

---

THE  
CHUMASH CIRCLE



A ROSE DOOLITTLE MYSTERY BY  
DANIEL PHALEN

---

Creston Hall Books  
Templeton, California

For Julynn,  
source of many mysteries,  
a secret unto herself.

Library of Congress Control Number 2001094308

ISBN 0-9712971-0-X

**The Chumash Circle.** Copyright ©2001 by Daniel Phalen. Publishing Company. Printed and bound in the United States of America. All rights are reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems without the written permission of the author. Published by Creston Hall Publishing Company, Templeton, California 93465. First edition.





## THE OWL



**T**onight the owl would come again. Rose Doolittle was sure because on each of four evenings straight, the great bird had swept in on silent wings, bolder each time, forgetting her own hunger for a closer look at the girl on the ground. What did she see, but a child gazing at stars? What could possibly interest her more than the quest for food?

A warm breeze had blown in from the east and pushed a cloud across the moon, rustling the poplars along the drive. Inside the corral, Rose turned her face to the wind and caught the scent of barley drying in the fields a mile away. As the wind lifted a lock of yellow hair from her eyes, she saw Rico, her grandmother's big paint horse, standing upright, nostrils flared, white mane dancing from his neck as he listened to the faraway *yip-yip* of a coyote.

*Maybe now*, she thought as she strained her eyes for a glimpse of shadow overhead. But the night sky was empty.

To Rose, summer nights in the wilderness were bliss. If Nana and Poppa would have allowed it, she would stay out all night, particularly when the heat beat in from the dry

Carrissa plain. As it was, her grandparents often let her prowl the dry brush for lizards and toads until long after dark. This was her third summer at the ranch, and she was eleven now. They knew she could be trusted.

She tucked her lower lip between her teeth and sucked air to make a squeaking sound, a technique she had used to call in the great barn owl. Some nights the raptor flew near, on others she stayed aloft, her magnificent wings outspread, white face tilted downward to scan the surface. Tonight, as Rose waited, a name for the owl came to her, a song on the wind, as singular and simple as the bird itself.

*Tra.*

Rose liked the sound of it, at once feminine but evincing a power of almost masculine supremacy, for indeed the owl ruled the night.

*Tra, I'm here,* she called in a silent message to her night hunter. *I'm waiting for you, Tra.*

Her own name was not nearly as majestic. Rose didn't dislike her name, but she thought she might change it some day, when her parents could no longer tell her no. Change it to something really exciting and mystical, like—Sareen, or maybe Marissa.

Again Rose squeaked for Tra, but there was no sign overhead. The cloud had passed across the moon now, and the half-orb gleamed like a street lamp in the sky. By its light Rose could see every tuck and fold of hillside. She could even make out individual tufts of tar weed where moonlight bathed the slope below in an odd blue light. The twin oaks across the hill looked silvery and the wire on Nana's garden fence gleamed as bright as day. Her night vision was keen, but the waxing moon brightened the countryside so well that the stripe on Rico's trailer showed a red as true as the strawberries beside the lawn.

Another cloud covered the moon, and the night went almost black. If Tra came now she would be harder to see, thought Rose as she stood perfectly still and listened. The wind suddenly died and the cloud darkened, and Rose shivered as a chill passed through her. How weird, she thought. Just moments ago she had been hot.

On impulse, Rose looked up, and suddenly a dark shape swooped down from the heights and glided silently on a wingspan wider than Rose's own arms. Tra swept in closer, her great eyes peering intently through the twilight, curious, intense, seeking the girl out as if bearing a silent inquiry.

*Are you the one?*

Lower she came, and faster, closing the distance with tremendous speed and streaking straight for the girl's face. Her trajectory tightened as she neared and the odd mask angled toward the girl, bearing the telltale triangle of eyes and beak beneath the scallops that conjured an image of eyebrows raised in surprise.

*Is it you?*

Rose dodged at the last second and felt the soft caress of wing tip, saw the clenched talons zooming within inches of her eyes, felt the rush of wind as the owl's swift passage lifted the hair from her scalp.

The owl veered away, turned in mid-flight with a flap of wing and swept in for another look. Again and again she flew at the girl, each pass closer than the one before, until the girl began to feel the first pangs of fright.

And then, as suddenly as it had started, the aerial bombardment ceased, and the owl soared upward over the barn and was gone.

She waited in the silence that followed, alone, half-frightened but exhilarated by the stunning display of aerobatics. She struggled to catch her breath, feeling the

thrill she always experienced in close proximity to a wild creature.

A loud shriek suddenly pierced the night, and the girl forgot the owl and quickly scanned the skies for a sign. It couldn't be Tra, for the owl's passage was always soundless. Then she saw it, a huge shape that flew rapidly across her vision and merged with the tree shadows across the hill. Too large to be a bird, its wings had blocked out the moon and dimmed the landscape, casting a foreboding pall over everything.

*Dark hunter*, said a voice inside her head. She felt something watching her from the trees, and as she met its stare she froze in fear, and a cold shiver ran through her like a blade of ice. She reeled backward from the malevolent force, and her foot struck a hole and she fell, desperately scratching at the adobe clay for support.

Then the shape lifted from the trees, immense and seeming to gather mass as it ascended. Higher and higher it rose, and then, as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone.

Rose struggled to her feet and staggered, her eyes scanning the blackness overhead. She heard a terrified cry, and the wind picked up and a strong gust struck the dirt outside the corral and kicked sand in her face. She blinked and dodged away, but too late.

She was busy digging grit from her eyes when she heard a soft *thump-thump* beside her. When her vision cleared she looked down and saw a soft gray lump lying at her feet. At first it looked like one of Poppa's old work gloves, but it was not. It was a dove.

Odd, but she'd never heard of doves flying at night.

She bent and gently lifted the bird, hoping to find it alive, but the head flopped loose. Its neck was broken.

Rose looked all about for a sign of the black thing she

had seen before, but it was either hiding or had fled. Carefully cradling the dove in both hands, she slipped through the corral rungs and followed the worn path down to the pond. Below the dam was a large patch of reeds and thick green grass. She set the dove down, quickly wove a hollow in the blades, then placed the dove in her makeshift nest.

As she stood up to view her handiwork, the clouds again parted, showing the dove on its side where she'd set the neck at a more natural angle. She had just turned to start back up the trail when a black shadow flicked over the ground where she stood. Rose looked up quickly, hoping for another glimpse of the dark hunter, but she saw only empty sky.

Nana's voice called her in for the night, and she trudged uphill past Rico's corral, baffled by the strange sequence of events. Tra had put in an appearance—quite a display, actually—as if Rose was the sole objective of her flight. But something ugly and alien had interfered, tainting the owl's wondrous beauty with the specter of violence and death.

Later from her bed, as she pulled the sheet to her chin, Rose asked, *What went wrong, Tra? Did the dark hunter chase you away? Are you fighting phantoms we humans can't see or understand?*

A dozen questions flew through her mind like pigeons racing in circles, but no answers came. Then abruptly the questions stopped, and Rose ceased thinking about hunters in the night and fell fast asleep.

## THE WOMAN



For the past three summers, Rose had helped Poppa mow his fields. She would walk in front of the tractor and pull large rocks from the mower's path. It was hot work even in the early morning, but she enjoyed sharing part of Poppa's busy day.

The mowing was to prevent fire. Summers in the inland valleys were blistering and by mid-July the parched hills were thick with dry grass three feet high. The slightest spark could touch off a wildfire, so Poppa mowed mornings and evenings when the air was moist. The idea was to reduce the grass to stubble which would burn fast and reduce the spread of a fire.

By ten Poppa had to quit. Forest Department law prohibited mowing between ten and five, the hottest and driest part of the day. The porch thermometer read eighty-five, headed for ninety, but as soon as Poppa got the tractor put away, he came over to where Rose was petting Mooney, Nana's yellow Labrador Retriever.

"C'mere, there's something I want to show you."

He started walking toward the broad crest of hill north of the house. "Where we going, Poppa?" asked Rose.

“‘Sploring,” he said. “See something special.”

Excited, Rose skipped ahead and up the tractor path to the hilltop. Exploring, or ‘sploring, as Poppa called it, was her favorite thing to do on the ranch. Well, second to frog grepping, maybe.

Mooney went right through Mr. Wilson’s fence. Poppa had told her no climbing fences where cattle were grazing, so Rose looked at Poppa for approval.

He nodded. “Old Tom Wilson isn’t running cattle this year. Go ahead, but be careful of those barbs.”

A well-worn animal track took them past the big oak tree on the fence line and they followed the track across the top of the hill until it dropped sharply into a cleft. Winter runoff had cut a narrow notch downhill, but the stream bed was dry now. Poppa shook his head and pointed at an outcropping of boulders.

“Favorite haunt for rattlers,” he told her. “We’ll make our own path on higher ground.”

Mooney seemed to know where they were headed, for he broke trail all the way to the bottom. The ravine widened into a wash wider than Poppa’s driveway, then narrowed quickly as it turned sharply around a hill. A clump of oaks hugged the hillside, and behind their boughs Rose saw the shape of a building.

“Is that it?” she asked.

“Yep, it’s adobe and probably a hundred and fifty years old, maybe more. Some say it belonged to a Chumash woman.”

“Can we go inside?”

“Nothing stopping us.”

The roof was gone and the adobe walls were worn smooth where the wood lintel had rotted away. As she approached, Rose realized that the ruin was little more than four walls

standing open to the sky. The floor had filled in with mud and debris. She picked at the floor with a stone, hoping to turn up a piece of bone or pottery.

“Fraid there’s not much left, Rosie,” said Poppa. “Too many people combing these parts today. Back when I was young this was a favorite campsite for hunters.”

“I wonder what she was like.”

“Who, the old woman? Hard to say for sure. When I was a kid, an old farmer told me she made medicine that helped a few Sisquocs survive the cholera epidemic.”

“I never heard of Chumash or Sisquoc.”

“Indian tribes. Lived here before the first Spaniards. The Chumash ranged up and down the state for hundreds of miles. Some lived in the mountains, some at the beach. Sisquocs were locals, mostly down in Santa Barbara County. Both got wiped out by European diseases and Spanish soldiers.”

“That’s sad. I wish I’d known the Chumash lady. I bet she loved living out here alone, with the stars overhead and the coyotes calling.”

“More likely she spent her days grubbing for acorns. The local *indios* didn’t have much, not like back in the plains states. Well, I guess we ought to head home for some lunch.”

“Oh, Poppa, so soon?”

“Yes, so soon. My belly’s empty and I get cross and cranky when I don’t eat regular.”

That evening they went out again in the tractor and Poppa mowed until close to eight o’clock, quitting because the fading light made Rose’s work on the ground unsafe. Rose was famished and bolted down three Mexican enchiladas Nana had cooked, then finished off with a thick wedge of fresh watermelon.

She went outside again in the cool of the evening to grep frogs. After a while, she began thinking about the adobe ruin

and the old woman, and she wandered to the top of the hill to watch the sun go down behind the Santa Lucia Range. Looking north, she could see the wide sweep of Creston Valley and the hills beyond with tucks deep in shadow. A red-tailed hawk glided overhead, homeward-bound for the night.

The flight of the hawk reminded her of Tra. She intended to repeat her vigil tonight and try calling in the owl again after the sky grew dark.

Twilight faded slowly in the summer sky and Rose let her eye follow the long shadows across the land. She was looking across the ravine where Poppa had taken her when she caught a strange shape out of the corner of her eye, off to her right. She turned to look, but saw nothing except the soft mound of hill topped by the shadowy outline of the oak.

An inner sense told her to wait, she would see it again, but not if she looked directly at it.

She focused on the distant mountain range, barely visible in the waning light. The hill colors were going to grays and blacks now. Soon it would be dark and she wouldn't be able to see...

There it was again!

Clearer now and definitely there. She took a few steps toward the shape, keeping her eyes on the ravine, moving steadily but not looking directly at it.

The shape stayed in place as Rose crept closer. Was it the old tree stump fooling her in the soft light? The barbed wire fence cut right through its bleached trunk. She would have to move very carefully because she could hardly see the wires anymore.

A little closer now, don't look at it...

A person! The shape was a person standing out there in the open, not moving! Was he lying in wait for her? Was he a tramp maybe?

Rose knew she should run to the house right away, but her feet and legs seemed to have a mind of their own, for she moved closer instead. It seemed she was two people, Rose the child, and another. She couldn't quite figure out which, but it didn't seem to matter because she felt no danger, only the warm presence of *someone* waiting for her.

As she drew closer, Rose sensed rather than saw that it was a woman. Why was a woman standing alone in the hills at night? Was she a neighbor out for an evening stroll? Perhaps so, but there was something totally different about the way she stood, not moving, just...being there.

"Close enough," the woman said.

Her voice crackled like paper, and her words were strange to Rose's ear, yet she understood them perfectly. What was going on?

"You are on one side, I on the other," the woman explained. "Neither of us may cross but we may share the moment."

One side of what? Rose wanted to ask, but she could not utter a word. Her limbs were trembling, yet she felt no fear.

"You are called Rose," the woman said. "I am called Noh-nah."

"Are—are you a gh-ghost?" Rose stammered.

"I am a spirit, and so are you. Forget such words. They have no meaning here and we haven't much time."

"But, I don't understand what's happening...it's all so weird."

"You seek the night bird," said Noh-nah.

"You mean the owl? I named her Tra."

"You did well, for that is her true name. She is drawn to you because your spirit is strong. You have much to learn from Tra."

"That sounds silly. How can I learn anything from an

owl?”

“Her wisdom sent you to me. You will understand more later.”

“Are you the woman in the story? Is that your house down in the ravine?”

“Hush, child. Such things are not important. What you must learn to do is let go of names and listen to the soul who speaks.”

“I’m not sure what you mean...”

“I must go. We shall talk again. Say nothing of this to anyone.”

The shape began to shimmer before her, and in the blink of an eye, No-nah was gone.

Rose stood for a long time without moving or thinking. Her feet seemed bound to the earth, rooted in her tracks as firmly as the stoutest oak. In her mind she was flying over the hills, soaring across the valleys and on to the wooded hillside where...

Where what?

Oh, good grief! Nana was calling.

“I’m coming, Nana!” she called, and suddenly her feet were her own and she bounded through the weeds and ran down the tractor trail.

Rico whinnied a welcome as her feet pounded the hard ground, and she saw the warm lights of the farm house, and heard the *bzzz-zing* of Poppa’s electric saw in the shop, and Mooney’s soft bark.

The normal world, a world full of love and good food and fun, awaited her. Why, then, did she feel she was leaving something dear behind?

Nana had a bowl of peach cobbler waiting on the kitchen counter. “Rose ANN,” she said, “it’s pitch dark and your bare legs are all scratched up. Were you out in another thistle

patch?”

Rose swallowed a mouthful of cobbler and looked out the window. The moon was just peeking over the tops of the eastern hills.

“Mm-hmm,” she said.

## THE BOY



The next day, Nana came to Rose with the news that Madigan Starr, the girl who lived over the hill, would like to meet her. Nana explained that Madigan was eleven also and would be entering sixth grade next fall. She was also a Girl Scout like Rose, and Nana thought they had lots of other things in common, including a love of horses.

Rose wasn't particularly interested in making a new friend, but Nana had gone to some trouble to find Rose a playmate. Nana put Rose in the front seat and Mooney in the back and drove the short mile to the Starr place.

The house sat uphill from one of many almond orchards that had been planted fifty or sixty years ago. The trees seemed not to know how to die, they only got scruffier and attracted squirrels by the hundreds. Owners with money hired bulldozer operators to push the trees over. Then they planted wine grapes. But not Randall Starr, for as Madigan came out to meet the car, Rose saw the huge canopy of nets that covered whole acres of ground. Nana had explained that Mr. Starr raised ornamental shrubs for landscape developers. That didn't mean much to Rose until she saw the operation.

Madigan was blond like Rose but had blue eyes, whereas Rose's were green. They were nearly the same size, taller than most kids their age, and both wore their hair back in a horse tail. Nana drove back down the Starrs' dirt driveway and Madigan shrugged.

"What d'ya want to do?"

Rose shrugged. "I dunno. Do you have a horse?"

Madigan shook her head no. "You?"

"Just my Nana's. I get to ride Rico sometimes. I'm going to start lessons next week."

Madigan nodded. "Do you have a boyfriend?"

"No, how about you?"

"Well, there's this guy in eighth grade who runs around with Brad, that's my brother. And Kyle Dowd asked me to Disneyland right after school let out. He's a seventh grader and he tried to kiss me when his parents weren't looking, but I didn't let him."

"How come?"

Madigan shrugged.

"So, where's your brother?" Rose asked.

"Inside with Wog Anderson. They're duking it out with Denial."

Rose wasn't sure what Madigan meant by "Denial" but she had an idea it was a computer game. Madigan led a path through garage clutter, opened the kitchen door, and turned down a hall. At the other end, she rapped on a closed door. A heavy thumping sound came from the other side, deep and so loud that it shook the walls. Madigan turned to explain.

"Brad likes Deathmasters," she said, as if that explained a whole lot. Probably a rock group. Rose lived in a small farm town and didn't watch much television, so she wasn't up on the latest.

Madigan knocked again, more loudly this time, and the

door opened and a scrawny guy with a green buzz cut opened. "Go away, sissah!" he said, but he held the door open.

"This is Rose," Madigan explained. "She's staying with her grandparents over summer. She's from Oregon. Rose, this is Brad."

Brad looked at Rose's sandaled feet, raised a hand in greeting, and started to close the door. Madigan stuck her foot in the way.

"I thought you might show her some cool moves on the wheel."

"Oh, yeah," Brad said, as if recalling his manners from a vague memory. He bumped the door wider with a foot-behind-the-knee move Rose had seen a few hacky-sackers do, shuffled across the room, and flopped down on his bed.

The room was dark except for a flashing blue strobe up near the ceiling and the dull glare of a computer screen. Another boy was seated at a study desk, working a steering wheel mounted on the desk top as he pushed violently on a foot-pedal arrangement on the floor. His narrow head was clamped between a pair of foam-padded headphones and his shirtless torso displayed a butterfly tattoo on one shoulder. A heavy chrome chain dangled from his belt.

Madigan rolled her eyes behind the boy's back, but Rose wasn't sure whether she thought the guy was coolness itself or just a jerk. Rose was already convinced he was a jerk.

The screen was displaying a road course that twisted and flattened as the boy bore down on a mock opponent and shot past it. He roared with triumph and spun the wheel recklessly, deliberately crashing his cyber car as he tore off the headphones and turned toward Brad.

"Too easy," he remarked. "Why doesn't your dad buy Trevellian?"

'Because it's not my birthday yet.'

“So? You have to wait till October?”

“Yeah, he’s not made of money like some townies I know. He works for a living.”

“Hey, my old man works oil in Taft. Just because he can’t stand my mother, I don’t see much cash, understand?”

“Hey, this here’s Rose. She’s from Oregon. This is Wog.”

The boy named Wog kept his eye on Brad. “I told you not to call me that anymore.”

“Well, you’ve always been Wog as long as I’ve known you. Stuart sounds so, you know, dweeby.”

“So, okay, Skwush-butt, you wanta talk sixth-grader stuff, go play with Hanson’s little brother.”

“Say hi to Rose.”

“Hi to Rose.” Wog, or Stuart, or whatever his name was, continued to give his back to Rose and Madigan.

“You dork,” said Brad. “You can really be a Class A dipstick, Anderson.”

“Takes one to know one. How about changing the tunes. Deathmasters suck.”

Rose hadn’t been at Madigan’s fifteen minutes and she was ready to go home. “Why don’t you show me the nursery?” she said quietly to Madigan.

Wog immediately barked a hoarse laugh. “Hah! Right on, Mad. Nursery’s just down the hall where Maddy goes sleepy-bye. First door on your left, the one with the perfume that makes you, like, puke green.”

“Come on, Rose,” Madigan said with a jerk of her head, “these guys are into macho games.”

Rose followed Madigan out of the room as Brad and Wog made sounds like British ambulance sirens. *Bee-baw, bee-baw!*

“My brother is such a complete zit-head sometimes, but only when he’s with his friends.”

Rose didn't think Wog Anderson made much of a friend, but she kept her opinion to herself as she followed Madigan back outside. First off, Madigan corrected her about the term "nursery."

"It's called a horticulture arboretum," she explained, putting on a stern face and tucking her chin. Then Madigan broke out in a grin. "Otherwise known as a nursery."

Rose had noticed three greenhouses on the way up from the bottom of the hill, but the rest of the slope, the hill crest, and the back slope were all covered with a canopy of black netting supported by poles and cables.

"The shade cloth is only thirty-percent," Madigan explained, "which lets in enough light for the plants to thrive. These aren't tropicals, so they won't burn, even in hundred-degree heat. Fifty-percent shade would stunt their growth and seventy-percent would kill most of them. Come on, I'll show you around."

Madigan stopped before one of the poles and pointed. "We used to have an owl. It roosted up there until Dad strung the nets."

Rose's interest suddenly perked up. "What did it look like?"

"Oh, I don't know, just an owl. Silly thing wouldn't leave. Just sat out in the open, with all these trees around. Most owls day-roost in the oak grove over on your road."

Rose knew the grove Madigan was talking about. "Did you ever see a white owl?"

Madigan shrugged. "Maybe, I don't remember. They're night things anyway."

"I love the night, don't you? Especially summer nights. I like to watch the sky turn colors and go dark, and then watch the hawks fly home."

"To me they're just a bunch of birds."

“Did you ever see that black-shouldered kite that flies at sunset?”

“My brother stopped flying kites when he turned ten.”

“No, I mean the kite bird.”

“Never heard of it. Are you going to the Fair?”

Rose gave up. Madigan was nice enough, but something was missing. She lived out here all year round, yet she didn’t know much about the birds that shared the neighborhood. Boys, her father’s business, and now the county Fair.

Rose had been to the Fair twice with Nana and Poppa in years past, and they had promised to take her again this year. The Fair was okay, lots of fun actually, but not the same as catching a frog and putting him back, or calling in Tra.

Madigan was talking again. “...probably won’t get to go. Daddy has to work late and Rita doesn’t like crowds.”

“Who’s Rita?”

“My stepmother. All she does is work in the nursery all day and read romance novels at night. So, my only chance to go is if I can convince Daddy that it’s okay to go with the Lightfoot kid.”

“Light foot? Is he crippled or something?”

Madigan laughed out loud. “Rose, you’re something!” she exclaimed. “No, that’s his name, Tobin Lightfoot. He’s Indian going way back, but he doesn’t look like it. Lives across the way in the old Grabow place. Want to go meet him?”

“Is it far?”

“Heck, no, you could see it from here if you stood on the roof.”

“Is he nice?”

Madigan pursed her lips. “I wouldn’t describe him that way. He’s kind of—different.”

The hike was just what Rose needed because the effort to cross broken ground took the talk right out of Madigan. Both

girls were slightly winded by the time they reached the gravel drive that wound uphill to a grove of cypress. A small boy came out of the house as they approached and headed toward an unpainted barn. He was followed almost immediately by a taller boy, well-built with a head of dark hair. As he came forward, Rose noticed the easy grace with which he moved, like a buck deer. He neither nodded nor smiled as Madigan hailed him, but waited silently until the two girls stopped.

“Hey, Tobe, how ya been?” Madigan said, awkwardly twisting her arms behind her back.

Tobin Lightfoot regarded his blond neighbor with a look somewhere between puzzlement and scorn. “Good,” he said, then he turned and looked squarely at Rose. “You must be Rose.”

“Yes,” she replied. “How did you know?”

He hesitated, glanced at Madigan. “Must have heard somewhere. Your granny rides the big paint, right?”

“Yeah, that’s Rico.”

“Fine horse. Good bones, good balance. Rode a horse like that once, never wanted to ride any other.”

“Rico’s okay, but he’s a bit skittish, almost head-shy.”

“That’s because of what the ropers did to him when he was young.”

“Oh, did Nana tell you about that?”

“No, I’ve never met your granny.”

“Then who...?”

“Hollywood cowboy used to own him, lived in a trailer over on the mesa. Thought pretty well of himself, but he wasn’t much of a roper.”

Madigan twisted at the waist again, apparently worried about having lost Lightfoot’s attention. “Um, are you riding in the Fair again?”

Lightfoot glanced at Madigan, the way Mooney did when

pestered by a fly. "I already rode," he said to Rose. "Got a good little mare from the mustang sale. Roped my calf in good time, came home."

Madigan stamped her foot. "Oh, darn, we missed it! Did you win?"

Tobin Lightfoot didn't answer, just kept watching Rose. She felt the weight of his gaze full upon her, the way the audience had watched her in the school play. Only she wasn't reciting lines. She wasn't saying anything at all, but he kept watching her anyway. Not staring, but watching, as if he expected something from her.

"We're going to the Fair Saturday," she blurted, waving a hand in Madigan's direction. She had no idea what she was doing, hadn't even asked Poppa if it would be all right to invite Madigan along. "Maybe we'll see you there."

"Don't usually go except to do some roping," Lightfoot said.

"Oh, sure."

Madigan was staring at Rose, trying to balance on one foot with her arms still twined behind her back, sort of like an awkward stork. Lightfoot didn't seem to notice anything was wrong, just waited for the girls to make the next move. Madigan seemed to have lost her tongue, so finally Rose took charge.

"Well, it was nice meeting you," she said. "By the way, was that your little brother who ran over to the chicken coop?"

Tobin Lightfoot's eyes gleamed with the light of discovery as he continued watching Rose, saying nothing. Madigan stopped acting like a flamingo and turned to stare at Rose.

"Who are you talking about?"

"The little boy who came out before Tobin."

"There was no little boy, Rose. Tobin lives by himself."

Rose looked to Lightfoot for an explanation, but he only

stared back, a hint of amusement beginning to light up his dark face. Madigan seemed to feel obliged to explain.

“A lady from the state comes by once a month. Tobin owns the house and the land. His parents died last year in this horrible accident out on Highway Forty-Six. Gawd, a four-car pile-up. It was in the papers and everything. Oh, sorry Tobin. But anyway, the state couldn’t send him to boys’ home because he’s sixteen, no seventeen now. And his relatives are all gone, no family. He doesn’t even have to go to school if he doesn’t want to because he’s Indian. Right, Tobe?”

Lightfoot didn’t answer one way or the other, just looked Madigan over once, turned around, and slowly walked back to the house.

“Guess we’d better go,” Madigan said to Rose.

Madigan chattered like a magpie all the way back to the house, broken fields and all. Rose was quiet, her mind stilled by the experience of simply watching and being watched. Tobin Lightfoot was different all right. Something about him frightened her, yet Rose yearned to know more about that difference. She hoped she would see more of Lightfoot before the summer was over.

But what had really silenced her was the appearance of the child. Rose was sure she had seen a boy run across the yard. Part of her believed Madigan’s story, but another part was convinced that there was more to the experience than met the eye. The boy was a connection of some kind, binding Lightfoot’s mysterious circumstance to her own. It sounded weird, as weird as her dream of the woman, or whatever had taken place the night before.

That night she called for Tra, but the owl did not appear. It was as if Tra had summoned Rose rather than the other way around, and now that the girl had responded, Tra’s purpose was complete. Rose was sure she would see the owl again, but

equally convinced that something else would have to happen first.

She would of course spend the rest of the summer with Nana and Poppa, but Rose felt she was embarking on a strange journey, each event a step toward the next. So far, this summer was like no other before, the journey unlike any in her experience. Soon, though, the answers to these mysteries would be revealed. Exactly when, she couldn't tell, but she promised herself she would learn their secrets. She must.

