went down on his knees beside the Ark, digging feverishly with his hands at the wet sand about the wheels.

"Quicksand!" Rusty echoed.

"I'll see if I can pull it out," Cy said hurriedly. "If I can't, we'll have to get out, fast. Maybe if I had a shovel, but—"

Cy's gentle coaxing of the Ark brought no results. It tugged its heart out, but sank back after every effort.

"No use," Cy said at last. "I guess this is where we 'abandon ship,' Nick."

"That's all right," Nick said quickly. "But it's terrible about the Ark. Will it go way down?"

"Maybe. Sometimes things do, and fast. We can't take a chance on it. Not if it really is quicksand. We'll get you out on dry ground, and I'll keep trying."

They stripped the cushion from the front seat and laid it on firm ground a little distance from the car. As carefully as possible, they moved Nick out to the cushion. When Cy made a last trip to retrieve the back cushion for them to sit on, he found that the Ark was tipped at a dizzy angle, its headlights fixed crazily on the sky.

"We can't just sit here and watch it being sucked down." Rusty's voice shook.

"There's nothing I can do now," Cy said. "At least the lights will be a beacon to show Toby where we are."

Rusty huddled close to Nick, trying to keep him warm, and watched the bleak headlights until her eyes stung.

"I guess this is the chance I've been waiting for, only

I didn't expect it to come this way," she said at last. "But we might as well talk about—things—as to sit here just waiting."

"Go ahead," Cy said gloomily. "There's no sign of Toby. Won't be for quite a while."

"Well."

Now that she had their attention, there was so little she could say. They could, and did, go over the things they all three knew, but without coming up with any answers to the reason why the car was so important, or who had been trying to keep Cy from digging. But of her visit to Marcia and her encounter with the man in the gray corduroy jacket, Rusty didn't say a word. To Cy the big thing was that they might have learned the secret of the Hidden Village.

Suddenly Nick said, "There's a car coming. Only from the wrong direction."

Cy sprang to his feet. "It won't be Toby, but any port in a storm. We're way off the trail, or else they are." He began to shout at the top of his lungs. Crink barked furiously.

The car slowed down, then stopped. Two men got out and came toward them across the mesa. One of them carried a torch.

"Here we are!" Cy shouted, and the men flashed the torch ahead to where Rusty and Nick were sitting.

"John Revere!" cried Cy, when the two reached them.

"Bob!" Rusty and Nick cried in the same breath.

Rusty thought giddily that she'd never been so glad to see anyone in her whole life as Bob, then, the next instant, glimpsing his companion, that they couldn't have found a more treacherous rescue.

"What on earth happened to you?" Bob asked, flashing the light over Nick, and dropping to his knees beside him.

"Busted leg, I guess," Nick said wryly. "I got in the way of a rock."

"That's tough," Bob said. "Not out here on the mesa?"

"At the cave," Rusty said, and Bob looked up with a frown.

John Revere and Cy went to see if anything could be done with the Ark. "Lucky that John visited one of the Hopi villages today," Bob said, getting to his feet. "We might all have spent the night in the open if he hadn't come along."

"I'm afraid the car's gone," John Revere said when he and Cy returned. "We might get it out with a hoist, if it doesn't disappear in the night."

Bob thought that over for a moment, then he shrugged. "Well, you can't always win," he said. "The next thing is to get Nick to the ranch and get a doctor. How about carrying him to your car, John, right on the cushions?"

"Not you, Bob!" Rusty spoke before she thought. "I mean, you mustn't go to the ranch. I—it might not be safe."

"Say that again?"

"It's just that—there's something I was to tell you, but I can't. Not here!"

"Then you can tell me at the ranch," Bob said. "Just so long as you haven't called out a posse to hunt me down."

When they had Nick safely in the car and were ready to start off, Bob said suddenly: "You know, John, I think we'll take those cushions along. We can carry them on the fenders, can't we?"

But Rusty was too miserable over her stupid outburst to wonder why he wanted the Ark's cushions at a time like this.

A mile from the Lazy-K they met Toby and called to him to turn back. When they reached the ranch house, Bob and John Revere lifted Nick from the car and carried him in.

Muff came tearing to meet them, but her relief at seeing Nick safe turned to a wild shriek of delight when she saw the man who carried him.

"Mr. Crombie!" she shouted, nearly capsizing Bob in

her joy. "Mr. Crombie, where'd you find Nick? Where've you *been?*"

Crombie! Bob Crombie, the Mr. Crombie Muff had told her about on the way to the deserted cabin, Rusty thought. She gulped. Not Bob Clayton at all, and he was known and trusted here. Why, then Toby had known him. Toby hadn't believed he was trying to steal the car, not really. And he *had* tried to help Bob get away. Rusty shook her head. It was too much to grasp right now.

Bob and Muff were greeting each other like old friends. "If it isn't my old pal, Muff!" Bob was saying. "How've you been, sugar? Where can I put this broken reed, Nicko the Terrible? We've got to get a doctor."

"But we've *got* a doctor, Mr. Crombie!" yelled Muff, dancing on one foot and then the other. "Dr. Jerrold's back! He's upstairs! He doesn't know about Nick. He just *got* here! Toby'd already left! Isn't it *marvelous?*"

"It is. It really is," Bob said, while he and John Revere deposited Nick on a sofa in a small room off the main lounge.

Rusty flew to the stairs and met her father on his way down. She flung herself into his outstretched arms.

"Oh, Pops!" she sobbed. "It's all right now! It's all right! Only I guess you'd better see to Nick the first thing."

It wasn't until after Nick was tucked away in bed, his leg in a cast, and they had finished a tardy and rather haphazard supper out in the patio, that Rusty met the much-discussed owner of the Ark. Toby's mother had insisted on taking over the nursing duties. Toby, Rusty, and Muff were in a huddle in the library, threshing over the day's events and waiting impatiently for Cy to return from Thea's cabin. Neither Thea nor Marcia Hollis had appeared at dinner, he had learned from Mr. Ireton, who seemed a little upset by all the excitement and by the return of the party from the desert. Cy hadn't even waited for dessert but had rushed off to discover what was wrong.

"They've probably gone for a drive and stopped some-

where to eat," Toby said unworriedly. "And missed all the goings on."

"I think they've absconded," Muff remarked. She waited as if she expected Toby to put her in her place, but he wasn't even listening. "Probably Thea and Cy will be like Evangeline and Gabriel in the poem, searching for each other for—"

"Stow the act," Toby broke in. "Cy'll probably bring Thea back with him in a minute."

Rusty wasn't so sure. Maybe Marcia's fear had succeeded in swallowing up Thea, too. Maybe they were both sitting in the dark, afraid to step outside, afraid to even open the door. And Bob was back at the ranch. The Ark wasn't back, but it might be tomorrow, if it could be salvaged. Maybe Marcia had seen Bob by now, had guessed that the Ark was found. He had disappeared with John Revere as soon as Nick was taken care of. Rusty had had no chance to talk with him.

Just then Dr. Jerrold opened the library door and Rusty saw Mrs. Fundy for the first time. Slim, dark-haired, not pretty, but with such a warm smile of welcome that her brown eyes and her whole face seemed to shine with it. She looked younger than Aunt Ede, Rusty thought, perhaps because she was an outdoor sort of person. In spite of her nervousness, Rusty felt drawn to her. Some of the stiff ache in her throat went away while they were being introduced.

"I'm—I'm sorry about the Ark," Rusty stammered.

It wasn't of the Ark that she was thinking. It was of the woman Pops was hoping she'd like. And she *did* like her. She looked kind and sensible and honest. As though she'd have a sense of humor, too. She realized with a start that Mrs. Fundy was talking to her.

"After all your heroic efforts to save it, too," she was saying. "I told your father we were asking a lot of you, but he assured me you would manage the assignment if it were manageable. I guess it just wasn't."

Toby asked a question about the trip to the desert, and

Rusty moved over to her father's side. He put his arm around her shoulders and looked down at her.

"Well, Rusty?" He smiled.

"I feel like phoning Aunt Ede," Rusty said. "That little fraud, Pops. Do you know she was way ahead of you? She had this all figured out."

He chuckled. "And what will you tell her?"

"That she can hop on a train and join us, the sooner the better. Because her being here won't embarrass you. It's all settled, I hope." She looked up at her father. "I like her, Pops," she said. "If you'll settle for a snap judgment."

"I'd hoped you would, Rusty," he said soberly. "By the way, Isabel wants you to call her Isabel, if you will. We decided that would be best."

Rusty nodded. It *was* easier that way. "How's Nick?" she asked abruptly.

"Furious at being cooped up and missing all the fun," her father answered. "And the things he's been telling me. I nearly put them down as the ravings of delirium."

Rusty shook her head. "They're not, Pops. At least—"

"May we come in?" asked a voice at the door.

Bob was leaning against the casing, watching them with interest. Behind him stood John Revere.

"Bob Crombie!" Mrs. Fundy went forward with outstretched hand.

"It's been a long time," she said as they shook hands. "You—you just vanished, Bob."

"I know. I'm afraid I've caused you a lot of trouble."

That's a bit of understatement if I ever heard one, Rusty thought, choking back an urge to laugh.

But Mrs. Fundy shook her head. "Oh, there were many things I wanted to know. Perhaps that's why—I'm sure you had your reasons," she said quietly.

Bob flushed. "I did. Right now they don't seem quite so sound as they once did. Well, even though the car's gone, we did manage to save the cushions."

He seemed quite serious, and looked so hopefully at Mrs. Fundy that Rusty found herself wondering if it was

an act. Just let him try putting something over on her, she thought. He's done all the mischief he's going to.

But Mrs. Fundy, apparently, found nothing absurd in the remark.

"I'm afraid that won't help much," she said.

"Depends on what you were after," Bob answered. "I've found what *I* was looking for—in the cushions."

Rusty gasped. So there was something valuable hidden in the old Ark. She might have known it. Otherwise why would there have been such a contest to see who should have it? And Bob had won. For an instant Rusty felt elated. She looked quickly at Mrs. Fundy's face, but there was no dismay there, only keen interest.

"Perhaps," she said, "we were after the same thing."

There were quick steps outside the door, and Rusty turned, startled, as Cy burst in, a wild look on his face.

"They've gone!" he said, breathing as though he'd been running. "Thea and Marcia. They've taken their things."

Toby sprang up. "Gone! How come Ireton didn't tell us?"

"He probably didn't know," Cy said. "The key was in the door, there was one light on in the living room, and," he groped in a jacket pocket, "this thing was stuck up on the mantel."

The blue envelope was sealed and it was addressed to Rusty. While they all watched her, puzzled, she opened it with awkward fingers.

*If Thea and I are lucky (she read aloud) we'll be far from the ranch when you read this. We won't write you. The mail is watched. But we'll get word to you some way. As soon as your father returns, leave the ranch. Next time it won't be a fall from a horse or a broken leg. It will be far worse.*

*Marcia*

There was a silence in the library. Then Toby said,



"That blow on the head, when she fell from her horse. She's gone out of her mind."

"She's gone, period," Cy said in a bitter voice. "And she's taken Thea with her."

## THE ARK'S SECRET

### Chapter XVI

IT TOOK all his father's persuasion to keep Cy from starting off immediately to hunt for Thea and Marcia. John Revere volunteered to talk to the men in the bunkhouse, see if anyone knew when they had left. But even Cy had to agree that there was no use just going off on a wild goose chase without knowing in the least where to look.

"I just don't understand it at all." Mrs. Fundy looked in bewilderment from one to the other. "What's been happening? Oh, I know there have been strange things going on at the cave, but they've only inconvenienced Cy. They couldn't be called a danger, really. Yet Marcia seems to be hinting that—that—"

The young people, silent and subdued, exchanged knowing glances.

"There *is* something more," Mrs. Fundy said quickly. "This accident to Nick—" There was a new, urgent tone to her voice and she turned to Dr. Jerrold. "Jim, something dreadful has been going on while we were away."

"Suppose you bring us up to date on what has been happening," Dr. Jerrold said.

He looked hopefully at Rusty, who looked away. At Cy, who sat staring at the floor. At Toby, whose face had suddenly become a closed book. He didn't look at Muff, but it was she who spoke up.

"We haven't anything to be *ashamed* of," she said, ignoring Toby's glare. "And if no one else is going to tell, I will."

"You'll do no such thing!" Toby said sharply. He turned to the doctor. "It's really up to Rusty," he said. "She's the one who knows the answers."

"Rusty?" Dr. Jerrold was surprised.

Rusty could feel them all looking at her, waiting. She had to decide now, whether Bob was on their side or wasn't. She stole a look at him, and, coloring, turned to her father.

"All right," she said. "On one condition. We'll only get at the truth and be able to clear up this—this mystery, and find Thea and Marcia if we're *all* frank. I haven't any answers, but maybe we can find them if—if we're not afraid to tell what we know."

"Sounds ominous," said her father. "Is everybody willing?"

Nobody answered at first. Then Bob said, "Fire away, Rusty."

The story came out, haltingly at first, because so much had happened since the night Aunt Ede had received the strange message from Cy.

The first interruption came from Toby. "You called the ranch back and were told there was no one here by the name of Jerrold?" he demanded. "Now what smart Joe answered the phone, I wonder." He made a little note on the back of an envelope. "I'll check on it. Go on, Rusty."

She told of the search for the car, the young man with the crew cut who had almost beaten them to it. Bob grinned sheepishly.

"It would have saved a lot of trouble if you'd let me get it," he said.

Rusty ignored him, and looked steadily at her father as she reported the appearance of "Bob Clayton," and Aunt Ede's sudden decision not to go on the trip after all.

"I don't understand," said Dr. Jerrold, turning to Bob, "why you had to use a—pseudonym, shall we say?" But before Bob could answer, "Perhaps you'll tell us when Rusty finished her story?"

Rusty hurried on to their arrival in Sioux City. She

didn't dare look at Bob when she told of his strange behavior in the dining room at the hotel, of the note under her door, and her decision to ignore it.

But Bob spoke up then. "Marcia was in the hotel, too, you know. In fact, she was the woman in the dining room who was so interested in us she forgot to read her book."

She told me she wrote the note," Rusty said. "But that comes later."

She told of the wire to Nell Remington, of the night in the motel, and of Marcia's visit to her cabin. She could see that not only Bob was startled.

"So she's been after the secret of the Hidden Village all along," Mrs. Fundy said, frowning. "But go on, Rusty."

It was harder after that. Harder to tell of the overheard conversation in the drugstore in Chatfield, the terror she and Nick had felt on the canyon road when John Revere had appeared, harder because they were all hanging on her words and because Bob's face was grim as he sat looking down, twirling a key chain over his fingers. When she told of the theft of the keys and Bob's disappearance with the car, Toby gave an uneasy laugh.

"I've been in the doghouse with you ever since," he said. "I thought I recognized Bob, and I thought if he wanted the car, well, he must need it, and I knew he'd return it."

"Go on, Rusty," said Dr. Jerrold quietly. The look he threw at Bob was not cordial.

Rusty faltered. The part about the sign at the cave, the loss of the horses, Muff's finding the boots, the trip to the trading post and finding Marcia lying on the trail—they'd all been in on that. It wasn't too bad. But when she stumbled through the story of her frightening adventure of the night before, she could see her father clench his fists until the knuckles showed white. Even without looking up, she could tell the others were stunned by her story.

"The rest, about what happened today, I guess you know all that."

Mrs. Fundy nodded absent-mindedly. Rusty stole a look at Bob. He was still swinging the key chain, and there was

a hard line to his jaw that Rusty had seen once before—when he had wrenched the golf club from Nick's hand. He must hate her. She hadn't spared him at all. *How* he must hate her!

"Oh, you poor dear," Mrs. Fundy began. But Rusty sprang up, with a desperate look at the door.

"Please," she said, and ignoring their protests, she ran blindly from the room. She was going to cry and she wasn't going to do it in public. She heard her father say, "It's all right. Let her go," and she rushed on, out into the cool dark of the patio.

There were footsteps behind her, and she turned, angry.

"Can't you leave me alone?" she asked whoever had followed.

Bob's voice answered. "If you'd rather I'd go back, just say the word."

"I'm going to bawl my head off," she said. "I don't think it would interest you."

He came to stand beside her, looking out at the soft velvet of the night. "I've been a stupid idiot," he said to the dark. "If I'd had any idea I was making you so miserable—"

She swallowed a sob and shook her head.

"I won't deny I got a bit of fun out of keeping you and Nick mystified. But it was thoughtless of me. And that business of the telephone call in Chatfield. I didn't have an idea in the world that you were on to me. I thought I'd done something to make you angry but I couldn't figure out what."

"I'm sorry I had to say all those things about you in there," Rusty said in a muffled voice.

"Sorry?" He sounded genuinely surprised. "But you only said what was so. I did do all those things. That's what seems so incredible now, I mean, hearing how they must have looked to you."

There was a silence while they watched the twinkling of far-off lights in the enclosure. Rusty stifled another sob. Bob put his arm lightly around her shoulders.

"Brace up, Rusty," he said cheerfully. "You've done your stuff, but I have to go back in there and tell *my* story. Courage, Crombie, courage!"

Rusty's laugh was uncertain. "Even your name, Crombie, I g-guess it had better be a good story."

"If you'll come back with me, I promise it will be," Bob assured her.

He stopped on the way back to pick up a box he had left on the table in the lounge, and everyone pretended a great curiosity about the box and paid no attention to Rusty's tear-streaked face.

"This is Exhibit A," Bob said, setting the box on the table. "And now," he didn't sound in the least eager to go on, "I'm afraid it's my turn."

From the box on the table he produced what looked like old-fashioned cylinder phonograph records, a dozen or more, and ranged them in two rows.

"Remember, Rusty," he said, "how Nick complained about the back seat of the Ark, how springless it was? Well, this is why."

"You mean those were in the back cushion?" Cy said. "What are they?"

"Dictaphone records."

"And that's what you were after?" Mrs. Fundy asked.

Bob nodded. "I knew there must be some, because when I was down here with Dr. Fundy, he had a dictaphone and a box of empty cylinders in the cabin. They used to disappear one at a time. I didn't know where he hid them. Didn't suspect the car until I learned you wanted it, Mrs. Fundy, and John wrote Cy had been digging and all that. Then I decided I had to get the car first."

"Why, Bob?" Mrs. Fundy asked quietly.

Bob smiled at her. "Tell me first why *you* wanted it."

"Very well. I knew my husband was in the habit of keeping a diary on the dictaphone when he was on a trip. He'd transcribe it later when we got home again. Once before, in South America, he had some very important information and he hid his precious records under the floor

of the car for safekeeping. Only they didn't fare very well. I hoped he'd kept such a diary of his last expedition, but you didn't bring me any records when you returned from Arizona after his death, and I was too upset then to think of such a thing. Now when Cy got me interested in digging again, I began to wonder about it. I decided since there weren't any records in the cabin, and the dictaphone was still there, they must have been hidden in the car I'd sold. As to why I wanted them, well, if Cy's going to dig, I'd like him to dig in the right place. And though Cy's cave has been good practice and fun, I was convinced that it wasn't the site of an Indian village."

"I've found potsherds there," Cy said stoutly.

"And now, Bob," Mrs. Fundy went on, nodding at Cy, "why did you want to find the records before I could get them?"

Bob's glance shifted uneasily. "I'm not sure I ought to tell, even now." He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "It was the mischief at the cave that made me decide to get those records," he said. "John knew what had happened four years ago, and he worried over Cy, that's why he wrote me about it. I had an idea it would be just as well if you never knew what really happened, so John and I thought we'd work in secret. That's why I used only my first two names and left off the *Crombie*. But today, when Nick could so easily have been killed, I saw that I'd made a mistake. Four years ago the same things happened to Dr. Fundy. Only more of them. And one evening, well, there was a mysterious fire in the lower cave, Dr. Fundy and I went down to investigate it, and— A rock fell from up on the mesa, Dr. Fundy jumped out of its way, lost his footing, and—"

No one spoke for a moment. Then Mrs. Fundy said, "You should have told me, Bob."

"I didn't have any proof that it wasn't just an accident. And you took it pretty hard. I thought knowing about the things that had happened would only make it harder for you. I'd like to have kept it from you even now. That's

why I suggested to John I'd just sneak down, see if we could find out the truth, take what steps we had to, say nothing to anyone, and I'd sneak off again."

"I see. And do you know now who was responsible for the trouble, and for Dr. Fundy's death?"

Bob put his hand on the dictaphone cylinders. "What I'm hoping is that Dr. Fundy mentioned some little thing on his records that would give us a clue. From some things he said to me then I got the feeling that he knew, or at least suspected."

Since the dictaphone was still in the cabin, and it was too late to drive over for it, they had to be patient. However, the boys bombarded Bob with questions. Bob told them how the upper cave had escaped detection, how Dr. Fundy had figured out the tunnel, how they had dug it together.

"So today, when we walked into the cabin, you disappeared into the tunnel, of course," Toby said.

"Then you hid, went back to the cabin while Toby and I were out yelling to Nick, and locked the door, didn't you?" Rusty had forgotten her tears, now that Bob didn't hate her and she could like him as she had on the trip. "Then did you come back into the cave again? Wearing a sombrero?"

"Certainly not," Bob said. "Never owned a sombrero."

"Someone in a sombrero was in the cave," Rusty insisted. When she saw that Bob looked unconvinced, she added, "Go ahead and laugh if you want to, but shadows don't *grunt*."

"You've had two whole days to find those records," Muff broke in. "Why didn't you find them?"

Bob shook his head helplessly. "Darned if I know. For one thing, I had to keep hidden, and for another I didn't have an alarm clock, and you'd be surprised how late I can sleep without it. Then with you racing around the lower cave, and old Nakwatiwa nosing around the cabin, pasturing his old burro on the brush, and me wasting time taking the floor out of the Ark—"

"Well, tonight you won't have to stay in any old abandoned cabin," Muff said. "Mother's going to put you up."

"The best news yet," Bob said, standing up. "The rest of the questions will have to wait."

Rusty had a good many things to mull over before she could go to sleep, however. Things had happened so fast she couldn't keep up with them. Last night—why, last night it had been the man in the gray corduroy jacket who had filled her thoughts. And Marcia's terror. Tonight, in the sudden relief of her father's return, of discovering what Bob had really been up to, she had almost forgotten that the man in the gray corduroy jacket still existed, that he would have to be found.

"And it isn't John Revere, unless he's fooling Bob, too," she thought. "But maybe by now Mr. Ireton has found out who it was."

The next day there was still no word of Marcia or Thea. Mr. Ireton was making inquiries, but there seemed to be nothing to do but wait. While Rusty and Muff brought Nick up to date on what had happened and tried to amuse him, the boys and Bob went to the cabin for the dictaphone. They were gone so long that Rusty was sure they must be exploring the upper cave. When they returned they brought the dictaphone up to Nick's room, and reported that the Ark was still visible and could be rescued.

"Not that it's worth much now," Mrs. Fundy said. "Unless Rusty and Nick want it for sentimental reasons."

"You mean, you'd part with it?" Rusty asked. She was still a little shy with Mrs. Fundy, but Nick had no inhibitions.

"Do we!" he cried. "It's the best old car. Why, if it hadn't been for the Ark—"

"Then that's settled," said Mrs. Fundy, amused. "And now, I see the boys are ready."

Bob announced, "Cy had a corking idea, and we've rigged up a kind of loud speaker. If it works, we can all



hear the records.”

Presently, after the boys had tinkered with the dictaphone some more, they heard a man's voice say clearly, "I learned the site of the buried Indian village from Nakwatiwa, the Hopi chieftain."

It was startling, uncanny, and Rusty felt sorry for Isabel Fundy hearing this voice from the dead.

Because she was unused to archaeological terms, Rusty found much of the account hard to understand. Mrs. Fundy and Bob listened intently. Cy, crouched beside the machine, followed every word. But what Rusty did understand, as record followed record, were the frequent references, often amusing, to the mischief that plagued the professor. The theft of his spades. The appearance of a ghost one night when he had worked unusually late. The Indian symbol. The covering up of the dig with the dirt he had sifted. The rope that had been stretched across the passage, over which he tripped. She grew more and more excited.

"Isn't he going to discover who did it?" she asked, when there was only one record left to hear.

Bob looked anxious. "If it isn't on this one, we're right back where we started."

The first part of the remaining record gave a report of Dr. Fundy's findings that day at the dig. Then, "Today, Nakwatiwa rode over on his burro to warn me that the cave is full of evil spirits," the professor's voice said. "I have long suspected that the old fellow is the author of the mischief that has delayed my work, but when I taxed him with it, I could get nowhere. Nakwatiwa knows that I was followed the other night, that I made threats, that I have an enemy now at the ranch. He tried to tell me that I was the man to watch out for, which is clearly nonsense. These petty tricks can have no relation to the other. I rebuked Nakwatiwa rather sharply, and he went away muttering. I hope we shall have peace now."

"That's all," said Cy.

"How strange!" Mrs. Fundy said. "Nakwatiwa! I can't

believe it. He told Dr. Fundy about the cave in the first place. Why would he try to stop him from digging?"

"He's afraid of the spirit of his ancestors," Bob said. "They visit him periodically, John Revere tells me. They may have objected to being dug up." He rose. "Well, we came up with a blank there, I'm afraid."

Nick had been silent while they listened to the records. Now he said, "What would you do to Nakwatiwa if you found he was the one?"

"Don't know, Nicko. He's pretty old."

"Why, Nick?" Mrs. Fundy asked. "Could you tell us something?"

"Not if it means the old fellow goes to jail," said Nick stubbornly.

Mrs. Fundy looked at Bob. "Would it mean that, Bob? It would have been only an accident if Nakwatiwa were the one."

Bob shrugged. Nick thought a moment, then, "I saw someone, I think it was Nakwatiwa, up on the rocks. I said yesterday I was half asleep, but I was awake enough for that. He acted as if he was sore about something, waved his sombrero and shook his fist in the air, and that was when the rock rolled. I didn't see it come at first, I was too slow getting up, and it caught me."

Bob looked grim. "Did you see him push it?"

"He could have, I guess. But I didn't actually see it until it was bounding straight down the cliff at me."

Rusty looked at her father. He was frowning, as though he weren't convinced that they were on the right track. She looked at Bob. He was turning a record over and over in his hands, and there was a scowl on his face.

"Even if Nakwatiwa *is* the answer to what's been happening at the cave," Rusty said quietly, "there are still Marcia's actions to be explained. And it wasn't Nakwatiwa who grabbed me the other night and made off with my jacket. If he's as old as they say he is, he couldn't run that fast."

"Just what I've been thinking," her father said. "Of

course, Marcia's being interested in the Hidden Village doesn't rule out Nakwatiwa's part in it."

"We can check up on him with Masi," Cy said. "But I'm afraid Masi won't come back to the cave."

"Then we'll have to go and see him," Rusty said. "Couldn't John Revere take us over to the Indian villages?"

"We can ask him," Toby said. "He's out of favor with Nakwatiwa."

At the thought of John Revere, Rusty's eyes began to sparkle. If John could get the old chieftain to talk, maybe the mystery would be cleared up. And she thought she knew a way to do it.

When the men had left to attend to the rescue of the Ark, Rusty took over the nursing duties from Toby's mother. What she had in mind would amuse Nick, make him feel he had a part in what was happening, too.

That night after dinner she cornered Bob. "Will you drive us to the Hopi village where Masi lives?" she asked.

"Yes, if you'll tell me what you're up to."

"I can't, Bob. I promised not to. John Revere is going with us."

All the way across the mesa, Rusty sat nervous and tense on the edge of the seat, a mysterious bundle on her lap, taking no part in what the boys were saying. John Revere was equally silent.

As they approached the Indian village, and saw fires burning here and there, Bob said, "Seems to be a festival going on."

"There is," said John. "Stop here, Bob. You'll have to wait a while for me. All right, Rusty."

"Here's the bundle, Mr. Revere," Rusty said. "And you won't forget, will you?"

"I know it by heart." John Revere laughed. "In English. Now to change it into Hopi." And taking the bundle, he disappeared into the dark.

"Going to tell us now, Rusty?" Bob asked.

Rusty laughed. "Wait until John Revere comes back. If

it doesn't work, he doesn't want to be laughed at."

They waited a long time. At last they heard footsteps approaching.

"It's Masi!" Cy exclaimed when a head appeared at the car window. "Hiya, old boy, where've you been? We missed you at the cave."

"Hey, Masi, what happened to John? What's going on over there?" Toby asked.

"It is a festival," Masi said. "As for John Revere, I hope nothing has happened to him. It was—daring of him."

Masi had been away, they learned, that was why he hadn't come to the cave. He had been to Chatfield, he explained proudly. And he had something for Cy, five tickets for the movie that was currently playing at the local theater. It was a movie about cowboys, and it would only be shown one more day. "I meant to give them to you at the cave tomorrow," Masi explained shyly.

Cy thanked him and promised to go and see it, which amused Rusty. Cy couldn't be dragged to a Western as a rule.

"I can't understand what's keeping John," Toby fumed. "What did you get him into, Rusty?"

She was a little worried now, and almost revealed the plot. But a few minutes after Masi left to return to the festival, John Revere appeared out of nowhere, opened the car door, and got in.

"That was almost too lively an adventure," John said, settling back with relief against the seat.

"Did it work?" Rusty asked breathlessly.

"No. According to plan, I appeared before Nakwatiwa as the spirit of one of his ancestors. Fine! I told him we, his ancestors, didn't mind being dug up, and for him to stop his mischief. He protested that he had not caused anyone any trouble, and Nakwatiwa does not lie. But when I asked who then had been making the mischief at the cave, perhaps my Hopi failed me. At any rate, Nakwatiwa discovered who I was. He did not—take it kindly. But at least we know—Nakwatiwa is innocent."

## THE MAN IN THE GRAY JACKET

### Chapter XVII

*THE STATION WAGON* wound its way up out of the canyon, and Toby shifted back to high gear as they turned onto the black highway that led to Chatfield. It was dusk again, and they were on their way to the movie Masi had urged them to see.

"I wouldn't want Nick's broken leg," Cy commented, "but at least he doesn't have to go see a Western."

"Too bad about you," Rusty said. "Too bad about Nick, too. He loves 'em."

"So does Muff," Toby said. "And her staying home with Nick wasn't all altruism. Mom read the riot act about the late hour."

No one knew quite why Bob had elected to join the party at the last minute. Rusty couldn't picture him caring much for a cowboy movie, and she wondered if he really meant to sit through it with them.

But he did. He laughed heartily at the cartoon comedy, and though Cy greeted the feature with a groan, Bob seemed to find it interesting. It was only when the film broke and the theater was suddenly pitch dark that Rusty discovered he had seen the picture before.

"What a horrible place for it to break!" she whispered. "Do you suppose the hero will get there in time?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't think he does. He rides into an ambush, if I'm not mistaken," Bob answered.

"Why, you've seen it!" Rusty said.

"Oh, yes. It was a long time ago—"

Someone was trying to squeeze past them. Bob stood up, but he said to the intruder, "This row's filled up, I think."

"It isn't either," a girl's voice said tensely. "Move your knees, Rusty. There's a seat on the other side of Toby."

"Thea!" Rusty cried, forgetting to keep her voice low. "Why, Thea, whatever are you doing *here*?"

"Sh-h-h," Thea cautioned. "Just let me slip in here and I'll explain after the show."

Rusty could hear the flurry of whispers when Thea reached the coveted seat beyond Toby. She was so curious she couldn't get her mind back on the picture. Thea and Marcia must have been in Chatfield all the time. But if they were in danger at the Lazy-K, could they be safe here? And why hadn't they gone on, as far and fast as they could travel?

"You didn't expect her?" Bob whispered.

"Thea? Certainly not! Did you?"

"I thought Masi must have had a reason for buying the tickets. He must have seen Thea yesterday."

Someone turned to stare at them, and Bob subsided.

The minute the movie ended, Thea whisked them off to the hotel, where she said Marcia had a message for them.

Marcia hadn't expected to see Bob, Rusty knew. And she watched the older woman's face with interest when Bob followed Toby into the room.

"Well!" Marcia said. "We meet again. You—you brought the car back after all, Mrs. Fundy's car."

"Wasn't I expected to?" Bob asked innocently.

Marcia only stared at him. She turned to Rusty. "Now that your father's back, you *will* leave the ranch?"

"If you'll come back with us tonight, Miss Hollis," Bob spoke up, "we may be able to clear up everything. Then no one will need to leave the ranch, unless—"

"Unless escorted by the sheriff, I suppose." Marcia's tone was bitter. "No, thank you. I'm not going back. I know when to quit. And Thea's not going back. If the rest of you want to play with dynamite, go right ahead!"

"Would you explain that, please?" Bob asked.

He and Marcia were facing each other, and Marcia was defiant.

"You'll find out!" she said. "You think because you've found the Hidden Village now, you're sitting pretty. Well, Dr. Fundy found it, too. Just remember that!"

"I do remember that," Bob said. "You see, I was with him when he found it."

Marcia gasped. "Then you're Bob Crombie!" she said, with something like awe in her voice. "All these years, and you never cashed in on it!"

Bob's eyebrows went up. "It *is* hard to understand, isn't it?"

But Marcia evidently thought she had said enough. She turned to Rusty. "I've spent these two days writing out something. At least if you won't be warned—I couldn't send it through the mail, but Thea was positive you'd be in Chatfield tonight. I want you to take this letter to your father. Then if he wants to take any action—well, here's what I know." She put a thick envelope in Rusty's hands. "And now," she added, "you'd better be on your way."

"Couldn't Thea come back with us?" Rusty pleaded.

Marcia shook her head. "Tomorrow morning early Thea and I will be on our way." She looked at Thea and Cy who were standing by the window. "And Thea's not leaving any address, Cy, so you can forget about getting in touch with her. She won't be able to write to you, either."

On the way down into the canyon, Rusty sat clutching the envelope in her hands and hating Marcia. As though Cy and Thea wanted their friendship advertised in that way, so callously, too.

"I hope you were too fast for her!" she muttered to Cy.

He laughed. "You mean the address? I've had that for months. Thea'll be eighteen next month. Then Marcia can go back to her scientist and leave her alone."

"Her scientist?"

"She's engaged to one," Cy said. "Heaven help him."

It was ten when they reached the ranch house. There were lights both upstairs and down. Mrs. Fundy and Dr. Jerrold were in the living room, and Toby's mother came

down the stairs as the movie-goers trooped in.

Rusty gave her father a quick report of what had happened and put Marcia's letter in his hands. He opened it, frowning.

"It's pretty long. Think I should read it aloud?"

"You'd better, Pops!" Cy said. "If you don't want us to do it for you."

"No, no. I'll read it. Sit down, all of you. We'll see what Marcia has been up to."

Rusty cast an uneasy look at the open windows, the door to the patio which was standing open. But no one else seemed to be nervous about what Dr. Jerrold was about to read.

The Hidden Village, Marcia explained in what Dr. Jerrold referred to as the "preamble," was only a name to her when she came to the Lazy-K. She'd heard it mentioned by a scientist friend of hers in Chicago. Then when Mrs. Fundy mentioned it to Cy, she grew interested. She wrote her friend, and he was quite excited about it, asked her to learn the exact site of it, since such a discovery might lead to fame and fortune for them both.

After all, Marcia wrote, *the secret supposedly died with Dr. Fundy. No one else could hope to win Nakwatiwa's confidence. Of course, Bob Crombie, his assistant, may or may not know. If he did he would surely make use of his knowledge.*

Dr. Jerrold paused and looked at Bob. "Interesting," he said.

Bob flushed. "Crombie thought he'd better dig into a few books and get his degree," he said. "Then full of learning but stony broke, he went with an expedition to South America to recoup his fortunes. After all, you can't dig without dough."

"I gather Marcia thinks some scientist, *her* scientist, perhaps, would have paid you well for the secret," Mrs. Fundy said.

Bob shrugged. "I wasn't that hard up," he said.

"End of preamble," Dr. Jerrold went on. "Marcia goes



on: *'But the real reason for writing this is so that you will know who caused the trouble at the cave, and who killed Dr. Fundy. Soon after I began inquiring about the Hidden Village, I was approached—'*”

Without warning, the room was plunged into darkness.

“My word!” It was Mrs. Whitman’s voice. “Toby, a fuse must have been blown out. I’d better go see about some candles.”

“I’ll get a flashlight, Mom.”

Rusty could hear Toby groping his way toward the door. Someone else passed her in the dark, too.

“It’s a fuse, all right,” Cy said. “The lights are on in the other buildings.”

Rusty could hear her father rustle the papers he held as he stood up. A door opened somewhere, and from above came Muff’s voice. “Mom, what happened? I was reading and—is it dark down there, too?”

“Stay where you are, Muff. I’ll bring you a candle in a moment. Is that you, Toby? Couldn’t you find the flash?”

“That was Bob going after him, I think,” Rusty said.

“No, I’m here,” Bob said. “I’m looking for matches. Here they are.”

He lit several, and moved toward the fireplace. “If I had a piece of paper, I could make a torch until Toby comes.”

“Just don’t burn up Marcia’s letter,” Rusty said with a laugh.

“Marcia’s letter. Where is it?” Dr. Jerrold cried. “I put it down on the chair when I—”

“It’s probably on the floor, Jim,” Mrs. Fundy assured him. “Here’s Toby with the flash now.”

But Toby raced into the room, breathing hard. “He got away! Didn’t you see him? He dashed out of here! He’s gone in a car!”

The next few minutes were a hubbub of confused voices, people running back and forth, doors opening and shutting. Someone screamed, “The letter!” and everyone got down on the floor to hunt for it, while Toby swung the flash around and kept saying: “He took it, he took it. I know

he took it! He came running out of this room!"

From upstairs came Muff's plaintive wail, "Mom, what's going on down there?"

Mrs. Fundy had found candles and Rusty and she lit them and held them aloft for the searchers. There were voices outside, the sound of men's hurrying feet, someone called, "Here it is!" and then, miraculously, the lights came on again.

The first thing Rusty saw was Muff, halfway down the stair, her robe pulled over her pajamas and her pigtailed standing straight out.

Bob ran for the telephone, and Cy said excitedly: "He's calling John Revere in Chatfield. Let's hope he's in."

"Why John, Cy?" Mrs. Fundy asked.

But they could hear Bob's voice. "He'll make for Chatfield, we're pretty sure. Send someone to the hotel to guard Miss Hollis and Thea. Then start down the canyon. We'll be behind him. Don't let him pass you."

Muff had advanced into the living room and was clutching at Toby's arm. "Who? Who? Who?" she insisted.

"Whoever Marcia was going to tell us about, that's who," Toby said. Then he realized it was Muff at his elbow. "Hey, you're supposed to be in bed," he said. "Get back upstairs."

"Toby, let her stay," his mother said.

Dr. Jerrold insisted on joining the boys in their chase up the canyon road, and Rusty wished she might have gone, too. The wait at the ranch was endless, it seemed, though they built a fire and Mrs. Whitman brought in a pot of hot chocolate, and they talked of what had happened and what might happen.

"I wonder who turned the lights back on?" Rusty said.

"Oh, Mr. Ireton, probably," Mrs. Whitman said. "Or Charley."

"What if the thief didn't head for Chatfield," Muff said. "Then he could come back here."

No one answered. If Muff hadn't caught the significance of Bob's instructions to John about guarding Marcia and

Thea, there was no point in alarming her.

The phone rang, and Rusty, with a questioning look at the women, ran to answer. It was Bob.

"You can trot out the fatted calf, or a reasonable facsimile," he said. "We're starting back, and I guess we'd all like some food."

"You caught him?" Rusty asked.

"Yes. He's safe in jail." Bob didn't sound elated.

"I'll tell the others," Rusty said quickly.

"Aren't you going to ask who it was?" Bob asked.

"I think you'd have said if you wanted to tell," Rusty answered.

"Good girl! I'd rather not over the phone. Wait up for us."

They came within the hour, and brought Marcia and Thea with them. They were all rather sober, and Mrs. Whitman hurried to bring out sandwiches and coffee. Marcia huddled by the fire, refusing to touch the food.

"I'm so glad it's *over!*" she said.

"It's Marcia's story," Bob explained. "She wants to tell it."

"It isn't pleasant," Marcia began, slowly. "As soon as I began inquiring about the Hidden Village, Mr. Ireton approached me, wanted to know why I was interested. I told him. He pretended he didn't know, and tried to lead me on to make him an offer, *if* he should be able to get me the information."

Rusty frowned, and looked at Bob questioningly. Surely Marcia couldn't mean that Mr. Ireton—Mr. Ireton!

"It was all very pleasant and friendly," Marcia went on, "until Mrs. Fundy decided to send for her old car. Then Mr. Ireton came to me in a panic. That car, he insisted, would ruin everything. He wouldn't explain what he meant, but he was frantic. He wanted me to rush off to Minneapolis, see that the car didn't reach the ranch, and he'd tell me what I wanted to know. Before I left he said to me, 'Run them off a cliff somewhere if you have to. That car must *not* reach this ranch!' I couldn't believe he

was serious, but when I came back here, unsuccessful, I discovered he wasn't joking in the least. He overtook me when I went for a ride, and he was furious because he thought I'd sold him out. He thought I'd *got* my information from Bob, whom he recognized the night he arrived, and he was sure I'd double-crossed him. You know what he did. You saw the welts," she added, turning to Rusty and the boys.

"Marcia!" Thea said. "It's all over now. You're safe."

"Yes," Marcia said. "He let out another secret in his fury. The reason he was so afraid of the car's being found. He said, 'Do you realize they could get me for murder if that car's found?' I pretended I didn't understand. I said what he'd been doing at the cave might be a misdemeanor, but it certainly wasn't anything worse. I think that's the only reason he let me live that day."

"Yet it wasn't on the record after all," Mrs. Fundy said. Bob threw her a quick look.

Marcia said: "I tried to warn you, Rusty. That night at our cabin. I thought that was our only hope. To keep the car away."

Rusty shook her head in bewilderment. "I can't understand," she said. "He *rescued* me when the man in the gray jacket grabbed me by the recreation hall!"

"No," Marcia said. "He was the man in the gray jacket. He came over the next day when you were at the dig. He had the note. He must have grabbed you, pretended to run away, and then come dashing back as if he'd just arrived to rescue you. At any rate, he had the note, and he knew I'd talked."

She began to laugh, shakily. "It was almost funny," she said. "Thea and I had packed the car earlier, and Thea lured him into the kitchen while I wrote the note to you. She wanted to ask him about her boots, she said. He'd worn them, you know. And Thea turned the key on him. And we ran!"

"Good for you, Thea!" Bob said. "That's using the old noggin!"

"I knew he'd hunt for us, of course," Marcia went on. "He probably read the note, unless he was too furious to notice it, but our only chance of getting word to you was to stay in Chatfield, until we saw someone we could trust. Thea saw Masi from a window, beckoned him into the hotel, and they fixed up the theater plot between them."

Mrs. Whitman shuddered. "To think we've had a man like that on the ranch all these years!" she said. "But what did he have against Dr. Fundy? He was the gentlest soul."

Bob nodded. "You know how secretive he was? Ireton was merely curious at first, we learned tonight when he was questioned by the sheriff. He tried to find out what Dr. Fundy was up to from John Revere, but of course John wouldn't talk. So he went after Nakwatiwa, with no more luck. One evening he followed Dr. Fundy to the cabin, watched him disappear into the tunnel, and shadowed him until he reached the big cave. There he tried to make a deal with him. If he got a big sum of money, he'd keep still about the Hidden Village. If not, he knew where he could get a price for his information. Dr. Fundy was angry, refused to have any dealings with him, and according to Ireton, drove him from the cave. He began to make trouble for the doctor in any way he could, sometimes at the cabin, sometimes in the big cave if he could gain access to it, sometimes in the lower cave, where Dr. Fundy kept up a pretense of work just to stave off the curious. The rock, he claims, wasn't meant to kill him, any more than he meant to kill Nick the other day. He just wanted to scare Dr. Fundy away. On the strength of that plea, he may get a much lighter sentence than he really deserves."

"And he was afraid Dr. Fundy had mentioned the blackmail attempt in the record?" Mrs. Fundy asked.

Rusty wondered how she could be so calm about it.

Bob nodded. "Which he did. He named the man, but it was rather subtly done, as you might expect from Dr. Fundy."

Mrs. Fundy frowned. "He named Mr. Ireton? Oh, Bob, I think you must be mistaken. Did you hear it, Jim?"

Dr. Jerrold shook his head, but his face was troubled. "There was something—something that bothered me. I wasn't satisfied with the Nakwatiwa solution, any more than Bob was, but just why I don't know."

"It was just a guess on my part," Bob said. "But now I know it was Dr. Fundy's intention, for his own information, and it amused him to be obscure. I began to reconstruct the whole thing. The big deal with the other scientists naturally fell through, that's why Ireton did nothing with his knowledge. And I suppose he guessed you were looking for a record of some kind when you wanted the car, Mrs. Fundy. He knew that if there was any mention made on the records of the blackmail attempt, we'd know who had a reason for killing Dr. Fundy."

There was more talk, each one expressing his amazement at the way things had turned out, and turning hopefully to the future when they could have more pleasant times at the Lazy-K. Then Marcia rose abruptly.

"It's terribly late," she said. "Thea and I would like to stay, Mrs. Whitman, if you can put us up."

When Toby's mother and Marcia had gone upstairs, Muff stood up, yawning. "Will I have a tale to tell Nick in the morning!"

"It's time you scrambled," Toby said severely.

"Yes. See you at breakfast, Muff," Bob said.

And it was at breakfast, which the young people decided to enjoy in Nick's room while they brought him up to date on the adventures of the night before, that Rusty found the last missing pieces of the puzzle.

Crink sat on Nick's bed, hopefully watching each piece of toast and waiting for his share.

"You know he shouldn't be on the bed, Nick," Rusty said. "Your mother wouldn't like it, would she, Toby?"

"Isabel fixed it with Toby's mother," Nick protested. "Isabel said if a guy had to be laid up and miss all the excitement, at least he ought to have his dog *on* the bed, not under it."

Cy chuckled. "Isabel's all right."

How easy it was for Nick and Cy to be on familiar terms with *Isabel*, Rusty thought. It would take time for her, but some day, she knew, they'd be the good companions Aunt Ede and she had always been. "And Aunt Ede's free now to travel. I'll bet she and Nell Remington see the world together first thing." She would call Aunt Ede, shortly, but first there were several things she wanted to know.

She turned to Bob. "You've held out on us long enough. What *did* Dr. Fundy say on the record that pointed to Mr. Ireton?"

Bob put his empty plate on Muff's lap and stood up. "Let's play that last record over," he suggested.

Cy hooked up the loud speaker again, and they heard Dr. Fundy's voice repeating his account of Nakwatiwa's visit.

"Nakwatiwa knows that I was followed the other night, that I made threats, that I have an enemy now at the ranch. He tried to tell me that I was the man to watch out for, which is clearly nonsense. These petty . . ."

Bob shut the record off. "No clue?" he asked.

Toby and Cy and Nick looked as mystified as ever. Muff had a frown on her face. But Rusty suddenly gasped and clapped a hand to her mouth. "Oh, how stupid! Of course! *I was the man to watch out for!*"

"*I meaning Ireton,*" Bob added.

"So that's it! Then the secret was in the Ark all along!" Toby said.

"And I sat on it!" said Nick.

"One last thing," Rusty went on, "did you *really* think I said 'higgleditch'? That last day before we got to Chatfield?"

Bob got the teasing look on his face. "Rusty," he said, "there are some things about this mystery even I haven't figured out. If you didn't say 'higgleditch,' what did you say?"

Rusty's eyes danced. "I think," she said, "this is where I get my revenge. I shan't ever, ever tell you!"

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