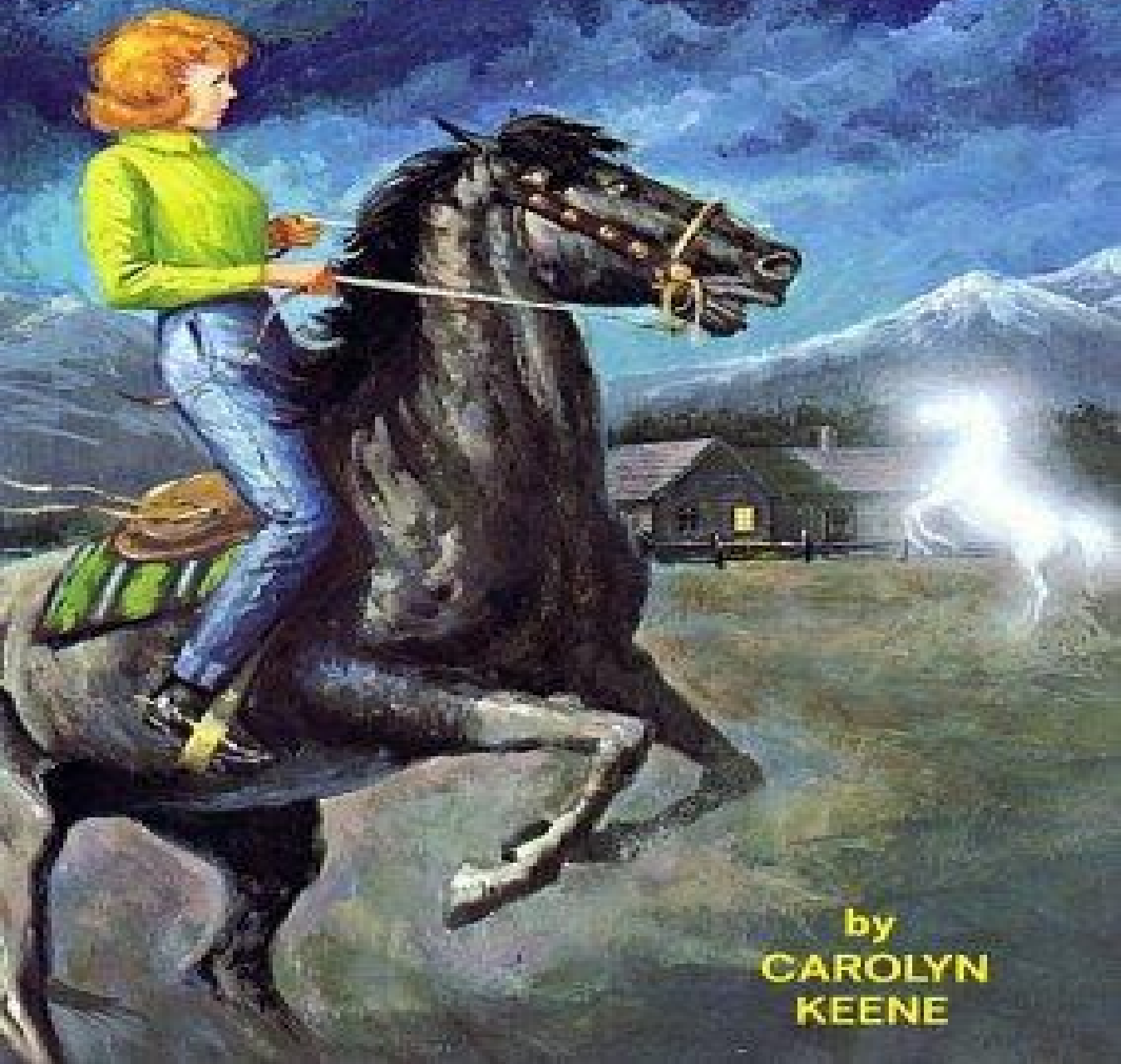




The Secret of Shadow Ranch



by
**CAROLYN
KEENE**

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Page

[CHAPTER 1 - A Curious Stranger](#)

[CHAPTER II - Dangerous Surprises](#)

[CHAPTER III - Warning Rattle](#)

[CHAPTER IV - A Red Clue](#)

[CHAPTER V - Desperado's Gift](#)

[CHAPTER VI - Shorty's Shortcut](#)

[CHAPTER VII - Rockslide!](#)

[CHAPTER VIII - Escaped Dog](#)

[CHAPTER IX - Tack Room Prisoner](#)

[CHAPTER X - Hidden Entrance](#)

[CHAPTER XI - A Rewarding Search](#)

[CHAPTER XII - Lights Out!](#)

[CHAPTER XIII - Missing Artist](#)

[CHAPTER XIV - The Nettle Trick](#)

[CHAPTER XV - A Perilous Ride](#)

[CHAPTER XVI - The Sheriff's Quarry](#)

[CHAPTER XVII - An Interrupted Program](#)

[CHAPTER XVIII - The Black Phantom](#)

[CHAPTER XIX - The Cliff's Secret](#)

[CHAPTER XX - Daring Tactics](#)

THE SECRET OF SHADOW RANCH

NANCY DREW arrives in Phoenix, Arizona, eagerly looking forward to a fun-filled vacation at Shadow Ranch, but abruptly finds herself involved in a baffling mystery. The ranch is being haunted by a phantom horse and maliciously damaged by an unknown enemy. Local people believe that the ghostly animal is carrying out the curse of Dirk Valentine, the romantic outlaw who was killed many years ago at Shadow Ranch, where he had gone to fulfill a promise to his sweetheart.

Suspecting that a treasure hidden by Valentine may be at the root of the Shadow Ranch mystery, Nancy undertakes a challenging search, aided by her friends Bess Marvin and George Fayne. The first vital clue is found in an antique watch and sparks a series of clever deductions and dangerous developments. While seeking further clues, the girls' investigation in a ghost town ends in near disaster when Nancy is trapped inside a building that is toppled by a rockslide—a rockslide which is deliberately caused. But the pretty titian-haired detective remains undaunted in her determination to solve the mystery.

For those who enjoy a suspenseful thriller, Nancy Drew's first Western adventure makes truly fascinating reading.



"Nancy, be careful!" Bess cried fearfully

NANCY DREW MYSTERY STORIES®

*The Secret of
Shadow Ranch*

BY CAROLYN KEENE

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CHAPTER 1

A Curious Stranger

"HERE I am, girls!" exclaimed Nancy Drew as she hugged her two best friends. "All set for an exciting vacation at Shadow Ranch."

"I hope you had a good flight," said Bess Marvin. The pretty, slightly plump blonde was not smiling as usual. Nancy wondered why.

"Are we glad to see you!" remarked George Fayne, an attractive tomboyish girl with short dark hair. She glanced anxiously around the crowded waiting room in the Phoenix air terminal. "Let's go where we can talk."

Nancy looked at the cousins with keen blue eyes. "What's the matter? Is something wrong?"

Bess bit her lip, then burst out, "Oh, Nancy, we can't stay! We all have to go home tomorrow!"

"But why?" asked Nancy, astonished.

"Because there's a mystery at the ranch," George said bluntly, "and Uncle Ed thinks it's not safe for us to be here."

Bess put in, "But, Nancy, if you could convince Uncle Ed you can solve the case, maybe he'd let us stay. However, I'm not so sure I want to. It's—it's really pretty frightening."

"I can't wait to hear what the mystery is," Nancy said excitedly.

George insisted on collecting Nancy's suitcases at the baggage-claim section. "But save the mystery until I come back!" George said and hastened off. Bess led Nancy toward an attractive sandwich shop in the air terminal.

On the way, admiring glances were cast at the two girls. Titian-haired Nancy was a trim figure in her olive-green knit with matching shoes. Beige accessories and knitting bag completed her costume. Bess wore a pale-blue cotton which showed off her deep suntan to advantage.

While they walked, Bess explained that her uncle had decided at breakfast to send the girls home. At his insistence, George had made reservations for a flight the next day.

"We told him what a wonderful detective you are and begged him to let you try to solve the mystery. He said it was too dangerous for a girl. George phoned you, but you'd already left." Bess sighed. "It's a shame! We could have had a super vacation!"

The three girls had grown up together in River Heights, and had shared many exciting adventures.

Several weeks before, Bess and George's aunt and uncle, Edward and Elizabeth Rawley, owners of Shadow Ranch, had invited them to spend the summer in Arizona. The Rawleys had easily been persuaded to include Nancy in the invitation.

Nancy's father, Carson Drew, a famous lawyer, had given his consent to the trip, but had asked his daughter to delay her departure for a week in order to do some work for him.

Previously Nancy had helped him solve *The Secret of the Old Clock*. It was her first case and had led to many other dangerous assignments, the most recent of which was *The Mystery at Lilac Inn*.

Now the young sleuth was eager to hear about the mystery at Shadow Ranch. She and Bess strolled into the sandwich shop and made their way among the crowded tables to a small one in a corner.

As they seated themselves, a slender gray-haired man in a tan suit sat down at the next table. Nancy placed her knitting bag on the floor between his chair and her own.

"What are you making?" Bess asked, nodding toward the bag.

"A sweater for Dad," Nancy replied. "I hope to finish it for his birthday. Originally I bought the wool for myself, but he admired the color, so I decided to surprise him and knit a sweater for him. Do you think he'll like the style?"

"He'll love it. Not to change the subject, but there are some handsome cowboys at the ranch," Bess remarked. As she told Nancy of the fun she and George had been having, Bess grew more cheerful.

Just then George joined them. Besides the brown linen purse that matched her dress, she now carried a big Thermos jug.

"I had a porter put your bags in the car," she told Nancy, "and I brought this Thermos back. We have to fill it with water for the drive across the desert. We started with two jugs. Bess and I drank up the water in one on the way here."

When the waitress came to take the girls' order, Nancy and George chose soft drinks, while Bess studied the menu.

"This mystery has me so upset," she declared, "that my appetite is gone." Then she added, "I'll have a double chocolate sundae with walnuts."

Nancy and George grinned. "Poor girl," said George, "she's wasting away."

Bess looked sheepish. "Never mind me," she said. "Start telling Nancy about the mystery."

George tugged her chair closer and bent forward. "About two months ago," she began, "Uncle Ed and Aunt Bet acquired Shadow Ranch in payment of a debt. They'd always wanted to be ranchers, so they moved there and began working the property. But for the past month there have been so many accidents that they've decided the ranch is being sabotaged."

"At first they weren't sure"—Bess took up the story—"but after last night, Uncle Ed said there was no doubt."

"What happened?" Nancy asked.

"The phantom horse, appeared," replied George.

Nancy's eyes sparkled with interest. "A phantom! Tell me!"

Bess shivered. "It's the weirdest thing—all glowing white and filmy! We saw it running across what we call the big meadow."

George added, "Shorty Steele—he's one of the ranch hands—says it's supposed to be the ghost of the horse which belonged to Dirk Valentine, an old-time outlaw."

"There's a very romantic legend about him," Bess said. "He was the sweetheart of Frances Humber, daughter of the local sheriff, who was the original owner of Shadow Ranch. One night when Dirk Valentine came there to see Frances, the sheriff shot and killed him. As he lay dying, the desperado put a curse on the Humber property, vowing that his horse would haunt Shadow Ranch. And whenever it appeared, destruction would follow."

"That curse came true," George said grimly. "This morning Uncle Ed found one of his wind-mills had been pulled down."

Nancy looked thoughtful. "Did the phantom horse make any sound?"

"No," replied George, "but just before it appeared we heard a weird whistle. The ranchers say the outlaw always called his horse that way."

"The phantom horse must be a trick, of course," said Nancy. "It sounds as if someone is trying to scare your aunt and uncle off their property." As she spoke, Nancy became

aware that the man at the next table was listening intently to the conversation.

"But why—" Bess broke off as she felt Nancy's foot nudge hers under the table. George caught Nancy's warning glance and also understood.

Just then the waitress brought their order and the girls chatted lightly of other subjects. When they finished and their check had come, Nancy reached for her knitting bag and gave a cry of alarm.

"What's the matter?" Bess asked.

"My bag! I can't find it."

George exclaimed, "I'll bet that man who sat next to us took it! He's gone too!"

The three girls jumped up and looked around, but the man was not in sight. George hurried outside to see if she could find him.

Nancy, meanwhile, looked on the floor nearby. Under the far side of the man's table lay the knitting bag. Quickly Nancy retrieved it.

"See if anything's missing!" Bess advised. "Maybe your wallet's gone!"

Nancy made a search, but as far as she could tell, the original contents were intact. However, their arrangement seemed to be different. Had the man been snooping—and if so, why?

Bess paid the check and the girls walked to the door. They met George coming in. "Didn't see him anywhere," she said. "Guess he drove off. The thief! He—" George stopped short. "Nancy, you have your bag!"

Nancy grinned. "Thanks for your help, anyway."

"I still don't like Old Eavesdropper," George declared.

As the girls walked through the terminal, Nancy stopped at a row of telephone booths. "Wait a moment," she said. "I promised to call home and let Hannah know when I arrived here."

Bess volunteered to fill the Thermos jug while Nancy phoned. "Give my love to Hannah," she called back as she hurried off.

"Mine, too," said George as Nancy entered the phone booth.

Mrs. Hannah Gruen was the Drews' warm-hearted housekeeper who had looked after Nancy since her mother's death when she was three. She and Nancy held a deep affection for each other.

Soon Hannah's cheerful voice came over the wire. "Don't worry about anything here, Nancy," she said. "Just enjoy yourself."

By the time Nancy hung up, Bess had returned. "I didn't tell Hannah I might be right home," Nancy reported.

"She's going to get a big surprise when we turn up tomorrow," George remarked gloomily.

Nancy smiled. "Not if I can persuade your uncle to change his mind."

As the girls stepped from the cool building the afternoon sun was dazzling. Waves of heat shimmered over the parked cars.

George led the way past several lines of cars, then turned into a row and walked toward an old ranch wagon. As the girls drew closer, they exclaimed in surprise. A man was dropping something through the open window of the car! *He was the eavesdropper who had sat beside them!*

"What are you doing?" George called.

The stranger glanced up, startled, then darted away among the cars.

Nancy dashed to the ranch wagon, with the girls close behind her. There was a piece of paper on the seat.

Nancy picked it up. "A note!"

In crudely penciled letters it said: "*Keep away from Shadow Ranch.*"

"Come on!" Nancy exclaimed. "We must catch that man and find out what this means!"

