

Andy and Dave's vacation turns deadly as they trace stolen artwork, are kidnapped, shanghaied aboard a tramp steamer, and face being buried alive in an abandoned gold mine. Their biggest shock is discovering the secret of the Phantom Bridge.

The Phantom Bridge

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CHAPTER I

A Close Call

One of the most frightening ordeals of Dave Carver's life waited for him a few miles ahead, but at this moment his mind was focused on today's trip and on his eagerness for the fun-filled weeks ahead.

It didn't matter how many times he had a chance to fly, Dave always found it an exhilarating experience, and today's flight was no exception. As a matter of fact, he and his younger cousin, Andy Carver, had long dreamed of owning their own plane, or better still, of building one. The wide grin on his face reflected the inner satisfaction brought on by that reachable goal.

"You seem to be really enjoying yourself, my young friend," said the uniformed passenger sitting next to him on the commercial jetliner.

Dave turned away from the window to face the man. "I am," he said. "I was thinking about the plans my cousin and I have for building and flying our own airplane. You can't imagine how great it will feel to finally have our pilot license."

"Oh, I think I can," he said, pointing at the wings on his jacket. "I'm Jeremy Riggs, captain and senior pilot for

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this airline. Today's the start of a mini-vacation for me, so I'm flying to Denver to spend time with my mom and dad. It's a nice change letting someone else drive."

Dave studied the shiny insignia the captain wore, then realized that he was staring. "Uh—sorry. My name's David Caver, but I go by just plain Dave. I got so caught up in thinking about vacation, I never noticed your wings. Of course, if I had, I probably would have asked you so many questions you would've been glad to see the flight end."

"Very glad to meet you, 'Just Plain Dave'. No need to apologize because I never get tired of flying or of talking about it. Do you live around here?"

"No," said Dave. "I'm visiting Andy, the cousin I mentioned. He lives up in the mountains near Denver with his parents, Uncle Martin and Aunt Karen. His father is my dad's younger brother, and is president and founder of a growing software company."

The pilot nodded. "Sounds like a smart man."

"He is. While still a teenager he earned the money needed to buy his first computer and then began writing basic programs. By the time Uncle Martin got out of college, he had already sold several applications to major companies, and had banked enough money from those sales to start his own business."

Captain Riggs, a good listener, appreciated Dave and his enthusiasm. "So, where are you from and what do your folks do for a living?"

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“Captain’s Cove on the Gulf Coast of Florida. My dad, John Carver, is lead anchorman on the Channel Seven Nightly News, and mom, she goes by Katie, is an award-winning video tape editor at the same station.”

“Interesting. It seems as though you both come from very talented families, Mr. Carver. What’s your cousin like?”

“Andy? I guess most people would call him a computer geek...er...whiz. He’s following in his dad’s footsteps having already written a number of programs on his own. Uncle Martin says he hopes that when retires that Andy will take over the company and market his own ideas.”

Dave’s seat-mate nodded appreciatively. “Sounds exciting. I hope you two have a great vacation and wish you success in building and flying your own plane. If you’ll excuse me, I think I’ll go forward and pay my respects to the cockpit crew.” Captain Riggs unbuckled his seat belt and squeezed past a flight attendant as she stowed one of the serving carts.

Dave pictured his uncle bragging on Andy’s computer skills. He’d been especially animated as he had described Andy’s new program that calculated the lift generated by different shaped wings. The cousins were planning to use the program to help design their dream plane.

As their long-awaited project came closer to being realized, Dave found himself becoming even more excited about spending time with Andy. The two had already filled

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their savings accounts with the reward money earned by assisting in the capture of a gang of armored car thieves on Sea Gate Island last summer, and by helping to recover the stolen vehicle and money. Dave swallowed involuntarily when he remembered how Andy had narrowly escaped with his life when after being kidnapped by the crooks.

Dave turned his attention back to the window. Fields passing beneath the wing were beginning to show the green of new corn, wheat, and soybeans. He loved the Springtime feeling of renewal. From this twenty-five thousand foot viewpoint, he could see the land coming back to life. His eyes moved constantly, trying to take it all in.

The sun's reflection sparkled in the wide river fed by the icy water from melting mountaintop snowfields before rushing along its twisting course to the Gulf of Mexico. He spotted the whitewater rapids where he and Andy often enjoyed wild and wet rides on huge rubber rafts. Towering high above the river were the magnificent Rockies, green at the base, turning to purple where the vegetation thinned. Each was capped by a topping of pure white snow that reminded him of a giant scoop of whipped cream.

A chime sounded. He glanced at the panel above him. The *Fasten Seat Belt* sign had winked on. The First Officer announced preparations to land. Cabin attendants began collecting the drink cups and the leftovers of a simple, but filling lunch. As all the seat backs and belts were carefully checked for proper adjustment, the head steward reminded

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everyone to remain seated until the aircraft was fully stopped at the gate.

A growling, grinding sound beneath the floor signaled the lowering of the landing flaps. Then came the whoosh of the wheel-well doors opening, and the rumble of the wheel carriages dropping into the air stream. Clank, clunk, clunk. All three landing gears locked, and the airplane began its decent on final approach.

Without warning, the flaps were suddenly reversed and the wheels retracted. Three powerful jet engines roared to full power as the aircraft banked sharply to the left, climbing steeply out of the valley. Carry-on bags, boxes, and briefcases slid from under aisle seats, and coats hung out at strange angles from closets near the restrooms. People screamed, babies cried, and Dave, although trying not to show any outward sign of fear, gripped the arms of his seat, his knuckles turning white with the strain.

Staring out his window, he gasped as a small blue and white twin-engine jet roared out from beneath them with barely a hundred feet of clearance. The jet wash of the huge airliner caused the smaller plane to wobble violently and veer off into a steep dive toward the nearest mountainside. Forgetting his own terror and discomfort, Dave watched in shocked disbelief, fearing that he was about to witness a horrible tragedy.

At the same time, his own airplane was bucking a combination of air turbulence from both the near miss and from the air currents rising from the dangerously close

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cliffs. Only after the flaps and gear were fully retracted was the captain able to attempt full control of the huge aircraft. Even with his own life in apparent danger, Dave remained riveted to the scene outside his window.

At the last possible moment, the pilot of the private jet wrestled it into a turn, climbing away from near collision with a towering granite wall. Dave's plane was now circling to begin a second approach as the small jet disappeared over the ridge at the south end of the valley. It was as close as Dave could ever remember to being in a crash—an experience he hoped he would never have to face again.

The Captain addressed the passengers over the speakers with an exaggerated western drawl, but with a noticeable quaver in his voice. "Folks, I apologize for the rough ride, folks. We had to hightail it out of the way of a jet jockey who came out of nowhere and ran a red light."

The off-handed manner of their pilot brought nervous chuckles to the shaken passengers and helped to relieve the tension. The attendants moved quickly down the aisle, restoring items that had been scattered about and giving assurance that everything was under control. Again, they retraced the flight path toward the ridge that lay between them and their destination.

As the sleek airliner circled slowly around the highest peak, Dave could see Andy's hometown of Stockbridge spread throughout the valley below and extending well up the slopes of the mountains. His cousin lived in one of

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these foothills at the edge of town. He spotted the airport, sprawled high atop a plateau. On one side it was bordered by a deep gorge carved out by years of mountain streams as they emptied into the whitewater river flown over moments ago.

Dave watched as his airplane's shadow kept pace on the ground, a dark shape that passed over houses and cars at more than two hundred miles per hour. To one side was the runway, laid out on a table top plateau that towered high above the valley. Passengers and cargo were shuttled to and from Stockbridge by winding road or by one of two cog-rail trains. The trains, a truly unique mode of transportation, rode up the steep incline from the station at the foot of the plateau to the terminal at the top.

The engine had gears meshed with a toothed rack between the rails so they could make the journey up or down in any kind of weather without slipping. The view during the trip was spectacular, making it an added treat for Dave every time he rode the train.

His attention was suddenly brought back to the present as the wheels touched down in an excellent landing. The thrust reversers on the jet engines channeled the roaring dragon's breath exhaust from the turbines backwards into a braking action. The flaps withdrew back into the wings as the aircraft turned onto the taxiway. Dave began collecting his reading materials—and his thoughts. A slight dip of the nose, and the graceful metal bird finally came to roost at the gate.

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It was with a definite sense of relief that everyone unfastened their belts and then began assembling their possessions for deplaning. Each passenger took time to shake hands with and to thank the level-headed pilot who had brought them safely through the terrifying experience.

Captain Riggs was standing outside the cockpit door with the pilot when he spotted Dave. “Captain, this young man was my seatmate until I joined you in the cockpit. Just Plain Dave, meet Howard Mercer, who, in spite of that phony accent he used over the intercom, is really from Brooklyn.”

Dave grinned and shook hands. “Captain. Actually, my name is simply Dave in spite of what your friend says. Thanks for a great and exciting ride.”

“You’re welcome, but I intended to save myself as well as everybody else, so I had plenty of motivation.”

“Whatever the reason, there’s a whole planeload of people who are glad you were at the wheel. Have a safe trip back, Captain Mercer. And you, too, Captain Riggs.” Dave turned and stepped through the door into the jetway.

“Good luck, *Simply* Dave,” he heard Captain Riggs call out.

Dave shook his head and smiled as he trudged up the incline into the terminal, his attention turned to the greeting that he knew would be awaiting him in a few moments.

Andy and his parents knew how much Dave loved to ride the incline, so they had parked at the lower station

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and had ridden the cog-rail up to the airport terminal. Andy was shifting from one foot to the other, occasionally jumping up and down to peer over the crowd at the gate as he tried to be the first to catch sight of his favorite relative.

“There he is!” he shouted so loudly that all eyes turned first to Andy, and then to the arriving passengers. It wasn’t hard to see who the young man was looking for. Dave flopped his carry-on bag onto the nearest seat and ran to throw his arms around all three Carvers in one big hug. They were happy to see him, but somewhat startled at the unusually enthusiastic greeting.

Martin recovered Dave’s carry-on bag. “Let’s get to the baggage carousel before it’s mobbed. You can identify your luggage, and I’ll load it on the cart we brought.”

Karen was full of questions. How is everyone back at Captain’s Cove? How are you doing in school? She also made him promise to tell all about the things that had happened during Andy’s last visit to Dave’s home. The happy chatter continued as they took the shuttle bus to the incline rail.

This time of year the view from the train was especially inspiring. A passenger was able to see most of Stockbridge by looking out first one side of the car and then the other. Andy pointed out the road across the valley that led up to his father’s office building. Then he located the intersecting road that rambled past the beautiful home the Carvers had built a number of years ago.

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“Wait ‘til you see the two ATVs dad bought for us to ride on the trails. We’ll be able to explore clear up to the snowline with them,” said Andy with obvious glee. The all terrain vehicles had four-wheel drives powered by 350cc engines. Each could carry a passenger and more than two hundred pounds of cargo. They were considered real workhorses in this rugged country.

“Fantastic! I’m really looking forward to spending these weeks with all of you. Dad and mom send their love, and said to thank you for taking me off their hands for a while,” said Dave with a chuckle. Then he added in a more sober tone, “After we get to your car I’ll tell you about the close call my plane had as we started our first approach. It came close to ending my vacation before it began.”

The others grew silent as they saw the serious look on Dave’s face. The remainder of the ride down the incline was subdued, with little conversation. The mood continued through the parking lot, into the car, and out the gate to the highway. It was then that Karen Carver turned to face her nephew and asked the question that all wanted answered. “I knew that something was wrong the minute your face lost that famous Carver smile. What happened on the plane, Dave?”

The harrowing details were related to the Carvers, who expressed their gratefulness that someone was watching over Dave and his fellow passengers. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, the relating of the airline pilot’s comments brought a chuckle to Karen and Andy.

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“What in the world *was* that crazy jet jockey thinking?” fumed Mr. Carver. “He obviously was not obeying the tower’s instructions. Our own company plane would never have crossed the path of another in the course of a landing or take off. I wonder where the flight was headed? I’ll check into that Monday. We can’t afford to permit that kind of irresponsible action to go unchallenged.”

“I’m afraid I was too occupied to note his tail number,” apologized Dave, “but I’m sure that someone must have seen it. He flew under us, so he must have been planning to cross directly over the ridge instead of making a normal departure turn around Devil’s Rock.”

Andy, who had been quiet during the telling of events, now added his comments. “You mentioned that he flew out of the valley after the near collision and headed south over the ridge. I’ll bet that was his flight plan all along. The local police have had problems with long-range airplanes flying drugs and contraband back and forth across New Mexico to the Mexican border.”

“That’s true enough, but I’d be surprised if this was a drug runner. I doubt if they’d risk traveling during daylight hours,” stated his father. “Nevertheless, we’ll get to the bottom of this. Promise you won’t let it spoil the rest of your vacation?”

“Promise,” said Dave with a nod. He sat back and enjoyed the scenic ride while listening to his younger cousin describe the plans made for their visit together. Near

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the turnoff to the Carver home was a combination filling station and grocery store where they stopped for milk, bread, and a copy of the local paper.

Andy asked to check out the weather section to see what the forecast for the next few days would bring. “Wow!” he exclaimed. “It’s going to be perfect, perfect, perfect! Mild temperatures with bright sunshine. The nights should be clear enough to use my 1200 power telescope and dad’s SkyTraker program.”

The popular SkyTraker software made it possible to find and identify hundreds of stars and planets. Even more amazing, the program enabled the computer to aim the motorized telescope to the exact position of any object in the sky.

The boys felt that was a great time to be alive, and were pumped up. There was so much to do, that it was hard to know where to begin.

As Andy closed the paper he noticed the headlines. “Oh, no!” he groaned.

Startled by his son’s sudden reaction, Martin asked, “What’s the ‘Oh, no’ about?”

“According to this lead story, there’s been *another* art robbery, Dad!”

“That has to be the seventh or eighth since they broke into my office,” said Mr. Carver through clenched teeth.

Dave sat up. “Wait a minute! Are you saying that somebody robbed you?”

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It was Karen who answered. “I should say so. Martin had two very valuable oil paintings and some rare Aztec pottery and statues taken. The insurance settled for the amount we paid for them, but they were irreplaceable.”

“What I can’t understand is how anyone thinks the stuff can be sold. Most of the robberies have involved art too recognizable to exhibit,” chimed in Andy.

“My dad has covered stories like this before,” Dave reminded him. “The people who buy stolen art are usually wealthy and are only interested in knowing they own something rare and valuable. They either put it in a private gallery for themselves and friends, or, worse still, they hide the artwork away where no one gets to enjoy it.”

“Maybe so,” rejoined his cousin, “but sooner or later a piece is bound to be traced to the thieves or to the buyers, and it’ll all unravel. That seems like an awfully big chance to take if a thief doesn’t plan to sell it.”

Since they all knew that there has never been a logical answer to that question, the topic was left up in the air. Still, Dave was already wondering whether or not he and Andy would be able to track down clues to help recover Uncle Martin’s valuable artwork. The thought of someone stealing from a member of his family left him with a feeling of anger, of being personally violated.

For now, however, the arrival of the foursome in front of the opening garage doors signaled that it was time to unload, unpack, and unwind. Everyone pitched in to carry Dave’s luggage to Andy’s spacious upstairs bedroom.

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The twin beds had been made up with fresh bedding, and an album of pictures from past visits was lying on the nightstand.

While the two boys busied themselves with putting Dave's clothes in the closet and dresser drawers, Andy's parents went downstairs. Karen was preparing one of her delicious dinners, with freshly baked pumpkin pie for desert. Martin was busy firing up the charcoal grill for steaks and ears of fresh corn.

Mrs. Carvers' cry of despair was followed by the sound of breaking glass. The commotion caught the boys in the midst of storing the empty luggage. They dropped the bags and vaulted for the stairs. Mr. Carver rushed back through the patio doors and met Dave and Andy as they headed for the dining room where Karen had gone to get a meat platter from the china closet. She was standing next to the broken crockery on the floor, but her attention was focused on the wall.

"Oh, not again!" raged Mr. Carver, staring at the empty wall over the sideboard. "This time they've gone too far!" He stormed out of the room to phone the police from the kitchen.

"What's going on?" Dave's confusion shown in his eyes.

"Dad had bought a large bas-relief that had been uncovered during an archaeological dig in the Middle East. It was several thousand years old and extremely fragile.

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Any mishandling could destroy it. Now it's gone. I doubt if any of our stuff will ever be recovered.”

Andy's shoulders shook with rage and Dave felt helpless to offer any comfort. All he knew was that his family had been senselessly violated by crooks without any conscience and his own anger was growing. One thing was becoming clear: spring vacation was going to be anything but dull.

CHAPTER II

Disappearing Headlights

Ten minutes later the police pulled into the driveway at the Carver home. Lieutenant Parker, the detective assigned to the series of art theft cases, arrived nearly an hour later. Martin Carver was fit to be tied, and made sure that Lieutenant Parker knew how he felt.

“First, they broke into my office, and must have known that I also kept valuable artwork in my home. Now even that has been violated by those thieving crooks. You’re supposed to be in charge of this investigation, yet you saunter in here an hour after my call. It’s no wonder this gang of criminals feels safe to operate in Stockbridge.”

Tim Parker was used to insults. They came with the job and had been a part of his life over the past ten years. He understood the frustration of people in turmoil after being victimized. He had learned long ago to handle their complaints with patience. “Most of the victims, including yourself, have been featured in newspaper articles that mentioned your collections. The gang does their homework.

“Let me say I know how you feel, Mr. Carver, but I can’t be at two places at once. This is the second art

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robbery today. I was on the other side of the valley investigating a break-in at the Miller Galleries when your call came in. We're doing all that we can. Apparently a well-organized gang is behind this. The final figures aren't in yet, but the gallery may have lost more than two million dollars in oil paintings, sculptures, and water colors."

Dave could not believe what he was hearing. What was going on? He interrupted the detective with a question. "Why are they picking on your town? Stockbridge isn't that large, and the roads in and out of here are pretty limited. If I were crooked enough to be in their line of work, I'd pick a place that had more to steal." He stopped, and then his face reddened. "Sorry, I didn't mean to offend anyone. I'm sure there's a lot of valuable things that I could find to take."

Andy chuckled. "You always climb all over me for painting myself in a corner. Now it's you that had best stop while you're behind." By this time, everyone was enjoying a good laugh at Dave's embarrassment—everyone, that is, but Lieutenant Parker.

"That's okay, young man. I know what you're trying to say. But Stockbridge is only one of a number of communities around here reporting similar cases. The authorities have all been in communication trying to establish a pattern, and they think that they've found one."

"What type of a pattern are you hoping to find?" Mr. Carver leaned forward anticipating the answer.

"I think it's fair to share some of the information that we've gleaned, but it goes no further than these walls. We

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have a map full of push pins to mark the locations of the thefts and have kept track of the types of art taken. Several facts are apparent. First, Stockbridge seems to be the hub of these communities. None are more than 200 miles away and they fan out in every direction from here. Second, none of the art taken appears to be contemporary, yet no single piece would be classified as masterpiece. Yes, it's all valuable, and, yes, it's all well-known and prized, but none of it in the class of a Leonardo da Vinci or Rembrandt."

All activity in the room had stopped as each person moved closer to hear about progress in the solving of the mysterious crime wave. The Lieutenant continued. "Many pre-Columbian Mayan and Aztec relics have been stolen." Mr. Carver solemnly nodded his head at the memory of his own missing collection.

"Sir," interrupted a police officer. "We've found something that appears to be another stain similar to the one at the Miller Galleries." He pointed across the dining room at a spot on the carpet near the sideboard.

Lieutenant Parker crossed quickly to the small dark red splotch and knelt with his nose almost against the carpet. "You're right! It's the same and I wouldn't be surprised to find there are more of them at the places we've already investigated. This could definitely be another tie-in between the museum and this residence theft. Send a lab man to backtrack and search for samples. We'll need a few carpet fibers and a swab from each one they find."

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Karen, who had kept silent until now, asked, “What do you think those stains could be, and how would they tie in to these horrible crimes?”

“We don’t know for sure yet, Mrs. Carver, but I personally believe that it might be a type of hydraulic fluid. If so, the thieves could be holed up somewhere near machinery and might have stepped in a puddle of it. That would explain their tracking it through the places they ransacked today.”

“Wow! That could be an important clue if you can pin down the type and manufacturer of that fluid,” ventured Dave.

“I wish it were only that easy, son,” lamented the detective. “It may turn out to be a common variety. If so, there are hundreds of businesses in the surrounding area that use machinery operated by hydraulics. Every corner garage has car lifts, for instance.”

“Still that’s a place to start,” replied Mr. Carver. “You are welcome to use my computer and software systems to manage any clues that are uncovered. My son, Andy, is quite good at processing data and would be happy to help out.”

One of the officers standing nearby moved closer and spoke quietly to Lieutenant Parker. “He’s right, sir. Young Carver and his cousin have helped us in bring several other puzzling cases to a close. They’ve both received awards from the Mayor for their work.”

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Parker turned slowly and glared at the officer. “You think I’ve spent these last few years with my head in a bucket? I know all about their amateur exploits and I say, NO! These art thieves are clever, and would be, no doubt, also dangerous if they thought someone was closing in on them. I won’t have citizens, especially young ones, getting involved in police business.”

“Excuse me, Lieutenant Parker,” said Andy in a huff. “Those crooks have broken into my dad’s office and into our home. That also makes it our business, no offense meant. You don’t have to advertise that any of us are helping. We can do it here at home and modem the results to your office with a password. Only you need to know what we find.”

The detective stared out the window. His men were taking plaster casts of tire tracks found near the back door. He chewed on his lower lip as he absentmindedly polished his glasses on his tie. Finally, he turned. “Okay, but I set the rules and you follow them or you’re out of it, understand?”

“You’ve got a deal,” exclaimed the cousins in unison. Andy looked at Dave in surprise.

“Come-on!” argued Dave at his cousin’s reaction. “I’m just as involved as you are. We’re all family. Whatever someone does to you, they do to me. Besides, I’m not going to just sit around on my vacation twiddling my thumbs while you type away. This would be a good time for you to teach me something about computers.”

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Mrs. Carver walked over and put her arm protectively around her nephew's waist. "Dave's right. He has a good head on his shoulders and should be a big help, I would think."

"I appreciate the offer, but I doubt you boys can do much good," said Lieutenant Parker, closing his notebook. "Nevertheless, you deserve the chance to help get back Mr. Carver's art. I'll share what information I can for a start, but you'll have to keep it confidential. Send whatever you find to my attention only. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" said Andy as Dave nodded.

With that arrangement made, the lieutenant and other members of his investigating team began to pack up and filter out to their cars. Minutes later, the Carvers were back in the dining room staring morosely at the bare wall. Martin was the first to speak. "Well, there's nothing we can do right now, so let's get the grill going and have ourselves a fabulous steak dinner."

He didn't expect, nor did he get, any argument.

Even though it was the beginning of spring, the evening air was still quite cool. Nevertheless, the four moved out on the back deck after dinner and enjoyed hot chocolate while they talked about the events of the day. They also recalled the many good times that Andy and Dave had enjoyed together in the past. Then the discussion turned to the packed schedule of activities that Andy had planned for the next week.

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It was Mrs. Carver who pointed out a small patch of white near the corner of the house. The Tiki torches that served the dual purpose of providing light and discouraging flying insects threw a soft shimmering glow across the lawn, reflecting off anything shiny or light in color. Andy walked out to see what the unknown object might be. The others saw him stoop, pick something up, turn it in his hands, and then head back to the deck.

“Looks like part of a broken plaster cast of the tire tracks,” he announced. “They probably poured a new one and left this one behind.”

“You know, that’s a tool we should learn to use,” declared Dave. “We might even start a collection to help us remember some of our adventures. May I see it?”

Andy placed the cast in Dave’s hand. They both moved closer to the torch to more carefully examine the pattern. Several obvious features were apparent. First, the size of the tread revealed the vehicle to have been a van, pickup truck, or a large car. Second, the tire was fairly new, given that the tread was still quite deep and the edges of the pattern were sharp.

The most noticeable thing, however, was the half-moon shaped gouge that ran across one-third of the tread. Like a fingerprint, the mark would make that particular tire stand out among many.

Giving the cast back to Andy to store in a safe place, Dave regained his seat in one of the chaise lounges, then leaned back to drink in the incomparable view of the

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heavens. He was enjoying the clear mountain air. The cloudless night revealed more stars than Dave ever imagined could be seen with the naked eye. Free from the pollution found at lower elevations, nothing in the atmosphere reflected and diffused the far-away city lights in the valley below. The deep contrast between the pure blackness of the sky and the brilliance of the zillions of stars in millions of galaxies was breathtaking.

Andy suddenly jumped to his feet. “We’re wasting valuable time! I told you about dad’s SkyTraker program. This would be a perfect night to show you how it works.”

Dave was halfway through the sliding doors when he turned to Mr. and Mrs. Carver. “Thanks for the great meal and for letting me spend my vacation here. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“We know you do, dear, and Martin and I are happy to have you here with Andy. We always look forward to your visits,” said Mrs. Carver. Like Dave’s mother, Katie, she felt that both boys were her sons. There was no more time to express her feelings, however, for the boys could already be heard thundering up the stairs to Andy’s room.

While Dave moved the powerful telescope to the large window facing away from the valley, Andy booted up the computer and accessed his software. He motioned for his cousin to join him at the monitor and began to explain how the program worked.

“First we call up this map of the world,” he explained, “and use the mouse to point the flashing arrow. . . .”

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“The cursor,” interrupted Dave.

“Right. Sorry, I didn’t mean to get too basic. I forget that you work with your dad’s computer, too. Anyway, after you click on the approximate area from where you are viewing the sky, the display changes to a closer view of the globe. Then you click again and narrow your location down even more. You keep clicking and zooming until you pin down the coordinates of where you are as close as possible. Of course, if you already know your longitude and latitude, then you enter them to view exactly how the constellations appeared in whatever section of the sky you’ve selected.”

Dave nodded his understanding. “So you’re saying that the screen will show a display that appears the same as if I were looking up the night sky from here?”

“Exactly. For instance, check outside my window and tell me where the brightest star is located.”

His cousin glanced in each visible direction, then pointed to a spot about fifteen degrees above the horizon. “There! It looks bright enough to be a planet. What is it?”

Andy checked his computer time and date to make sure it was accurate. He then scrolled the on-screen view of the sky until it showed the northeast quadrant which was the direction that his window faced. A large body was pictured just above the artificial horizon on the monitor. He clicked on it with the mouse.

Triumphantly, he pointed to the text that scrolled across the bottom of the screen. “It’s Venus. And here’s a summary of what we know about that planet.”

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Dave was impressed. “I’ll bet that would work in reverse order,” he said.

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, what if I entered the local time, date, compass direction, and degrees above the horizon of a known planet or star? Once I matched that section of the sky with the display on the monitor, then wouldn’t the longitude and latitude automatically appear to tell me where I was standing at that time?”

“You’re right. As a matter of fact, the basic principle of navigating by using a sextant is much like that. The computer makes it a lot easier, and, in most cases, more accurate. We’ll have a chance to study lots of stars while you’re here. I also copied the program on disk for you to load in your own computer when you get home. Here, it’s in this plastic case so it won’t get dirty or wet.” Dave took the case and slipped it into his inside jacket pocket so he wouldn’t forget it.

Andy stood up from his keyboard. “Now, I want to show you how powerful my telescope is. Let’s move it to the other side of the room.”

After setting it up at the southwest window, Dave aimed down toward the valley and discovered that he could read license plates on cars in downtown Stockbridge—over six miles away! He had tilted the instrument up to watch a night flight take off from the airport when Andy touched his shoulder.

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“Look past the runway over toward the mountain. Over to the right—there, near the tower. See those headlights bumping up and down?”

“What about them?” asked Dave, following the erratic vehicle through the viewfinder.

“I don’t know of any road over there, and from the crazy gyrations of those lights, the driver must not be trying to find one. Unless I’m badly mistaken, he’s headed right toward Killigan’s Gorge. That’s a straight drop of at least a hundred feet. I hope whoever is driving knows that!”

The boys watched, transfixed, as the bouncing light beams edged closer and closer to the gorge that was hidden in darkness. Suddenly, the vehicle stopped, paused for a few moments, proceeded slowly and smoothly straight ahead ...then disappeared!

“Oh, no!” exclaimed Andy. “They must have gone over the edge.”

“I don’t think so. If they had, the lights would have dipped down, but they didn’t. It’s probably some couple parked up there to be alone. I’ll bet they’ll be coming back in an hour or two.”

Andy was worried. “I still think we should report it. At least someone can check it out.” So saying, he picked up the phone and made the call. He described the erratic behavior of a car or truck near the gorge and said he was concerned about the welfare of the driver. Asked how he could be so sure of the facts, when he lived on the opposite

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side of the valley, Andy explained how he had spotted the headlights with his telescope.

The authorities promised to send a helicopter with a spotlight over the area and thanked him for his report. He was also reminded that pointing a high-powered telescope toward the city could make them liable for an invasion of privacy. Properly reprimanded, Andy promised to keep that in mind, then hung up the phone.

“Tomorrow, we can take the ATVs up there and make sure everything’s okay,” Andy told Dave after describing his conversation with the police.

“Good idea. For right now, I’ve had enough adventure for two days. Let’s turn in and get some sleep.”

After the lights went out, Dave lay awake for a long while listening to his younger cousin softly snoring. He started at the sound of a “red-eye” flight taking off, so named because the passengers at that hour were usually bleary-eyed from lack of sleep. In the quiet, the sound of the jet seemed close, and the noise from powerful engines made him relive the moments of terror when his own flight narrowly escaped a deadly collision. Who had been at the controls of that jet? Why was he operating outside the control of the tower? As his eyes began to close at last, Dave seemed to hear the airline pilot say in his shaky drawl, “*That jet jockey came out of nowhere...*”

CHAPTER III

Tracks to Nowhere

The staccato racket of a powerful two-stroke engine jolted Dave out of his deep sleep. He sat up and stared at Andy's bed to discover it was not only empty, but neatly made up. Swinging his feet over the side of his own bed, Dave scooted out from between warm soft blankets, then padded his way to the window. He focused sleepy eyes on the two-story barn that sat more than a hundred yards away at the back of the Carver lawn. Two bright red four-wheeler ATVs sat in front of the double doors. Andy was crouched beside one of them, pumping the throttle while adjusting the carburetor.

Not wanting to miss out on anything, yet always the ideal guest, Dave made up his bed, grabbed his clothes and shoes, and headed for the bathroom. Moments later he emerged—shoelaces flapping, shirttail half-in and half-out, and with his pajamas still draped around his neck, he bumbled down the stairs, tying, tucking, and straightening his clothes. Martin Carver was sitting at the kitchen counter when Dave burst through the door.

“Morning, Dave. I figured you'd be heading this way in a hurry when you heard Andy out there. I told him to let

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you sleep, but you boys are so afraid of wasting a minute of time together. Incidentally, I got a call from the dispatcher at the police department who gave me a message to pass on to Andy. Said to tell him that they didn't spot anything unusual at the gorge. What was that all about?"

"Nothing that important, Uncle Martin. Andy and I thought we saw a car in trouble at Killigan's gorge and reported it to the police. They must have sent a helicopter to check it out. Guess it was a false alarm."

"You did well to let them know. The police would rather follow up on false lead than take the chance that someone could be in trouble. Oh, one more thing. Are you boys planning to sleep out in the barn tonight?"

"What...? No! Why do you ask?"

"I was wondering what the pajamas around your neck were for, that's all," Andy's father said with a chuckle.

Dave flushed and turned back toward the stairs.

"Thought I'd save you from a worse embarrassment, if you know what I mean. Leave them with me and I'll take them on my way ups to shave. And tell Andy I said to hurry back here to the house so you two can have breakfast before heading out to wherever you're planning to go."

"Yessir," said Dave, handing his pajamas to his uncle. "And thanks for reminding me about these before Andy saw them."

They both laughed, and Dave was out the door.

"Yo, Andy!" Dave waved his arms, then took off at a dead run to the barn.

THE PHANTOM BRIDGE

“Yo back at you! Come on down—the red one’s yours,” Andy yelled as he pointed at the identically colored ATV next to the one he was adjusting.

“Cute, kid. How would you like one of my famous Dutch rubs on that fancy hairdo of yours?”

Andy’s reply was lost as the younger cousin straddled his bike, popped the clutch, and roared toward the house. Seconds later, Dave’s four-wheeler sputtered; then added its throaty voice to the racket. He pulled up next to Andy. They switched off the ignitions, waited until their engines wound down and then ran for the deck.

“Hey, we’ve even got matching helmets. And get this—they’re equipped with two-way radios so we can keep in touch. Is this great—or what!”

That called for a high-five on the back deck before they burst inside where Mrs. Carver was already cooking up bacon and eggs. The sweet smell of corn bread wafted from the oven. Breakfast was much like last night’s meal in that conversation, between mouthfuls, was a continuation of news, stories, and good-natured ribbing.

“Think there’s any chance that we’ll hear some news about the robberies, today?” Dave addressed the question to his uncle.

“I rather doubt it. These thefts have been going on for some time. Maybe you boys will get the information on the oil stains, though.”

Karen Carver interrupted. “Before you two start rip-roaring up into the mountains, and before you get involved

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in chopping away at that database, I'll remind you that it's your turn to take care of the breakfast dishes."

Andy sighed. "You mean hacking, not chopping the database, and Dave had already planned to take care of the dishes while I check out the ATVs." He glanced out the corner of his eye to watch his cousin's reaction to being volunteered. Dave's threatening glare was enough to set his aunt and uncle laughing. "Just kidding, ol' buddy," said Andy, feigning fright. "You clear off the table and I'll load the dishwasher."

After the kitchen was in order, Karen helped them to pack their lunches. The morning air was still cool, so the cousins slipped into their windbreaker jackets before collecting the odds and ends needed for adventuring. They assembled a coil of rope, binoculars, a flashlight, camera, compass, snow shoes, a broom, and a map of the mountain trails.

Promising to be home in plenty of time for supper, they scurried out through the patio doors. Andy carefully packed everything on the luggage racks and into the saddle bags strapped to each side of their sleek four-wheelers.

"Let's head up to Killigan's Gorge to check out where the headlights disappeared last night," suggested Andy, mashing his starter button.

Dave tightened the chinstrap on his helmet and nodded. Andy leaned over and showed him how to switch on the radio.

"Hear me, Dave?"

THE PHANTOM BRIDGE

“Loud and clear.”

Andy shook his head and pointed to the press-to-talk switch near the clutch. Touching his own switch, he instructed, “Press the button with your thumb when you want to talk.”

Dave did as he was told. “Man, that really is loud! How do you turn it down?”

Andy showed him the volume control near the headset jack, then pointed to a path that disappeared into the woods near the barn. “Follow me. I’ve been through here a dozen times and know all the bumps and turns. Keep it under eighty and we’ll be fine.”

Try as he might, it was difficult for Dave to keep up with his cousin. This type of vehicle was still unfamiliar to him, although he had owned and ridden a number of motorcycles over the years. It wasn’t long, however, before he felt comfortable with the motion and controls of the powerful ATV. Like hares and hounds, they were off and running cross country to the foot of the airport plateau.

“There’s a trail that leads up to the back of the airport. If you follow me we can avoid the roads and the traffic.”

It took nearly twenty minutes to reach the top of the flattop mountain. Both boys were more than ready to hop off the bikes and rest aching bones and muscles.

“Looks like more fun than it is,” groaned Dave, rubbing his tender backside. “The people who make all those great commercials about four-wheelin’ either don’t

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do the actual stunt riding or they've become equally numb at both ends."

They laughed and sat on the ground, their backs against a fallen tree, as they watched as one airplane after another launched from the runway a half-mile away. Andy pulled the tab on a cold drink and they took turns drawing long swallows from the can. Dave was tilting back his head for a second gulp when his eyes widened. He gripped Andy's arm.

"That's the jet—Look! I know it's the same Lear jet that nearly crashed into my plane yesterday!"

"How can you be sure?"

"By the make and the color—blue with white trim—and by the wing-tip fuel tanks. Hand me a pair of binoculars," he said, reaching back his hand while keeping his eye on the jet.

Andy ran to his ATV and wrestled with the straps on his pack, but by the time he succeeded in freeing the field glasses, the mysterious plane had disappeared over the south ridge once again. Dave was clearly disappointed, but fished a receipt from his sweater pocket and a ball-point from his camera case. He sketched the pattern of the jet's paint job. Andy watched over his shoulder and nodded approval.

"Maybe someone will recognize the plane from this sketch," Dave said as he folded the paper and stuffed it in his shirt pocket. "Okay, let's head up to the gorge and see about your ghostly headlight beams."

THE PHANTOM BRIDGE

Although no finished road led to the spot where the boys had sighted the mystery vehicle the night before, there was an old horse and buggy trail that wandered parallel to the edge of Killigan's Gorge. Careful not to disturb any tracks, the boys idled their ATVs along the grass bordering the dusty path. There were several shallow ruts, but no clear tread pattern could be defined.

"That's strange," said Andy over his helmet radio. "Whoever was driving had to have come this way. You can see those funny squiggly lines along here, but nothing that resembles tire treads. Might be that the tracks were blurred by rain—or maybe by dragging a bush or carpet behind...."

Dave accelerated away before Andy could finish and stopped near something shiny beside the tracks. Bending down from the seat of his four-wheeler, he picked up the object and was examining it as his cousin pulled alongside.

"What is it?" Andy asked.

"Looks like one of those cheap replacement gas caps. You know, the chrome 'fits all' type for people who leave their old one at the gas pump. It's not rusty or even dirty so I doubt if it's been here long. Wonder if it could've jolted off your vanishing car or truck?"

"I think you're right," replied Andy from the spot where he was kneeling. "Here's a mark in the dirt where the cap first hit, and then rolled over to where you found it. About three nights ago we had a pretty hard rain that would have washed out any traces. That means the gas cap had to

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have been dropped last night or the night before. The question is...where did its owner go from here?"

Tucking the cap into his jacket pocket, Dave glanced around, then turned back to Andy. "I vote we search the surrounding area on foot and see if we can pick up any clues to the disappearance. We might even find the vehicle itself if the police missed seeing it from the chopper."

Leaving their ATVs and their helmets, they began walking slowly down the road. The sun's angle was low enough to reveal a light coating of new dust on the grass that curved off to the right toward the edge of the gorge. Dave shaded his eyes with his hand as he studied the only path that the vehicle could have taken, given the large rocks and bushes that dotted the landscape.

Realizing that they might have to go some distance, they climbed aboard their ATVs and slowly inched toward the gorge, discovering broken twigs, rocks that had been scattered, and depressions in the softer ground along the way. Eventually, the signs led them directly to the edge. They dismounted and carefully approached the dizzying drop. Lying prone, on their stomachs, they peered over the edge. Eighty feet below a wide stream flowed through the gorge. Old weathered timbers of an ancient bridge stuck out of the water along one side.

"That's been there a long time," observed Dave as he pointed out the brush and debris tangled in the ruined structure. "If someone had driven off the edge, we would see wreckage scattered all over that old bridge down there."

THE PHANTOM BRIDGE

“Maybe so, but there are no marks indicating that anyone turned around and went back. As a matter of fact, it appears that the grass is flattened right to the edge. The guy must have been driving Chitty Chitty Bang Bang and flown off the cliff.” Dave nodded thoughtfully at the reference to Ian Fleming’s fictitious car that also functioned as a plane or a boat.

Dave collected his binoculars and studied the river-cut chasm that made up the gorge. It was at least forty feet wide at this point. Directly opposite was a granite cliff that rose up yet another eighty feet before leveling off onto a yet higher plateau. Aside from a ledge that protruded a few feet from the sheer wall and several large clumps of bushes, there was nothing to see.

“This makes no sense at all,” Dave murmured.

“What doesn’t?”

“If that old bridge had fallen straight down from here, it would have to have gone right across to the face of that cliff, wouldn’t it? But I don’t see anything over there—no tunnel, no road...nothing. Who would have built a bridge to nowhere?”

Andy glanced back down to the hand-hewn timbers below. “It’s made out of wood. Maybe it fell upstream and drifted down this way.”

Dave shook his head. “It would have been in a lot more pieces if it had smashed its way through all the turns and rapids.”

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“Not necessarily,” argued Andy. “It could’ve been carried away in a flood a long time ago, then floated downstream in one piece before getting stuck here when the water went down.”

Dave conceded that was a possibility. He walked back to replace the field glasses in his pack, then glanced at his watch. “We better put this mystery to rest for right now. If we don’t get on with our exploring before it gets much later, we’ll run out of time. After all, we did promise to be back for dinner.”

Andy unfolded his map. He pointed to a bridge drawn across the same stream. “This bridge is down there in the valley and is the only way across the river, aside from the two highway bridges. To get there we have to retrace our path from the airport, and then head upstream along this trail for about three miles. After crossing the bridge, we’ll head southwest to a trail across one of the public grazing lands. That’ll take us to the high meadow and the edge of the snow belt.”

Helmets in place, radios on, and engines thundering, they spun around and bounced their way back to the dirt road. Behind them across the abyss, concealed amid the artificial leaves of the bushes “growing” on the ledge, a tiny video camera turned on silent gears, following their retreat from Killigan’s gorge.

Andy and Dave's vacation turns deadly as they trace stolen artwork, are kidnapped, shanghaied aboard a tramp steamer, and face being buried alive in an abandoned gold mine. Their biggest shock is discovering the secret of the Phantom Bridge.

The Phantom Bridge

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