



#102

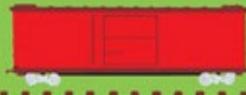
# The Boxcar Children®



## The Ghost of the Chattering Bones

CREATED BY GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER





#102

# The Boxcar Children®



## The Ghost of the Chattering Bones

CREATED BY GERTRUDE CHANDLER WARNER



# **The Ghost of the Chattering Bones**

**Created by Gertrude Chandler Warner**

**Illustrated by Robert Papp**

**ALBERT WHITMAN & Company, Chicago**

# Contents

## CHAPTER

[Chapter 1 The Haunted Bridge](#)

[Chapter 2 A Strange Verse](#)

[Chapter 3 The Watery Ghost!](#)

[Chapter 4 Jon's Blunder](#)

[Chapter 5 The Bones Chatter Again](#)

[Chapter 6 Eton's Loop](#)

[Chapter 7 Going ... Going ... Gone!](#)

[Chapter 8 What's Wrong with This Picture?](#)

[Chapter 9 Thief!](#)

[Chapter 10 The Secret Hiding Place](#)

[About the Author](#)

## CHAPTER 1

# *The Haunted Bridge*

“What kind of mystery is it, Mrs. McGregor?” asked six-year-old Benny. The youngest Alden couldn’t keep still. He was bouncing up and down with excitement in the backseat of the family van.

Mrs. McGregor, who was sitting up front beside Grandfather Alden, looked over her shoulder and smiled. “It’s Norah’s story to tell, Benny,” she said. “Not mine.”

Henry gave his little brother a playful nudge. “Hold your horses, Benny,” he said. “It won’t be long before we’re at Eton Place.” At fourteen, Henry was the oldest of the Aldens.

“I guess I can hold my horses a little bit longer,” said Benny. He didn’t like to wait.

Norah Eton, a good friend of the Aldens’ housekeeper, had invited Mrs. McGregor and the four Alden children to come for a visit in the country. There was an old mystery that needed solving, and Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny were eager to hear all about it. There was nothing the Aldens liked better than a mystery. And together they’d managed to solve quite a few.

Twelve-year-old Jessie looked up from the map she was studying. “We make a left at the next road, Grandfather,” she told him. Jessie was the best map reader in the family. She always knew how to get where they were going.

“Oh, now I remember!” Mrs. McGregor nodded. “It’s been so long since I’ve been out this way, my memory’s a bit foggy.”

“How long has it been, Mrs. McGregor?” Grandfather Alden asked, as they turned off the highway onto a gravel road full of twists and turns.

“Let me see, now ... Norah’s great-niece, Pam, was just a toddler the last time I saw her,” said Mrs. McGregor. She thought for a moment “Now she would be about Violet’s age.”

At the mention of her name, ten-year-old Violet turned away from the window. “Will Pam be staying with her great-aunt Norah all summer?” she wanted to know.

“Oh, I imagine so,” Mrs. McGregor answered. “She usually does. You see, her parents own an antique store in the city. They spend their summers traveling all over the country hunting for treasures.”

Benny's eyebrows shot up. "Treasures?"

"Interesting old things to sell in their store," explained Mrs. McGregor. "They stop at every flea market and swap meet they can find."

That sounded like fun to Benny. "Why doesn't Pam go along?"

"Travel can be tiring," put in Grandfather, who often went away on business.

"Yes, indeed," agreed Mrs. McGregor.

"I imagine Pam would much rather spend her summers with her great-aunt Norah."

"That makes sense," said Henry.

Mrs. McGregor went on, "When Norah and I were young, we loved exploring Eton Place—all the fields and the streams and the woods. The property's been in the Eton family for a long time. As a matter of fact," she added, "Norah's putting together a history of the Eton family. She even hired a college student to help with the research."

"That must be interesting," said Jessie. "I'd like to put together a history of the Alden family sometime."

Benny tapped on his sister's shoulder to get her attention. "Don't forget to mention Watch, Jessie," he reminded her. Watch was the family dog.

"Oh, Benny!" Jessie laughed. "I'd never forget Watch."

"How about our boxcar?" asked Benny.

"I'd never forget our boxcar, either," Jessie told her little brother. "Our old home is an important part of our family history."

After their parents died, Jessie, Henry, Benny, and Violet had run away. They found an old boxcar in the woods and stayed there for a while. Then James Alden found his grandchildren and brought them to live with him in his big white house in Greenfield. He even gave the boxcar a special place in the backyard. The children often used their former home as a clubhouse.

"I'm glad I brought my camera along," said Violet. "We can take pictures of our trip to go in our family history."

James Alden smiled into the rear view mirror. "Photos are a great way to keep a record of the times."

"I wonder what they did in the olden days," Jessie said thoughtfully, "before cameras were invented."

"They didn't have cameras back then?" Benny sounded surprised.

Violet shook her head. "Not until the 1820s." Violet knew a lot about

photography. It was one of her hobbies.

“You’re becoming a real expert, Violet,” said Henry.

“Thanks, Henry.” Violet beamed. “But I still have a lot to learn.”

Grandfather spotted a small gas station. He pulled up close to the gas pumps. A woman with gray streaks in her dark hair came over to the car.

“Fill ’er up?” the woman asked with a friendly smile. She was wearing blue overalls with the name DARLENE embroidered across the front.

Grandfather nodded. “You read my mind.”

While Darlene filled the tank, the children hopped out of the car. They set to work washing the windows and the headlights.

“You folks on vacation?” Darlene asked them.

Jessie nodded. “We’re spending a week in the country.”

“Oh?”

“At Eton Place,” Benny added.

As Darlene replaced the cap on the gas tank, she lowered her voice. “A word of advice,” she said. “Don’t go fishing from the old stone bridge. Some say it’s haunted.” Her eyes twinkled but her voice was serious.

The children were so surprised by Darlene’s word that they were speechless. Before they had a chance to ask any questions, Grandfather had paid the bill and they were on their way again.

“Eton Place sounds a little ... spooky,” Benny said as they drove along.

“You don’t believe there’s really a ghost, do you?” Henry asked in his sensible way.

“Um, no,” Benny said. But he didn’t sound too sure.

Violet added, “Darlene was just teasing.”

“I imagine she was talking about the ghost of the Chattering Bones,” put in Mrs. McGregor.

The children all looked at their housekeeper in surprise. “The ghost of the what?” said Benny, his eyes round. “Did you say—”

“Oh, look!” Mrs. McGregor broke in, as the car rounded a curve. “There’s the mailbox!”

Benny craned his neck. “Where?” he asked. He had been thinking about chattering bones. They were a scary thought.

Mrs. McGregor pointed to the side of the road. Sure enough, up ahead was a mailbox set atop a post. The shiny gold lettering on the side of the mailbox read:

## ETON PLACE.

Grandfather turned the station wagon into a long driveway that wound through the trees. They slowed to a stop when they came to a big plum-colored house with a large porch. On one side was an orchard. On the other, a flower garden.

“Oh, a purple house!” Violet cried with delight as she scooted sideways out of the wide backseat. Purple was Violet’s favorite color. She almost always wore something purple or violet.

“Yes, the house has always been plum-colored,” said Mrs. McGregor as Henry opened the car door for her. “Thanks to Meg Plum.”

As Grandfather lifted the suitcases out of the car, Jessie noticed a tall, silver-haired woman in a flowery-blue sundress standing near the orchard. She was talking to a man in a business suit. As if feeling Jessie’s eyes on her, the woman suddenly looked over.

“Margaret!” The tall woman rushed towards Mrs. McGregor. “How wonderful to see you!”

“It’s been too long,” said Mrs. McGregor, returning her friend’s warm hug.

“And this fine-looking group must be the Alden family!” Norah Eton said.

Mrs. McGregor proudly introduced everyone. “Welcome to Eton Place!” Norah said, a smile spreading across her face. “I can’t wait for you to meet my niece. I know she’ll enjoy your company.”

“We’re looking forward to meeting Pam,” said Jessie, speaking for them all.

“Guess what, Mrs. Eton?” Benny put in. He was still thinking about the mystery.

“What, Benny?”

“We’re pretty good at tracking down clues,” he told her proudly.

“So I’ve heard,” said Norah. “I’ll tell you all about the old mystery after dinner, Benny. But you have to promise me one thing.”

“All right,” said Benny. “What is it?”

“You must call me Norah.”

“Okay, Norah,” agreed Benny. “It’s a deal!”

Just then, a voice boomed out. “I’m Spence Morton.” The man in the business suit walked toward the group and put out his hand for Grandfather to shake. “I hope you’re not here about the bridge, too,” he said. “I made a fair offer, but I’ll go higher if necessary.”

Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny looked at each other in bewilderment. Was this the same bridge Darlene had mentioned?

Spence Morton went on, “I was passing through town and happened to pick up a local paper.” He pulled a newspaper out from under his arm and thumped a finger under a picture of an old stone bridge. “This is exactly what I’ve been looking for!” he told them, his eyes glittering behind gold-rimmed glasses. “My wife takes great pride in her English garden,” he added, “and this charming bridge will be perfect for the stream that runs through it.”

“That bridge is not for sale,” Norah stated icily. “As I said before, you’re wasting your time.”

The man did not look pleased to hear this. “Everything has a price tag,” he insisted.

“We’ll see about that.” Norah’s mouth was set in a thin, hard line.

“Mark my words,” said Spence Morton, “I’ll do whatever it takes to get what I want.” With that, he turned and walked away.

Norah sighed. “Every time I turn around lately, there’s Spence Morton. Yesterday I found him measuring my bridge! Can you believe it?”

Mrs. McGregor shook her head. “The nerve!”

“He isn’t a bad person, but ...” Norah stopped and let out a long sigh.

“But,” finished Grandfather, “he just won’t take no for an answer.”

Norah nodded slowly. “I wish now I’d never let the newspaper do that write-up on my bridge.” Then, changing the subject, she added, “Will you join us for a late dinner, James? There’s plenty to go around.”

“Thanks, Norah,” he said, “but the sun’s already going down, and I still have some business to take care of.”

Grandfather gave a cheery honk as he drove away. Everyone waved, then headed toward the plum-colored house.

Mrs. McGregor looked around as they stepped inside. She smiled at Norah. “I see you’ve made some changes,” she said.

“Yes, I finally got around to fixing the house up a bit,” said Norah. As she led the way to the stairs, she shook her head. “But what a mess! Walls torn down ... floorboards pulled up. This place was a real disaster area for a while.”

Upstairs, a room with plum-patterned wallpaper was waiting for Mrs. McGregor, another with fan-shaped windows for Violet and Jessie. A third bedroom with twin beds and fringed blue bedspreads was just right for Henry and Benny.

“We’ve been keeping dinner warm for you,” Norah told them. “Anybody hungry?”

Benny waved his hand in the air. "I am! I am!" he cried, to no one's surprise. The youngest Alden was always hungry.

Norah laughed. "Well, come on down as soon as you've settled in."

It didn't take the Aldens long to unpack. They were waiting for Violet to finish brushing her hair when Benny cried, "Look!" He was peering through one of the fan-shaped windows.

Jessie could tell by her little brother's face that something had startled him. "What's going on, Benny?" she asked, stepping up beside him.

"Look down there!" Benny said, his eyes wide.

"What is it?" Henry hurried over, with Violet close behind.

"It's a bridge!" declared Benny.

The Aldens huddled around, straining to see out into the gathering darkness. Sure enough, the shadowy outline of a curved stone bridge could be seen in a far corner of the backyard.

"There must be a creek behind the house," noted Henry.

Violet said, "I can't be sure, but I think that's the bridge that was in the newspaper."



“Got to be,” said Jessie. “That’s the one Spence Morton wants to buy. I’m sure of it.”

Benny nodded. “I bet it’s the haunted bridge Darlene was talking about. We’re not supposed to go fishing from it, remember?”

“Of course we can go fishing from it, Benny,” Henry insisted. “The bridge isn’t haunted.”

“No one goes fishing from that bridge,” said a voice behind them. “No one does. Ever.”

## CHAPTER 2

### *A Strange Verse*

Henry, Jessie, Violet, and Benny turned around quickly in surprise. A young girl about Violet's age was standing at the opened door, watching them. She was wearing jeans and a green T-shirt. Her blond curls were held back from her face with a beaded headband.

"You must be Pam," Jessie said with a friendly smile.

"That's right. And you must be the Aldens."

"Yes. I'm Jessie, and this is Henry, Benny, and Violet." Jessie motioned to her brothers and sister in turn.

"I don't get it," said Henry. "Why doesn't anyone go fishing from—"

Before Henry could finish his thought, Pam wheeled around and walked off.

The Aldens looked at one another in confusion. "Pam sure seemed in a hurry to get away," Violet said with a puzzled frown.

"I guess she didn't want to talk about the bridge," said Jessie. "I wonder why."

Henry shrugged. "Beats me."

"I bet it *is* haunted," Benny said in a hushed voice. "I just bet!"

"Help yourself to more meatballs, Benny," Norah urged at dinner.

The youngest Alden didn't need to be coaxed. "Thanks," he said, eagerly adding a few more to his plate of spaghetti.

Mrs. McGregor turned to Norah's great-niece. "You've really grown since I saw you last, Pam," she said with a warm smile.

"Time sure flies, doesn't it?" Norah took the basket of garlic bread that Violet handed her. "Pam was only a toddler when she spent her first summer with me." Norah reached out and gave her niece an affectionate pat on the arm.

Violet looked over at Pam. "You must miss your parents."

Pam's face turned red and she lowered her eyes.

"We miss Grandfather whenever he goes away on business," Benny chimed in as he wiped tomato sauce from his chin.

Pam looked glumly at her plate. "Who needs parents around all the time?"

The Aldens were surprised by her words, but they didn't say anything.

Just then, a young woman in a yellow halter top and matching shorts came into the room. She was very tall with lots of curly brown hair. “Sorry I’m late, Norah,” she said, slipping into an empty chair beside Jessie. “I lose all track of time when I’m working.”

“Not to worry,” Norah said with a cheery smile. “Everything’s still piping hot.” Then she introduced Mrs. McGregor and the Aldens to Annette Tanning. “Annette’s helping me research the Eton family. She’s from out-of-state, so she’ll be staying here until school starts again in the fall.”

“You’re in college, Annette?” Jessie asked, passing the salad along.

“Yes, I’m studying history.” Annette placed a napkin over her lap. “When I saw Norah’s ad for a research assistant, I jumped at it.”

Norah smiled. “I was lucky to get such a hard worker.”

“I really love looking through old things,” Annette went on. “You never know what treasures you’ll find.”

That got Benny’s attention. “You found a treasure?”

“Not a real treasure.” Annette laughed nervously. “Nothing like that. Just interesting facts. That’s all I meant about—” She stopped suddenly as if she knew she’d said too much.

Benny polished off his milk. “We’re good at finding real treasures,” he said proudly. “Right, Henry?”

“We have found a few,” Henry admitted.

Seeing Annette’s puzzled face, Mrs. McGregor explained, “These children are first-class detectives.”

“Detectives?” Pam looked over in surprise.

“We solve mysteries,” Benny told her with a grin. “That’s our specialty.”

Norah turned to her assistant. “I think we have just the mystery for them. Right, Annette?”

“What ...?” Annette held her fork in mid-air. “What are you talking about?” She sounded upset.

“Why, Meg Plum’s mystery, of course,” answered Norah. “What else?”

Suddenly Annette’s whole manner changed. “If you don’t think *I’m* doing a good job, Norah, just say so!” She stabbed at a meatball with her fork.

The Aldens were surprised. They stared at Annette with their mouths open.

“Of course I think you’re doing a good job.” Norah looked shocked. “What’s gotten into you, Annette?”

“Well, for starters, I can’t work with a bunch of kids in the way.”

Benny put down his fork. “But we never get in the way.”

Mrs. McGregor was quick to agree. “The Aldens are very self-reliant.”

“Of course they are,” agreed Norah. “No reason for anyone to be upset.” But it was clear that Annette was upset.

“We’ll do our best to help,” Henry promised.

“Thank you, Henry,” said Norah.

Annette looked as if she wanted to argue. But she didn’t. She finished her dinner in silence, not looking too pleased. Then she excused herself and left the room.

Norah apologized for her assistant’s behavior. “Annette has many good qualities, but she can be a bit moody sometimes.”

When the Aldens were clearing the table, Henry let out a low whistle. “Annette sure doesn’t want us helping out,” he said.

Benny added, “She wasn’t very friendly.”

“I guess we’d better keep out of her way,” said Jessie, filling the sink with hot, soapy water. The children agreed.

After leaving the kitchen spic-and-span, the four Alden children hurried out to the front porch. Norah and Mrs. McGregor were sipping iced tea and chatting. Pam was bent over a jigsaw puzzle nearby. Annette was nowhere in sight.

The Aldens made themselves comfortable. Then Benny looked at Norah—was she ready to tell them about the mystery?

Norah was ready. She took a last sip of her iced tea, then placed the empty glass on the table beside her. In the soft glow of the porch light, with the crickets singing in the dark, she began telling them an odd tale.

“A long time ago, my great-great-grandfather, Jon Eton, decided to see a bit of the world. His travels took him to England, and to the little village of Stone Pool. That’s where he met and fell in love with the beautiful Meg Plum.”

“That’s why your house is purple, right?” put in Violet. “Because of Meg Plum, I mean.”

Norah looked surprised that Violet knew that. “Right you are, Violet,” she said.

“Meg left the village of Stone Pool behind to start a new life with Jon right here at Eton Place. But I’m afraid my great-great-grandmother didn’t have an easy time of it.”

Jessie looked questioningly at Norah. “You mean, she didn’t like it here?”

“Oh, she liked it well enough, Jessie. But she was terribly homesick. Apparently,

she would sit for hours, just staring at a photograph of Stone Pool.” Norah shook her head sadly. “They say Jon often found his young wife in tears.”

“Poor Meg!” Violet was shy, and meeting new people often made her nervous. “Did Jon try to help her?”

“Yes, but I’ll tell you about that another time, Violet.” Norah was reaching for a photograph album from the table beside her. “Right now, I have something to show you. It just so happens Annette came across a photograph the other day.” She pointed at a page in the album. “Here it is—Meg’s photograph of the village of Stone Pool.”

Although it was cracked and badly faded with age, the photograph showed shoppers in old-fashioned clothes strolling along the walkways and in and out of the little stores. Benny pointed to the fancy script at the bottom of the photo.



“What does that say, Norah?” he wanted to know. The youngest Alden was just learning to read.

Norah put on her glasses and read the words aloud: “The village of Stone Pool as it appeared on a summer afternoon in 1810.”

Mrs. McGregor peered over Norah’s shoulder. “Looks like a charming village.

No wonder Meg was homesick.”

Norah continued her story. “One day a special gift arrived for Meg from her grandmother.”

The Aldens were instantly curious. “What was it?” said Henry.

“A heart-shaped brooch,” Norah told them. “It was a family heirloom made from precious gems. The rubies were particularly beautiful and rare.”

“What’s a brooch?” asked Benny.

“It’s a pin, Benny,” Mrs. McGregor answered. “Just like the one I have on my blouse. Only Meg’s brooch sounds much fancier than mine.”

“Meg loved the brooch. She wore it whenever she was feeling homesick.” Norah started flipping through the pages of her album again. She stopped and pulled out an old photograph. “Here’s a picture of my great-great-grandmother wearing her brooch.” She passed it along.

Sure enough, the fair-haired woman in the high-necked blouse and long skirt was wearing a heart-shaped brooch at her throat. The Aldens took turns studying it—first Violet, then Benny, then Henry, and finally Jessie.

“I wish I could show you the brooch itself,” said Norah, taking the photograph that Jessie handed her. “But I’m afraid that’s impossible.”

“Impossible?” Jessie looked puzzled.

Norah let out a sigh. “Sadly, the brooch disappeared long ago.”

“Oh, no!” cried Violet.

“Apparently, Meg left the heart-shaped brooch on her dresser one evening,” Norah explained. “In the morning, it was gone.”

Benny’s mouth dropped open. “You mean ... somebody stole it?”

“That’s what everybody figured,” said Norah. “But the strange thing is, they say there was no sign that someone had broken into the house.”

“There’s something I don’t understand,” Henry remarked. “Why would Meg leave a valuable heirloom out on her dresser in the first place?”

Jessie had been wondering the same thing. “If the brooch meant so much to her, why didn’t Meg put it away in a safe place?”

“Exactly—yes!” said Norah, who seemed delighted by their questions. “It doesn’t make sense, does it?”

Henry raised an eyebrow. “What are you saying, Norah?”

“I’m saying that I don’t think the brooch was stolen.” Norah closed the album and placed it on the table beside her. “I’ve always believed Meg found a secret hiding

place for it.”

Jessie blinked in surprise. “Why would she do something like that?”

“It’s not as strange as you might think, Jessie.” Norah settled back against a cushion. “I’m just guessing, but it’s possible she hid that brooch to keep it safe—and out of her husband’s reach.”

“What do you mean?” asked Violet.

“Now, don’t get me wrong,” Norah said, holding up a hand. “Jon Eton was a kind man, but he liked to gamble. He was a bit too interested in money for his own good.”

“Interested enough to sell Meg’s brooch?” Jessie asked in surprise.

“It’s hard to say, Jessie. But I don’t think Meg was taking any chances. I’m convinced she found a hiding place for it.”

“How can you be so sure, Norah?” Henry wondered.

“Because in her later years, Meg made a wall-hanging with a verse hand-stitched on it.” Norah leaned forward. “I believe that verse holds a secret.”

“What kind of secret, Norah?” asked Henry, unable to keep the excitement out of his voice.

“The secret of where the brooch is hidden.” Norah reached down for the framed verse propped against her chair.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” Violet cried as Norah held it up for everyone to see.

Jessie moved closer to get a better look. “Meg used a different-colored thread for every letter,” she said admiringly.

Norah smiled proudly. “Meg was known for her fancy stitching.”

Benny could hardly stand the suspense. “What does it say, Norah?” he asked, bouncing up and down. “The verse, I mean.”

Norah smiled at Benny’s enthusiasm. Then she read the words on it aloud:

*When last goes first,  
and first goes last,  
Eton’s Loop will show you  
a clue from the past.*

Confused, the Aldens looked at one another. After hearing the verse one more time, Henry said, “That’s a tough one to figure out!”

Benny agreed. “It’s not much to go on.”

Jessie tugged her small notebook and pencil from her pocket. As she copied the verse, Henry and Violet looked at each other and smiled. They could always count on Jessie to be organized.

“I don’t get it.” Benny was thinking hard. “What exactly is Eton’s Loop?”

“I wish I knew, Benny,” Norah told him.

“When we were your age,” put in Mrs. McGregor, “we drove ourselves crazy trying to figure it out. Every time we thought we were on to something—”

“We’d end up going around in circles!” finished Norah.

Violet had a sudden thought. “Would you like to work on the mystery with us, Pam?” she asked, looking over at her.

“We can use all the help we can get,” added Henry.

Pam shook her head. “I don’t like mysteries,” she said, barely looking up from her puzzle.

Benny could hardly believe his ears. “But they’re just like jigsaw puzzles,” he was quick to point out. “You fit all the pieces together and—”

Before he had a chance to finish, Pam suddenly got to her feet. “I think I’ll go up to bed.”

Norah looked disappointed. “Well ... I suppose that’s best if you’re tired. Oh, would you mind putting this back in the living room for me on your way, dear?” she added, holding the photograph album out to Pam.

“In the cabinet with the glass doors, right?”

“Right.”

With that, Pam gave her great-aunt a hug, then she said good-night and went inside. Norah looked worried.

“Pam just hasn’t been herself this summer,” she said. “She’s usually so cheery. For the life of me, I can’t figure out what’s bothering her.”

The Aldens looked at one another, wondering the same thing.

## CHAPTER 3

### *The Watery Ghost*

That night, all the Aldens fell asleep right away. Around midnight, Benny stirred. He thought he heard something—a rushing kind of sound. It seemed to be coming from outside. What was making that noise?

“Henry?” he whispered.

Henry didn’t answer. He was sound asleep.

Benny slid out of bed. He went over to the window. Leaning on the sill, he peered out through the window screen into the inky darkness.

The strange noise suddenly stopped.

“Benny?” Henry asked sleepily “What’s going on?”

“I ... I heard something.”

“It’s just the crickets,” Henry said in the middle of a yawn. “Nothing to worry about.”

Benny nodded his head. “No, it was something else, Henry,” he insisted, trying to keep his voice low. “Something ... weird.”

“You were probably dreaming,” Henry told him, in a sleepy voice.

“Maybe,” Benny said, as he climbed back into bed. But he knew he wasn’t dreaming.

“I’m telling you, your great-great-grandmother’s brooch was stolen,” Annette was telling Norah at breakfast the next morning. “If you ask me, it was taken by one of the workmen at the time.”

Benny frowned. “You don’t think there’s a secret hiding place?”

“I certainly don’t.” Annette tore a small piece of crust off her toast and popped it into her mouth. “I’ve done the research. I know what I’m talking about.”

Benny looked crushed.

Violet felt her little brother’s disappointment. “We won’t know for sure until we do some investigating, Benny.” She passed the platter of bacon to Pam.

Henry nodded. “We should at least check into it.”

“Maybe you missed something, Annette,” Benny said.

This was the wrong thing to say. Annette frowned. “Well, isn’t it lucky we have

the Aldens around to keep us on track,” she said, though it was clear from her voice that she didn’t think it was lucky at all.

Jessie and Henry looked at each other. Why was Annette so unfriendly?

“According to all the old newspapers, there was no evidence of theft.” Norah took a bite of her toast and chewed thoughtfully. “And what about that little verse of Meg’s? What do you think it means, Annette?”

“Nothing, probably.”

Norah lifted an eyebrow. “Nothing?”

“Nonsense verse,” Annette said, patting her mouth with a napkin. “That’s all it is.”

Pam tucked a loose strand of hair under her polka-dotted headband. “What’s nonsense verse?” she asked.

“A silly rhyme that has no meaning whatsoever,” Annette answered.

But Norah wasn’t convinced. “I think there’s more to Meg’s verse than meets the eye.”

Mrs. McGregor was quick to agree. “If anyone can figure it out, the Aldens can.”

Annette threw up her hands in a frustrated way. “Well, I have better things to do with my time,” she said, pushing back her chair. “I’ll be in the den if you need me.”

“Before you go, Annette,” Norah said, changing the subject. “I was wondering if you’ve seen my tape recorder. It seems to have disappeared from my desk.”

Jessie couldn’t help noticing that Pam was blushing.

“I’m afraid not,” said Annette. Then an amused smile curled her lips. “But I’m sure the Aldens can track it down—just like that!” she added, with a snap of her fingers. Then she hurried away.

“I don’t think Annette likes us,” Benny said in a small voice. He wasn’t used to anyone making fun of them.

“I’m sure she likes you just fine, Benny,” Norah assured him. “She puts in long hours and it makes her a bit grumpy. You mustn’t let it bother you.” She paused as she swallowed a mouthful of eggs. “This research seems to mean a great deal to Annette. I’m not really sure why.”

Mrs. McGregor, who was buttering her toast, suddenly looked up. “Your assistant seems sure the brooch was stolen.”

Benny nodded. “By one of the workmen. I wonder what she meant by that.”

“She was talking about the men who were working on the bridge,” explained Norah, as she poured syrup on her pancakes. “They were hired around the time the