

THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

KEN HOLT *Mystery Stories*

THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

THE RIDDLE OF THE STONE ELEPHANT

THE BLACK THUMB MYSTERY

THE CLUE OF THE MARKED CLAW

THE CLUE OF THE COILED COBRA

THE SECRET OF HANGMAN'S INN

THE MYSTERY OF THE IRON BOX

THE CLUE OF THE PHANTOM CAR

THE MYSTERY OF THE GALLOPING HORSE

THE MYSTERY OF THE GREEN FLAME

THE MYSTERY OF THE GRINNING TIGER

THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAGICIAN

THE MYSTERY OF THE SHATTERED GLASS

THE MYSTERY OF THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

THE MYSTERY OF GALLOWS CLIFF

THE CLUE OF THE SILVER SCORPION

THE MYSTERY OF THE PLUMED SERPENT

THE MYSTERY OF THE SULTAN'S SCIMITAR

A KEN HOLT *Mystery*

THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

By Bruce Campbell

GROSSET & DUNLAP *Publishers*

NEW YORK

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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THE SECRET OF SKELETON ISLAND

CHAPTER I

AN OFFER OF A RIDE

THE PHONE BOOTH was hot and stuffy, and Ken Holt wiped the moisture off his forehead for the third time. He opened the door slightly to get some fresh air and just then the phone came alive.

"Here's your party," the operator intoned.

"Hello," Ken said loudly. "Hello."

"Global News," came the answer. "Granger speaking."

"This is Ken Holt, Mr. Granger. I'm out at school."

"What's up, Ken?" Granger asked. "Need some money?"

"It's not that. I just wanted to know if my father had come in."

"Your father?" There was a pause before Granger continued. "Why, kid? He's not expected so far as the office knows. He's still in France."

"I got a letter from him last week saying he'd be in on the eighteenth and that he'd call me. I haven't heard from him since. And today's the twentieth."

Some hundred miles of telephone wire carried Granger's booming laugh from the busy offices of an international news agency to the quiet corridor of Galeton Preparatory School.

"That's pretty good," Granger said, after he had stopped laughing. "He's only two days overdue and you're worried. He's famous for that, son. We've lost track of him

for weeks, but finally he'd let us know where he was or what he was doing. Forget it. He'll turn up when he gets good and ready."

Ken blinked to get the perspiration out of his eyes. He moved a little closer to the mouthpiece as if that would help Granger understand better.

"But you see, Mr. Granger, Dad wrote *me* that he'd be in on the eighteenth. He's never missed a date with me."

"There's always a first time, son," Granger answered. "This might be it."

"Your three minutes are up," the operator interrupted.

"Tell you what, Ken. I'll wire the Paris office and see what they know. I'll call you back later this evening. Don't worry. Richard Holt can take care of himself."

The phone went dead on Ken's "thank you." Ken dropped the receiver on its cradle and stepped out of the steamy booth into the cool air of the corridor. He turned toward the stairs that led to the second floor and his room, thinking over Granger's words and trying to get some comfort from them. By the time he got to his door he'd given that up. As his father Richard Holt, the famous foreign correspondent, had taught him, Ken always faced the facts. And the facts here weren't calculated to allay his fears.

He closed the door of his room behind him and sat on the bed to reread the letter for the tenth time.

Dear Ken:

Spring is breaking out all over, and if I didn't know that I was permanently infected with the bug, I'd say I was getting spring fever. How's about you and me cutting loose and going up to Maine for a week of fishing? And that's no idle chatter, either.

Things here are winding up—I hope—and I'll be home on the eighteenth. I'll call you as soon as I get my feet on the ground again and we'll make some plans for playing hooky.

And while you're planning the excuse you'll have to give old Doc Berdine, you might be trying that alleged brain of yours on the story I'm running down. It's big, and I don't think it's pretty. I'll give it to you just as I got it, and I won't give you my conclusions—partly because I'm not at all sure I'm right and partly because I feel it's a parent's responsibility to help develop his child's cerebral activity.

Here goes: On a routine assignment to Marseille I noticed a freighter (the *Lenore*) coming into port high out of the water—in other words empty. That's kind of strange these days when ships are scarce. I hung around on the assignment for two weeks, and before I'd left, another freighter (the *Louise*) had come in empty. I remarked on it casually to a friend of mine who lives in Marseille, and he said that these two ships almost always came in empty.

The well-known Holt-nose-for-news (which I hope you inherit) went to work then and dug up some more facts, to wit: Both of these ships take several days longer to make the trip between New York and Marseille than other ships of their class; both ships leave New York with practically no cargo; the captain of neither ship will accept bulky cargo at New York even at premium rates.

Well, there you have it. What do you make of it? You can give me your opinion when I call you on the eighteenth—which I will, rain or shine, or my name isn't

Richard Holt.

Ken folded the letter and slipped it into his wallet. Only one thing impressed him in what he had read—the eighteenth. Despite Granger's assurances, Ken was worried. If his father had arrived on the eighteenth he would have called. If he had been unavoidably detained he would have wired. Ken got to his feet and began to walk up and down. There was no doubt about it, he should have heard in any case.

It was all right for Granger to say Richard Holt could take care of himself, but accidents did happen. Suppose

he had been hit by a car and taken to the emergency ward of a hospital? And suppose he had no identification papers on him at the time? Then what? Pictures began to go through Ken's head in rapid succession—and none of them was pleasant.

Abruptly he stopped his aimless pacing and, swooping swiftly, pulled the bottom drawer of his bureau open. In a moment he had scanned the timetable he found there, and in another he was out in the hall again, heading toward the headmaster's office as rapidly as his legs could carry him.

Ken was glad, as he waited in the anteroom, that Dr. Berdine was a man one could talk to. He was fully aware that his fears were based on very slight grounds. He was completely understanding of Granger's attitude: sure, Richard Holt had always been the enigma of Global News, but he'd never been unpredictable so far as his son was concerned.

It took Ken only a few minutes to state his case to the headmaster. Dr. Berdine leaned back in his swivel chair and looked out of the window for a moment before speaking.

"Ken," he said swinging around again, "my first impression would be to agree with Granger. I think it entirely possible—and even probable—that he's right. On the other hand, I've known you for several years now, and I've never seen you so disturbed. I know your father pretty well, too. That's how he came to place you under our care."

Ken fidgeted in his hard chair. He didn't have much time, and he hoped Doc wasn't going to embark on a lengthy lecture.

"You see, Ken," the headmaster continued, "you are a great responsibility to us—more so than the other boys here. They have families they always can find. Your father is all the family you've got, and he's away most of the time."

"But, sir," Ken broke in, "I've gone to New York by

myself many times."

Dr. Berdine nodded. "And always at the request of your father, and with the knowledge that he was there waiting for you." He paused again. Then he got to his feet. "You're a pretty smart boy, Ken. I'd say you could take care of yourself as well as the next man. I also know that this is Friday and that there will be no classes until next Monday, so I guess you can go."

Ken was out of his chair before the headmaster had finished speaking. "Thank you, sir."

"One moment." The headmaster looked at his student carefully. There was no doubt of it—Ken looked as if he could easily take care of himself. A little short of six feet, with broad shoulders, he looked the athlete he had proved to be. And even a stranger could easily have guessed by looking at his intelligent dark eyes that Ken was as good a student as he was a football player. The smooth light skin of his rather rugged face was a strong contrast to his jet-black hair. He looked, as he stood there waiting for the headmaster's next words, like a steel spring ready to leap into action.

Dr. Berdine smiled a little. He was very fond of Ken. "Take care of yourself, and call us the minute you find anything." He opened his desk drawer. "Got enough money to carry you through?"

"I think so, sir."

"Better take this." The headmaster handed two ten-dollar bills across the desk. "Hurry along, or you'll miss the eight-thirty train."

It was ten minutes to eight when Ken reached his room again, and about ten minutes after by the time he left. He'd done nothing but change his clothes and get cleaned up. There was no reason for taking any luggage; he had other clothes in his father's New York apartment.

The early-evening dusk was darkening the tree-shaded streets of Galeton as Ken loped along toward the railroad station three blocks away. By the time the station came

into view it was quarter after eight. There was no agent on duty when he got to the ticket window so he went outside to sit on a bench until the train pulled in.

The platform was deserted except for himself, Ken noticed. Well, that wasn't unusual. Galeton folks didn't make a habit of running into New York. He glanced at his watch: five more minutes to go. Just then he heard the crunch of tires on the gravel roadway, and through the windows of the little station he could see the headlights of a car that parked on the other side of the building. As Ken was idly wondering who was meeting the train, he heard footsteps and a man appeared around the corner. The stranger looked around, and then, seeing Ken sitting in the near-darkness, approached him.

He was a man of medium height, a little on the plump side. Ken found himself thinking that a couple of daily turns around the track wouldn't do the dumpy figure any harm.

"Are you Ken Holt?" The voice was pleasant and friendly.

Ken got to his feet. "Yes."

The man extended his hand. "I'm Turner—Joe to the boys at Global."

Ken took the extended hand and shook it.

"I was just driving past," Turner went on, "when it suddenly occurred to me that Dick Holt's son went to school around here some place. I looked it up, and since it was right on my way, I decided to drop in and see you."

Ken didn't quite know what to answer. "It's nice of you, Mr. Turner," he said finally.

Turner waved his hand negligently. "Nothing at all. Thought it would be nice to tell your father that I found you in good shape." He scrambled in his pocket and pulled out a cigarette. "Dr. Berdine told me you were heading toward New York. That right?"

"Yes," Ken said.

"That's luck." Turner flipped the match across the

platform onto the tracks. "I'm heading back home myself. You can come along."

Far down the track a pin point of light appeared. It was the train coming in. Turner swung slightly to follow Ken's gaze.

"It'll take the train about six hours to make it—if it's on time," he said. "We can make it in less than five in the car."

In Ken's mind the prospect of saving more than an hour loomed large and important. He made his decision quickly. "Sure. I'd like to go."

Turner grunted for answer and led the way around to the back of the station. A big car was parked there—a sedan. Turner crawled in behind the wheel and motioned Ken to get in beside him. It wasn't until he'd closed the door that Ken realized that there was another man in the car, seated unobtrusively in the corner of the back seat.

Turner nodded in the direction of the back. "Meet Willie," he said. "He's one of the boys." He leaned forward, turned the key, and the motor throbbed into life. Turner swung the car out into the street smoothly and turned toward the highway.

"Some wagon, huh, Ken?" Turner faced toward him. "She'll do better than a hundred if she has to."

"Sure looks like it," Ken agreed, but he was not paying much attention. Something about the entire business seemed wrong. He leaned toward the driver. "I just remembered something, Mr. Turner. I have to make a call to Granger."

Turner looked puzzled. "Who?"

The uneasiness that had been bothering Ken solidified. Something *was* wrong. If Turner worked for Global he would certainly know who Granger was. Ken didn't understand what he had gotten into, but he certainly had gotten into something.

"Granger," he said, stalling for time. They were almost out of the town now, and he had to act fast if he were

going to act at all. "You know, manager of the New York office." Ken pointed ahead to a gas station that was looming up. "Would you stop a moment, please?" He put his hand on the door handle, although Turner had shown no sign of slowing up.

"Let go of the door." The voice from the rear seat was quiet but icy cold. It meant business.

"Better listen to Willie, son," Turner said. He was grinning slightly. "He usually means what he says."

Ken let go of the handle and turned toward the rear. The man was still slumped in the corner, but he lifted his hand to show Ken what it held. Ken swallowed hard once or twice and then turned back to face ahead. The gas station whizzed by, but Ken made no further effort to get the car to stop.

What Willie held in his hand was a dull, snub-nosed automatic!

CHAPTER II

A DASH OF PEPPER

A MILE CLICKED OFF on the speedometer without a single word spoken to disturb the smooth throb of the motor and the soft rush of wind past the open windows. As the first shock passed off, Ken could feel his muscles relax. Gradually the impulse to rip the door open and jump receded from his mind.

Very clearly he could remember the advice his father had given him a few years ago. "You see, Ken," Richard Holt had said at the conclusion of a story about a tight spot he had found himself in, "when you're hemmed in that's the time to figure your odds carefully. Closing your eyes and butting ahead will only give you a headache."

The odds, Ken conceded to himself, were definitely against him now. He compared his own solid frame with the pudginess of Turner beside him and the small, ferretlike Willie in the back seat. Those two he might be able to handle. But what he couldn't handle was the gun Willie held loosely but competently in his hand. So cutting and running for it was out—at least for the present. And running blindly was no solution, anyway. Why was he here? That was the first question to be answered.

What did these men want? Ken was sure they weren't kidnaping him for ransom: Richard Holt wasn't wealthy enough to merit such attention. Revenge? Had his father found out something about some gang or other? That was

a possibility, Ken admitted. Holt had often written stories that had resulted in drastic police action. But not recently—not for several years. Or was Richard Holt on the track of something that would . . . ?

Ken's mind jerked to a halt. What was it his father had written in that letter? Something about empty freighters that plied between New York and Marseille. Was he getting too close to something? Did someone think he could stop further investigation by kidnaping Holt's son?

"Answer when we speak to you, kid." The flat voice came from the back and was accompanied by a poke from the muzzle of the gun.

"What?" Ken stopped speculating to bring his thoughts back to the present situation. "What did you say?"

"I wouldn't waste my time doing that if I were you," Turner said.

"Doing what?"

"Planning on how to get away." Turner laughed briefly. "Willie wouldn't like that."

"What were you going to New York for, kid?" Willie was repeating his question.

"To see my father." Ken decided to play it safe—and dumb. The less he admitted knowing at this point, the less these men could find out. And maybe by making them ask a lot of questions he could get something out of them—something he could use when and if he got away.

Turner laughed again. "Then you ought to thank us. We're saving you the train fare."

"Are we going to New York?"

"Don't be too nosy." That was from Willie in the back.

"Not to New York," Turner admitted, "but we're taking you to your father."

"Where is he?" The question popped out before Ken could stop it. Now he knew why his father hadn't called. He forced himself to sit still, but inside he was seething.

Willie spoke up again, his voice even nastier this time. "I told you not to ask questions, didn't I?"

"Take it easy, Willie," Turner cautioned, and by the way the man in the rear seat subsided it was plain to see who was head man here. Turner spoke to Ken again. "We've got your pop safe and sound. He's all right, except he's been getting in our hair. We want him to stop snooping around where he's not wanted."

Ken couldn't think of any answer to make to this statement, so he sat quietly.

"We tried to convince him," Turner continued. "We offered to make it worth his while, but it didn't work."

"I could have told you that," Ken murmured.

"What's that?" Willie leaned forward.

"I didn't say anything," Ken said.

"You're a pretty wise kid, huh?" Willie's voice rose higher.

"Relax, Willie." This time Turner's voice had a real edge to it. "I'll handle this."

Ken made a mental note not to annoy Willie. And then he added a promise to himself: if and when he got Willie without a gun in his hand . . .

"We thought maybe you might convince him," Turner said, speaking to Ken again.

"How could I convince him?"

Turner shrugged his shoulders. "A man can be pretty brave when it's only himself he's got to worry about. But when it's his kid, he'll sing a different tune."

The rage that rose inside Ken drove away the momentary chill Turner's words had caused. It was the lowest trick in the world they were trying to pull. Richard Holt would never knuckle under to lawlessness to protect himself—but he might for his son. They mustn't be allowed to get away with it. One word went around and around in his head—escape, escape. But how?

For a long while no one spoke and Ken concentrated on memorizing the names of the towns they passed through, but he soon gave that up as a waste of time. As long as they stayed on Highway 52 it would be an easy

matter to reconstruct the path they followed. For this reason, too, he abandoned his attempts to keep an eye on the mileage they were covering at a rapid pace. That also would be easy to ascertain later.

They had driven about forty-five miles since they'd left Galeton, when Turner spoke again. "Must be pretty tough on a boy having to spend his life at boarding schools. I mean, without having a family to go home to during vacations, and things like that."

This change of pace on Turner's part puzzled Ken for a moment. He would have expected anything except this sudden solicitude. Again he decided to play it safe and say as little as possible. "It's not so bad."

For a brief instant Ken allowed his mind to flash back over his life during the past ten years since his mother had died. There hadn't been any relatives, so after a year of trying to keep a home going and do a job of reporting at the same time, his father had sent him to boarding schools. It hadn't been much fun at first, Ken admitted, but when he got accustomed to it, his life had become quite pleasant. Particularly vivid in Ken's memory were the periods when Richard Holt was near by and the two of them took long vacations together.

Turner was speaking again. "Yeah," he said, "I guess you can get used to anything after a while. I suppose," he continued, "that you keep in touch with your father by mail. He must write interesting letters."

A cog seemed to slip into place and a whole new pattern was formed in Ken's mind. Now he had it! Turner hadn't kidnaped him to help convince Richard Holt to abandon his inquiry into the empty freighters. They were afraid that Holt had told him enough about the case to make him a threat too.

And in that case both Holts had to be kept quiet. *Kept quiet!*

For an instant panic took control and Ken almost reached out for the door handle, but again he was able to

fight down the impulse. What was die best course to take? What should he answer Turner? If he denied knowing anything about the story, these men would feel free to do anything they wanted to him and his father. If he admitted knowing about it, they would feel compelled to silence them one way or another. The situation looked hopeless until a flash of inspiration crossed his racing thoughts. Suppose he admitted knowing about the story, but said that he had kept the letters? Then they would be afraid to touch either him or his father until they were sure they had all the evidence that could be used against the gang.

All this thinking had taken but a moment. Ken turned in his seat to face Turner. He must not let him realize that he had figured out the motive for this questioning. He held his voice perfectly level as he said, "Sure. Dad writes all the time."

If Ken had any doubts as to the accuracy of his deduction, the effect of his last words reassured him completely. Turner tensed visibly.

"Must be interesting to hear about the stuff he's digging up all over the world."

"Sure." In spite of the danger of his situation Ken almost smiled at the confusion evident in the man's manner. "He tells me what he's working on and writes me his ideas as they develop. Then when he finishes a story, and it's printed in the newspapers, I know the whole background."

"You must have a lot of letters by now," Willie said, and he sounded as if the letters were a personal insult.

"A whole boxful of them."

"Where do you keep all that junk?" Willie pressed, betraying his anxiety in his belligerent air.

"What business is it of yours where the kid keeps his letters?" Turner snapped.

Ken smiled to himself. Willie had really given things away, and Turner hadn't covered up by his angry remark. It was perfectly plain that they were afraid of the letters

and that they were just as afraid of Ken's finding out how much they wanted them. Turner, no doubt, was smart enough to realize that if he knew how important the letters were the gang would have a tough time getting hold of them.

And then Ken suddenly remembered that in his coat pocket he had the letter that mentioned the empty freighters. If these men ever found that out—if they ever searched him! . . . He knew that they might very well do just that when they got him to their hide-out.

There was only one solution—he had to get rid of it. Very casually he slipped his hand into the right pocket of his coat. He silently thanked the air-mail service because the letter was typed on thin tissue paper to save weight. Slowly, to make as little noise as possible, he crumpled the single sheet into a tight ball that easily nestled in the palm of his hand. A few minutes later he rested his hand on the ledge of the door and allowed the little pellet to fall through the open window into the night.

Turner, who had evidently decided that it was unwise to question Ken any further, settled down to his driving and the big car really began to zoom over the highway. Almost two hours went by while Ken made plans and discarded them. He had to get away somehow and tell his story to the police. But how? No matter what ideas occurred to him, none of them could overcome the ever-present threat of the gun behind him.

Turner's voice broke the silence. "Need gas."

Willie sat up. "O.K. I'll keep him covered." He spoke to Ken. "When we get to a gas station don't make a move—or a sound. I'll be watching you."

And Turner added. "Even if you could get away, it wouldn't do any good. If the police hear about this . . ." He paused. "It wouldn't be healthy for your pop."

"Don't worry about me," Ken said quietly. "I know when I'm licked." And he felt licked, too. His last prop had been knocked out from under him. These men thought of

everything. The police were out now, of course.

He sat there quietly while a gas-station attendant filled the tank and wiped the windshield, and all the time he could sense Willie behind him, the gun ready if the need should arise. He still had to get away—even if he couldn't go to the police. He had to get in touch with Granger at the Global News office. Granger would know how to handle it—without the police. It was Granger or nothing. There was no one else he could turn to.

The car pulled out of the gas station and started on its way again. Miles went by and another hour with them and still Ken had arrived at no workable plan.

"We turn off near here, don't we?"

"Pretty soon," Willie answered. "And then it's only ninety-five miles."

Ken repeated the figure to himself several times. This was the first bit of tangible information he had managed to get. Wherever they were going, it was ninety-five miles from the junction. When they made the turn, he noted that they were now on Route 23A. Furthermore, he figured, at the rate they were moving it would take them only about two hours to reach their destination. He didn't have much time. But another half hour went by and he was no closer to solving the problem. Up ahead there was a dim glow of light on the low clouds that heralded the approach of another of the small towns that dotted the highway. Soon a sign flashed by, white in the light of the headlights:

YOU ARE NOW ENTERING BRENTWOOD
SPEED 25 MILES

Turner allowed the car to slow down and they entered the sleeping town. Even the main street seemed deserted and dark, except for street lights. Just before they left the town they passed one building that was lighted up, but before Ken could even see what it was, they were in the darkness of the open country again. They turned a corner

and ahead of them was an all-night eating place, a big neon sign proclaiming that it offered curbside service.

"I'm hungry," Ken said suddenly.

Turner grunted. "Don't blame you."

"Let's keep moving," Willie advised. "We'll be there in a couple of hours."

Turner disregarded his confederate. He pulled the car into the parking place of the elaborate diner. "This'll do fine. You go in and bring out a tray, Willie. Leave me the gun."

"O.K."

Willie handed the gun across the seat and got out of the car. Turner settled back in his corner and kept an eye on Ken. Five minutes later Willie appeared carrying a tray—one of the kind that can be clamped to the door of a car—which he attached to the door on Ken's side, before getting back into the rear of the car.

"I'll take the gun," he said. "You and the kid eat first."

After the exchange had been made Turner reached across Ken and picked up a hamburger and a mug of coffee. "Go ahead, kid."

Ken picked up a hamburger and bit into it. Food was actually the last thing he wanted, but he had hoped he could get the car stopped. Now that he had succeeded in that move he had to go through the motions.

"Pass me the salt and pepper," Turner said through a mouthful. "These things taste like sawdust."

Ken did as he was told and then liberally sprinkled his own hamburger in an effort to give it some taste. It was just as he was replacing the salt and pepper shakers that the idea struck him. He finished his food rapidly and gulped down the coffee as Turner took the gun from Willie to allow the latter to eat. Ken passed a hamburger and the coffee cup back. The palms of his hands were damp with perspiration.

"Salt and pepper," Willie demanded.

Ken complied and waited for the containers to be

handed back. When he turned around to put them on the tray he palmed the pepper shaker and brought his hand down into the shadows between him and the side of the car. He worked feverishly to unscrew the top of the shaker before Willie finished and without letting Turner know that anything was going on.

He got it loose finally, and dumped the entire contents into his palm. Trying not to spill any of the pepper, he managed to get the top on again just as Willie finished and got out of the car. Making it look as if he were helping Willie unfasten the tray, Ken managed to get the pepper shaker back in place. Then, while Willie was returning the tray to the diner, Ken dumped part of the pepper from one hand into the other.

A minute later Willie reappeared and got into the car quickly. It was evident that he couldn't get to where they were going soon enough. Turner returned the gun, started the motor, and the car began to move. Ken sat tense, waiting for the opportunity to use the weapon he had acquired. It came sooner than he expected.

They had just jolted back onto the highway when Willie spoke up. "Forgot to get cigarettes. Got any, Turner?"

"Sure." The car maintained a slow pace while Turner groped in his pockets. He handed the pack to Ken. "Pass them back."

Holding his left hand carefully cupped, he took the cigarettes and turned to face the rear. Willie had leaned forward and, just as he took the pack, Ken swung his hand in a short arc and threw all the pepper it contained directly into Willie's eyes. Before he could cry out—even before the pepper could have taken effect—Ken had turned and thrown the pepper in his right hand into Turner's face.

The bellow of pain from the rear coincided with the cry from Turner. By that time Ken had reached forward to grab the wheel and had brought his foot down hard on the

brake. The car bucked and lurched and the tires screamed as it stalled to a stop almost instantly.

Both men were clawing at their eyes like animals as Ken ripped open the door and ran.

CHAPTER III

ALL ALONE

KEN HAD NEVER GONE out for track at school, but he found himself wishing that the track coach could clock him as he tore off into the darkness. The three or four hundred feet to the diner were covered in a matter of seconds. That was his instinctive goal—that patch of light. But his flying feet had no sooner reached the parking area when he swerved back to the road and ran until the darkness again swallowed him up completely.

Then he stopped to catch his breath. Behind him was the diner, and beyond that were the two sharp points of red—the taillights of Turner's car. Ken crawled across the ditch at the side of the road and walked twenty feet into the field beyond. There he felt safe for the moment, safe enough to think of the next step.

What he needed most was a phone. He had to get in touch with Granger to tell him what had happened and to get him to put his staff to work running down the few clues Ken had garnered. Catching the gang was important—sure. But more important was rescuing Richard Holt, and doing that without calling in the police if possible.

There was a phone in the diner, no doubt, but that was dangerous territory. When Turner and Willie had pulled themselves together, they'd head for water, and the diner would be the nearest source of that. If they found

him there, they'd hang around outside until they could get their hands on him again—or they'd come right in after him and claim he was a runaway from some school or other. He wouldn't stand a chance against their adult persuasive powers—nobody would believe him. No, the diner was out.

There was only one thing to do. Ken peered out from the bushes that bordered the road and made sure that they hadn't yet moved the car. Then he got back on the road and began to trot back the way they had come—back to the last town they had passed through. There must be a public telephone booth there some place.

Keeping his ears cocked for the sound of a car behind him, Ken covered the ground with long, easy strides. He had got his second wind by now, and the feeling of freedom seemed to put wings on his feet. As he rounded the turn in the highway he saw a sign announcing the town of Brentwood. A block went by and then another, and up ahead he saw a lighted building. He recognized it as the one he'd noticed from the car.

He had just started to cross the street toward it when he heard the sound of a car behind him. With a vault he cleared the hedge alongside the sidewalk and in a split second was prone on his stomach on someone's neatly clipped lawn. The car roared past and he rose to his feet grinning sheepishly. It was an old touring car.

A minute later he was standing in front of the building ablaze with lights, and reading the lettering on its front window:

BRENTWOOD WEEKLY ADVANCE

Ken grinned widely then. This was really luck. It shouldn't take him more than a moment to get a call through to New York. He looked inside the window but could see no one in the front part of the newspaper office. When he opened the door slightly he heard the clicking of

linotype machines from the pressroom in the rear, and the air current blowing through the far doorway carried with it the smell of hot lead from the typesetting machines.

And then he heard the throb of a motor from behind him. He looked back quickly, just in time to see two headlights swing into view and come toward him. He closed the door quietly and slipped around the corner of the building to hide behind some bushes that stood on the neighboring lawn.

From where he was crouched it was impossible to know whether the car had turned off on a side street or whether it was still coming. It didn't take long to find out. Running slowly and almost silently, the car came into view and stopped in front of Ken's hiding place. Turner was at the wheel.

Ken heard the door open.

"I'll look around in here," Turner said.

"Just let me get my hands on that kid." Willie's voice had become savage. "It was your idea to stop for food. We should have let him starve."

"O.K. That's over with now. We have to get hold of him somehow. As long as he's loose we're in trouble. Stay in the car."

Turner's footsteps crossed the sidewalk. Dropping flat on the ground and looking through the prickly bushes, Ken saw him approach the window of the newspaper office and stand there. Then he moved forward again and disappeared from sight.

A minute went by and then another and another. From the car there was nothing but silence. And then Turner reappeared and got back inside.

"Not there."

"Did you ask?"

"Don't be stupid," Turner snapped. "What was I going to ask for? A runaway boy?"

"How do you know, then?"

"There's no one in front. I just walked through quietly

and looked around. There's an old duck in the back working on a machine. He looks as if no one's disturbed him for the past fifty years."

"What do we do now?"

"Quit yapping and let me think."

During the silence that followed, Ken suddenly remembered that the license plate of Turner's car would offer invaluable aid in tracing it. He managed to wriggle backward out of the bushes without making any noise, and began to crawl toward the back of the car. But a second later he froze into immobility once more. Willie was speaking again.

"Maybe he's gone to the cops."

"He won't. He knows what will happen to his old man if he does."

"Well, he's got to do something."

"So do we—and I've got an idea." The motor roared into life, drowning out Turner's next words.

Ken was on his feet even before the car had pulled away from the curb, but his plan of taking down the license number was doomed: the rear plate had been carefully smeared with mud. He couldn't even be sure of the colors or the state.

As the taillights blinked out beyond a turn Ken roused himself. He strode to the door of the newspaper plant and had just opened it when he saw headlights coming up the street. This time he was trapped. He couldn't run for his previous place of safety because that would bring him directly into the glare of the approaching lights, and he couldn't stand where he was to be pinned against the door by those bright rays. He made up his mind when the car was less than half a block away, pushed the door wide, stepped through and closed it softly behind him. His head turned rapidly as he looked for a good hiding place. Quickly he rounded the counter that divided the cluttered office in two and dropped behind it out of sight.

He could hear the car pull to a stop, and then the front

door opened and feet shuffled through. The door closed decisively and Ken held his breath. Footsteps approached the counter slowly and then stopped. A voice said, "Come on up out of there."

In the short moment it took him to get to his feet he was conscious of a great feeling of relief—it wasn't Turner's voice, and it wasn't Willie's. Ken stood up and found himself looking at one of the biggest men he had ever seen. His massive head topped Ken's five feet ten inches by at least half a foot, and maybe even more. His shoulders looked as though they had to pass through an ordinary door sideways. He had a pipe in his mouth and as he waited for Ken to say something he puffed at it furiously.

Ken looked up to meet the stranger's eyes.

"Well," the man said in a voice to match his size. "What goes on here?"

"I—" Frantically, Ken tried to find some reason for hiding under the counter. "I was looking for a telephone."

"Under there?"

Ken swung around quickly toward the direction of the new voice and saw two replicas of the man before him. They were much younger, one of them looked about Ken's age, the second a bit older. They too were huge. There was no doubt in his mind that this trio was a father and two sons. Actually, the only difference between them was that the sons had flaming red hair and the father's was beginning to gray.

Ken felt almost like a pygmy surrounded by these three towering figures. He turned back to the father. "You see," he began and then stopped. What could he tell them? He couldn't say anything about what had happened without giving the story away. And these were obviously newspapermen. A story to them was something to be printed. And publicity meant the police.

"Look," he started all over again. "I wasn't trying to steal anything. I really was looking for a phone. Not under the counter, of course ... I mean that's why I came in

here."

"Running away from something, son?" The big man's eyes were wary and alert, but they seemed friendly even through the suspicion.

Ken nodded. This much he could admit safely.

"Police?" It was the older of the sons who asked that question.

Ken shook his head. "No."

"You're too old to be running away from home." The father tamped the ashes down into the bowl of his pipe with a huge forefinger as he made this observation more to himself than to anybody else. "Who do you want to call?" he asked, switching the conversation abruptly.

"Global News Service."

"Global?" The three of them stared at Ken.

"What do you want with Global?" Suspicion had given way to surprise in the older man's face.

Ken shook his head helplessly. "I can't tell you. I know it looks peculiar, but I have to speak to Granger at the New York office right away." He stopped and waited, looking from one to the other of these three redheaded newspapermen. "Look," he continued, "I have money to pay for the call—"

"Pay for the call?" The father grinned. "With the phone bills we get around here one more call to New York won't make much difference." He looked at his sons across the counter questioningly. They nodded almost imperceptibly. "Know the number, son?"

"Sure."

"Go ahead then. Use that phone on the far desk. You'll have some privacy there."

"Thanks." It was not the word, but the way it was spoken that showed Ken's relief. He almost trotted across the room to the phone and spoke to the operator in quick, breathless words. Now that he was going to talk to the man who could help him, Ken felt a desperate urgency—as if every second lost meant that his father were going

further and further away. It seemed like an hour before he heard a rasping voice in the receiver.

"Global News, Starky speaking."

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Granger, please."

"Granger?" The voice rose in question. "He's not here now. He's on duty daytime. Anything I can do?"

Ken swallowed the lump in his throat.

"Hey!" the voice called. "Are you still on? Is there anything I can do?"

"Do you know what his home number is?" Ken said. "It's important."

"Sure," Starky answered, the sarcasm very obvious. "I know—life and death."

"It is," Ken said, trying to keep his voice steady. "It really is."

"Well, maybe it is, but we're not supposed to give out home numbers."

"Listen, Mr. Starky," Ken pleaded. "I'm Ken Holt—Richard Holt's son. I have to get in touch with Granger. He was supposed to call me at the school, but I left before he could call. Did he leave a message for me?"

"Oh, Dick Holt's kid." Starky's voice lost some of its boredom and took on some warmth. "Why didn't you say so? Wait—I'll look on his desk. Maybe he did leave a message for you. I just came on a little while ago."

Ken waited while the minute hand of the big clock on the wall went around once before he heard Starky on the other end of the line.

"Yeah, kid. There's a note here saying he tried to call you at the school, but that you were on your way to New York."

"Anything else?"

"Yeah. So far as Global knows, your father is still in France." There was a pause and then the voice came through again. "And there's another note. . . ."

"I have to have Granger's home number, Mr. Starky. I must get in touch with him at once."

Ken's grasp on the phone had tightened until the knuckles were white and bloodless.

"If you'll give me a minute, Ken, I'll finish. You can't get Granger at home now. The other note says he's left for the West Coast by plane. He'll be gone a week."

"Oh!" Ken exclaimed in a whisper. With Granger gone, he had no one at all to turn to. No one else at the office knew him well enough to take any stock in the story he wanted to tell, or if they did, they would naturally suggest the police.

"Hey, you still there?" Starky asked again.

"I think so." Ken's mind was a complete blank and he wasn't even sure of what he was saying. Complete isolation closed in on him like a heavy fog. Starky was saying something else and he had to force himself to listen.

"You can get Granger at Global in San Francisco in a couple of days." There was a pause. "I guess that's all, huh?"

"That's all," Ken repeated flatly. "Thank you."

CHAPTER IV

THE ALLENS TAKE HOLD

THE CLOCK on the wall before him blurred in Ken's eyes and then faded out of sight entirely as he dredged up and discarded ideas. None of them was any good, he knew, because every plan of action that occurred to him involved help—speedy help. And since there was no friend he could turn to, the only help left to him was the police. But maybe they'd work quietly. Maybe the gang would never know he'd gone to the police until it was too late for them to hurt his father.

He became aware of a deep silence in the room and when he looked up he saw three pair of eyes staring into his. The father of the trio cleared his throat.

"Couldn't help overhearing some of your conversation, son."

Ken said nothing. There wasn't much you could say, he thought numbly.

"You Richard Holt's son?"

Ken nodded and then a surge of hope went through him. Maybe this newspaperman knew Dick Holt. Maybe he . . . "Yes," he said. "Do you know Dad?"

The big man shook his head and Ken's brief feeling of hopefulness vanished like a puff of smoke. "Never had that pleasure. Heard about him—and used his dispatches, of course."

That's a great help, Ken thought. There must be

several million people who had heard of Richard Holt or noticed his name on stories. But what good did that do?

"What kind of trouble are you in, son? Or can't you talk about it?"

"Sure. Maybe we can do something about it. We're newspapermen too." This from the older of the sons. "I don't mean we're in your father's class. . ." His voice tapered off in embarrassment.

There was something about these three tremendous men—something about the kind and interested look in the face of the father—that seemed to ease the terror that Ken was feeling. Perhaps it was the fact that they too were newsmen. Didn't Richard Holt always say that reporters would stop at nothing to get an exclusive story, but that they always stuck together when the going was tough for any member of the fraternity?

Could he tell these people his story off the record—to use one of his father's phrases? Caution urged him not to, but the need for talking with someone was too strong to be denied. Ken looked carefully at the father. He seemed all right—like a man who could be told something in confidence.

As if he had read Ken's thoughts, the man spoke again. "You can tell us, son. And we'll keep our mouths shut if whatever you tell us isn't criminal." He waited a moment. "I'm Bert Allen, but that probably won't mean anything to you. I own the *Advance*." He indicated the older of his sons. "That's Bert junior, and that's the baby of the family—Sandy." He grinned as if that word for his six-foot younger son were a family joke. "Everybody calls me 'Pop' to keep from mixing me up with Bert junior."

The name Pop Allen clicked in Ken's head. He'd heard something about him—something about the paper too. "Didn't your paper get an award last year?" he asked.

Pop grinned again. "Yep. Did a little cleaning up around here. County politics sort of got in the wrong hands for a bit." He leaned back, the chair protesting

against the shifting of that great weight.

"I'm Ken Holt." Ken mentally tossed a coin: heads he'd tell them—tails he wouldn't. Heads won. He took a deep breath. "This has to be off the record for a while even if it does involve criminals." He looked around the room and at the door leading to the pressroom. "Can I talk safely here?"

Bert crossed the room and closed the open door. "O.K."

Ken started his story at the beginning, when he received the letter from his father. He was enough of a reporter to tell a story tersely, and the Allens were smart enough to listen without making a single interruption. When Ken brought the tale up to the moment when the Allens had found him hiding beneath the counter, he felt as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. But when he saw that the three were staring at him unblinkingly he caught himself up. Didn't they believe him? Was the story that incredible?

"Quite a yarn, son," Pop said finally.

"But it's true!" Ken exclaimed. "Every word of it."

"Didn't say it wasn't," Pop lighted his pipe before he continued. "Course, it would have been nice if you'd kept that letter."

"But I couldn't. I was afraid they'd search . . ."

"Sure, Pop." Sandy took up the defense. "That was the only thing to do. Ken didn't know he was going to get away."

Pop glanced at his younger son and nodded. "I can see that, all right. I was just saying it would have been nice to have it handy."

"Look, Pop." Sandy leaned forward. "The men must have stopped at the diner to wash the pepper out of their eyes."

Pop nodded. "So you want to check to see if that's true?"

Sandy reached for the phone. "It will only take a minute."

"Not by telephone, Sandy. That'd be too obvious.

Suppose you take the car and run over there—get a cup of coffee or something. Don't ask questions directly and keep your ears open."

Sandy stopped on his way to the door and dropped his hand on Ken's shoulder encouragingly. "Don't worry."

Ken found himself smiling for the first time in hours. It looked as if he had found one friend, anyway.

"It's not that we doubt your word, son," Pop said, after the door had closed behind Sandy. "It's just that we get in the habit of checking everything in this business." He smiled at Ken. "And you must admit you gave us a pretty tall story—at least for simple countryfolks like us."

The pleasant tone of voice and the smile went a long way toward removing the dejection Ken had experienced at having his truthfulness questioned. And it was true, of course, that what he had told them was certainly strange.

"Come on, Bert. Let's get a little work in while Sandy's snooping. Got to get the paper out, you know."

The Allens seemed to have dropped Ken from their minds entirely as they turned to their typewriters. A man came through the front door and disappeared into the pressroom from which came increasing noises as a second linotype machine went into action. At intervals someone would come out of the back room, lay long sheets of freshly inked proofs on Pop's desk, and then pick up the sheets of paper that were coming out of the typewriters at a rapid rate.

The clock on the wall said two o'clock and Ken came to with a start as he realized that he had left school only six hours ago. The minute hand slid over another ten minutes and Ken began to wonder why Sandy was gone so long. It couldn't have taken more than five minutes to drive to the diner, and Sandy had been away almost half an hour. Maybe the men hadn't stopped there—maybe they'd just looked through the window—

"You'd better plan on covering the Chamber of Commerce meeting tonight, Bert." Pop had broken the

silence.

Bert looked up. "Why me? That's Sandy's job. I was going over to cover the high school play."

"You might have to do both. Sandy may be busy."

The front door opened with a rush and banged against the wall. Sandy almost ran into the room. "It's O.K., Pop. They'd been there—two of them. Joe down at the diner said he thought they were sick when they staggered in, but they told him a story about dropping a can of pepper out of a bag of groceries. Said the wind blew it all over the car and in their eyes." Sandy pounded Ken on the shoulders. "Man, oh man! What that pepper did to them!" He grinned happily.

Pop got to his feet and gathered several sheets of paper together. "Take these in to Hank, Bert. They'll keep him busy for a while. We've got some talking to do."

A minute later the four of them were huddled around Pop's desk waiting for him to speak. He knocked the ashes out of his pipe, refilled it, and got it smoking before he began.

"So all we have to do now is figure out what we have to do," Pop said at last, settling himself a little deeper into his chair. "I'd like to say right away that I think it probably would be smarter to get the police in on this."

"Do you really think so, Mr. Allen?" Ken's hopes, raised so high by Sandy's report, sank again. "After what Turner said—"

"I remember that threat." Pop nodded. "And it's easy for me to advise telling the police because it isn't my father that's being held. On the other hand," he continued, "there are some logical reasons for not calling the police right away. In the first place, I think it's fairly safe to assume that this gang is afraid of you—or rather of what you know and of the evidence they think you have."

"Afraid?" Sandy asked.

Pop shrugged. "Why else would they have kidnaped Ken? As long as he's at large he's a threat to them—a

threat to them even though they have Richard Holt. If capturing your father alone would have meant their safety, they wouldn't have bothered with you at all, would they, Ken?"

"I guess not," Ken said slowly. "But that doesn't help my father's position any. They can do whatever they want with him. They threatened . . ."

"Easy does it, son." Pop interrupted quickly. "We'll gain nothing by blowing our tops—or by sitting around here imagining the worst that can happen. Anyway, I think you're wrong. These men must be pretty smart, in their own way, if they've organized a really big-time racket of some sort. And it's not smart to ask for trouble. Why should they expose themselves by doing any serious harm to your father when, so far as they know, you've got as much evidence on them as he has? If they had both of you in their hands, of course, and knew they'd be in the clear if they could get rid of you—" He stopped, and let the sentence finish itself. "But as long as you're at large, Ken, I don't really believe they'll do any more than hang on to Richard Holt."

"But then they'll be after Ken again, won't they, Pop?" Bert asked.

Pop didn't side-step the issue. "I think that's pretty likely," he admitted. "But we Allens are fairly husky. Maybe we can prevent that."

"But I can't just sit here and be protected," Ken burst out. "I've got to do something."

"Well, who said you shouldn't?" Pop's great rumbling voice could sound amazingly mild. "But we want to get our plans straight first. We still haven't settled the question of calling in the police."

"Turner—" Ken began.

"But the police can work quietly when they want to, Ken," Bert broke in.

"Quietly, maybe," Pop agreed. And then he added, surprisingly, "But how fast d'you think they'd be on a job

like this?"

"Well—" Bert paused, as if he just realized he didn't know the answer.

"That's it." Pop nodded. "If *we* had reservations about Ken's story, how many do you think they'd have? They'd cable back and forth to France a couple of times, first of all, before they'd even be convinced Richard Holt had left there. Then they'd have to question everybody at Global. And then, if they really thought something was going on, they'd begin to make inquiries about freighters. The thing would take a lot of time—and some of the prying around would be sure to get back to this gang, if they're half as smart as I think they must be. Then they really might be forced into doing something desperate—something they wouldn't do if they thought Ken, and maybe even Global, were fiddling around trying to figure the thing out for themselves."

Ken nodded his head in agreement. "The only thing is," he added bleakly, "I don't see how I'll be able to get much of anywhere by myself."

Pop looked across the desk at him. "Hadn't you noticed," he inquired dryly, "that the Allens had dealt themselves into this?"

For a minute Ken looked back at them, and then he shook his head. "That's what I'm afraid of," he said finally. "I don't have any right to drag somebody else into this. I should have realized that when I—"

"You can stop right there." Pop Allen held up a mighty hand. "We Allens don't get dragged into things. We leap. Or perhaps I should say"—there was a twinkle in his eyes—"we walk forward steadily and fairly fast, once we get started. And there are folks who say it doesn't take much to start us. When we see one of our own breed getting pushed around, for example—the Allens have been newspapermen for three generations—or when we just happen to feel nosy—" He broke off. "We didn't have to do a cleanup job on local politics," he said quietly after a

moment. "We weren't being bothered any. But we just didn't like the smell of 'em." He was looking straight into Ken's eyes. "So unless you want us out, I'd say we're in."

Ken let out his breath in a big sigh. He hadn't realized until now, when it was all over, how alone he'd been feeling in a suddenly hostile world. But it wasn't entirely hostile any longer. He had friends.

"Want you out?" he muttered, and his voice sounded husky. "What would—?"

"Good. Then that's settled." Pop Allen was entirely businesslike again. "Now I'd say we ought to do a little more trackin' down of facts on this case. If we really put our minds to it, maybe we can dig up something that will convince the police a little quicker than we could with what we've got now. We won't waste time. If we can't find some new evidence in a day or two, go to the police anyhow, and try to get them to work quietly. But maybe we can save them some trouble and help *make* a little trouble for those gentlemen you met tonight." He nodded at Ken. "What have we got to go on?"

"Not much," Ken admitted. "We think it's got something to do with the freighters Dad wrote about," he itemized. "And we know the men were taking me to a place ninety-five miles from the junction of Routes 52 and 23A. And that's about all."

"Well, that's better than nothing." Pop swung around. "Bert, get me that road map out of your drawer."

When he had it unfolded and spread out on the desk, he pointed. "Here's your junction. Now, let's see. What's the scale on this thing?"

"Ten miles to the inch," Sandy told him.

Pop reached for a ruler. "Hmm. Nine and a half inches then." He laid the ruler along the road marked 23A and twisted it several times to follow its curves. Suddenly he looked up. "Sure you were right about that ninety-five?"

"That's what Willie said," Ken assured him.

"What's the matter, Pop?" Sandy was leaning over his

shoulder.

"It's out in the ocean—that's what's the matter."

"In the ocean?" Despair weighted Ken's voice. Had Willie deliberately tried to mislead him? But Willie hadn't expected him to escape. Why should he—?

"Let me look, Pop." Bert shoved Sandy aside. "How far out in the ocean?"

"Couple of miles, I'd say. It's ninety miles to Bayberry Dunes—and that's where the road ends, at that spot on the shore."

"But that's only five miles off," Bert pointed out eagerly. "Maybe Willie was a little wrong—or maybe it's impossible to measure a winding road that accurately on the map."

"You know," Ken said slowly, "it makes sense that it ought to be somewhere *near* the ocean—if it's got anything to do with freighters. Doesn't it?"

Pop shook his head. "Not near the ocean at Bayberry Dunes. That's an extra-special fancy summer resort. No docks there at all, except a real cute little one at the yacht club."

"Pop's right. It's a snooty place." Sandy knit his brows. "But look: even if they can't dock there—if it's got nothing to do with the business end of whatever's going on—they might have a lookout spot there, or a place to signal from or something. And, anyway, I bet it's where they were going to take Ken."

Bert nodded approvingly. "That's my hunch too. And besides, it's the only lead we've got. Why don't we investigate it?"

"Let's go." Sandy was on his feet before the words were out of his mouth.

"Not so fast, Speedy." Under his father's sudden glare he sat down again. "I don't want you running around in the dark after these men," Pop Allen went on. "They're not playing games, you know. Besides, Ken needs a little rest. Take him home and get him to bed. I'll call Mom and let

her know you're coming."

Ken's heart sank. He'd thought for a moment that there was going to be some action—that steps would be taken toward rescuing Richard Holt immediately. But Pop's words had been like a dash of cold water.

Then he realized what else Pop Allen was saying, and he was ashamed of his doubts.

"Then about seven, when it's light," the editor was telling Sandy, "you and he can use the roadster and take off. Keep Ken out of sight as much as possible—but he'll have to go with you because he's the one who could recognize Turner or Willie if you can track them down." He glared again. "By tracking them down I don't mean anything melodramatic, now, mind you. I just mean you'll look around and see if you see anything that looks in any way suspicious down there. If you do, you report immediately—and we figure out what to do next. Do you understand?"

His eyes fastened first on Sandy and then on Ken.

"Yes, sir," they said. Both of them were grinning, Ken faintly, Sandy widely.

"Good. Then get out of here." He swung back to his desk, but turned again before they were on their feet. "Don't worry, Ken. We'll muddle out of this somehow. But you"—he roared at Sandy—"you come right back here. We've got a paper to get out."

"Yes, *sir*."

If Ken had been surprised at the size of the Allens, he almost fell over when Sandy opened the door of a pleasant rambling house five minutes later. Mrs. Allen was as small as her husband and sons were large. As big as a minute, Ken thought to himself—and then decided that thirty seconds would be an even better description. He felt like a giant alongside of her, and Sandy dwarfed her completely.

"Hi, Mom," Sandy said. "This is—"

"I know. Ken Holt. Hello, Ken."

Her voice was low and pleasant. More than pleasant—

it was like a cup of hot rich cocoa after hours of skating in the cold. He took her extended hand. "Hello, Mrs. Allen."

"Better call me Mom." She smiled. "Everybody else does." She turned to Sandy. "Dad said to send you right back."

"I know. I'll just make sure Ken's settled in." Sandy started toward the stairs.

"Sandy." Mom didn't raise her voice, and the smile was still on her face. But somehow the single word was as effective as Pop's roar. "Back to the office. I'll get Ken to bed." As Sandy turned around, her smile widened. "Having raised two sons, I think I can be trusted with that stupendous task."

Sandy grinned down at her. "Yes, ma'am. I mean aye, aye, sir. I'm on my way." He looked over her head at Ken. "In case you haven't noticed it, Mom's the boss around here. If you don't behave, she'll spank you like she does us." He picked her off the floor, kissed her, and set her down again. "Take good care of him, Mom."

Twenty minutes later Ken, in a pair of Sandy's pajamas that were inches too long for him in the legs and arms, sank back on a spare bed in Sandy's room. It was almost too good to be true, he thought. He'd found himself a family. If only Dad weren't in trouble, it would be a wonderful world. But with the Allens on his side, they'd find Dad and . . . He fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

BAYBERRY DUNES

KEN FELT SOMEONE shaking him. He turned over and buried his head in the pillow, but the shaking continued.

"Come on, Ken. Rise and shine," a voice urged.

Ken opened one eye. For a second he stared blankly, and then he recognized the face above him and remembered where he was. He threw back the covers and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

Sandy was making the rounds of the windows, letting the shades zip up and allowing the hard early morning sunlight to fill the room. Then he picked up a bundle from the foot of the bed and tossed it to Ken.

"Clothes and sneakers," he said. "Hope they fit."

"Clothes?" Ken was still a little groggy. "What happened to mine?"

"Nothing—except that they were seen last night. Found you some like mine." He indicated the dark-blue dungarees and turtle-neck sweater he was wearing. "Clothes mask the man, you know—or hadn't you heard?"

"Thanks." As the confusion and misery of the night before came flooding back over him, Sandy gave his shoulder a friendly shove.

"Come on," he said. "It's almost eight. Mom's still asleep so I'll get us some breakfast. You'll have time for a shower if you make it quick."

"Thanks," Ken said again, as Sandy left. Ken wished

there were a more effective way to let him know how much he appreciated everything.

The hot water felt good, and the cold that followed it brought him completely awake despite the few hours' sleep he had had. When he was dressed—he had to turn up the dungarees a couple of times—he saw in the mirror a husky young man who looked more like a sailor than a prep school student. He supposed that Turner or Willie would still know him if they met face to face, but Ken didn't intend to have that happen if he could help it, and he was reasonably sure that at a distance he would go unrecognized. Sandy's idea had been a good one.

The odor of frying bacon and fresh coffee made him realize suddenly how hungry he was. Even blindfolded he could have found the kitchen merely by following his nose. Sandy was breaking the last of the eggs when Ken walked into the room.

"How do you feel?" Sandy asked. But before Ken could answer he pointed to a big glass of orange juice. "Go ahead. I've had mine."

Ken swallowed deeply. "Boy, that's good." He tipped the glass up again and finished it, rinsed it out and set it on the drainboard of the sink. "I feel O.K.," he said, "but a little jittery. As if I shouldn't have taken time out to sleep last night or—"

"Sure. I know." The toaster popped up with two slices of toast. "Butter those, will you? And put a couple more in."

Ken did as he was told. "Is this what the well-dressed newspaperman wears?" he asked, nodding at Sandy's clothes and his own.

Sandy slid eggs out of the pan and put crisp slices of bacon on both plates, poured two cups of coffee and then sat down, gesturing toward the other chair. "I've sailed before the mast, son," he said. "In me youth, that is. These shabby garments have seen the seven seas. Well, one of them, anyway," he added around a mouthful of toast.

"You? A sailor?"

"Avast there, landlubber. I'll have no disrespect." Sandy laughed. "No—not really a sailor. A mess boy on an old freighter last summer. And that was really the word for it. I sure was a mess."

"What do you mean?"

"This old tub was built during World War I. She was a good ship, all right, but whoever designed her ought to have had his head examined. The galley was amidships and the crew's mess was aft. So I had to load the food on a sort of carrier, climb down a ladder, cross the well deck, and then crawl into the messroom."

"Sounds like fun."

"Oh, sure. Especially when there was any kind of sea running. The deck was under water about half the time then. I'd hang onto the ladder until we were at the top of a swell and then run like the dickens. Sometimes I made it."

"And when you didn't?"

"I picked up the cans of food—those that hadn't been swept overboard—and went back to the galley to refill." He leaned back and sighed. "What a summer!"

Ken swallowed the last of his coffee and got up to take the dishes to the sink. It was pleasant enough, to talk about something besides his father, but nothing else seemed quite real. Until he *knew* what—

"Pop and Bert and I talked some more last night," Sandy said suddenly, as he washed a plate. "There isn't a lot to go on."

"Yes. I know." Ken picked up a towel. "I've been thinking about it too. What do we do if we can't pick up the trail at Bayberry Dunes? I keep saying 'we,'" he added, looking down at the dish in his hands, "but if you people—"

"Cut it out," Sandy said briefly. "It's 'we' all right. Bayberry Dunes is a small place," he went on briskly. "If the hide-out is there, we ought to be able to get wind of it somehow. If it isn't—but we can face that when we come to

it."

He cleaned up the sink and dried his hands as Ken stacked the last plate. "Let's go."

Ken followed him out to the rear yard where a battered roadster stood, and eyed it curiously. "New model?"

Sandy grinned. "Only twelve years old. But don't let it worry you." He fumbled with straps. "Let's get this top up. We don't want to be any more exposed to the public gaze than necessary."

The canvas was in only slightly better condition than the body, but it obviously had served its purpose well and would continue to do so.

"O.K. We're off."

Sandy turned the key and stepped on the starter, and Ken knew immediately why the car's apparent condition caused Sandy no concern. Her motor purred like a sleek, well-fed cat in front of a fire, as the dented radiator swung around and headed toward Bayberry Dunes.

"This used to be Bert's car," Sandy said. "The paint job shows a few signs of wear, but watch the speedometer."

They were passing the diner and Sandy stepped down on the accelerator for a moment. The needle on the meter whipped up to better than sixty in less time than Ken would have believed possible. Sandy eased off on the throttle and she dropped down again.

"You win," Ken admitted. "How fast will she go?"

"Bert's done almost ninety, but he said she was still gaining when he called it quits." He grinned. "Mom doesn't like us to drive fast."

They settled down to the business of getting to Bayberry Dunes, and once they hit the quiet open country Sandy let the car out a bit. The white road rolled under them with sleepy monotony. Ken lost a little of his tension—it was easier to stand the suspense once they were actually underway—and even dozed off briefly. He roused himself once to ask if Sandy wanted him to drive.

Sandy shook his head "Had plenty of sleep before I got

to the office last night."

Ken allowed himself to slip off again. He still had a lot of sleep to make up, and it was possible he might not get any that night.

It was an hour and three quarters after they had left the house when Sandy nudged him. "We're almost there."

Ken sat up straight, sharply awake. The flat country had given way to hilly dunes and there was a smell of salt water in the clear air.

"Where's the ocean?"

Sandy pointed toward his left. "On the other side of the dunes and about a hundred feet down. You'll see it in a minute."

In less time than that Sandy had guided the roadster around a hairpin turn and over the crest of a hill. The road widened out and he pulled over to one side and stopped.

"Come on." He pushed open the squeaky door.

Ken followed him across the road and a narrow grass shoulder to a stone fence. Down below was an island-protected bay and beyond that the blue Atlantic.

Sandy pointed directly below. "That's Bayberry Dunes—all of it."

Ken followed the outstretched arm with his eyes. The little village, white and neat, huddled at the foot of the hill they stood on. It was roughly semicircular in shape, its streets curved to fit the curve of the bay. Even at this distance Ken realized that it was a resort town of the more luxurious sort. With the exception of a few short blocks of business buildings, all the other structures were elaborate houses surrounded by large tracts of carefully manicured land. Each water-front property had its own dock reaching out into the quiet bay.

On the sheltered water a half dozen small sailboats tacked back and forth in the lazy breeze, their white sails startling against the deep blue. A speedboat put out from one of the private docks and sped seaward, leaving a white wake that marked the water like a chalk streak on a

blackboard.

But the thing that most dramatically caught Ken's attention was the island lying between the two arms of land that formed the bay. Perhaps a half mile across and twice that long, the smooth greens of a golf course were crowned by a shining white wedding cake of a building, flanked by several smaller structures and two long shedlike things big enough to be hangars. A sizable dock thrust shoreward, like a finger pointing to Bayberry Dunes, and alongside it rode half a dozen cabin cruisers, several large auxiliary sailboats, and two sleek mahogany speedboats. Near the dock was what appeared to be a ferry slip, and moving toward it was a snub-nosed ferry not much smaller than those Ken had seen plying the Hudson River between New York and New Jersey. Light glinted on the chromium trim of the huge cars that filled it.

Sandy noticed his gaze and grinned. "I see you've got expensive tastes," he said. "Bayberry Dunes is too rich for my blood, but *that* place"—he gestured toward the island—"that, me boy, is the ultimate something-or-other. According to the press, the Inlet Hotel and Country Club represents about five million dollars' worth of weekend rest and relaxation. I understand you can have one of their smaller rooms for about fifty simoleons a day." He laughed. "And to think that Skeleton Island was once a hangout for pirates."

"Skeleton Island?" Ken was curious. "Why was it named that?"

"The story is that years ago somebody dug up a skeleton of one of the pirates who used to frequent the island."

"Captain Kidd maybe," Ken chuckled.

But his face sobered immediately. "Well, I guess that snooty country club is one place we don't have to bother searching. But none of *those* places looks much like a gang hide-out either." He leaned on the stone wall to look directly downward at the estates of which the village was

composed. "They all look so—respectable."

"If it's a smart gang that's exactly the kind of a hideout it would choose," Sandy pointed out. "Come on. Let's go down and have a real look. I just wanted you to get the lay of the land first." They started back to the car. "The names on the gates of the houses won't mean anything to us, of course—we can't expect our pals to announce themselves. But we can at least copy them all down and have them checked. If we should run across somebody who is connected with shipping, for example, we might have some kind of lead."

Suddenly it seemed to Ken that their plan was foolish and hopeless.

"Even if they're somewhere in this neighborhood, they may not be right in town," he said. "We could be a couple of miles out in our calculations, and that would mean—"

"Sure. And on the other hand we might see Turner or Willie or their car the minute we get into town."

"Yes. That's right." Ken managed a small grin, and reminded himself that there was no use giving up before they'd begun.

The village and its outlying estates covered more territory than Ken had realized from the top of the hill. It was an hour later when they returned to the center of town from their last exploration of a residence-bordered road. Sandy pulled up before a drugstore on the main street and shut off the motor.

"How many?" he asked.

"Thirty-five." Ken tried not to sound as defeated as he felt. Thirty-five names—and he hadn't the first glimmering of an idea as to how quickly they might be checked for clues. And in the meantime—

"Let's call Pop," Sandy said suddenly. "Maybe he's got an idea."

A languid soda fountain clerk put down his cloth as they pushed their way through the heavy swinging glass door, but when they headed for the telephone booth at the

rear he resumed polishing an already gleaming coffee urn.

"What's the number at the *Advance*?"

Sandy told him and Ken started into the booth. He had picked up the receiver when he suddenly remembered something.

"I'd better call my school. If they don't hear from me they're likely to start sending out inquiries and that's one thing we can do without."

Sandy nodded agreement.

A moment later Ken heard Dr. Berdine's secretary on the wire and asked to be connected with the headmaster.

"Ken!" The warm voice sounded relieved. "I've been hoping you'd get in touch with me. Your father called a little while ago."

"My father!"

"Yes—about an hour ago. Said he was afraid he'd missed you, and that if you came back here, or telephoned me, I was to tell you to meet him at the apartment right away."

"Where was he calling from?" Relief made his voice crack on the last word.

"Why, from the apartment, he said. He'd just got in. He tried to tell me what had delayed him, but the connection was bad and I couldn't catch it. Where are you, Ken?"

"Did you say he was calling from the apartment?"

"That's what he told me. Where did you say you were, Ken?"

"I'm—" He was shaking now. Something was wrong. Very wrong. "I've been staying with friends, sir—people in the newspaper business. Thanks very much, sir. I'll get in touch with you later."

The minute he hung up he thought perhaps he ought to have asked Doc Berdine some further questions. But then Doc would have asked questions of his own and—

"Your father's O.K.?" Sandy's face was a grin from ear to ear.

Ken swallowed. "Doc said he'd called. From the

apartment."

"That's what I gathered. Boy, you must be—I don't suppose you found out how he got away from them, or anything?"

"I don't think he did." There was a ringing in Ken's ears and he felt as if his head were spinning like a top. "He said the apartment, Sandy—and Dad doesn't have a phone there."

"Doesn't *have* a phone!" Sandy looked blank.

"That's right. So—"

"But maybe your—whatever-his-name-is-was mistaken. Maybe your father said you should *come* to the apartment and he thought that's where he was calling from."

"Maybe. Sure. That must be it. I'll call Global and see."

But nobody at Global knew anything. Granger wasn't there, of course, but his assistant would have known if Holt had been around.

Ken was shaking again by the time the fruitless conversation was over.

Sandy clutched at another straw. "Maybe your father's deliberately staying away from there—doesn't want them to know he's in town until he's had a chance to get together with you."

Ken had to admit there was that possibility, but he couldn't believe in it.

"Doc Berdine said the connection was bad. You could make it sound like that if you had to disguise your voice, couldn't you? If you were saying you were somebody you weren't?"

"I guess so. And if Turner's trying this stunt to get hold of you again—Come on, we're going to call Pop."

Sandy grabbed Ken's arm and swung him around toward the booth. But Ken almost threw him off balance by stepping swiftly inside the booth and dragging him along, so that the tall redhead filled the doorway.

"What's the idea?" Sandy muttered, wedged in the

narrow space.

"That's Turner. Just come in. Buying cigarettes. We'll trail him."

CHAPTER VI

ON TURNER'S TRAIL

SANDY BARELY HAD TIME to get a look at Turner before the man left, his purchase completed.

The moment he disappeared beyond the edge of the glass door the boys left their protecting booth and started after him. They reached the front of the store before he could have walked ten feet. But just as they arrived at the door, a stout, matronly summer visitor appeared on its other side, her heavy arm outthrust.

Ken decided this was no time for courtesy, grimaced wildly in what was meant for an apology and a request to stand aside, and pushed against the glass.

But her weight was against him! The immovable object on the other side stood firm. The door remained closed.

Ken realized his mistake and stepped back. So did the woman. Then, after a moment in which no one moved, Ken tried again. And she too stepped forward. The door was still between them.

"Stand all the way back," Sandy said, jerking Ken away with one hand and gesturing invitingly with the other.

But the same thought had occurred to her. Just then she stepped back, with an inviting gesture.

They all held their positions briefly, until each decided that the other would not move. And then, inevitably, they both came forward once more simultaneously.

But this time Ken recovered quickly enough to release his pressure almost in the instant he applied it. The door moved slightly inward. He grasped it by its edge and pulled it wide, slipping through with Sandy at his heels before the woman could enter.

"Sorry!" Ken said as he passed her.

"Excuse us," Sandy added.

And then they were both outside in the brilliant sunshine looking frantically up the street and down.

There was no sign of Turner.

"He had to go one way or the other," Sandy said.

"Unless he went inside somewhere right near by."

"In that case we're sunk. But if he didn't—Let's get the car."

Two minutes later they had driven to the street's end in one direction without catching sight of their quarry. Sandy swung the car around in flagrant disregard of a sign prohibiting U turns, and started back. When they had again come to the end of the street without success, he pulled over to the curb and stopped.

"Now what?"

"We had a chance and missed it." Ken's voice was bitter.

"Well, we couldn't help it." Sandy glanced down the broad highway into which the street flowed at this end of the village. "If he came this way he may have been heading out of town."

"Hey!" Ken jerked erect. "Could you get to New York that way? It's the road we came in by, isn't it?"

"Sure. You turn at the fork ten miles down for New York."

"Then I bet that's where he went. If they faked that call to get me to the apartment, somebody must be waiting there for me to show up. Turner may be going in to check on it."

"What are we sitting here for?" Sandy snapped on the ignition.

"I'll report to your father first." Ken glanced around. "That gas station ought to have a phone."

Three minutes later he was back in the car. "Let's go. Your pop and Bert were both out, so I just left word where we were going and why."

He glanced at Sandy a little uneasily as the car sprang ahead. If Pop Allen had been in, would he have approved? After a moment Sandy caught his eye, and it was clear he had been asking himself the same question.

"Well," Sandy said, "we did try to get him. And, after all, we're just going to look around. We won't get into any trouble."

"If we think there's anybody in the apartment, we'll call a cop," Ken agreed. "We could charge burglary."

"Sure. We'd call the police the minute we had anything we thought they'd listen to." They were both relieved that it was settled.

Sandy let the roadster out until the country was flowing by in a smooth green blur.

"How much of a start do you think he's got on us?" Ken asked. "There was that business at the door, and then we looked around town and I made that call—ten minutes, I guess, at least."

"Nearer fifteen. And he's probably driving as fast as we are, so he should be about twelve miles ahead of us." Sandy remembered something. "Did you read off our list of names over the phone?"

Ken shook his head. "I hated to take the time. We will the next time—unless we catch up with Turner and he leads us right to what we want to know."

Sandy looked in his rear-view mirror. There was no one in sight behind him and nothing in front. The road was flat and fairly straight. His foot went down on the accelerator a little harder and the needle on the speedometer moved to the right.

"Of course," he muttered, when ten swift miles had gone by, "he's probably making just as good time as we are

on these open stretches."

They didn't talk much after that. Speculation as to what they would find when they reached New York was almost pointless. Both of them had the uneasy feeling that they were making the long trip for nothing and wasting precious time, but neither of them wanted to say so.

Traffic grew heavier as they neared town and Sandy was forced to slow down. Twice he left the highway and drove short distances on back roads to avoid congested areas. When they rejoined the highway after his second detour they were within fifteen miles of the city, and after that the crush of vehicles prevented a speed of more than thirty miles an hour.

The absence of trucks on the Pulaski Skyway beyond Newark gave Sandy's expert driving a chance to weave in and out of cars, and almost before Ken realized it they were diving into the white-tile-walled Holland Tunnel beneath the Hudson. When they saw daylight again they were in New York City.

"You'll have to direct me from here," Sandy said. "I don't know this town well enough."

"Swing left on Canal Street," Ken told him. "We'll hit the West Side Express Highway and stay on it up to 72nd Street. The apartment's on West 70th."

But when they reached the ramp leading up to the highway they found a traffic jam around a stalled car, and Ken directed Sandy around it and northward along the lower level. "Take the next ramp up," he said.

The broad street along the river wharves was packed with loading and unloading trucks.

"Home was never like this," Sandy muttered, skirting a huge trailer casually backing across the right of way. "I don't see how—"

"Look!" Ken grabbed Sandy's arm. "That car! The one with the Venetian blind in the back window."

Sandy glanced for an instant in the direction Ken was pointing, but before he could see anything unusual, a

truck cut across in front of him and he had to slam on his brakes to avoid crashing.

"Pull in there," Ken said quickly, pointing to a space between two piles of crates awaiting transfer.

"Can we park here?" But Sandy was already nosing the car into the spot Ken indicated. "What's up?"

"That's Turner's." Ken nodded back over his shoulder toward an empty car parked between the uprights supporting the elevated highway over their heads.

Sandy pulled the hand brake up so abruptly that the roadster rocked. "Well, it's a small world." He grinned. "I'd like to meet that gentleman." He made a fist of his hand—a fist the size of a grapefruit. "What do we do? Go find him?"

"I sure wish we could discover what he's doing around here." Ken indicated the piers lining the far side of the street. "If there happens to be a ship in over there called the *Lenore*—or the *Louise*—"

"You stay here," Sandy decided. "And keep out of sight. I'll snoop around."

"O.K. If somebody comes along and says we can't park here, I'll go around the block slowly until you turn up."

"Right." Sandy slid out of the car and walked off.

Ken slumped down in the seat until he was practically invisible and settled himself to wait. To the right of the car a truck backed up to a pile of crates and began to load them. Behind it a traffic jam developed that seemed to call for horn blasts from every vehicle on the street. The driver of a horse and wagon added his bit by shouting at the top of his voice. Things finally calmed down when a mounted policeman took charge and got the cars moving again. For a moment, Ken thought he would be ordered away, but the police officer evidently had more important matters on his mind than one small road' ster.

Suddenly Sandy was back again and beneath the wheel.

"Had quite a job. You can't see anything from the street, so I had to sneak inside the pier building while the

guard was busy. There are two ships tied up in there. One's a Swedish ship with some funny name, but the other's the *Louise*. She's a little old tub."

Ken let out his breath in a big sigh that was half relief and half confirmed fear. "We're on the right track then."

"It looks like it. So what? What do we do now? We wouldn't get any place if we waited around here for Turner and asked a traffic cop to arrest him when he turns up."

Ken sat up straighter. "We've still got to take a look at the apartment. And you're right—there's no sense waiting for Turner here. He may be in there for the day, and carrying on some legitimate business right now, for all we know. Anyway, all he'd have to do would be deny anything we said about him. So let's get on up town."

Sandy turned the ignition key.

"Wait." Ken stopped him. "I just remembered. We need his car license number. Maybe I can scratch off enough dirt to see it." He reached for the door handle.

"I'll do it. Keep your face out of sight around here."

When Sandy returned to the roadster a moment later his eyes were ablaze with excitement. "Got it all right. Illinois plate. But guess what else?" He didn't wait for Ken's answer. "Pasted on the windshield is a little sticker that says he's a guest of the Inlet Hotel and Country Club! How do you like that?"

"Are you kidding!"

"Imagine Turner staying at a snooty resort like that."

Ken shrugged his shoulders. "I guess they'll take anybody who can afford the price."

"Yes. You're right." Sandy settled himself under the wheel. "Well, then, let's get on up to your apartment and see what we can learn." He looked around the busy street. "I'd like to call Pop first, but this doesn't seem a very good neighborhood for telephones."

"We'll know more pretty soon, anyway," Ken pointed out. "Let's wait until we've had a look around at home, and then call him."

They got up on the elevated highway at the next ramp and fifteen minutes later were descending to ground level again at 72nd Street. Sandy turned the car south at the first block at Ken's direction, and then east on 70th.

"There's the house." Ken pointed to a five-story brownstone building on the right. "Pull up a few doors past it to park."

Sandy turned off the motor. "Now what? What's the setup?"

"Dad's place is on the fourth floor. The street door's locked. When you press the bell for an apartment, somebody inside has to push a buzzer that lets you open it."

They both thought a moment.

"Well," Sandy said finally, "suppose I go over and ring your father's bell, and if somebody lets me in, I'll just say I've made a mistake—that I'm looking for a Mr. Smith."

Ken shook his head. "If there's anybody up there—any of Turner's gang—they wouldn't press the buzzer, Why should they?"

"They might think it was you."

"They'd probably know I'd have a key." Ken struck his forehead with his hand. "What's the matter with me? I do have a key—two of them. One for the downstairs door and one for the apartment. Come on."

"Wait a minute. Wouldn't it be safer if I went alone?"

"It would not. And besides this happens to be my problem. Remember?"

"O.K." Sandy glanced upward. "We can't tell anything Joy the windows, I suppose?"

"No. Dad's place is at the back. Look: we'll try to get upstairs without being seen, and then see if we can hear anything through the apartment door. If we do—and we're sure it's not Dad—we call a cop. Right?"

"Right."

They grinned at each other briefly, and then each turned to open the door on his side of the car.

"At least we know Turner isn't there," Ken said quietly, as they crossed the sidewalk. "But if we can get one of his pals arrested, it might be better than nothing. Especially if it's Willie." His lips tightened at the memory of that unpleasant character.

"Anyhow they can't see us approaching the house, since the apartment has no windows in front."

The words sounded cheerful, but Ken's hand was unsteady when he fitted the key into the lock of the downstairs door, and Sandy tripped a little over the threshold and caught his breath with a quick gasp as if he had been holding it.

Ken led the way down the dimly lit hall to the mahogany-railed stairs.

On the second floor they paused and listened. For a moment it seemed as if the whole house must be empty or sleeping, and then they heard the faint comforting sound of dishes rattling behind the door at the rear.

Ken glanced at Sandy, nodded upward, and they walked quietly down the hall to the second flight and began to climb again. At the top they stopped once more, and strained their ears to catch any sign of life from the floor above.

For an instant Ken was certain he heard something, but just then a third-floor radio blasted into sound, quick footsteps crossed a wooden floor on the other side of the wall along which they stood, and music, laughter, loud talk, followed one another in rapid succession as some householder twirled a dial.

"Let's go," Ken whispered quietly, and they started up the last flight. A moment later he was peering cautiously around the newel post at the head of the stairs. There was no one in sight. He gestured toward the rear door and Sandy nodded.

Walking on their toes they approached it, step by step, feeling their way in the hope of discovering a creaking board before it caused their own discovery. Finally both of

them were within a foot of the door, and Ken bent his head so that his ear almost touched the wood.

After a long moment he straightened up, shaking his head and gesturing toward the floor: he could hear nothing but the radio in the third-floor apartment below.

"You try," his lips said silently.

Sandy leaned forward to put his ear against the door—but the door wasn't there.

It had opened wide suddenly and silently, and in the doorway stood Willie, gun in hand.

"Nice of you to call," he said, smiling unpleasantly. "Come in."

CHAPTER VII

WILLIE IS THOROUGH

NUMBLY THE BOYS allowed themselves to be motioned inside while Willie locked the door behind them.

"Handy with pepper, aren't you?" he said, coming close and glaring into Ken's eyes. His free hand lifted menacingly, but a sudden move from Sandy halted the gesture in mid-air. Quickly Willie stepped back a pace and swung the gun back and forth in a short arc that covered them both. "No, you don't. Don't get any ideas that you can jump me just because there are two of you. This thing can shoot quicker than you can jump."

"Willie doesn't kid around," Ken said quietly, not looking at Sandy but aware of the tense body slightly crouched beside his own. "So take it easy."

"That's right. You're getting smart, aren't you?" Willie backed up another two steps and lowered himself into a chair. "You two can stand," he said. "Let me know if you get tired. I'll be glad to hear about it." And he laughed.

The ugly sound seemed to hang in the air while they were all silent for a moment.

With a sense of faint relief Ken felt Sandy straighten up. It meant the redhead wouldn't start anything right away, and instinctively Ken knew the wisdom of not irritating Willie. Turner was too intelligent to use a gun unless it was absolutely necessary; Willie wasn't that clever.

The familiar room—the room Ken had always wanted to come home to, and had always hated to leave—seemed curiously unfamiliar now that Willie sat in Richard Holt's favorite chair. For an instant Ken's eyes roamed around, and he wondered if anything had really been changed. But no; everything was as it had always been. The heavy dark-red drapes at the windows, the long rows of books on the shelves, the ancient brass box on the table that Ken had kept his most precious possessions in when he was a kid—all were there. But they *looked* so different now. Suddenly Ken was swept by panic, as if everything that he had ever known or trusted were slipping away from him. The sensation was more terrifying than the sight of Willie with his gun.

"What are you going to do with us?"

Sandy's steady voice broke the mounting wave of terror that was flooding over Ken. Abruptly he stiffened and pulled himself together. Sandy hadn't lost his head. He mustn't either. They'd get out of this—somehow. After all there were two of them.

"Don't worry about that." Willie fished a cigarette out of his pocket and managed to get it lighted without shifting the gun muzzle more than a fraction of an inch. He looked Sandy's six feet up and down. "Who are you, Pinky? How'd you get in on this?"

"He's got nothing to do with it," Ken said quickly.

Willie brushed the words aside. "I wouldn't believe anything *you* said. I suppose you're going to tell me he just came along for the ride." He glanced back at Sandy. "I asked you who you were."

"It's none of your business," Ken insisted sharply, before Sandy could answer. Anger was building up in him now, and the angrier he got the less afraid he was. He certainly didn't want Sandy involved any more than he was already.

Willie got to his feet and took a step toward Ken before he realized that he couldn't focus his attention on one of

the boys without allowing the other an advantage. Ken could almost see the man's slow wits figure *this* out, and then Willie backed up again to his chair where he could cover them both in comfort and safety.

"O.K., O.K. Be a wise guy," Willie muttered. "We have a special treatment for wise guys." He sat down, ground out his cigarette on the rug beneath his feet, and lighted another one. "Not getting tired, are you?" he asked then, and laughed again.

"Keep your mouth shut," Ken had said beneath his breath to Sandy as Willie was settling himself.

"O.K.," Sandy said quietly.

Ken knew the other realized the importance of keeping the Allen name hidden as long as possible. For one thing, it would give Pop Allen a better chance to figure things out and—But how could anybody, miles away, figure *this* angle out and do anything about it until it was too late? And if they didn't get help from outside, and Willie *did*—

The minutes slipped by. It seemed to Ken that they had already been standing there for hours side by side in front of the fireplace, staring straight ahead over Willie's dented hat. But when he looked down at his watch he calculated that they must have entered the house not more than a quarter of an hour before.

Suddenly the doorbell sounded. Ken tensed, and then felt his heart begin to thud harder than ever beneath his ribs as the ring repeated itself in a series of long and short jabs that was clearly a signal.

It was, obviously, a signal that Willie recognized. He struggled up out of the deep chair and walked crabwise toward the door, his gun still pointed. His finger pressed the answering buzzer, and after another moment or two he opened the door into the hall and held it open with his foot.

They could hear the mounting footsteps and then Turner appeared in the narrow aperture and thrust the door wide. For an instant he stood quietly, looking from

Willie to the boys. Then he closed the door and Willie locked it.

"Got 'im," Willie said happily.

"So you came home," Turner said to Ken, ignoring Willie's glee. When Ken didn't reply he smiled faintly. "You're a sucker when it comes to your father, aren't you? One word from him and you—"

"I—" Ken stopped. He'd been about to say "I knew that was a faked phone call," but decided that it might be as well to let Turner think what he chose.

Turner waited a moment, as if politely expectant of what Ken had begun to say. But when Ken was silent, he merely nodded and smiled again. "Fine thing," he said. "Filial devotion. Like to see it. And now who is this?" He looked questioningly at Sandy.

"They won't talk," Willie offered. "But if you'd like to take this gun a minute and let me—"

"Hold it, Willie." Turner's quiet words sponged away the eagerness in Willie's face. "Time for that later. Too bad *you* had to get into this though," he added to Sandy.

The worst of it was, Ken thought wildly, the man really sounded as if he meant it—as if he were thinking of Sandy when he said it was too bad. Turner's calm politeness, his close resemblance to a normal human being—to one of the teachers at school, or the sort of man Dad might bring home for an evening's talk—was the most terrifying thing about him. It was like the living room of the apartment suddenly seeming frighteningly unfamiliar.

"It may be too bad for *you*."

Turner looked up sharply as Sandy unexpectedly answered him.

"I've got a family that's going to start looking for me pretty soon—and they've got a pretty good idea of where I am."

"Really?" Turner looked casually interested. "But you see you're not going to be here very long," he said. "We don't want to make a spectacle of the business of

transporting you boys elsewhere, but just as soon as it's dark we'll all be moving on. And I'm very much afraid your family isn't going to think of looking for you in the place we're taking you to." He smiled, as if he'd just given them a piece of welcome information, and then turned slightly away from them to study his watch thoughtfully.

Ken's fingers clenched in impotent rage. He glanced sideways at Sandy and their eyes locked for a moment of angry misery.

"We'll have to make these fellows secure here for the afternoon, Willie." Turner was brisk again. "I can't spare you to watch them the rest of the day. Let's see." He glanced around the room, as if measuring its value as a prison.

"I can fix them so they'll be safe," Willie offered.

"I don't mean that," Turner told him shortly. "I just want them tied up so they can't move—and I mean can't move at all. You understand?"

"Sure. Sure. I understand." Willie grinned.

Ken understood too. They weren't simply to be locked in; they were to be prevented even from reaching one of the rear windows to shout for help. Turner knew his job.

Willie handed the gun to Turner and disappeared briefly. When he returned he had a wide roll of adhesive in his hand. Ken remembered that roll. He'd bought it last year when he and his father were planning to fix up—He cut the thought off abruptly. He did not dare let himself think about his father right now.

"This'll do fine, won't it?" Willie asked.

Turner considered. "I should think so. But don't do it here. Take them in the bedroom."

Turner did know his job. The bedroom had only one window—Richard Holt used it as little as possible for that reason, preferring to sleep on the living-room couch except when Ken was with him; and that one window opened on the blank, windowless wall of the apartment house next door. Banging their bound hands or their heads against

the wall would attract no one's attention.

Prodded by the gun, the boys walked into the adjoining room and sat down, at Turner's nod, on the chairs Willie had brought in from the corner by the desk. He had chosen two heavy wooden armchairs—"Carved atrocities! Where'd we ever get them?" Richard Holt had often remarked. While Turner held the gun, Willie professionally taped their wrists to the arms and their ankles to the legs. He bound the adhesive so tightly that within less than a minute the boys felt the beginnings of numbness caused by lack of circulation.

Then he proceeded to stick a strip of adhesive over each boy's mouth.

"Hope you can breathe comfortable through your nose," he commented as his grimy thumb pressed the strip savagely down on Ken's mouth.

Finally he jerked off both the boys' belts and strapped their bodies so closely against the backs of the chairs that it was difficult to draw a full breath.

Turner inspected the bonds carefully. "All right."

"When I tie somebody they stay tied."

"I hope so." Turner's casual tone left no doubt that even though Willie need not expect praise, he might expect something quite different if he ever failed in his duty.

"Sorry you wouldn't be able to turn the pages if I gave you some books," Turner said smilingly to the captives. "But it'll only be a couple of hours—well, say four at the outside—and then perhaps we can make you more comfortable." He bent for one last glance at the belt buckles fastened well beyond their reach behind the chairs.

"Don't worry," Willie said with a grin.

"No. No, I won't. You have your talents, Willie." And without a backward glance he left the room, Willie trotting after him and, at Turner's backward nod, closing the door. Their two voices could be heard murmuring briefly in the other room, then their footsteps sounded across the floor,

the apartment door opened, closed, and was locked, and two pairs of footsteps thudded faintly on the stairs.

Ken tried to take a deep breath and the belt cut into his muscles. He gave it up and turned toward Sandy, several feet away to the left. Their eyes met. Sandy's looked startlingly blue between his red hair and the white slash of tape. He winked one eye. Ken winked back. But there was no bravado in the signal. And after a moment they looked away from each other again because there was—despite what books always insisted—very little that two pairs of eyes could say to each other when the rest of the two faces were held immobile by tightly stretched adhesive.

Ken looked at his hands, taped palm down, from the base of the fingers far back beyond the bared wrist. He could wiggle his fingers, but that was about all he could do. And short of using them to signal with the old deaf-and-dumb code—which he didn't know—he couldn't figure out what use he could make of them. He couldn't reach the belt buckle, couldn't reach the tapes on his legs, couldn't reach his mouth, couldn't reach one hand with the other. It did occur to him that he ought to move his fingers constantly to keep the circulation alive. He tried that, and moved his toes and foot muscles at the same time. Glancing over at Sandy, he could see his fingers too were being kept in motion. But after a moment they caught each other's eye, glanced down at their hands, and gave it up. It seemed so futile. And besides, it was tiring. They might need their energy later on, though Ken couldn't at the moment see why.

Ken had automatically strained at all the tapes the minute the men were out of the room, but had subsided when he realized that he was not having the slightest effect on them.

Now, however, after considerable time had gone by—five minutes? an hour? a century?—he tried again, more slowly this time and with all the strength he could muster.

He could feel his neck muscles strain with the effort, and his heart pound as the shallow breaths and the exertion put heavy strain upon it.

No faintest ripping sound, no slight loosening rewarded him. He knew with certainty that he could probably go on straining at the bonds like that for weeks without making any headway, and still he couldn't persuade himself to give up. They *had* to get out of here.

A strangled sound reached him and he looked around to see Sandy shaking his head. "Stop it," the gesture commanded. "It's a waste of time."

Ken nodded agreement and relaxed his muscles. They ached agonizingly. And his skin crawled with sweat.

What was that advice of his father's he'd remembered some time ago—or was it really only the night before? "Closing your eyes and butting your head will only give you a headache." And that's what he'd been doing. Now he had to face facts. Logically.

They had to get out of here. To do that they had to get free. And force wouldn't free them.

His gaze traveled over himself, searching for some strength or ability that Willie hadn't fettered. But he'd been right the first time: only his fingers were usable, and he could reach nothing with them.

But wait!

He measured the height of the chair arm above the floor. It looked about right. Maybe there was something they could do after all. In his frantic struggles he'd almost forgotten that there were two of them locked in here together.

Ken looked over at Sandy and found him watching him intently. Ken winked. And this time the wink meant "Watch me. I've got an idea!"

The books were right after all. Eyes were able to talk. Now Sandy's were saying "I'm with you. Just show me."

Ken wasn't worried about noise. If anybody downstairs wanted to complain to the police it was all right with him.

He even managed to grin inwardly at the thought. But only for an instant. Then he concentrated on thrusting his whole body forward.

It worked. The heavy chair actually moved a couple of inches. He lunged again, this time sideways, but that wasn't so successful. Again and again he lunged, moving a few inches each time, and gradually—in a slanting line that carried him forward and sideways—managed to maneuver himself into a position facing Sandy and a few feet in front of him. Then, putting his feet on the floor as firmly as he could to stop the chair from sliding, and bending his wrists back so that the palms faced forward, he lunged once more.

The chair toppled over. Ken took as much of the weight as he could on his hands, but still came down on the floor with a jar that rattled every bone in his body.

For a moment he rested there, on his hands and knees, the heavy chair over him like the shell of a turtle. Then, by inches, he dragged himself forward until his face was against Sandy's right hand.

He left it there a moment and then twisted his neck to look up, trying by furious blinking to convey the idea that was in his mind. But Sandy already knew what was expected of him.

Immediately his free fingers clawed at the tape across Ken's mouth, feeling for some kind of hold, and after what seemed endless attempts he managed to get one fingernail under a corner. Ken waited until he grunted to indicate that he had as firm a hold of it as he could get with the tip of one finger and one fingernail, and then he jerked his head back hard. It felt as if his skin were being torn from his face.

But already the adhesive was off the right side of his mouth.

"Again," he mumbled.

This time it was easier. Sandy could get a better hold, and the jerk was swifter.

"Give me a minute to rest up," Ken said, letting his head drop to ease the aching neck muscles.

Sandy grunted unintelligibly. Ken looked up, and guessed that Sandy was proposing the same performance for himself.

"It takes too long," Ken told him. "And now that I've got my teeth free I want to see if I can't unfasten those." He glanced toward the rows of tape around one of Sandy's wrists.

The top of the binding was smooth, one row of adhesive on another without a visible end. Ken bent awkwardly to look beneath the chair arm, and groaned. The end was out of his reach.

"I don't suppose you've got a knife on you?"

Sandy shook his head.

Ken sighed hopelessly. Sandy wriggled his fingers for attention, and when Ken looked up, Sandy let his eyes rove carefully all around the room.

With new hope Ken followed his example. But his careful scrutiny revealed nothing that could possibly serve to cut the bonds.

Suddenly Sandy grunted. Ken looked up, followed his gaze, and then looked back at him. From his higher vantage point Sandy had seen something that might be used.

"On top of the bureau?" Ken asked. Sandy nodded.

"But I can't reach it."

Sandy twisted his head sideways, grimaced elaborately, and finally sighed with despair as Ken still looked blank.

"Oh!" Ken's eyes lighted up. "The cloth runner hangs down the side. I get it."

The bureau was against the wall and it looked miles away. Six feet is a matter of two steps ordinarily, but today it seemed an impossible distance. Time raced by as, with the heavy chair over him, Ken lurched across the floor, quarter inch by quarter inch. When at last he had reached

his destination he was so tired he didn't think he could move another muscle. But Sandy was grunting encouragingly. With a desperate effort Ken lifted his head as far as he could, managed to grasp the hem of the runner in his teeth, and pulled.

"Ungh!" Sandy's wordless sound held a warning note.

"You mean the stuff's ready to tumble over?" Ken looked back at him. Sandy nodded. "O.K. Here goes."

Ken gave one final tug and then turned his head aside and tried to huddle his shoulders protectively around it.

A tray, a comb, a brush, a heavy alarm clock, a solid little glass bowl the size of a fist that held an accumulation of paper clips and tie pins and tie clips—all of them came plunging downward. The bowl missed Ken's head by a fraction of an inch, and the clatter was tremendous, but he had a wide assortment of potential weapons at hand.

Ken studied them all carefully as soon as he had caught his breath. The bowl hadn't broken and was useless as it was. The comb, the brush, the tray, all those pins—useless. But the alarm clock had crashed open and was a tangle of springs and broken parts. And scattered beneath the tangle were the shattered fragments of the glass face.

Carefully Ken edged around so that he could reach the largest piece without having to crawl over the smaller ones. It was a long curved sliver with a sharp point. He bent down and got it between his teeth, holding his lips back in a snarl to prevent them from being cut.

The journey back seemed twice as far as the original trip, but he arrived, finally, beside Sandy's chair again.

Sandy helped by twisting the glass around to bring the sharpest edge into play, and Ken began his delicate task.

After the first five minutes he wanted to give up. His tongue was bleeding and his lips were cut in several places. And there was only the slightest notch in one band of tape. But Sandy was nodding and winking at him encouragingly, as if he were unaware of the slashes on his

own wrist where the glass had slipped and dug into his flesh. Somehow Ken kept on.

When the notch became a noticeable cut, Sandy won some slight extra movement. Patiently he held his wrist at exactly the right elevation, tensing his muscles to put additional strain on the slowly yielding tape.

The slash grew longer and longer, as the glass cut its way down the narrow channel between Sandy's arm and the arm of the chair. But finally Ken could not make any further effort. He was well over halfway through, but he was just too tired. The glass slipped out from between his teeth, as it had done so many times before, but this time he couldn't bend forward again to the floor to pick it up. Weakly he let his head rest against Sandy's hand.

But after a moment he felt a nudge. He forced himself to look up and saw Sandy making motions with his head. For some seconds the message didn't penetrate, but at last he understood that Sandy wanted him to move back. He turned his head as far away from the chair as possible.

Sandy winked again reassuringly. Then the muscles in his forearm raised up like steel cables, and the tendons in his neck sprang out. With all the strength in his body he was pulling upward against the tape. For a long time nothing seemed to happen. He remained like that straining desperately. And then the tape tore through and his arm snapped upward. His huge fist missed Ken's face by an inch.

Dimly Ken watched as Sandy's hand reached down and grabbed the piece of glass, dropped it twice when his numbed fingers failed to hold it, and then faintly he heard the harsh rasping sound as Sandy went to work on his other hand.

The moment he had it free he reached back and unfastened the buckle that held him to his chair. Bending over, he cut his ankles free and ripped the tape from his mouth. Then he went to work on Ken.

At last it was finished.

They stood there a moment, rubbing life into their numb limbs, trembling with fatigue and cramp.

"This is yours, I believe?" With a courtly gesture Sandy handed Ken his belt. "Let's get out of here," he added.

"Check." They slipped on their belts again. "Let's go find a policeman. We'll sit right here with him until Turner and little Willie get back and—"

Sandy held up a warning hand. There were footsteps on the stairs. And immediately afterward there was the sound of the key in the lock. They stood frozen, listening.

Then Ken pulled Sandy close to the wall, where the door into the bedroom would conceal them when it opened.

CHAPTER VIII

THE "LOUISE"

WHEN THE BEDROOM DOOR opened, the boys heard a breathy gasp that meant the empty overturned chairs had been sighted. And then, as the visitor took two slow steps forward, Ken stepped out and around in front of him, while Sandy shut the door at his back.

The small eyes in Willie's narrow face blinked once. His hand moved toward his pocket. But before it got there, Ken's left hand had sunk into his diaphragm. And as Willie doubled forward, Ken's right came up in a long, looping haymaker that caught him on the chin.

Willie's eyes glazed. His knees sagged. Slowly he toppled forward. And then he lay at their feet, stretched out flat.

Ken looked down at him unbelievably. The dim thought went through his mind that this was some kind of trick—that Willie couldn't actually have been knocked out by a couple of untrained blows from a hand still half-numb and shaking.

"Nice going," Sandy said. "And I mean going. Boy!"

"Is he really—out?"

"Like a light."

Ken grinned. "I never did that before."

"Well, the next time you try it, I hope I'm not on the receiving end." Sandy was already bending over Willie, dragging him forward into the room. "Now what?"

"Well—" Ken was still too stunned by his unexpected success to be able to think clearly.

"I say one of us goes for the police, and one stays here just in case. Do you want to—" Sandy straightened up suddenly, his eyes alert.

An instant later Ken heard it too—steps on the stairs again. And this time it sounded as if there were more than one visitor arriving.

"I reminded Willie of that."

It was Turner's voice.

Ken snapped into action. He jerked open the door into the living room, and gesturing to Sandy to follow, crossed to the far wall and turned the lock on the window. Sandy was right behind him as he climbed out onto the fire escape.

"Down?" Sandy whispered, closing the window swiftly.

"Up."

Ken led the way, taking the iron steps two at a time. In six strides they were passing the windows of the top floor, and in another six they were stepping forth onto the flat roof. Out in its middle, safe from any curious eyes on the street below, they stopped.

"We can cross over the roofs"—Ken pointed to the unbroken line of them stretching away toward the end of the block—"and come down through another house. But it'll be too late."

"Too late for what?"

"The cops. Turner'll be out of there in about two seconds, once he sees we're gone. And then what'll our story sound like?"

Sandy nodded comprehendingly. If they were going to make a charge against Turner they wanted one that would stick; and the only way to get that, under the circumstances, was to catch him red-handed. Turner would do his best to prevent that.

"The important thing is where Turner goes from here," Sandy said.

"That's what I think." Ken led the way to the front of the house, and they peered down over the coping.

Before a full minute had gone by, figures emerged below them, leaving the house. Turner and a stranger held Willie's slack body upright between them. They had difficulty negotiating the short flight of steps to the sidewalk, and then stepped more quickly across it to Turner's waiting car.

Turner and his companion seemed to be laughing as they got Willie inside. Their casual manner would have convinced almost anybody that Willie was the victim merely of a too-enthusiastic celebration.

But Turner was behind the wheel in a matter of seconds and his motor came to life.

"Come on," Sandy said.

As they tore down the stairs, Ken told himself they had been fools to stand up there watching while Turner got underway. Now they had probably lost him again, and Turner would take good care never to return to the one place where his presence alone constituted an illegal act.

When they reached the corner, Ken was sure he caught sight of Turner's car at the far corner of the next block, just pulling away as the light turned green. He motioned to Sandy to turn left. "And left again on 71st. I think they're heading for the elevated highway."

By the time they reached the end of the long cross-town block, and waited there for a red light to change, Turner's car was nowhere in sight. But they kept on, and were soon hastening downtown as fast as the heavy traffic on the highway would permit.

"What now?" Sandy asked.

"Let's try the pier and see if we see any signs of them there."

Sandy nodded.

"Our only advantage is that we know more about them than they think we do," Ken said, trying to figure things out as they moved along above the Hudson River. "And

since all I've done so far—so far as Turner knows—is run away, maybe it won't occur to him that we've done a little chasing too. He doesn't think I've got any idea of why they're holding Dad."

"And the fact is you haven't," Sandy said. "They've admitted they're holding him—but we can't get them for that yet. And they've broken into your apartment—but it's too late to get them for *that*. So we really don't have anything on them that we can prove. If we only had some idea of what the whole business is about—what's wrong with the *Louise*, what the gang is up to—"

Ken interrupted. "That's why it's important to stick with Turner. So long as he doesn't catch on that we're following him, he may lead us right into something. We've got to call your father too," Ken added. "We never were able to tell him Turner's license number and about that sticker on the car. Maybe he won't think it means a thing, but the hotel may be where Turner's holed-up."

"Keep to the left. We get off the highway at 19th Street," Ken pointed out a few minutes later.

At the foot of the ramp they found themselves once more beneath the highway, twisting in and out around the towering supports. At this early evening hour most of the day's quota of trucks had disappeared, and the night travelers had not yet arrived.

"The pier's in the next block," Ken said. "Maybe we'd better park."

Sandy pulled up between a couple of huge trailers that seemed settled for the night. "There's a diner across the street that ought to have a phone."

They got out and moved toward it. "And there—look, just beyond the corner, along the curb. Turner's car!"

Behind the shelter of another truck they studied the car long enough to assure themselves that it was empty—unless, of course, Willie still lay silently on the back seat—and then Ken said, "Suppose I stay here and watch for possible developments while you go and make the call."

"Why don't you make it?" Sandy suggested. "You might know something Pop wants that I don't know about."

"O.K." Ken didn't argue. It would be good to hear Pop Allen's voice, even if it were angry, and Ken suspected it would be.

He was right. As soon as he had the editor on the wire, Ken's eardrums were almost shattered by the bellow.

"Where in thunderation have you boys been?"

Ken waited until the explosion was over and then told him everything. Pop Allen did not waste time once the story was started. He heard it out.

"And I've got that list of names of the Bayberry Dunes people right here," Ken concluded rather anticlimactically. "Want me to read them off?"

The operator's impersonal voice cut in to announce that Ken's time was up.

"Give me your number," the editor ordered. "I'll phone you back."

Ken hung up and waited. A moment later the phone rang.

"Never mind those names now," Pop Allen began. "That hotel lead sounds more promising. Come to think of it, I ought to have a story from that neck of the woods. Think I'll send Bert right down."

"What story?"

"Eh? Oh. Well, I'll think of something."

"Oh." Ken grinned into the mouthpiece. Then he sobered again. "If Turner gets away from us," he said, "maybe Bert will catch sight of him. He's driving a big black sedan with a smeared Illinois license plate and a Venetian blind in the back window."

"Don't worry. Bert'll keep his eyes open. Are you hoodlums ready to come back here?" Pop demanded.

"We thought we'd stick with Turner—see where he goes from here."

"I don't like the sound of that. Turner's too—"

Ken broke in. "But, Pop—" he used the word without

being aware of it, and if Pop Allen noticed the new familiarity, he apparently didn't mind. "But, Pop, suppose we're all wrong? Suppose Turner's going from here to their headquarters? And it isn't at Bayberry Dunes at all? Well be careful. Honestly. We won't get close enough to let him see us."

Pop thought it over for a moment. "All right," he said. "I still don't like it, but I suppose we can't afford to miss any chances. Keep in touch with me though. And if he does lead you down to the Dunes, get in touch with Bert as soon as you can. He'll be on the lookout for you. There's a soda fountain in town—"

"We know the place."

"All right. Drop in there once in a while. Bert will make it a regular port of call. Now mind you: watch your step. Stay out of sight. And stay out of trouble."

"Yes, sir."

"Got enough money?"

"Sure." Ken grinned into the phone. "Haven't had time to spend any."

"All right. Call me regularly now, mind you."

"Sure."

Ken opened the door of the booth almost into Sandy's excited face.

"Turner's coming across the street—headed this way!"

They both looked hastily around the small diner, noting its lack of hiding places. It was too late to leave by the door. And then Ken glanced through a narrow opening to the right. Beyond it was a small steamy room, empty except for a yellowed old man up to his elbows in soapy water at the sink.

The old man looked up in surprise as they dashed through, but before he could speak they had let themselves out through a rear entrance. They stepped directly from the brightly lighted room into a dark alley, and for a moment they were blinded. But when their eyes adjusted to the dimness they could see that the alley

opened into a narrow passageway beside the diner, and when they peered around its corner, they realized that the passageway led into West Street and the piers. Carefully they edged their way forward, past garbage cans and rubbish that clattered and bumped at every step. But even at that comparatively quiet hour the neighborhood noises were loud enough so that the sounds they made were not too startling.

Finally Ken could poke his head around the corner of the diner. A moment later he beckoned Sandy to follow, and they strolled casually past to watch the backs of Turner and a companion seated at the counter over cups of coffee.

"Let's go back to where your car is," Ken said. "We can watch his car and the diner both from there."

"What did Pop say?" Sandy asked, when they were inside the car, leaning over the back of the seat in order to peer through the rear window.

Ken told him.

"Swell. Sending Bert to Bayberry is a good idea."

"I don't know how your father's ever going to get a paper out with both of you—"

Sandy interrupted. "Don't be silly. Dad got out a paper by himself before we were born. Besides, think what a break this might be for the *Advance*—getting in on a gang-busting business, just like the big papers."

It was a new thought for Ken and somehow it made him feel better. If the *Advance* became famous all over the country as a result of—

"I've got an idea." Sandy spoke abruptly.

"What?"

"Let's eat."

Ken stared at him and then they both began to laugh.

"This is probably the first time in my life I ever forgot about food for a whole day," Sandy said.

"Me too."

For some reason this seemed hilariously funny to

them. Still leaning over the back of the seat, they laughed some more.

"Turner's New One—Day Miracle Diet," Sandy muttered.

"Avoid overeating by this simple method: merely fasten a strip of adhesive tape over the mouth and—"

They laughed until the tears ran down their cheeks.

"Cut it out, will you?" Sandy finally muttered. "I'm too weak for this kind of exertion. No kidding: let's eat."

"In the diner?" Turner was still seated there, apparently having far more to say to his companion than could possibly be said over one cup of coffee.

"I'll take a look around. Must be some other place near. You stay here and keep an eye out."

Ken was glad when the redhead returned. Nothing had happened during his absence, but the street had seemed to grow darker and more dismal by the moment. And their brief spell of laughter had somehow made the situation they were in—and that Richard Holt was in—seem grimmer by comparison.

"Good," Ken muttered, around a mouthful of one of the pair of hefty sandwiches Sandy had just dropped into his lap.

"Umm. I'd feel the same way about a piece of sole leather right now." Sandy pried the top from a container of coffee.

A group of men walking southward on the far side of the street started across in their direction almost in line with the car. Their loud voices carried clearly, and as if by a common impulse the boys cocked their heads to listen. Anything that went on in this neighborhood, Ken was thinking, might possibly concern them.

But his brows puckered as he realized that the most loquacious of the men was speaking a strange language. Ken decided it was French, and mentally kicked himself for having chosen Spanish instead as his language elective at school.

Finally another voice said sharply, "Don't talk so much, Frenchy."

The one who had been speaking earlier switched laboriously into English. "But to me is important. When we carry passenger it is I—Jacques—who do the extra work. To carry always the meals, to—"

"I said don't talk so much. In public, anyway. Remember we don't carry passengers—not by our papers."

Then the men were silent until they passed out of hearing beyond some big truck trailers.

The boys looked at each other. "Am I just getting a suspicious nature—or do you think maybe they belong to the *Louise*?" Ken asked.

"I don't know. I'm getting a suspicious nature too."

They started to unwrap their second sandwiches and suddenly Ken stopped.

"They're coming out."

Eyes glued to the opening door of the diner across the street, they stuffed the sandwiches into their pockets. The two men came toward the pier where the *Louise* was tied, and disappeared into the big shedlike structure opening off the street. A moment later Turner's companion, the man who had been with him earlier, emerged again with a still-groggy Willie, and got into a car that had been parked beside Turner's. Turner himself appeared briefly for a moment, spoke to the man at the wheel, and then waved the car off. It moved south on West Street. Turner watched it for an instant and then started across the street to the diner.

"The car or Turner?" Sandy asked, flipping the ignition key.

"Wait a minute." Ken's head was suddenly spinning again. What was it the Frenchman had said about—?

"We stick here," Ken said. "Remember Frenchy's line about a passenger?"

"What about it?"

"Well, suppose they've decided that the safest place for

Dad is somewhere out of the country? Suppose they're bringing him here to put him on the ship?"

Sandy pondered. "It could be. So—"

"So we'll watch for a car and keep an eye on Turner at the same time. If Dad turns up, we'll go into so much action every cop within five blocks will hear us."

"O.K. But wait a minute: how'll we ever know? If that's really what they were going to do, they wouldn't stop the car out in the middle of the street and ask your father please to go aboard. They'd drive right out onto the pier—probably right up to the gangplank."

Ken nodded slowly. "You're probably right." He waited a minute. "Then I'd like to be out on the pier waiting for them."

Sandy whistled softly. "That's a tall order, son. Risky business." He glanced at Ken's set face. "Still, I guess it's worth the chance."

Ken recalled Pop Allen's warning. He'd promised the editor they'd stay out of trouble. And he'd meant it. But if his hunch was right—

"I think I'll try it, Sandy." He put his hand on the door. "You keep an eye on Turner and—"

But Sandy was already getting out of the car.

"You mean *we'll* try it."

"But—"

Sandy was moving off toward the pier, walking in the shadow of the hulking buildings. Ken gave it up and hastened after him.

When they reached the fifteen-foot-wide doorway into the vast interior, Sandy paused, peered cautiously around the edge, and then, motioning to Ken to follow, slipped inside and hurried across a vacant space to the dark shadow of a pile of crates.

A huge voice bellowed from somewhere within the cavernous void.

"Hey! Get out of here!"

Sandy waited, apparently trying to establish the

direction of the sound, and then darted to the right and back and forth between the cases and machinery stacked in the enormous shed. The aisles between them formed an elaborate maze.

Ken, close behind him, was grateful that the few electric lights, high above their heads, cast so little light on the ground.

He could hardly keep his bearings in the labyrinth, but when Sandy finally stopped in a particularly dim corner, Ken thought they must already be several hundred feet from the entrance. Then, after a moment, they made their way toward the side of the building, and soon Sandy pointed around the corner of a crate.

"Louise," his lips said, silently.

Ken looked. He couldn't see the ship from where they stood, but he could see the gangplank slanting down from what he supposed must be her deck to the floor of the pier. The beam of light streaming along it, between the boys and the doorway, made a good screen. All sounds of their pursuer had ceased.

"They probably think we're a couple of sailors," Sandy whispered.

"Hope so." Ken peered around the crate again. Now the big doorway at the street end was visible as a large rectangle of grayness against the only slightly lighter interior.

At first he saw a bent elderly man wandering toward the door between the crates. It was the man who had shouted at them, he thought, giving up now and returning to the post he had abandoned long enough for them to slip inside. And then Ken jerked his head back. "Turner," he whispered.

"Two guys sneaked in here," the old man reported grumblingly. "I told you I couldn't do everything around here. Watch the door and—"

"A big redhead and another kid not quite so big?"

"I don't know whether one of them had red hair or not.

But one was bigger than the other. Neither of them was exactly a dwarf."

"Good. Lock the door."

"What?"

"You heard me. I said to lock the door."

With a clanging and a rattling the great sheet of corrugated metal slid downward, like a shade being pulled, and the opening below it narrowed and disappeared.

"And now get the crew down here," Turner ordered.

The old man wandered off, and Turner swung around and raised his voice. It was clear to the boys that his next words were addressed directly to them.

"This is your last chance," Turner said. "Come along out of there now." He waited.

Ken could feel Sandy's breath against his neck, and a shiver ran over him.

"You can't leave without coming up here to the door," Turner continued, "unless you want to jump in the river. And the current's pretty swift at the end of the dock. Well? Are you going to be sensible?"

When he stopped speaking, the silence seemed to beat against Ken's ears.

"Can you swim?" he whispered faintly.

"Some," Sandy whispered back. "Not enough for the Hudson at night, though."

"We may have to try it, anyway."

They heard the sound of many footsteps on wood, and moved their lookout to watch some dozen men banging down the gangplank. At a trot the crew members made their way forward to the door, and Turner spoke quietly to one of them. The listener turned and rattled off several brisk sentences in French, and then the men fanned out and started off in pairs, moving back along the various aisles toward the end of the dock and the spot where the boys were hidden.

CHAPTER IX

LIKE RATS IN A TRAP

FOR THE SPACE of several seconds the boys watched the men advance, slowly and methodically, looking around each packing case and even climbing up some of the stacked piles to make certain the boys weren't lying flat on the top. There was nothing that escaped their searching eyes and probing hands. And inch by inch, foot by foot, they were coming nearer.

"Better start backing up," Ken murmured against Sandy's ear.

"And get caught at the end of the pier?" Like rats in a trap, Ken found himself thinking. Like rats in a trap. The phrase repeated itself over and over in his head.

"Wait!" Sandy caught his arm. "These things usually have two floors, one for freight and"—he jerked his head upward—"one for passengers."

Ken looked up too. "How do you get there?"

"Stairway. Hold it." Sandy peered around the corner of their concealing crate for a moment, and then turned his head to whisper, "There it is—right—" But he stopped and looked around the crate again. "Too late," he reported.

Ken took his place and saw the stairway—and saw too that one of the searchers was trotting directly toward it. A moment later the man had mounted halfway up the flight and stood there scanning the pier with the aid of a powerful flashlight. Ken ducked back just in time to avoid

its beam.

Escape by way of the stairs was impossible.

"The river then?" Ken whispered, trying not to think what it would be like in the black oily water.

Sandy shook his head. "Not yet."

Ken understood. The river was a last resort.

"They'd hear us," Sandy pointed out. "See us too, probably." He gestured toward one of the flashlights flickering erratically against the wall. "And the piles are too slimy," he added.

Ken had thought of that too; even if they managed to elude the searchers' lights once they got in the water, how would they get out again, and where? The Hudson was edged for miles with a solid row of piers, and all of them stood high on supports which certainly hadn't been designed to help swimmers wanting to come ashore. There probably were ladders some place, but finding one might take hours.

But if the river seemed hopeless, what else offered itself?

The boys stared at each other, paralyzed by indecision. They'd be discovered, surely, in a matter of minutes.

"There's a ledge around the walls of the pier on the outside," Sandy said suddenly. "If we could get on that—"

"Let's try."

But before they could make a move toward the opening in the wall through which the gangplank of the *Louise* thrust itself, heavy fists pounded on the great closed door at the head of the pier.

Ken felt his heart bound. Help was coming! Somehow Pop Allen or—

They peered around their crate. Turner opened a small door set in the large one and five men—five sailors—entered. The leader spoke in a guttural voice, the words indistinguishable.

"Swedish," Sandy muttered.

And Ken remembered that Sandy had reported a

Swedish boat on the far side of the pier. But any idea of being rescued by the new arrivals was dispelled by Turner's brisk words.

"Glad to see you. We caught a couple of river rats stealing stuff here on the dock, and thought you boys might want to help rout them out. Go to it."

The sailors looked cheerful and determined as they joined the band of searchers already at work.

"The ledge," Ken whispered.

Moving cautiously, always with a quick glance around the corner of one concealing mass before they slipped on to the shelter of the next, they retraced their steps back toward the gangplank opening. If they were to reach the ledge that way it would mean coming very close to that brilliant path of light, but perhaps by sliding around the very edge of the doorway, at a moment carefully chosen— But when Ken put one eye around the corner he drew back instantly and with a new sense of panic. At the head of the gangplank, overlooking the whole area around the opening, stood an officer. The narrowed eyes under the visor of his cap shifted constantly from side to side.

For a moment Ken was certain he himself had been seen, but when he and Sandy had stood huddled against the wall for a long slow minute he knew that somehow he had been missed. His throat was dry and the muscles of his jaw ached from clenching his teeth together to keep them from chattering. One more possible escape was closed to them.

Like rats in a trap. The phrase began to repeat itself again. Like rats in a trap.

Sandy tugged at his sleeve and indicated that they were to move on along the wall, back toward the far end of the pier. Ken moved after him.

Turner's voice demanded to know why the culprits hadn't yet been found. Answering voices muttered here and there in the dark, and footsteps quickened their pace a little, as Turner moved part way down the pier to

superintend the labors.

"These walls are full of doors," Sandy murmured, nodding back over his shoulder to indicate that he referred to the sort of opening through which the gangplank entered. "Stick to the wall."

Ken had not known that, and he told himself that now they really had a chance. If they could just find another door—one without a bright light over it and a guardian officer—they might get out of here yet.

Almost on all fours they went on, feeling the dark wall ahead of them as they moved. And after what seemed to Ken miles of this slow form of travel, Sandy finally halted. Ken raised his eyes from the middle of Sandy's back, where he had kept them glued as they pursued their tedious way, and saw that within a few feet of Sandy's outstretched hand there showed a dark space against the dark wall. It was the narrow slit of a partially opened door.

Silently Sandy explored it, raised his arm to motion Ken on—and then abruptly thrust the palm of his hand at Ken and backed hastily against him.

There was another period of breathless waiting like the one just after Ken had sighted the officer. When Sandy finally permitted himself to speak again, in the faintest of whispers, he informed Ken that as he looked he had seen one of the searchers step up onto the gangplank and flash his light along the outer wall in both directions.

Turner's men had also remembered the ledge, and now that too no longer offered any hope. Even if they flashed their light on it only at intervals, it wouldn't be safe: negotiating a way around the narrow foothold would probably require some time, and the boys would be sure to be seen at some point on their precarious trip.

Like rats in a trap. Like—

Well, it would have to be the river then, Ken thought grimly.

He edged around Sandy to study the situation, first assuring himself that the doorway was momentarily free of

the searchlight's beam.

No. They couldn't possibly jump in here. The *Louise* stood too close to the pier.

He took a step backward, tripped over something, and lost his balance. Sandy caught him and held him upright until he freed his foot. It had been caught in a line of taut rope.

Ken steadied himself against the wall and looked at it. Dimly he could make out that it led outward and upward through the opening.

He turned to Sandy. "Where does it go?"

"Stern deck probably. Mooring line. Why?" The final word had urgency in it—the searchers' footsteps around them were coming closer—but it had hope too.

"Yes, I've got an idea all right," Ken wanted to tell him. "But it's so crazy it—" Instead he kept quiet, because unnecessary conversation might prove their downfall.

Was it so crazy, though? Or was it perhaps just crazy enough to work? Ken made up his mind.

"Let's climb aboard," he whispered.

Sandy's eyes widened.

This time words were necessary. Ken put his mouth against Sandy's ear. "Most of the crew's, down here. If we could get to the bow of the ship and then climb down here *behind* them—"

Suddenly Sandy nodded decisively. He twisted around so that he could speak. "Watch out for the rat shield, though—big, round piece of tin slipped over the line up a little way."

Ken's determination ebbed. Any additional obstacle that slowed them down might mean they had no chance of making it between the intermittent flashes of light sent along the outer wall of the pier.

The searchers were less than a hundred feet away, some few of them considerably nearer. And just as it occurred to Ken that once the pier had been completely searched, the men might turn their attention to the ship

as the only other possibility, Sandy provided a way around that difficulty.

"We'll throw something into the water," he whispered. "Make them think—"

Of course! Make them think the boys themselves had jumped in! It might put the searchers off long enough to let them get aboard and race down the empty deck to—to what? Ken wasn't sure, but this was no time to face future problems. Present ones demanded all their attention.

He nodded eagerly. And then stopped. What was there to throw?

Sandy was already aware of that question. He was bent low feeling swiftly over the floor. Ken joined him.

But after several frantic seconds they were almost ready to give up. The pier floor wasn't clean, but neither was it littered with any loose articles that might conceivably make enough of a splash.

Sandy suddenly stood up and hefted one of the smaller wooden cases making up the pile that was just then serving as their hiding place. Satisfied with the weight of the box, he whispered:

"You go first. I'll hurl two of these when you've landed."

Ken nodded and turned toward the narrow opening through which the rope passed.

At the last moment he almost turned back again. The thought of arriving alone on the deck of the *Louise* was terrifying. Suppose Sandy didn't make it? Suppose—?

Ken swallowed, peered out until his eye caught the faint glint of the metal that was the rat shield—fortunately it hung almost level with his feet, about three feet from the pier—and jumped.

For the next few moments he was too busy to be frightened. He caught the rope with both hands and swung for an instant, tried to get a foothold on it, struck his ankle a painful blow on the sharp edge of the shield, and finally caught the rope between his feet just above the piece of tin. And then he started upward. First one hand

and then the other moved up and clutched at the rough rope, and he hauled his body up after them, a few inches at a time. Once he slipped and hung breathless over black space for an instant until his knees again gripped the rope. His hands burned, his already bruised knees struck against each other agonizingly. And it seemed to him that the journey was endless. During every second of it he was aware that in the following second the beam of a flashlight might pin him there, outlined against the side of the ship like a fly on a wall.

But suddenly his hands reached up one more time, and struck metal. He had reached the *Louise*.

The last was almost the worst. Afterward Ken couldn't quite remember how he had managed to fling himself over the rail, and then to drop softly onto the dark deck. He crouched there in the shadow, certain that he wouldn't hear the sound of the splashes over the noise of his own gasping breath.

He heard them though.

And the seconds after that were torture.

Turner's sharp "They jumped! After them!" was followed by wildly pounding footsteps.

"Where?"

"Off the end?"

"No—at the gangplank!"

"I thought it sounded like the end."

Turner cut through the shouts. "Get a light here. And you—yes, you—take yours down to the end. Snap into it."

Voices muttered, running bodies crashed into crates and stumbled.

And then suddenly, miraculously, Sandy landed with a faint thud beside him.

For an instant they huddled there, side by side, then Sandy breathed, "Come on."

At a crouching lope they started forward, close against the rail.

"Samson!" It was Turner again, shouting this time at

the top of his voice.

"Yes? Here."

The answer came from the ship, and Ken realized that Samson must be the officer he had seen standing at the head of the gangplank.

"Flash your light over the stern," Turner commanded.

Samson would have to pass them to do that!

But almost before Ken realized that, Sandy had grabbed his arm and jerked him suddenly to the right, across the open and unshadowed deck toward the little deckhouse. An instant later he had pulled Ken in behind him through a narrow doorway. They stood there, flat against the wall and in deep shadow, as a uniformed figure thudded past outside.

Over Sandy's shoulder Ken could see the man named Samson lean over the stern rail and flash a light on the waters below.

"There's something!"

"Naw—that's a piece of driftwood."

From somewhere on the pier the voices came up to them.

"Flash it over here!"

"No—over there! Over *there!*"

"Now," Sandy breathed, and slipped outside.

Ken moved behind him, not daring to let himself glance at Samson's back. Silently the boys darted around the deckhouse and raced across the deck behind it to the railing overlooking the well deck. Sandy had just reached it, when several beams of light focused on the foot of the gangplank amidships, and then slanted upward as their bearers started to board the *Louise*.

After a paralyzed instant both the boys turned around and ran as swiftly as they could back to the shelter they had just left. Sandy eased the door almost shut behind them.

"Samson!" Turner's voice sounded faintly.

"Right here."

There were footsteps heading toward them from the stern.

Sandy turned away from the door and Ken, turning too, saw that there were small portholes in the deckhouse. Together they moved around the railing that shielded the ladder descending below deck, and cautiously peered through one of them that faced forward. Samson had come to stand at the rail above the well deck, almost directly in front of them. He was apparently speaking to Turner just below.

"Just got word that he won't be coming aboard here," Turner said. "So I'm sending your men back, and you can—"

"What about the boys?" Samson cut in.

"They're probably under the pier. We'll—"

Feet thudded on the gangplank, and Sandy grabbed Ken and swung him around. "Come on," he said.

With a single leap he was at the head of the ladder dropping downward, and Ken, without understanding the reason for this sudden move, was behind him. At the foot of the ladder they were in a narrow passageway. Sandy sped down it, turned into a wider one, then again into a narrow lane between walls marked by small doors. Sandy stopped at one, jerked it open, and muttering "Watch your step," disappeared.

A moment later Ken discovered himself descending a ladder in a tunnellike shaftway. Air rushed upward past him, carrying with it the smell of steam and hot oil, and the rungs under his hands quivered to the rhythm of a steady roaring hum somewhere in the bowels of the ship.

At last his foot struck solid flooring.

"O.K." Sandy whispered. "We're down in the shaft alley—right on her bottom. When Turner said the crew was coming aboard, this was the only place I could think of fast where they wouldn't be likely to prowl around as long as a ship's in port."

"And where do we go from here?"

"I figure we ought to stay put until things quiet down. They're probably lowering a boat now, and fishing for us under the pier. Later we can sneak back up and out."

Inactivity seemed dangerous, but Ken realized that Sandy's suggestion made sense. And certainly this seemed a safely deserted place. In the dim yellow light of a feeble bulb he could see the immense, round drive shaft of the ship within a few feet of him, passing through the stern in one direction, and running forward through a small passageway in the other almost as far as Ken could see. Somewhere, at the far end of that passageway, the roaring hum must have its origin.

He suddenly remembered Sandy's previous summer's experience on a freighter, and it occurred to him that although this small closed—in space had the feel of a trap, probably it was in reality the safest place for them to be right now.

Sandy gestured toward a small recess in the wall, and together they went to it and settled themselves there on the floor. It was odd to be sitting down, free for a moment.

"I guess I sure messed us up," Ken said. "Did you notice what Turner was saying there"—he jerked his head upward—"just before you dragged me off? About the man not coming aboard here?"

"Yes."

"So I guess my whole idea of getting out on the pier to watch for—well, we could have skipped the whole business."

"But you didn't know that before." Sandy wasn't blaming him.

"No, but—"

"You know, this ship is almost exactly like the one I was on last summer," Sandy broke in, deliberately cutting through Ken's efforts to express his embarrassment. "I bet I could find my way around her practically blindfolded. That's the engine room, down there," he pointed along the alleyway through which the shaft ran. "Crews quarters are

at the foot of that first ladder we came down—the one in the deckhouse."

Ken accepted the shift in conversation. "I guess there's plenty of places to hide on a ship."

"Not if anybody's looking for you. After all, a ship isn't very big. They could go over it with a fine-tooth comb in a couple of hours. But as long as nobody suspects you're on board—" His voice slowed down and stopped, and for several minutes they both sat in silence. Too keyed up earlier to realize how exhausted they were, they lapsed into a kind of blank thoughtlessness now that they were actually fairly secure.

The engine-room noise seemed to increase in volume, and from far above their heads a new sound added itself to the one already humming in their ears. Something heavy thudded ponderously on the deck, and then thudded again.

"That's funny," Sandy said after a moment.

"What?"

Sandy motioned him to be silent. Another dull thud made itself felt down through the decks, and then still another. Somewhere the roar of an engine speeded up.

"Hey!" Sandy was on his feet.

"What's the matter?"

Sandy pointed to the huge shaft, now silently, slowly revolving.

"We've got to get out of here! They're shoving off!"

CHAPTER X

STOWAWAYS

SANDY HIT THE LADDER FIRST and was halfway up before Ken's foot was on the bottom rung. But Ken was right behind him by the time Sandy cautiously inched open the heavy door at the top.

For what seemed like a long time they both hung there, while Sandy peered through the slit, and it was all Ken could do not to thrust the redhead bodily forward and through the door. Even if the deck were heavily populated with members of the crew, Ken was thinking, they'd have to risk it—just dash out and make their way somehow to the rail, leap overboard, and trust to luck that they'd be able to get to shore not only alive but unobserved. Of course it would be risky. But what else was there to do? Otherwise, they'd be carried across the Atlantic. To France, probably. To Marseille.

Ken gave Sandy a frantic nudge. Why didn't he get going? The farther away from the pier they got, the—

Sandy pulled the door shut again.

"Hey!" Surprise and panic made Ken say the word aloud, but it was lost in the gradually increasing roar and clatter all around them.

Sandy was making motions with his hand. And the motions seemed to mean that he wanted Ken to back down the ladder again.

Had Sandy lost his nerve? Even if Samson himself

were standing directly outside the door, this was no time to be cautious. Couldn't Sandy understand that? But perhaps he had misunderstood those motions. The ship was vibrating so much that perhaps Sandy's hand was moving that way without his volition.

Sandy twisted his head around.

"Go on back down," he said.

"But—"

Sandy gestured impatiently.

And after a moment Ken obeyed. If Sandy *had* lost his nerve, this was no time to shove him out on the deck. But if that's what had happened—

Ken put out a hand to steady the redhead after he himself had reached bottom, his mind churning with frantic speculation. Curiously, however, Sandy looked comparatively calm.

"Keep your shirt on," he said, grinning.

"Look, Sandy, if we're under way, how—?"

"Listen a minute, will you? We'd be out of our minds to go out there now."

"But—"

"Yes, I know." Sandy was pulling him back toward their niche along the wall. "I've been dumb. We can't really be on our way out to sea."

"What do you mean, we can't? We are." Ken gestured toward the revolving shaft.

"We're going somewhere—but not out. If I had used what brains I've got, I'd have figured it sooner. The ship's not loaded. Feel the way she's shaking? That's because she's so light the screw's partly out of water. She can't travel any distance like this."

Ken stared at him. Sandy must know what he was talking about.

And then Ken remembered.

"In that letter from Dad," he said, "one of the things he told me about the *Louise* and the *Lenore* was that they arrived without any cargo. So—" So, his gesture said,

you're wrong; and we're on our way.

But Sandy wasn't impressed. "Maybe they don't carry cargo. But they've got to carry something—some kind of ballast. Or the ship would shake itself to pieces. It would fall apart halfway across. So this is the way I figure it." He pushed Ken down onto the floor and settled himself beside him. "We're probably heading down the river a little way to some other pier. The ship could stand the strain that far. Why they didn't pick up their ballast—or whatever it is—here, I don't know. But they didn't. So all we have to do is sit tight until they pull in at the next stop, and get ourselves off this tub there. See?"

"Well—"

"The place was crawling with sailors when I looked out up there." Sandy jerked his head in the direction of the ladder. "It would have been crazy to run head on into them. But I was ready to—I almost jumped out into the path of two guys coming right toward me. And then I realized what was making the boat vibrate so much, and I knew we'd have a better chance a little later. It's just a good thing I realized it in time, that's all."

At first Ken hadn't been able to believe that fate was really offering them another chance. But Sandy's positiveness, and the calmness with which he was settling comfortably into their niche, finally convinced him. With a weary sigh he too relaxed a little, and then shifted around on the hard metal in search of a less painful position.

"It's kind of too bad, in a way," Sandy murmured after several minutes of silence. "I've always wanted to go to France. Especially with free passage, and such a comfortable stateroom—" His gaze traveled around their cramped and oily quarters. "Parley vous Francay?" he asked Ken politely.

Ken summoned a grin. "Wee, wee, sanyor."

Sandy snorted. "Such ignorance. Why, I was saying to the French prime minister only the other day—" His voice broke off abruptly.

Ken stiffened. Then he heard it too—a new noise added to the noisy jumble to which his ears were slowly becoming accustomed. This one was a sharp tinny click, repeated at irregular intervals.

Sandy leaned close. "The oiler's checking the bearings," he whispered. Suddenly he left their niche to peer down the long passageway leading toward the engine room, and then hurried back. "Coming this way all right. And there's a bearing right over there." He pointed to a spot along the shaft almost as far toward the stern as the boys were themselves. "Hold your breath and cross your fingers."

Ken flattened himself back against the wall and Sandy crowded close against him. With a sudden gesture he grabbed the back of the neck of his sweater and pulled it up over his head.

Ken could see past him to the heavy turning shaft.

The faint metallic clickings the oiler made came nearer and nearer. And finally the oiler himself was within the line of his vision as he reached the last bearing. Whistling soundlessly the man unhooked the can of oil from beneath it, slowly poured the oil into the bearing, and then replaced the can underneath to catch the oil as it dripped through.

He had kept his eyes on the job as he worked but now, finished with his rounds, he pulled a piece of waste from his pocket and began leisurely to wipe his hands. Casually his eyes wandered around the narrow space. Ken held his breath as they seemed to waver momentarily at the very spot on which the boys stood. And then the man turned toward the stern and walked back to inspect the huge enclosure through which the shaft passed on its way into the water.

"On an old tub like this why does he have to be so careful?" Ken wondered despairingly, as the oiler bent over to assure himself that the packing in the box was snug.

Satisfied, finally, the man straightened up and started

back toward the engine room.

Ken waited until he had counted up to fifty after the man moved out of sight, and then he said faintly, "O.K."

Sandy clawed at his sweater and freed his head.

"Whew," he whispered. "Another couple of seconds and I'd have suffocated."

"It would have been in a good cause," Ken assured him. "He looked right over here once, and if your red hair had been showing we'd have caught his eye for sure."

They moved apart a little, relaxing slowly.

"How often does he do that?" Ken asked.

"About every half hour," Sandy told him reluctantly. "At least they do it that often when they're really at sea. But since we're just moving down the river a ways, he may not come through again. In any case, we've got a while." They were settling down again into the positions they'd found most comfortable before. "What time is it?"

Ken looked at his watch and was puzzled for a moment because it seemed just a blur to him. His exploring fingers explained the reason: the face of the watch was still sticky with the adhesive substance that had not so long ago bound him to the chair in the Holt apartment.

Somehow the memory made him feel better. They'd got out of that all right. They'd get out of this predicament too. Somehow.

"Only seven o'clock," he said with surprise, when he'd scraped the watch crystal clean.

Sandy was surprised too. They grinned at each other.

"Well, we ought to be safe until seven-thirty then, at least," Sandy said. He twisted around suddenly and felt in his pocket. "So let's complete that delicious repast that was so rudely interrupted some time ago."

Both the sandwiches were considerably battered, but neither Ken nor Sandy noticed. And as they ate, their spirits rose.

"How long before we stop for this ballast, or whatever

it is?" Ken asked between mouthfuls.

Sandy shrugged. "Who knows? They might be going to a pier only a couple of hundred feet away—though I don't know why they'd do that—or they might be going as far as Staten Island. But I *know* they've got to stop some place."

This time Ken didn't question him.

When the food was gone, Sandy shifted around until he could rest his head against the wall.

"I'm kind of tired," he muttered. "Don't know why I should be, but—" The word was swallowed in a huge yawn.

Ken felt suddenly ashamed. He should have thought of that.

"Could it be because you didn't get any sleep last night?"

"Never sleep Friday nights. The *Advance* is a Saturday morning paper. I sleep Friday afternoon and evening."

"In that case it's probably because you didn't get any sleep today. Go ahead—get some now. I'll keep an eye out. And I'll wake you up before it's time for the oiler's next round."

"Sure you don't mind?" Sandy's eyes were already closed, but he opened one to look searchingly at Ken.

"Smile when you say that, brother. Go on to sleep."

The oiler didn't come through at seven-thirty but Ken woke Sandy a few minutes early, and while Sandy sleepily pulled his sweater up over his head in an automatic gesture, Ken got out past him to peer up the alleyway. After five minutes of fruitless watching down the long passage, he came back to their niche.

"Go on back to sleep," he muttered. "I'll keep watch out there. If he starts this way, I'll come back and let you know."

Sandy didn't answer. He had fallen asleep again. Gently Ken pulled the hot sweater down over his friend's head and then returned to his post.

The oiler did not come again until nine, and for a second time they seemed to suspend breath while he

worked only a few feet away. After he had left, Ken asked the question that had been bothering him for the past half hour.

"Haven't we been going for a long time? You said maybe she'd even go as far as Staten Island—but how long would that take?"

Sandy's brow furrowed. He grabbed Ken's wrist and studied the watch.

"Hmm. That's funny."

Ken's heart missed a beat. "What?"

"Could have made it easy by now." The movement of the ship thrust him against Ken and he straightened up. "Hey!" His eyes widened. "How long's that been going on?"

"What?" Ken asked again.

"That swell." Sandy jumped up. "I don't see how I could have been wrong, but I guess I was. You don't get a swell like that in the Hudson. We're out of the harbor already. We're out at sea."

"We're out at sea?" Ken repeated the words blankly, as though he were unable to take in their meaning. "But you said—"

"Sure. I know. I could kick myself from here to Sunday and back. I said they *couldn't* be going across empty. But apparently they are."

Ken was on his feet now too. "But they *can't*. I mean—" He grabbed Sandy's arm. "We've got to get off."

"We can't get off. Not now. We'd never get back to shore."

Sandy's self-reproach calmed Ken more than anything else could have done.

"How could you know? Any more than I could know we never should have gone out on the pier in the first place. If this is anybody's fault—" Suddenly he grinned. It wasn't much of a grin, but it was the best he could do. "Are we going to spend the rest of the trip trying to decide who's to blame for this?"

Sandy grinned back, and his wasn't very good either.

"We are not," he decided. "And furthermore, we're not going to spend the rest of the trip in this hole. Really, when you think what people expect you to put up with these days—no running water, no towels—" In a swift change of mood, his gaze traveled with mock disgust around the cramped alleyway.

Ken played up. "It's the lack of room service I object to. I've been ringing and ringing and absolutely nothing happens. Let's insist that they give us another suite."

"I'll speak to the captain myself." Sandy started for the ladder.

"Hey!" Ken ran after him. "Where do you think you're going?"

This time the grins were both a little better.

"All right," Sandy said. "We'll leave the captain out of it. We'll find a new place for ourselves. No kidding—we can't stay down here very long—not when we have to go into a huddle every little while, and don't know how long before the oiler will spot us. Let me think a minute."

Ken could almost watch Sandy tracing in his mind the plan of a freighter as he had come to know it so well the previous summer. At last he snapped his fingers.

"Got it. Steering engine room. It's right above us—well not exactly *right* above us, because the stern curves outward as it goes up. But it's in the tip of the stern on an upper level." He thought again. "Ought to be safe to try to make it now. It's not time for a crew shift, and not a mealtime. Anyway, I don't think it is—though so far I haven't been so good at figuring this tub's program. Let's try it, though. You feel ready for some exploration?"

"Aye, aye, sir."

Afterward, Ken couldn't have reconstructed their journey. Sandy had told him the room to which they were going was almost overhead, but reaching it involved nothing so simple as merely climbing a ladder and opening a door. They climbed the ladder, all right, but after that there were several narrow corridors to be traversed, with

cautious sights around each corner before they turned, and two terrifying retreats when approaching crew members nearly ran them down. But finally they were closing another door behind themselves, and Ken was catching his breath and studying the little semicircular room in which they stood.

It was clearly the aft part of the boat—its curved wall repeated the curve of the ship's stern. In the center was a huge mechanism with wheels that turned, gears that whined, and a great vertical shaft that went down through the floor of the room. It turned a quarter of a revolution as Ken watched it.

"Rudder post," Sandy said, following Ken's gaze. "But this is the really good thing about this place." He indicated the lattices which fenced off the curved sections of the room, making straight walls and at the same time providing a sort of storage compartment between themselves and the curved metal wall behind. "Our new home," Sandy explained. And while Ken watched, he crawled behind the lattice, over coils of rope and bundles of canvas. "Can you see me now?" he asked finally.

"I can see your head," Ken told him.

"That's because I'm on top of something. Come on back and help me move it. We'll pile stuff up against the lattice and make some room for ourselves back here."

Several minutes later they had contrived a shallow hiding space in which they could be entirely out of sight if anyone entered the steering engine room for a routine check.

"If nobody decides to search this ship for a couple of Stowaways, we ought to be safe here for days," Sandy said finally. "Safe," he added wryly, "if slightly hungry."

Ken moved his shoulders into a more comfortable position against a heavy roll of canvas.

"My ignorance removes my responsibility," he pointed out. "You're the sailor here. Just concentrate until you figure out a way to get us some food eventually. I will also

expect a regular supply of drinking water." He waved his hand in a gesture of command.

"Sure. Sure. Just give me a minute, sir."

They were silent for a moment, relaxing in the security of their new hiding place. For the first time Ken became aware of the aching muscles that were his legacy from the difficult hours in the Holt apartment. Methodically he began to massage his arms and legs and the back of his neck.

"Good idea," Sandy muttered, following his example. "I always say there's nothing like a sea voyage for loosening up the nerves."

Finally they stretched out, trying to ignore the vigorous shaking to which they were constantly being subjected.

"And now tell me the story of your life," Ken suggested. "Make it long—say, about five days—can freighters cross in five days? And make it interesting, or I might really get hungry and you'd have to go looking for the galley."

Sandy grinned, and then, surprisingly, he complied. He talked of the Allen family and the *Advance*. Ken listened, forgetting where he was, so absorbed was he in this story of the sort of family he had always dreamed of belonging to. Not that Richard Holt wasn't the most wonderful father in the world; but ever since his mother had died, he'd missed having a real home to go to. Hearing about the Allens, he felt almost as if he belonged to them.

Once or twice in the beginning of the tale he glanced at his watch, but after a while he forgot even the time in his mounting interest. Maybe the *Advance* would hire him for the summer, he was thinking.

"Any doubts I ever had about wanting to be a newspaperman all my life," Sandy was saying, "were good and cured last summer when I—" He stopped.

"Go on," Ken murmured. And when Sandy didn't speak for a moment, he added, "Don't forget. I'm likely to get hungry if you—" Some listening quality in Sandy's

silence brought him erect. "What's the matter?"

Sandy grabbed at his wrist and studied the watch. "Almost twelve," he muttered. "We're stopping," he told Ken. "Feel it? The difference in the way the engines are going? The—"

"Sure." Ken listened too now. Of course he could hear it: the pounding vibration had diminished. "Why should we stop out in the middle of the ocean?"

Sandy grinned fleetingly. "We're not in the middle—not in a few hours. And I don't know what we'd be stopping for. Unless—" He jumped up in his excitement and banged his head against the steel curving behind them. "Ouch! But listen, if I was right after all, if they really can't cross without ballast or cargo or something, they might have gone down along the coast—or up along the coast—and be stopping at some other port to pick it up."

"Come on." Ken nudged Sandy. "Let's get somewhere where we can see something. On deck. Or beside a porthole. Or somewhere."

They crawled out from behind their screen and made for the door. And even as they moved, the rhythm of the ship's engines slowed further, and suddenly ceased.

CHAPTER XI

A RENDEZVOUS AT SEA

IT WAS SO SILENT and so dark on the deck that for an instant Ken had the feeling they had made a mistake and stepped inside a coalbin instead. But gradually his eyes became accustomed to the lack of light, and he was able to make out dimly the larger shapes around him. Before he could see things at all clearly, however, Sandy was hurrying him across a clear space and shoving him down between a railing and a huge coil of rope. They lay there quietly for some time, while the ship's many small noises came slowly into focus around them.

From somewhere forward—the well deck, probably—came the sound of voices and footfalls on metal. Ken lifted his head above the rope and saw a man's silhouette just as it heaved itself onto the stern deck from the ladder leading up to it. Holding his breath, Ken watched him vanish into the deckhouse, and heard the door bang shut. The sound it made seemed startlingly loud.

"Keep it quiet!" someone called softly.

The sailor reappeared, closing the door more gently this time, recrossed the aft deck, and disappeared down the ladder.

Sandy nudged him, and Ken flattened himself out on the deck again so that their heads were close together and they could talk.

"What gives?" Sandy whispered.

Ken shrugged. "Something going on up forward, but I don't know what."

"Better find out."

"Too risky. There's a lot of them down there right now."

"We'll be careful. Come on." Sandy wriggled out from behind their cover and slithered across the deck, with Ken behind him. When they reached the deckhouse they stood up and, keeping close to its shadowy wall, moved crabwise around it until they were facing forward. About ten feet in front of them was the rail overlooking the well deck. Scattered words out of the conversations going on below there drifted up to them, and it seemed as if the entire crew of the *Louise* must be moving around down there and discussing some pressing business.

"Prenez garde!"

". . . here now. No . . ."

". . . easy!"

But from where they stood they could see almost nothing. Finally Sandy dropped to his knees and then stretched out full length again on his stomach. With Ken in his wake, he moved the few feet forward necessary to bring his head almost to the rail. Together they peered down into the center portion of the ship. But the darkness there seemed absolute, shadowed as it *was* by the raised structures amidships and aft. Suddenly a cigarette glowed almost directly beneath them, and then made a brilliant red arc in the air as it was flipped far over the side.

The ship had stopped, the crew was at work. This much they could tell, but no more. It was baffling to be almost at the center of so much mysterious activity, and still not be able to guess what it was all about.

A sharp metallic sound floated back to them from somewhere forward, and the boys both looked up in time to see a line of light appear and disappear again as a door was opened and shut.

"That was on the bridge," Sandy breathed into Ken's ear. "Maybe now—"

But he didn't finish the sentence and Ken finished it unsatisfactorily to himself. "Maybe now we start up again." Could it be that the *Louise* had developed some need for minor repairs, that the repairs had now been accomplished and she was about to get underway again? So far as he could tell there were no lights in any direction which might suggest land near by. Surely if they were to take on either cargo or ballast it would be at some port such as Philadelphia or Baltimore—and surely any port would make itself visible even in the dead of night.

But suddenly a new voice cut across the murmurs that were all around them. Ken identified it as Samson's, and though he couldn't make out the quick words—perhaps they had been spoken in French—he realized that they had spurred the crew to new activity. The ship seemed to quiver on the still water as dozens of men scurried here and there on their newly ordered duties.

In a moment the wheezy puffing sound of a deck engine was heard, and from below sounded the unmistakable swish of slithering rope and the rattle of pulleys. And then, startlingly clear against the faintly starlit sky, the long arm of a boom rose out of somewhere, swung wide, and descended. The deck engine wheezed again, the boom rose once more, and this time it moved far over toward the *Louise's* portside before it came down.

Sandy's voice was a mere thread of sound. "Taking off the hatch cover. Getting ready to load cargo."

The boom's pattern against the sky was repeated as the second hatch cover was lifted. And then it dipped into the bowels of the ship and brought up something the shape and size of a small bale of cotton, which it lowered over the side. And that pattern too was repeated.

"Bumpers," Sandy breathed. "So she doesn't bump against the pier."

"What pier?" Ken asked. And then, just as he felt Sandy's shrug in answer, an idea came to him. He tugged at Sandy's sleeve and jerked his head back toward the

deckhouse. After a moment the redhead understood. Side by side, they slid back to the protection of its wall, where their whispers were less likely to carry to the ears of the busy crew below.

"Would they use those things if another ship were coming alongside?" Ken murmured.

"Sure. But—?"

"Then don't you get it? Another ship's going to meet us out here."

"You mean—?" Sandy waited, and Ken could guess at the various possibilities of the situation as they occurred to Sandy one by one.

"Smuggling," Jack whispered.

Ken nodded. It was the obvious explanation of transferring cargo out at sea and under cover of darkness.

"But what?"

Ken shrugged. "We'll find out."

"And I don't get to see France."

Ken knew what he meant: after they'd learned what they could about this mysterious business of the offshore rendezvous, they'd get themselves on to the other ship and ride her back to land.

They could barely make out each other's grins, but each could see enough to know that his excitement was shared.

They were no longer rats in a trap. Of course their situation was still dangerous. If they were discovered now, it would still be more than unhealthy. But the possibility of another ship near by offered an excellent chance of escape.

And, looking at their position in another light, they were now spies behind the enemy lines, not prisoners cut off from any hope of rescue.

Eventually their grins subsided, and they both settled to the task of trying to pierce the darkness and the garbled sounds below for some clue as to what would happen next.

For several minutes at a time Ken let his eyes wander

up and down the length of the *Louise*, first off the port-side, then off the starboard. First he looked close to the ship, then slowly upward toward the horizon where only a few stars shone. Once he caught his breath at what he thought was a light quite near by, and then he realized it had been the reflection of one of the myriad stars overhead, caught momentarily in the gently swelling water beneath them. Then he began to see repetitions of the reflection everywhere, on both sides of the ship. It was a long time before he could be certain that two—or was it three?—of those watery flickers did not appear and disappear but remained constant. Some distance away, they were—it was impossible to judge how far, in the dark—and on his right as he faced forward.

"Starboard," he told himself. "If we've been heading south since we left the Hudson, that's the side the shore would be on."

When he was entirely sure that he was seeing lights, small and faint as they were, he pointed them out to Sandy.

Sandy nodded, when he had located them, but he didn't seem unduly excited.

"Been thinking," he whispered, in explanation of his preoccupation. "Think it's about one o'clock now?" And when Ken nodded, he went on. "Could be then." He fell silent again.

Ken waited as long as he could. "Could be what?"

Sandy held up a hand for silence, as if he were doing a sum in his head that he dared not interrupt, and then finally he turned and put his lips against Ken's ear.

"If we've been doing about ten knots, we'd be about forty-five miles south of Ambrose Light now. Right?"

Ken shrugged. He didn't know the east coast that well.

"So—" Sandy stopped and pointed dramatically forward.

Once more their eyes caught the wedge of light that reported the opening and closing of a door on the bridge.

Then, as they strained their eyes to see, a man was silhouetted atop the bridge roof. The silhouette raised something long and narrow in his hands, and held it at eye level.

"Telescope," Ken whispered to himself. And then to Sandy, "How can he see anything now?"

"He's not looking. He's signaling. That's a blinker light." Sandy's whisper had a new tenseness. He shoved Ken around to face shoreward. "Watch!"

For half a minute nothing rewarded their blind stares. They glanced back at the bridge, and the figure was still there. They looked back over the water again.

"There!"

They saw it simultaneously—the pin point of light that flashed on, then off, then on and off again several times in an irregular series like the dots and dashes of Morse code. Finally it disappeared altogether.

They watched the spot for several seconds, and at last swung around toward the bridge just in time to see the figure up there lower his instrument and depart. And then a decisive voice gave new orders, and the scurrying figures on the well deck seemed galvanized into sudden and more energetic action.

Without a word to each other the boys started forward again in order to see.

Far down in the hold a light went on, just as they peered over the edge. Although its dim glow did not reach the deck, it did faintly illuminate the wide empty hatchway. The ship had her maw open for a load—there could be little doubt of that.

Finally they returned to the greater safety of the deckhouse shadow, to wait. Time dragged. Sounds on the *Louise* had settled to a low murmur, as if the whole ship and her crew were waiting too.

Ken felt impatience rise up in him until he thought he couldn't sit still for another moment. He wondered what Sandy had been figuring out earlier, with his whisper

about Ambrose Light, and turned to inquire. But Sandy seemed sunk in thought and Ken hesitated to ask what might be a useless question and thus an unnecessary risk. It was always possible that one of their faintest whispers might, by some trick of breeze and the surrounding silence, give them away.

Suddenly he straightened and caught Sandy's arm. His own pointed shoreward. Off the starboard side a light had blinked. It blinked again as they watched, and then again. And it seemed to grow slightly larger each time.

And then there was a new sound, not on the *Louise* this time. Ken shut his eyes a moment to hear it better.

"Exhaust," he whispered finally. "Hear it?"

Sandy listened and finally nodded. "Diesel."

They had been right. Another ship was pulling alongside.

Almost in an instant the well deck came alive again. The deck engine wheezed into action, and the great boom swung high into the air and then hung there poised. Farther forward another engine began to chug, and a second boom rose up and hovered over the deck.

They were listening and watching so intently that when a metal door banged behind them both boys jumped convulsively. Someone had just come out of the deckhouse at the other side of the small structure. Before they could move, a figure appeared around the corner, walked directly in front of them, and leaned over the rail to call below.

His French was unintelligible, but they could scarcely have understood if he had been speaking the simplest English. They were paralyzed there behind him, not five feet away.

The man's back remained toward them, however, and he continued to peer downward. And as he stood there the light to starboard winked again, much closer now, and there was an answering flicker from the bridge of the *Louise*. Then a warning bell sounded on the approaching craft, the sound of its Diesels stopped for a moment, and

started again.

Samson's voice called an order from the bridge and there was a rush of footsteps toward the starboard side of the deck.

The sailor leaning over the rail straightened up and stepped backward. He had half turned toward the ladder when the *Louise* lurched slightly in a heavy swell, and he took a step or two sideways to catch his balance. His foot stubbed against Ken's toe, and an instant later he was sprawled at their feet.

He scrambled up again immediately, but instead of moving toward the ladder he began to fumble around over the deck, as if seeking the object that had tripped him.

Ken held his breath and waited in an agony of suspense. He didn't dare to draw his foot back now. The movement would inevitably betray him.

But somehow the groping hands failed to touch Ken's shoe. The sailor straightened up, took a step away, and then turned again to swing his own foot in a wide arc over the metal flooring. The swing barely grazed the sole of Ken's shoe, returned on its axis and struck it more sharply.

It was too late now for concealment. Ken braced himself on his hands and jerked his legs up beneath him, ready to rise. He could feel the sailor towering over him, and coming closer.

But before Ken was halfway to his feet something whizzed past his ear and there was a dull crash. The next thing Ken knew the full weight of the sailor had slumped forward against him, and he was shoved back on the deck to land with a bone-jarring thump.

"You all right?" Sandy's alarmed whisper and the sudden lifting of the weight coincided.

"Yes." Ken still wasn't quite certain what had happened.

"I had to hit him," Sandy explained. "Here—help me. Roll him up close to the deckhouse."

Ken scrambled out of the way and together they shifted the weight in against the wall. Ken bent and listened to the man's steady breathing before he stood up. Sandy's blow had knocked him out, but apparently it had done no serious damage. They could scarcely investigate any further just now.

Together they pressed themselves against the wall and waited. But no one seemed to have heard the confusion on the aft deck—it had, in fact, been an almost entirely silent encounter.

Now the throbbing of the Diesel was almost alongside.

"Come on," Sandy said after a long moment. "Let's look around."

"What about—?" Ken gestured toward their victim.

"He's all right. But we'd better not be in the vicinity when he comes around."

They dropped on all fours to make their way to the starboard rail, and found themselves looking down just as the *Louise* jarred to the other ship's impact. In the darkness her shape was only a confused mass, but there was enough faint light aboard the *Louise* to show up sailors busily throwing lines back and forth between the two.

"Well!" Sandy whispered. "What do you know!"

"What? I can't see whether it's a—"

"My figuring was right after all." Sandy interrupted him eagerly. "That's just where we are—off Bayberry Dunes!"

"Off! How can you tell?" Ken lifted his eyes, but the distance was still marked only by those few faint and uninformative lights.

There was a triumphant grin beneath Sandy's words. "Because that thing below us is the ferry that carries cars between the Dunes and the Inlet Hotel!"

CHAPTER XII

"OVER THE SIDE!"

SANDY WAS RIGHT. The moment he had voiced his discovery, Ken accepted it. But it didn't satisfy their curiosity; it only aroused it further. With mounting eagerness they peered below to try to discover what would happen once the two vessels were securely lashed together.

The ferry, about half as long as the *Louise*, was stationed amidships, directly opposite the well deck. Her top deck, bare except for two small pilothouses and two overturned lifeboats, was almost even with the freighter's well-deck rail, and therefore about ten feet below the stern deck on which they stood. But even at such close quarters it was difficult to see details in the darkness.

Voices from the ferry began to sort themselves out from the voices aboard the *Louise*; they sounded breathless and strained, as if the ferry's crew was hard at work, lifting or pushing something heavy. Suddenly the deck engines of the *Louise* began to cough, and then they could see her forward boom descend toward the ferry's deck. There was a rattle of steel cable, quick impatient orders, and then the deck engine sounded again as the boom lifted, swung over the rail of the *Louise*, and held its load—something large and dark—over the forward hatch.

A moment later the burden had been lowered out of sight into the freighter's hold. But that moment had been enough. The boys had seen that what the boom

transported from the small ship to the larger one was a car—a long, sleek expensive car, of recent model.

And almost before it had disappeared, the aft boom, also in operation now, lifted a similar burden from the ferry's deck and deposited it alongside the first. And then both booms were swinging over the side again to repeat the performance.

Fascinated, Sandy and Ken watched. The work went forward with incredible speed. The moment a car had been lifted from the ferry's deck, men rolled another into position; the instant the boom returned, empty, and dropped the loading platform into place, the car was transferred to it, and then it too was on its way into the hold of the *Louise*. Swiftly and almost soundlessly, except for the muffled noise of the deck engines and the muted signals called to the operators of the booms, the business went on: two cars, and then two more.

A voice cut sharply across from the bridge of the *Louise*. "Francois! Francois!" And then in lowered tones, "What's happened to him? Ten minutes ago I sent him . . ." The rest was lost.

"Our stumbling friend has been missed," Ken murmured quietly.

"We'd better take a look at him—quick."

At a crouching run they returned to the deckhouse and groped for the man Sandy had knocked out. The figure still lay against the wall, where they had placed him, but he was stirring now.

"We ought to tie him up," Ken said.

"Right. Keep an eye on him while I look around."

In less than a minute Sandy was back with a length of light line—Ken never did learn how he had managed to find it so quickly, but even at the moment he mentally gave thanks for Sandy's earlier experience on a freighter—and they did a workmanlike job of binding the semiconscious sailor hand and foot. Then, using their handkerchiefs, they gagged him so that he wouldn't be

able to sound an alarm. Finally they lifted him, trussed like a chicken for the spit, and carried him aft where they placed him behind the big coil of line that had furnished them with a hiding place earlier.

"And now to get off here," Ken said between his teeth. "We haven't got all night."

Once more they stationed themselves at the rail, this time to concentrate on the possibilities of escape. The cars were still being swung aboard with unabated speed; the ferry would soon be unloaded and ready to depart. Even as they realized this they heard a voice from the well deck inquire, "How many more?" And another from the ferry replied, "Six-eight."

There was no time to waste. But neither was there an obvious solution to their problem—one that they could act on immediately.

The ferry didn't extend far enough aft, along the side of the *Louise*, to allow them to drop aboard her from the freighter's stern deck. Similarly, she couldn't be boarded from the forward deck, even if the boys had been able to get to it through the activity amidships. The busy well deck itself offered the simplest path to the ferry—or would have, if it weren't so crowded with the very men they had to avoid.

Two more cars had been transferred and the boys still stood there, undecided as to how to proceed. From behind them suddenly sounded a muffled thump.

"It's Francois," Ken said quickly. "Kicking his heels. Wait—" and he darted quietly across the deck. A moment later he joined Sandy again. "I laid a coil of the rope over his knees and one over his ankles," he whispered. "He can't move much under that kind of weight." Then he went on, before he could change his mind again. "How far above the water is the deck of the ferry?"

"Three or four feet maybe. Why?"

"Because that's how we're going to have to get aboard her—from the water."

Sandy nodded slowly, as if he too had reached the same conclusion. "It's a long chance. And if we're in the water when her screws start turning—" He didn't have to finish the sentence.

Ken put the unspoken danger out of his mind with a deliberate effort. "How do we get off here quietly?"

"Easy. Tie a line to the rail and slide. Way aft so nobody'll see us." He looked over the side again. Even the ferry seemed far below them, and the water was even farther away. "Sure you want to try it?"

"Got any other suggestions?"

They looked at each other a moment. "O.K.," Sandy whispered. "I'll get a line."

It was less than two minutes afterward that they were standing at the stern of the freighter, lowering a heavy line noiselessly down into the black water some twenty-five feet below. Sandy tugged at it to test the knot. "All right. She'll hold."

"Aye, aye, sir," Ken murmured. "You go first," he told Sandy.

"Right. Take it easy. And remember—head for the far side of the ferry. I'll wait for you below." And then he put one leg over the rail, grasped the line in both hands, and disappeared.

Ken counted to ten. Then he got a good grip on the line, kicked his feet free, and began the long descent, his legs wrapped around the rope to ease the strain on his arms.

He was afraid to move too quickly, for fear he would slip and land in the water with just the sort of splash they must avoid, and the rope seemed endless. But finally cold water stung his feet through the thin canvas sneakers he was wearing, and a moment later he was submerged to his armpits, one hand still grasping the rope.

"O.K.?" Sandy's whisper sounded right behind him.

"Yes."

"Dog paddle," Sandy directed. "First away from the

ship and then left toward the stern of the ferry. And keep right beside me."

The swells that had looked so gentle from above now seemed like mountains of water. They let themselves rise and fall with them, not daring to strike through for fear of the noise, and it meant slow headway. For what seemed like hours the stern of the freighter still loomed close above them, a huge threatening mass, but at last they were bearing left and the lower bulk of the ferry drew slowly nearer.

Ken looked up once, and in the confusing dimness it seemed as if a car just then being swung aboard the *Louise* hung directly over his head. If it were to fall—He looked away again, and paddled harder.

And then they were beneath the overhanging stern deck of the ferry. Ken rested his hand against its slimy side, and breathed in deep gulps.

"Can't get aboard here." Sandy nudged him. "Come on—around to the other side. There'll be a sort of ledge there. It's our best chance."

Ken took another deep breath, and they were paddling again. The steel plates rising out of the water beside them seemed to go on forever, like the Great Wall of China.

"O.K." Sandy said at last, drawing close to the ferry.

Ken looked back and saw that they had actually traveled only some twenty-five feet along her length. But they had reached the roofed section of the deck.

Together they felt for a handhold, stretching their arms up as far as they could reach while they trod water. But all their clutching fingers encountered were the smooth plates of the hull. The ledge—if there was a ledge—was out of reach.

"Wait for a swell," Ken gasped.

They surged upward, flailing wildly as the water raised them, and then, with it, they dropped again.

"Again," Sandy said. "Now!"

They thrust upward with all their power that time, and

just as Ken felt himself being dragged down again with the suck of the swell, his hand grazed a rough protruberance.

"Almost," he said, as his body was knocked against Sandy's and his shoulder struck the ferry's side.

"Yes." Sandy waited to get his breath. "But we'll never make it. It's too high—to grab."

Ken gulped, and tried to brace himself against the steel. It was a moment before he could speak. "You—try it alone—next time," he finally managed. "I'll take your—foot—and push."

"O.K." Sandy didn't waste breath on argument. Time was running out.

"Last two now!" a voice sounded above them.

The last two cars were being loaded!

Ken shut his ears and mind to the message, trod water frantically, and cupped his hands for Sandy's foot. Just as he got his fingers securely around it, a swell ebbed away under them, and then lifted again. Sandy thrust himself upward, and Ken pushed with all his might. But even as his hands left the water, his body was thrust completely under by the power of the redhead's leap. And then Sandy's foot sprang free.

Fighting the weight of his clothes, Ken struggled upward, and barely remembered not to strike the water too hard with his hands when he broke the surface. He sucked in a desperate lungful of air, and shook his head to clear the water from his eyes.

From close above him he could hear hoarse panting, and when his eyes could focus again, he made out Sandy's dangling legs thrashing about. Slowly, as he watched, they were drawn up.

"Just—a second." The whisper drifted down to him.

"Take your time. We'll make it." Ken couldn't tell whether his words were audible to Sandy or not.

He seemed to tread water for a long time, trying to breathe slowly and deeply, until Sandy said, "Here. Grab my hand."

Ken stretched his arm up, moved it to the right and to the left and back again. And suddenly another hand took firm hold of his.

"Ready?" Sandy asked.

"Just a—Here comes a swell. Now!"

Ken lunged upward. It felt as if his arm were being jerked from its socket. And then he fell athwart something hard that cut into his stomach, and his legs were thrashing air. Sandy grabbed him by the shoulders and pulled. He was aboard. He lay flat on his face, panting.

All Ken wanted to do was lie there and rest, but Sandy was pulling at him. "Come on. Can't stay here. Too narrow."

Yes. He was right. Once the ferry was moving, they would be rolled off the shelflike ledge at the first swell. But he couldn't move. He couldn't get to his feet and—

He was on his knees even as he told himself it was impossible, and then, with Sandy's arm flung across his chest to keep him from toppling forward, he was on his feet, back against the wall. And then, shuffling sideways, they were both moving sternward.

"All right, boys—take her away!"

They had made it just in time.

Sandy reached the end of the wall and peered around its edge toward the open stern. And his arm, still across Ken's chest, tightened.

"Hold it!"

The pulleys were rattling. The loading platforms were being lifted from the ferry deck for the last time. In a moment the lines would be loosened. Already there was a muted jangle of the bell in the ferry's engine room.

Sandy poked his head around the corner once more.

When he looked back again he jerked his head forward, dropped the arm that had been flung backward across Ken, and stepped around the corner. As Ken stepped around after him, Sandy dropped flat on the deck and Ken followed.

Inside the covered portion of the ferry, just forward of where they lay, men were lighting cigarettes and leaning back against the wall or easing themselves down to the floor. They were relaxing after their labors, engrossed with themselves.

After a moment Sandy put his mouth close to Ken's ear. "Should be a ladder going up right here," he breathed, and Ken could sense rather than see his arm moving in widening circles as he explored the darkness. The arm stopped, the hand contracted as it closed around a rung, and then Sandy left his side and seemed to move like lightning up the wall. Ken edged over in time to grab the rung below Sandy's feet, and followed. At the top he flattened out beside Sandy's outstretched body. The deck beneath them quivered to the throb of the engine, and the movement of the ship set up a breeze that struck chill through their wet clothes.

Tentatively they raised their heads to look around. The flat deck seemed deserted, the forward pilothouse a dark blob against the starlit sky. Behind them, the *Louise* was already indistinguishable from the night. The faint shore lights that Ken had picked out earlier were still there, and the ferry was moving toward them—a squat dark shape that must be as invisible now as she had been when they awaited her approach earlier. She was a ghost ship, riding a ghostly sea.

Ken shivered, and then shook himself. For a moment he too had felt like a ghost, insubstantial, nonexistent. But the fact remained that both he and Sandy were quite substantial indeed, and that anybody climbing the ladder from the deck below could stub his toe quite solidly—as Francois had done—against their solid bodies. Even in this darkness they must find some further protection.

"Over there-lifeboats," Ken whispered, pointing.

Sandy nodded, and together they crept toward them.

There were two. And although they were small boats they were turned upside down and resting on blocks so

that there was room to slide beneath them. They had to lie flat, but after their recent activity they had no objection to that.

Ken pressed his aching back muscles against the deck, stretched out his legs, his arms. His wet clothes clung to him like a chilly blanket, but even that discomfort seemed slight in the luxury of rest. He was tired, he thought vaguely. Very tired. Sandy's quiet breathing and the vibrations of the ship mingled in a single monotonous hum. Gently the ferry rose and fell with the sea.

Sandy nudged him. "Had a good nap?" he whispered, and there was laughter in his voice.

"Huh?" Ken instinctively raised his head, bumped it against the lifeboat, and was jarred into complete wakefulness. "No kidding," he muttered, ruefully feeling the bruised spot, "was I asleep?"

"It was a reasonable facsimile," Sandy told him, "for a good half hour. But now you've got to put your rested brain to work: we'll be in in a few minutes."

Ken raised his head again, cautiously this time, and peered out from beneath the boat. The shore lights were startlingly close now—the ferry was inside the bay, swinging in a wide circle to approach the slip which faced the mainland. Ken turned toward the other side, and could see the scattered street lights of Bayberry Dunes on the other side of the quiet inlet waters.

Just as he turned back again the red and green lights marking the end of the ferry slip were turned on. The noise of the ship's exhaust diminished abruptly, and the ferry began to drift toward its anchorage.

"We've got to get below," Sandy whispered. "Can't disembark from this deck."

"Are you sure we can from down there?" Ken smiled grimly, and decided his question hadn't been very amusing after all. The innumerable problems ahead were becoming momentarily clearer to a mind that had briefly forgotten them all in sleep.

"That's how we got on. If we get back to the ledge we can swim ashore." Sandy began to wriggle out from under the lifeboat. "Come on."

Ken groaned inwardly. His clothes were still wet—cold and wet enough so that another swim seemed highly unpleasant. But he obeyed.

Suddenly the dark figure ahead of him stopped. Ken halted too. Heavy footsteps were coming across the deck. Ken risked a glance, and could make out a deckhand walking forward to the pilothouse. They could hear the door open, and caught a glimpse of the dim compass light inside before it closed again. For several minutes the man remained there, probably conferring with the pilot, and then he opened and closed the door and returned the way he had come. The engine-room bell sounded and the Diesels were thrown into reverse. With a dull thud the vessel struck the greased piling of the slip, to the accompaniment of creaking timbers, and then the heavy boat slewed ponderously around and continued forward as the engines fought to check her speed.

"Look." Ken jerked his head to indicate, through the narrow space between lifeboat and deck, the line of cars occupying the pier ahead.

Sandy looked, briefly. "Let's get out of here before they begin to load."

Once more they began their forward crawl. They reached the aft ladder just as the ferry bumped into place.

For a brief necessary moment they came erect, side by side, and Sandy reached forward to take hold of the rails. As his fingers closed around them a face loomed up out of the darkness below—a gray blur of a face. For an instant nobody moved. It was as if they were frozen for all time in that curious tableau.

And then a hole gaped in the face below—a widely opened mouth. But before the rising shout could be born, Sandy let loose a mighty haymaker. The face dissolved into nothingness as the seaman's body fell away from the

ladder and landed, a moment later, on the deck below.

This time there could be no doubt that the thud had been heard.

Feet clattered suddenly on the deck below, and behind them the door of the pilothouse banged open.

Like pictures in a swiftly changing kaleidoscope the various possible methods of exit from the ferry flashed before Ken's eyes—and all of them were impossible. The ladder could not be descended now. They couldn't leap overboard sternward from where they were, because the lower deck stretched its distance below them. And on either side of the ferry the black piles of the slip lifted darkly, like blunted spikes waiting to impale a leaping body.

There were footsteps behind them.

"Over the side!" Ken said. "Let's go." Together they rushed toward the rail.

"Hey! You there!" The footsteps had broken into a run.

"Jump!" Ken made no attempt to keep his voice down. It was too late to escape unseen. All they could hope for now was to jump widely enough to overleap the pilings.

Their bodies curved outward from the ship at the same moment. Ken could see the pilings below him, rushing upward, their black tops gleaming. Wildly he flailed his arms, to thrust himself forward beyond them.

He seemed to be plunging endlessly through the air, and always the pilings were right there, beneath him.

And then they were gone, and there was a brief gleam of dark wetness. And then two mighty splashes sounded, and his ears roared with the sound as he felt the cold waters of the bay engulf him.

CHAPTER

SKELETON ISLAND

KEN LANDED in the water with such force that he found himself plunging down straight through it to the slimy, muddy bottom. When he had driven himself up again his lungs were almost bursting.

Sandy's head appeared quickly, only a few feet from his own, and together they thrust the single stroke necessary to bring them back up close to the piling.

The confusion aboard the ferry on the other side of the great dark wall was obvious; subdued shouts, thudding footfalls sounded through the night.

"You all right?" Ken gasped.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Fine."

Ken looked shoreward along the wetly gleaming piles, measuring the distance ahead: it was certainly less than a hundred feet. They could swim that in no time, and be safely on land again—except that they wouldn't be safe. Making directly for the shore was certainly just what they would be expected to do, and a welcoming committee would be awaiting them there.

So they would have to go in the other direction.

Ken jerked his head toward the lights of Bayberry Dunes. "That way."

"We'd never make it across the bay."

"I know. We'll just go around the other side of the slip."

Ken swallowed the last words of his whisper as a flashlight's beam landed on the water beyond them, from the deck of the ferry. Scarcely daring to move enough to keep afloat, they flattened themselves against the piling and watched, fascinated, as the light marked out a curving path that illuminated the water in a great semicircle around them. But the towering piles prevented it from angling in close enough to expose their bodies.

Back and forth it swung, blinding their eyes. And from the stern a second light appeared, its flashing semicircles overlapping the first. But in the shadow of the piles there was still a narrow path of utter darkness.

"Come on."

Ken took the lead, swimming along that path. When he reached the end of the piling he waited tensely. A light flashed directly downward from the stern deck of the ferry could reach them once they had rounded the corner.

Head close to the water, he peered around. At the moment all was darkness ahead. Swiftly he took advantage of the fact, slipping around the end of the wall and swimming shoreward a few feet along its inner side until the shadow of the ferry's stern was overhead. An instant later Sandy overtook him there.

One of the shouted orders over their heads suddenly sounded out clearly. "Get the rowboat out—and hurry it up!"

Together the boys started across the slip, keeping beneath the deck extending above them. They could certainly not be seen there, from the deck, but even so they dared not cause much disturbance in the water. If anyone were to guess their presence, and orders were given to start up the engines, the ferry's huge threshing screw would suck them into its orbit like a whirlpool swallowing a leaf.

Ken had to fight down panic. All his instincts prompted him to reach the farther piling in the shortest possible time, to use his swiftest crawl despite the

splashing it would make. But he forced himself to keep to the slower underwater stroke that barely disturbed the surface. Foot by foot they edged around the stern of the boat.

Finally they reached the other piling, and then again there was that short exposed stretch along its inner wall. Ken refused to let himself look back. For a moment he was sure he saw a light strike the water just in front of him, and he braked his movement and started to turn his head to see its source. But he conquered that impulse too and kept going.

"Not here," a voice said from above.

He'd been right then, he thought. It had been a light—landing just ahead of them and, presumably, just behind them too. It must have missed them by inches. If he'd paused to look around—

Ken shook the thought out of his head. He was learning not to worry about the danger past and the danger just ahead. Each moment demanded all the mental and physical energy he had to give. And, right now, they had reached the end of the piling and must explore its farther side. After a single swift glance, Ken edged around the corner and flattened himself against the slimy uprights to catch his breath. Sandy joined him there.

Once more they would be safe in the shadow of the piling for their swim toward shore—safe, that is, from lights aboard the ferry. But when the rowboat had been launched—

They tried to peer through the darkness to make out their surroundings. If they could figure out the direction from which the boat was likely to appear, they could plan their strategy more effectively. But all they really knew was that it couldn't be launched within the slip itself: it was too narrow; the ferry occupied the full space.

If it were put in the water on the far side of the slip—the side they had just left—they ought to be able to swim to shore before it rounded the slip and caught up with

them. But if it were to appear first on this side, the story would be different.

A large structure bulked out of the water at the shore line ahead of them. Whether it was a wall or a building Ken couldn't tell, but it rose as high as the ferry pier building itself, and reached a couple of hundred feet from the end of the pier leftward.

Ken had already begun to swim again, as he took note of their surroundings. And he was just coming to the reluctant conclusion that there was no place to get ashore nearer than the far end of that long water—lapped wall, when a light appeared there. It disclosed a small boat landing extending some fifty feet into the water, and a moment later it picked up a rowboat alongside. The level of the light dropped, as if the man holding it had stepped down into the boat. There was the faint splash of oars, and the light began to flash out over the water.

So they *were* launching it on this side! Ken knew that to turn around and attempt to swim back the way they had come would be useless, with that powerful flash sweeping always at their heels. Sooner or later it would pick them up.

Nor could they any longer, as he had hoped, reach the shore by swimming along close to the piles until they came to the shore line. There was too much danger that the light would follow just that path and easily show up their bobbing heads outlined against the wood.

He had been swimming steadily forward, along the piling, as he tried to plan the moves ahead. It was safe there for a few moments yet—until the rowboat came close enough to reach them with its swinging arcs of light.

Ken pulled in close against the piling and halted, pulling Sandy to a stop beside him.

"We've got to swim under the boat," he whispered, his mouth barely above the surface.

Sandy looked at him for a moment, steadily.

"Not sure I can," he said then. "No good under water."

"But—" Ken stopped. If Sandy didn't think he could make it, then it was out. But what else could they do?

"I'll try it," Sandy said. He moved his wet face a fraction of an inch closer to Ken's ear. "If they pick me up, you go ahead. Get to mainland. Find Bert."

"Look, I—"

"Let's go. Say when."

There was no use arguing with him. Ken clenched his teeth.

The boat was coming closer now. In a matter of seconds they'd have to make the attempt.

Ken leaned over for one last word. "Kick off against the pile. Head straight for the boat."

Sandy nodded. His mouth was a thin, tight line.

Now the cone of light was sweeping within feet of them.

"When!" Ken whispered.

He took two long breaths, to clear his lungs, and filled them to capacity. Then he forced himself under water, with his legs doubled beneath him and his feet hard against the piling. Tipping his palms to force him deeper, he finally straightened his legs out with all the power he had, and drove forward. Then he was swimming as fast as he could directly toward the point where he had last seen the boat.

Before he had gone a dozen strokes his ears were pounding. He tried to shut out the sensation, to concentrate only on moving his arms and legs. Once more. And once more.

The pressure was growing unbearable.

Finally he knew that if he took one more stroke it would have to be upward. He could not stand it any longer.

He let his arms and legs come to rest, rocking there in the water. One more second, he told himself. And then one after that.

Dimly, through the pounding in his ears and the suffocation in his chest, he was aware of confusion

overhead. Something flashed past him, almost grazing his head.

One more second, he told himself. And then one—
No. It was the end. His lungs were bursting.

He didn't care now whether he was coming directly up into the cone of light or not. He didn't care about anything except reaching air.

He gave his legs one last mighty thrust and reached his hands over his head.

He would never make it. It was too late. The surface was somewhere far, far above him. Here in the black water there was only terror and blankness. Blankness . . .

And then his head was lolling backward and there was air on his face.

Air!

He gulped at it, sucked it into his body in short, painful breaths that tore at his throat.

He was still alive. He hadn't died down there in that bursting watery prison. He turned his head from side to side, seeking the boat and its cone of light.

He saw the boat, finally—behind him, the figure in the bow outlined against the light he was flashing ahead.

He had made it. He had swum underneath the danger and come out on the other side.

But Sandy! And Sandy had said he wasn't sure he could swim very far under water.

Frantically Ken swung around. Sandy was nowhere in sight. Had he come up too soon, been sighted and captured? Was he already lying limp and helpless on the floor of the rowboat?

The possibilities spun through Ken's mind like the hideous events in a nightmare.

And then something broke the water two yards away, between himself and the boat. The fingers of a hand reached and closed and disappeared again.

Ken covered the distance in two strokes and grabbed at where the hand had been. His elbow struck something.

His hand found it.

He pulled Sandy's head above water and held it there, with one arm around his shoulders.

"You made it," Ken told him, as Sandy fought weakly to take the air into his lungs. "It's all over."

Finally the desperate gaspings subsided to more normal breaths.

"I'm—O.K." Sandy even managed a faint grin.

Ken nodded. He couldn't quite manage a grin himself. He had been too terrified at the sight of that white drowned-looking face.

"I'll take you in," he said, lifting Sandy's arm and putting it across his shoulders.

Sandy left the arm there and, slowly, they started toward the landing from which the boat had come. The boat itself was far behind them now, already curving in to round the end of the piling. In less than three minutes they reached the underpinning of the landing, and rested there beneath the protecting floor above.

"They're sure we made for shore on the other side," Ken said.

"That's fine with me." Sandy was almost himself again now. For the last half of the way to the landing he had been stroking with one arm, and now even his face was losing its pinched look.

Ken was so relieved about that that he could hardly make himself realize the extent of the danger they were still in.

"And now what?" Sandy murmured.

"Ashore, I suppose."

Sandy nodded, and Ken led the way ahead, keeping beneath the little pier. Where it was joined by the end wall of the long building, he stuck his head out and lifted himself briefly up by his hands. There was no one in sight.

"Come on."

They heaved themselves up to the dock and crept forward close to the building's wall. It stretched ahead of

them some fifty feet, but the expanse was broken by a wide, open door.

Shivering in chill night air that plastered his wet clothes to his body, Ken looked longingly at that door. It tempted him. Just to slip inside there, out of the predawn breeze, seemed highly attractive. But the building was such a natural haven for them that it would surely be suspect. Caution told him to avoid it.

He beckoned to Sandy, and they moved on again. With only a swift glance inside, to make certain nobody stood just within the door awaiting their appearance, they slipped past the opening and on to the end of the building. But the instant Ken peered around the corner, he jumped backward.

"Men coming this way. Get inside."

Sandy spun around and an instant later they stepped through the door, out of darkness into a blackness so absolute as to be almost tangible. They did not know there was a car directly in front of them until they bumped into it, head on.

Hurriedly they backed away, almost unaware of bruised shins and knees, and skirted the wall, edging between it and the car as they made their way toward the rear of the building where it extended out over the water. When they passed a second car and then a third, Ken said, "Garage, I guess."

"Looks like it."

The voices outside were still audible, but no words could be understood. And then suddenly, some distance away, they heard the sound of a car motor, and the noise of wheels bumping across wooden planks. A moment later another car started up, and it too rumbled across planks.

"They're getting ready to take another load out," Ken murmured.

"Maybe they're giving us up."

"No such luck. They've probably decided for certain by now that we're ashore some place, and that they can pick

us up when they're good and ready, after their work's done."

Footsteps sounded on gravel somewhere close outside, and the sound changed as the feet stepped onto the landing dock.

"Where do we start?" a voice asked.

Ken grabbed Sandy's arm and they hunched down in the narrow space between wall and car. The searchers had reached their hideaway!

"Other end."

Apparently the footsteps had come from the other side of the landing, because after only a few more steps on wood they seemed to be on gravel again, rounding the building along its inshore side. Soon there was a rattle and a rasping noise, and Ken straightened up long enough to see a big door, at the opposite end of the building from which they had entered, being rolled up. The light from a flash showed four men in the opening. All of them moved forward into the garage.

Noiselessly Ken turned the handle of the car nearest them.

"Inside. In the back," he murmured.

Now there were several flashlights at the big door, thrusting fingers of light in a crisscross pattern that illuminated the whitewashed interior completely.

"But, Ken—" Sandy began.

"Come on."

Hauling a reluctant Sandy behind him, Ken crawled inside and crouched down on the floor in front of the back seat. Carefully Sandy eased the door shut.

Then he turned to Ken and whispered urgently. "Suppose they put this car on the ferry?"

"They won't. It's a guest car. It's got a license."

"You sure?"

"I felt it. Positive."

"Oh."

A car motor started up somewhere near the door, and

the car was driven out. Once more they heard that telltale rattle as it was driven over wooden planks.

"You're *sure* this car's licensed?"

"Sure. Probably one of the decoys. They must put some of the guests' cars in here too, so nobody will suspect their car-smuggling racket."

Now several men were wandering around in the garage, opening and shutting car doors. Engines started up, one after the other. Finally the car just ahead of them was driven away.

Ken felt more nervous than he wanted to show. If the men moving around the garage with flashlights—they could see them, sometimes, reflected on the ceiling—had fewer and fewer cars to examine, they would find the boys in very little time.

A big figure brushed past the door through which they had climbed into the car, and an instant later the front door was jerked open. Both Ken and Sandy stiffened, ready to spring the moment they were found.

But the man didn't flash his light into the back seat. He climbed in under the wheel and pressed the starter.

Slowly the car moved forward, first over the smooth cement floor, then over gravel. And then boards were resounding hollowly beneath its wheels. There was a bump, a lurch, a smooth hiss as the tires apparently struck a metal flooring. And then the car stopped. The driver got out, slammed the door shut and left.

Before the boys could move, another car stopped behind them, its bumper grinding lightly against theirs.

"Don't look now," Ken said quietly, his eyes averted from Sandy's, "but I think we're back on the ferry."

"I *know* we are. You and your license plate!"

CHAPTER XIV

ROOM 119

THE KNOWLEDGE that they were back on the ferry did not disturb Ken, because a new train of thought had suddenly started up out of nowhere.

"Get moving," Sandy prodded. "Or do you *want* to land back on that freighter?"

"Sure—I mean no."

Behind them other cars were being run aboard with monotonous regularity. The ferry would be filled within a short time. Sandy got to his knees and looked warily out of the rear window, and then motioned to Ken to see for himself. Except when a car was actually entering their lane, with its parking lights on, their side of the ferry was in darkness.

"We can get aft easy," Sandy muttered. "Come on."

"O.K.," Ken said absent-mindedly. And then, with urgency in his voice, he added, "I've got it!"

"Good, good," Sandy said, reaching for the door. Had Ken been more alert he would have heard the edge of nervous irritation in his tone. "Then maybe you can take it along. But let's get going!"

"I mean I've got something figured out." Ken grabbed Sandy's arm to compel his attention. "They're not just smuggling cars. They're smuggling *stolen* cars!"

"Huh? How do you figure that?" Sandy stared at him through the darkness. But before Ken could answer, he

recalled once more their most immediate problem. "Look: tell me later, huh? Or won't it save?"

"Sure it'll save." Ken could take in Sandy's words now, once he had finally arrived at a logical conclusion to his furious thinking. "Lead on."

Sandy opened the door of the car cautiously, paused long enough to take one last glance in both directions, and then slid out into the narrow space between the vehicle and the ferry wall. Behind him, Ken closed the door softly, and set off after the shadowy figure making its way toward the stern.

The whole crew was busily occupied at the far end of the boat, assisting with the loading of the cars, and it was a comparatively simple matter to lower themselves silently over the side and strike out again for the small landing and the long shedlike building where they had hidden only a few minutes before.

Finally, dripping water at every step, they crawled up once more on the little pier and slithered along the end of the long building, past the wide door through which they had previously entered. When they reached the corner of the wall, Sandy paused.

"Now what? Which way?" he whispered.

There was no one in sight just ahead, but Ken felt this was a situation which might change very soon.

"They'll really be scouring the island for us as soon as the ferry's loaded," he murmured.

Sandy grunted his agreement. "Ought to get away from the water front."

"Right. Got any idea of the layout of the place?"

"Only by looking at it from up there on the bluff." Sandy jerked his head in the general direction of the mainland, and the top of the hill where they had first paused to look down on Bayberry Dunes and the Inlet Hotel. "We're on the bay side—that means the hotel is across the island. And there are several buildings near it, but I don't know what they are."

"Let's head for it, anyway." Ken paused, and looked ahead in the direction of the hotel: in it, he had long ago convinced himself, Richard Holt was being held. "Hiding's only one of the things we've got to do."

"I know." The soberness of Sandy's voice told Ken that his friend understood what was in his mind. He peered around the corner once more. "Nobody in sight yet. Let's cross the road and hit for the open field."

They crossed the gravel gingerly, careful to plant their feet in such a way as not to rattle the loose stone, and bending over to make themselves as little visible as possible. When their wet sneakers finally padded onto the grass beyond, they increased their speed.

The ground rose gently, and when they had rounded a clump of bushes Ken stopped.

"Up ahead—see?" The building he was pointing to was the hotel itself, its white paint glimmering faintly in the starlight. Oblongs of glowing yellow were, the boys assumed, windows at the end of lighted corridors, and a larger yellow glow spread outward from an illuminated rear doorway. Between them and the building lay almost a thousand feet of carefully tended lawn, black and smooth and affording no cover for most of its distance; but close around the hotel was a low hedge behind which they might hide if they crouched low. Off to the left and right of the big center structure stood the shadowy bulks of various outbuildings.

A few minutes later they were huddled behind the hedge, peering over it. The rear yard of the hotel was paved, and in comparison to the darkness around them the entire space seemed vividly bright by that light emanating from the door.

"Can't cross here," Ken whispered.

He was suddenly overcome by discouragement. Behind that doorway, perhaps, was Richard Holt. And yet Ken was as effectively cut off from his father as if he were in the office of the *Advance*, or in New York City. He and Sandy

would be perfect targets, out there in that illuminated area: it would be foolhardy to risk crossing it, now that they had come this far without being caught.

"Let's try that building to the right," Sandy suggested.

After a moment Ken nodded. He didn't know exactly what they would gain by the maneuver, but it was better than standing still.

Gradually their goal took more definite shape as they approached it, crouching low behind the hedge and keeping their heads down. It seemed two stories in height, but there were windows on the upper level only.

Suddenly Ken caught at Sandy and craned forward to speak softly into his ear.

"Listen! Do you hear snores?"

They held their breaths, and after a moment Sandy nodded.

"Sleeping quarters for the help," Ken said, nodding upward toward those darkened windows. "Maybe we can—" He stopped, as something caught his eye—a faint gleam in the open space to the side of the building they'd been staring at. He motioned to Sandy to follow and they crept nearer.

"More cars," Sandy whispered, when they were close enough to see the neatly ranged rows of shining sedans, coupes, and handsome low-slung sports models.

"You think they belong to the help?"

Sandy's mouth lifted in a wry grin. "No hotel help I ever knew drove cars like that."

"That's what I think. These really *are* the guests' cars—the legitimate ones they allow on the island as a cover-up. They have to have *some* excuse for the ferry."

"So that's what you were trying to tell me."

"Yes." Ken gestured back in the direction of the ferry where he had made his triumphant assertion. "That explains the licenses on the cars they're smuggling: they have to look like guests' cars until they're safe out at sea on the *Louise*. They've got everything figured out. They

steal cars and—"

Sandy had been staring off into space, following Ken's reasoning closely. But suddenly now his attention had been caught by something, and his sudden jerk forward interrupted Ken's swiftly whispered words.

"What's up?" Ken breathed, wondering if in his excitement he had carelessly raised his voice and brought a searcher in their direction.

"That car there—last one, third row. It looks like Pops."

"You must be seeing things."

"Maybe," Sandy said, "but that taped windshield looks familiar."

Silently they crossed to the car Sandy had pointed out. He put a hand on its door and turned a grinning face toward Ken. "I was right! It is!"

Ken grinned back, uncertain why, but aware of a swift new hope. "What's it doing here?"

Sandy shrugged. "If Bert came down to Bayberry Dunes, this is what he'd have used. But why he'd be over here—" He shrugged again, still grinning.

He reached up and pulled out a rectangular card thrust beneath the windshield wiper. When he turned back, with it in his hand, Ken's face was sober again. More than that, it was grim.

"You think they got Bert too?" he whispered.

Sandy's grin also fled. But after a moment he shook his head. "No. I don't. Look at this—looks like a regular guest tag, doesn't it?" He glanced around. "The other cars have them too."

"Then you think he's a *guest* here?" Ken's voice sounded incredulous.

"Could be." Sandy was grinning again. "Wait a minute—let me see." He quietly opened the car door, flicked on a small dashboard light, and examined the bit of pasteboard more closely. At his eager gesture Ken bent to see too.

Beneath the hotel's name on the tag, the light revealed

a penciled figure: 119.

"Room number, maybe," Sandy said. "You think?"

"Could be."

Now they were both grinning again, with the kind of relief that shipwrecked sailors show when a smokestack is sighted far away on the horizon. If Bert were really here—if they had an ally in their uneven fight against Turner and his friends there was a chance.

"There's only one way to find out whether that is his room number or not," Ken said after a moment.

"Yes. But we can't cross that courtyard. Unless—"

Their eye; met.

"We heard snoring, didn't we?" Ken whispered. And when Sandy nodded he went on. "People who snore are asleep. And people who are asleep aren't wearing their clothes. Right?"

"Right. My idea exactly."

With elaborate care Sandy put the little card back exactly where he had found it, and then they turned and made their way toward a narrow doorway opening into the two-story building they had studied earlier. The knob turned under Ken's hand, and they stepped softly inside. After a moment they could make out, more by the sense of touch than by sight, that the lower floor of the structure was apparently used for the servicing of cars. With infinite care, a step at a time, they moved ahead along the wall, their hands stretched out to avoid crashing into the hoses, tools, and other bits of equipment standing or hanging in their path.

Suddenly Ken's toe stubbed against something solid, and his exploring fingers assured him that it was a flight of stairs leading upward. With a whispered word of warning to Sandy, he started to mount.

There was a door at the top, but when they had opened it they found their way unexpectedly illuminated: a single small unshaded bulb hung from a cord in the middle of the corridor that bisected the second floor. By its

light they could make out the rows of doors opening off the hall on both sides.

"Go ahead," Sandy mouthed silently, nodding toward the door at the head of the stairs to indicate that he would keep watch.

Ken nodded and started down the hall. It seemed to him that the water in his sneakers squished noisily at every step, and before he reached the first door he bent down, jerked them off his feet, and then padded on in his stocking feet. At the door he held his ear close against the wood. The snores inside sounded satisfyingly loud and rhythmic. Slowly, an infinitesimal fraction of an inch at a time, he turned the knob.

A few moments later he reappeared in the hall and closed the door again. Over his arm were several items of clothing.

Sandy raised clasped hands in congratulation. But Ken shook his head and indicated that the job was not yet completed.

He had managed to find an outfit that he thought would fit himself, but clothes for Sandy presented a special problem. He listened at three more doors, went cautiously through the routine of entering and searching three more rooms, and still he had only the single suit to show for his labors. But the fourth door proved luckier. When he came back into the hall from that venture he hastened back to where Sandy was waiting, thrust one bundle of clothes at him so that he would have a free hand for balancing himself on the dark stairs, and then followed Sandy down to the first floor again.

They dressed in the dark, fumbling with strange fastenings and unable to judge how the garments should be put on except by trial and error. Twice Ken got his right arm into the left arm of his coat, before he managed the difficult operation correctly.

"You ready?" he breathed finally.

"Just about."

"Let's stick our own clothes under the stairs."

"O.K."

The starlight outside was so much brighter than the pitch-black interior they had just experienced that they both had the fleeting impression that they could see everything clearly in its faint sheen. And when they looked at each other they stopped dead and stared.

A wild laugh rose in Ken's throat and he clapped a hand over his mouth. The other hand pointed at Sandy. "You should see yourself!"

"Too bad *you* haven't got a mirror," Sandy returned.

"But *you*—" Ken couldn't stop the laughter. The hand at his mouth choked it back, but it filled him inside. And when he saw that Sandy was laughing too, it all seemed twice as funny as it had before.

Sandy's wrists extended a full three inches below the satin—lapelled waiter's jacket which Ken had confidently expected to fit him, and the lapels themselves were separated by a broad expanse of tanned chest—Ken hadn't been able to find a shirt belonging to the tall waiter.

He hadn't found a shirt for himself either, but the bellboy's gray monkey jacket he was wearing didn't require one. And the fit of the clothes wasn't too bad. In fact, when he had looked down at himself, out there in the yard, he had believed he could pass muster for one of the Inlet Hotel's smarter bellboys. It was Sandy who pointed out to him the enormous stain across one shoulder and down the jacket's back: the owner of Ken's suit had apparently come into conflict with an unsteadily carried bowl of tomato soup.

"If you only had a herring," Sandy murmured, between gasps.

"I'd be wearing a soup-and-fish." Ken finished it for him, in the positive conviction that this was the funniest joke he had ever heard.

Their crazy hysteria died as quickly as it had flared up. Suddenly they were standing there in the dark staring

at each other solemnly.

They had been abruptly recalled to their situation by the faint sound of voices drifting to them from the direction of the ferry pier.

"If we're going to get into the hotel," Sandy whispered, "we'd better start."

They hurried back to the hedge outlining the lighted yard, and, after one swiftly exchanged glance, stepped through the hedge and marched straight for the rear door of the hotel. If anyone saw them they would—they hoped—be taken for a zealous waiter and an earnest bellboy, working long past their usual hours. They walked swiftly, but even so the distance seemed enormous. It was with a sense of relief that they tried the rear door, found it unlatched, and stepped inside.

But a moment later they were frozen in their tracks, at the terrifying realization that they were now actually within the very center of the web they had been trying all night to avoid. The wide corridor they stood in stretched clear to the front door of the building, a hundred feet ahead, and its entire distance was visible in the soft lamp glowing on the clerk's desk halfway between the two ends. The glow reflected itself in the polished length of the floor, and the boys felt as if they were on exhibit on a brightly lighted stage. For a paralyzing instant they even believed that the clerk behind the desk was staring directly at them.

Then they realized that he was asleep, his shining shirt front rising and falling gently to the time of his breathing.

In a panic of indecision Ken eyed the broad stairway curving upward just opposite the clerk's desk. Did they dare to try it? A single creaking board, a single thudding footfall might wake him, and then all their careful plotting would have been in vain.

Of course there must be back stairs somewhere in the building. The question was whether they could find them

while there was still time.

Ken made a bargain with himself: they'd make one brief attempt to find another and safer stairway, and if it failed they'd risk slipping past the clerk.

With a gesture to Sandy, he turned toward the first door on the left inside the hall. It stood slightly ajar, and opened under his hand without a sound. Ken stepped through. A narrow flight of stairs lifted straight ahead of him, visible in a light hung over the landing at a turn halfway up. Ken turned back to motion Sandy to follow.

Sandy was inside, and carefully pulling the door to again behind them, when the clatter of footsteps sounded just outside the rear entrance only a few feet away. Their movements came to an abrupt halt. And an instant later they both saw, through the slender crack of the door through which they had just passed, the hurrying figure of Turner moving toward the front of the building.

The boys remained motionless in their hiding place while Turner's low, sharp voice spoke a few indistinguishable words to the clerk. There was a kind of grunt, as the latter apparently woke, the sound of a chair being pushed back. Then hurrying feet started up the softly carpeted front stairs.

Ken started up the back stairs, taking them two at a time. Behind him, Sandy's steps synchronized with his own. At the top he pushed open a door and found himself in a short, narrow corridor apparently leading directly into the main hall. At the junction he stopped and looked cautiously around the corner.

Turner's head was already visible in the main stair well up ahead, and in the second that Ken watched, the man reached the top step and started down the hall in their direction. Ken flattened himself against the wall and Sandy pressed himself against him.

Turner passed the mouth of their little corridor without a glance in their direction.

Ken hardly raised his eyes in time to lean forward and

catch one more sight of the man before he disappeared through a door a few yards beyond them and on the opposite side of the hall.

They stood perfectly still for a long moment after the click of a latch told them Turner was safely out of sight. Then, on legs that seemed weak as water, Ken stepped out into the hall. The door right across the hall bore the brass numerals 129. Beyond it was a door numbered 127.

Walking on tiptoe, they went on. The door through which Turner had disappeared was numbered 125. A few yards past it the main corridor ended, and branch corridors led both right and left. Ken turned left because they were walking on that side of the hall, and he had no way of knowing which was the right direction. To his enormous relief the numbers went on just as he had hoped they would: 123, 121—and then 119.

Together they stood before it, staring first at the door and then at each other.

If they knocked, and it wasn't Bert who answered . . .

And yet if they didn't knock at all . . .

Cautiously Sandy tried the knob. It held firm, locked on the inside.

Sandy's clenched hand rose and knocked, faintly, three times.

Nothing happened.

The silence swept over them in waves. Not even the slightest stir sounded behind the closed door.

After a minute that lasted for a century Sandy raised his hand again. That time the knocks were louder. Ken's heart leaped into his throat as he heard them. It seemed inconceivable to him that Turner, a few doors away around the corner, should not have heard them too, and come dashing out to investigate.

A bedspring creaked. Sandy stiffened beside him. Then softly padding footsteps approached the other side of the door. Instinctively both boys drew back.

The key turned in the lock, the doorknob moved. And

then the door opened and Bert's red head appeared in the narrow aperture.

CHAPTER XV

MR. TURNER PAYS A CALL

WITHIN THE SPACE of a breath Ken and Sandy had pushed past him into the room, and Bert was closing the door behind them and locking it again.

But the look of utter surprise that had showed on Bert's face for the instant it had been visible in the light of the hall didn't prevent him from acting quickly.

"Hold it," he whispered.

They obeyed, standing perfectly still in the gloom as he reached for the catch that controlled the open transom over their heads, and pulled it fast. Then he crossed the room and tugged at the cords of the Venetian blinds, until the slats turned downward. Now they could no longer make out his figure at all, but the whisper of rings sliding on a rod told them that he was pulling the curtains across the windows too. Finally, his precautions completed, Bert flicked on the bed lamp.

All of them blinked a little in the light, staring at each other. Bert's glance swept across Sandy's bare chest, took in the soup-stained bellboy's outfit, and he grinned faintly.

"Well," he said quietly, "fancy meeting you here."

"We—" Ken began.

"You—" Sandy's croaking whisper cut into his and they both stopped.

"Take it easy." Bert pushed them toward the bed. "Stretch out and relax," he said, "while you tell me all

about it."

The bed was rumpled, but Ken thought he had never seen such a beautiful sight in his life. Bert, although fully clothed, had evidently been lying on it.

The moment Ken's back came into contact with the soft mattress he had an intense desire to stay there forever. He was tired. More tired than he had ever been before. And now that Bert was on the job his own responsibility, and Sandy's, seemed suddenly to have dissolved. Now they could rest.

"Well?" Bert said after a moment. "Maybe you'd better begin. To put it literally, we don't have all night."

The weariness and relaxation that had flooded over Ken fled immediately. What had he been thinking of, to believe they could rest now? Their job had hardly begun.

He sat up abruptly, and found Sandy hauling himself erect beside him. "Our story's kind of long," Ken said. "Maybe you'd better tell yours first."

"Ken's right," Sandy agreed. "Go ahead."

"Well, mine's easy," Bert said. His voice sounded calm and unexcited, but entirely businesslike.

Ken, who had seen so little of Bert, knew immediately that here was another Sandy, with all of his steadiness, plus the addition of a few more years of experience. Ken didn't let himself relax again at the thought, but he did feel strongly aware that now he and Sandy had a staunch ally. The thought was as strengthening as a night's sleep, as a full meal would have been.

"I took off as soon as you called Pop," Bert went on, "and pulled off the road to take a look around right up at the top of the bluff above Bayberry Dunes."

"Where we stopped yesterday," Sandy muttered.

"Yesterday?" The word was startled out of Ken. "I feel as if it were about ten years ago."

Bert grinned briefly and looked down at his watch. "Matter of fact, it was just about twenty-four hours ago that you turned up in the *Advance* office." He looked up

again. "Which means that it will be light in another couple of hours and we've got no time to lose. Anyway, I stayed parked up there quite a while, out of sight off the road. There wasn't much traffic—I could get a good look at everything that went by. And finally this sedan you'd told Pop about came along. At least I decided it was the one, and that I'd better get on his tail. He was almost at the bottom of the hill before I caught up with him, and for a minute I thought maybe I'd made a mistake, because he didn't go into town as I'd expected him to. He cut over and pulled up at the ferry pier."

Bert rubbed his chin reflectively. "I didn't quite know what to do then. Pop had said to stick around town and watch for you two, but I felt I ought to keep an eye on this lad—what did you tell us his name was?"

"Turner," Sandy and Ken said simultaneously.

"Well, I didn't want to risk getting on the ferry with him. People have always noticed a kind of resemblance between Sandy and me"—he grinned a neat duplicate of Sandy's grin, below the thatch of red hair that was identical with his brother's—"and I figured that if Turner had seen Sandy with you, Ken, he might take special notice of another member of the Allen family. Anyway, I let the ferry go off without me, and when it came back an hour later I got aboard for the next trip."

"Just like that—you got aboard?" Ken asked.

"Well, it wasn't quite that simple. The gateman asked if I had a reservation at the hotel, and when I said no, he said the ferry was for guests only—and that all guests had to have reservations ahead of time. I said I'd like to telephone over to the island and make one—and he said the hotel was filled up."

"Then how did you manage it?" Ken wanted to know.

"Oh, Bert's kind of a stubborn guy," Sandy told him.

"Stubborn—and the possessor of a press card. I said I'd planned to do a story about this place, but that of course if they didn't want it done, why that would be a

good story too—unusual hotel refuses admittance to press—mysteriously exclusive. This seemed to get the little old man kind of upset, and he telephoned over here—at least that's what I supposed he did—and pretty soon he told me it was all fixed up. The hotel wanted me to be its guest free of charge. So when I got here they showed me up to this room, sent up a swell meal although it was kind of late, and promised to show me all over the place tomorrow. I'd planned to take a little walk around the minute I arrived, but they fixed that by sending me the food, and I couldn't arouse their suspicion by refusing it. By the time I'd finished, it was too dark to see anything. I wandered a little—but some assistant clerk was beside me every minute, telling me what all the buildings were and assuring me I could see them better in daylight. Finally I pretended to give up and came in. And later, when I tried twice to get outside again by myself, the clerk at the desk offered to send for someone to escort me—said the island was too dark to make it safe for guests to wander around alone at night. So I finally decided to wait until morning. They're smart operators, all right."

He leaned back. "And now let's hear how you two got along with them—and how *you* got here."

Ken took a deep breath. "We'll give it to you fast."

At the end of fifteen minutes Bert had heard a bare recital of their experiences up to the moment when he himself had opened the door to the sight of their haggard faces above the stolen clothes. Sometimes his brow furrowed in concentration as he followed the reasoning that had led to their conclusions. Sometimes—as when he heard of their struggles with Willie's adhesive bonds—his jaw clenched in controlled anger. But he didn't interrupt, and finally the whole complicated tale was finished.

For a moment Bert sat quietly staring into space.

"I'll take care of pinning on your medals later," he said at last. "Right now we've got other things to do. Personally, I think you've figured the whole thing about right. And I

also think you've got plenty of evidence to interest the cops. I suggest we call Pop right away, and have him bring up the reserves. It shouldn't take long. The State Police move fast. They'll get here before Turner gives up looking for you two."

His brisk voice paused, and his next sentence was directed straight at Ken. "If your father's being held anywhere on the island, they'll find him."

Ken thought a minute. Bert's suggestion certainly seemed wise. Already they'd fought long enough against heavy odds and so far they hadn't accomplished anything at all toward releasing his father. Now, if there was enough evidence to interest the police, there was no reason why they shouldn't be called in.

"O.K.," he said. For the first time he himself was convinced that the police would believe their story, and when they found Richard Holt held against his will, they'd probably also send a Coast Guard ship out to examine the *Louise*, and the whole thing would be over.

Bert moved toward the telephone on the desk. "I'd like to put through a call to the Brentwood *Advance* office," he said. And then, while he listened to the dull murmur that came over the wire, his face tightened. "It is? ... Well, how soon? ... I see. Thanks." He hung up and turned back toward them grimly. "There's trouble in the line some place. Won't be able to get any calls through to the mainland until the repairmen arrive in the morning."

The news was no shock to Ken. The moment he'd seen the expression on Bert's face he knew what had happened.

"They're smart operators, all right," he said dully.

"You don't think the lines are out by accident then?" Sandy asked.

Nobody bothered to answer his question, and he didn't look as if he expected a response. The closed line fitted too neatly into the Turner pattern.

Sandy sat up. "Well," he said, "we'll certainly get a call through the first thing in the morning. They'll *have* to open

the lines then. The guests won't stand for it."

"It'll be too late then," Ken said. "The minute it's daylight they'll give this place a real going-over. And it won't take them long to find us." He glanced down at his stained uniform. "They'll even know by then just what we're wearing."

"Bert can leave for the Dunes on the first ferry out," Sandy suggested. "All he has to do is stay out of Turner's sight, and he won't be recognized as having any connection with us. Nobody else on the island has seen us."

Bert glanced at Ken before he spoke. "That'll be too late, too," he said. "Even if they haven't picked the two of you up by then, they'll know for certain you're here on the island—where else could you be?—and they'll probably move Holt elsewhere. They may even—"

Ken finished it. "They may kill him," he said evenly. "Once the *Louise* is out at sea, without any real evidence that she stopped here to load, the only other evidence against them will be Dad's story and ours. I don't think it would bother them much to kill us either, once they find us. Then they'd really be in the clear."

For a long moment they were all silent, looking first at each other and then down at the floor.

Suddenly Ken began pacing up and down the floor. "But we've got to do *something*. We can't just sit around here and wait for it to happen. Can we?"

"We've got to do something," Bert agreed. "The only question is what."

Ken walked to the windows and back again. "Do you suppose we could take a chance on arousing the legitimate guests here, and getting them to help us? If they heard the whole story they'd—"

Bert was shaking his head. "It just wouldn't work, that's all. How would we go about it, except by going from door to door and waking them up? And what happens if the first door we knock on belongs to one of Turner's

men?"

"We could set fire to the place," Sandy offered.

"Oh, sure," Ken agreed scathingly. "And have them get rid of Dad without any trouble in all the excitement—unless they just left him to—" He couldn't finish the sentence. "That's a crazy idea," he said.

"I guess it is. I just thought—"

"I know." Ken looked over at him. "Sorry I jumped on you."

"Cut out the polite speeches, will you, and get your brains to working on this?" Bert's sharpness was what they both needed.

There was silence in the room for more than a minute.

At the end of that time Ken said slowly, "How's this: we don't believe the line is really out, and if we could get a call through, that would be the best thing. Right?" He waited for their nods before he continued. "O.K. then. There's just that one clerk on duty downstairs—at least he's the only person Sandy and I saw around. So the business of getting rid of him and getting at the switchboard ourselves ought not to be too tough."

Bert broke in. "Good. You've got it. I'll go down first—I'm the nosy newspaperman who's been wandering around half the night, anyway—and I'll get him to talking. Tell him I've got insomnia. You two will wait at the head of the stairs until I give the signal, and then—"

A soft rap at the door brought his excited voice to a stop.

All three of them held perfectly still, staring fixedly at the door. Ken thought rapidly of all the possibilities that lay before them. Whoever was out in the hall had to be answered. Bert was known to be occupying that room. Failure to answer would simply result in the door being opened with a master key.

His eyes met Bert's for an instant, and he saw there an echoing of his own thoughts.

"Yes?" Bert said loudly then, in a fair imitation of a

sleepy voice.

The only response was another knock, somewhat more peremptory than the first.

"Just a moment," Bert said. He took one step that brought him to the bed, and depressed its springs until they squeaked slightly. The boys were taking up the positions he indicated. Sandy was stepping into the single closet, and pulling the door shut on himself. Ken was striding across the carpet to stand flat against the wall where he would be hidden when the door swung open.

"Coming," Bert said easily, turning the key in the lock. "It's a fine time of the night to—" His voice died away as he pulled the door open a little way.

Ken could see through the slit between the hinges, and what he saw made him catch his breath.

It was Turner who stood in the hall. The man's first expression, as he looked up into Bert's face beneath the flamboyant red hair, was one of utter surprise. But immediately he recovered control of himself. He had noticed and correctly interpreted the resemblance between the two Allens, Ken was certain. It was already too late to prevent that. But he wished desperately that he could warn Bert, who had never seen Turner at close range before, that this visitor was the one man they must all avoid. Ken's hand instinctively moved out to push the door shut in Turner's face, but he drew it back in time. That would be foolhardy.

Turner was moving forward into the room. He was almost touching Bert now, but Bert stood his ground.

"Did you try to make a phone call?" Turner asked, his voice blandly innocent.

"Yes," Bert said. He stood there blocking the partially open doorway.

"I'm sorry about the lines," Turner said. He moved forward out of the range of Ken's vision.

He's a fool, Ken thought. He can't push Bert around. But a split second later he saw Bert back into the room

slowly, as if reluctant to give up his advantageous position—but back up nevertheless. And then he saw why.

As Bert retreated past the opened door, Ken saw a hand come into view—a hand holding a gun. When Turner spoke, his voice was no longer quite so smooth.

"Inside, and not a sound." Without taking his eyes off Bert, Turner reached behind him and swung the door closed. "Now," he continued, "where are they? Make it fast, I'm in no mood to fool around."

From somewhere—a movie, or a story perhaps—Ken remembered a bit of action. He shifted silently and raised his hand. In a blur, so fast did it move, the edge of his palm came down on Turner's wrist. The gun flew out across the room to fall on the bed, while the yelp of pain that rose in Turner's throat was shut off abruptly as Bert landed one on his chin with all his more-than-two-hundred pounds behind it. Turner's body was lifted off the floor a full six inches. He fell and slumped into Ken's arms, a dead weight.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN ON THE BED

FOR A MOMENT they held the tableau, Ken supporting Turner's inert body, Bert slowly massaging the knuckles of his right hand and smiling faintly, as if to himself. The closet door creaked and Sandy stuck his head out.

"What happened?" he whispered.

The words restored them to activity. Bert reached out to help Ken lower Turner to the floor, and both of them bent down to study his blank white face.

"Still breathing," Ken said, almost in surprise. He slapped Turner's face lightly, but the eyes remained closed. "You Allens don't fool around, do you?" he said over his shoulder to Bert. "Oh, by the way—Mr. Allen, meet Mr. Turner."

"Glad to know you," Bert told the recumbent figure. "In fact, it's a pleasure."

"This time we don't even have any ropes handy," Sandy said, coming into the room. "What'll we tie him with?"

Bert jerked blankets off the bed. "These sheets look fine." He pulled off the top one and ripped it into long strips. As he handed them to Ken and Sandy, one by one, they used them to bind Turner's hands and feet, and concluded the process with an efficient gag.

"Well," Sandy said, tying the last knot, "this is all very interesting, but it leaves us just where we were before."

Bert shook his head. "Oh, no. We're in a much worse spot now."

Ken nodded agreement. "We sure are. The desk clerk must have reported to Turner about that phone call we tried to make—that's what brought our friend around here to investigate. So the desk clerk is in with the gang, too, and he's going to get curious if Turner doesn't get a message to him pretty soon."

"Maybe we can get the desk clerk up here too," Bert suggested. "Can either of you imitate Turner's voice?"

Sandy shook his head. "My voice is too much like yours," he told his brother.

"Maybe I could," Ken said slowly, "if I whispered. Don't all whispers sound pretty much alike?"

"It's worth trying," Bert said. "But what'll you say? If he gets suspicious he might bring along several of his pals."

Ken thought a moment. "I'll make him think he doesn't have time for that," he said then. He picked up the phone and held it so that the mouthpiece was right against his lips. When he spoke into it it was in a low breathy murmur that barely carried to Sandy and Bert standing close beside him. "Got him," Ken whispered. "Come up here fast." He listened for the answering "Yes, sir," and the click, and then hung up.

Sandy grinned briefly at Bert. "How are your knuckles? Want me to pinch hit for you this time?"

"Oh, no, you don't," Ken said quickly. "We want this one conscious."

"Ken's right," Bert said. "Maybe we can learn something this time, if we keep him in a condition to talk."

"You take this, Bert." Ken picked up Turner's gun and handed it to the big redhead. "If he sees it the minute he comes in, it might persuade him to get confidential with us. And let's get this out of sight."

He motioned toward Turner's trussed-up body, and he and Sandy moved it toward the head of the bed where it

wouldn't be immediately visible to anyone standing in the open doorway. Then, at a gesture from Bert, they both stepped inside the bathroom, leaving the door slightly ajar. Bert stood close to the entrance at which the clerk would appear, in the spot Ken had occupied when Turner arrived.

"I'll answer when he knocks," Ken said.

Almost in the instant he stopped speaking, there was a light tap at the door.

"Come on in." Ken's whisper that time was louder and more urgent.

The door was pushed quickly open, and the clerk hurried into the room. There was a gardenia in his buttonhole, and his neat dark suit was the perfect clerk's uniform. But there was a hard line around his jaw at the moment that wouldn't have looked well behind a hotel desk.

Bert swung the door closed behind him and blocked it with his huge bulk. Just as the clerk spotted the figure lying on the bed, Bert's voice said calmly, "Easy, son. Don't make a sound." And he thrust the gun forward so that the clerk could see it.

The gardenia bounced as the man jerked around, and for an instant the firm jaw fell slackly. While he was still staring at Bert as if he couldn't quite believe his eyes, Ken and Sandy stepped out and crossed hastily to take his arms. Firmly they propelled the reluctant form to the bed, and forced it down.

The jaw tightened again, but immediately afterward the clerk assumed a look of confused and horrified innocence. "What's going on here?" he demanded.

"Don't waste our time," Ken said quietly. "We know all about the cars, and what goes on here. We're just asking you to answer one question: where's Richard Holt?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." The shocked surprise was almost convincing. "This is a respectable hotel and—"

"Sure, sure," Sandy interrupted. "We know all about that too. Now what about giving out with some information?"

The clerk shook his head. "I simply don't know what you're talking about." He pretended to see Turner for the first time, and drew back in horror. "Why, you've attacked one of our guests! And now you're holding me!" He tried to struggle to his feet. "The police will hear about this as soon as—"

"As soon as the telephone line is repaired?" Ken cut in.

The man seated on the bed stopped his struggles, looked at Ken closely, and then turned to look at Sandy and at Bert, the latter still holding the gun pointed directly at him. His eyes narrowed for an instant. And suddenly he opened his mouth wide, as if to shout at the top of his lungs.

Ken clapped a hand over his mouth just as the sound reached the surface. It wasn't a shout that came out; it was only a startled grunt. With Sandy's help he shoved him back on the bed then, and together they held him until his frantic struggles stopped.

"I guess we need a gag for him too," Ken said finally, glancing over his shoulder at Bert. The trouble was, he thought grimly, the clerk had suddenly realized he was dealing with amateurs—with people who had a gun and who wouldn't use it. He would shout again at the first opportunity, knowing it wouldn't be at the risk of his life. And he'd be right. They'd never get any information out of him now.

Bert tied his hands and feet while Ken and Sandy held him prone, and then Bert slipped a gag under Ken's hand so quickly that only another feeble grunt had the chance to make itself heard. Bert wrapped several additional strips of sheeting over the loosely stuffed mouth and then straightened up.

"Better tie him to the bed, so he can't kick around," Ken suggested.

Bert nodded, ripped up a pillowcase, and fastened the now quiet figure to the bedposts.

When the job was completed, Ken pulled down his rumpled uniform.

"I'm going downstairs and try to put a call through," he said. "Maybe there's still time for the police to get over here before they catch up with us, now that Turner's not around to direct operations."

Bert and Sandy nodded.

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

"Maybe I'd better do it," Bert suggested. "After all, I'm a guest here, and if any early bird sees me wandering around—"

"You'd look mighty funny behind the desk," Ken finished, with a wry grin. "No—I'm the one that's dressed for this part. Well"—he walked toward the door—"take good care of our friends." And then he was outside, shutting the door softly behind himself.

The hall was deserted, as he'd assured himself it would be, but he couldn't prevent himself from looking back at every step to make certain he wasn't being followed. When he reached the broad front stairs he took a long breath and started down, trying to walk nonchalantly in case there were curious eyes below watching his descent. But he reached the bottom without having seen anyone, and an instant later had pushed his way through the swinging gate in the counter, and found himself in the clerk's domain. To the right of the partitioned space was the switchboard.

Ken was in front of it before it occurred to him that he had never operated one in his life. Bewilderedly he stared at the maze of levers and plugs, the rows of tiny holes and the small round buttons above them.

Slowly he lowered himself into the chair in front of the board, and tried to apply his mind to the problem of understanding the mechanism. Obviously the holes were meant to accommodate the plugs: but which hole and

which plug would put him in touch with the mainland?

For a long moment he studied the board, afraid to touch anything for fear he would inadvertently arouse a sleeping member of Turner's gang—provided any of them were sleeping, rather than wandering around Skeleton Island searching for himself and Sandy. But eventually he decided that he could scarcely afford such caution.

With the operator's receiver to his ear, he pulled at one of the plugs and inserted it in the first opening on his right. Nothing happened. The instrument at his ear was perfectly still. He tried the second hole, with the same result. Then he tried the second and third plugs in those holes, and still no audible response could be heard.

He pushed down one of the orange-colored levers and was rewarded by a dull buzz somewhere inside the board, but the receiver itself was still silent. He pushed the lever the other way. Useless. He tried a second lever and a third, but still without success.

Ken could feel the perspiration beginning to trickle down his forehead. Time was running out and he was making no headway at all. He wondered if either Bert or Sandy knew more about switchboards than he, and was half out of his chair on the way to seek their help, when he decided that if they were experts at this sort of thing they would have mentioned it earlier. Slowly he sat down again, and tried to study the board calmly in an effort to comprehend the theory behind it, since his efforts at putting it blindly into practice had been of so little avail.

Three of the levers at the extreme left bore numbers just beneath them. They must control, Ken decided, the incoming lines—the live lines that led to shore. Maybe if he—

He jumped, startled by a light that had suddenly sprung into being on the board, behind one of those round buttons above the holes. He was wondering frantically what to do about it when it went out again. But while he was still staring at the spot, the light flashed once more,

and disappeared a second time. He waited anxiously, but it didn't flash again.

With an effort he turned his attention back to the levers, unable to escape the sensation that that light had been an eye spying on his desperate maneuvers. Carefully he picked up the plug at the extreme left of the board and moved it up toward the first of the numbered levers, aiming it at the opening directly beneath them.

Suddenly the light flashed on again, and the plug slipped out of his fingers. And then the light was gone once more, and with a shaking hand Ken retrieved the plug. He fumbled, inserting it in the hole, but finally he drove it home—and waited. The electric clock above the switchboard ticked off the seconds with terrifying speed. There was no sound, no signal of any kind to suggest that his plug had made contact with a similar board at Bayberry Dunes. After what seemed to him an interminable interval, Ken removed the plug, and sat staring fixedly at the instrument before him.

Should he try every plug in every hole, and go through the entire routine for each position of the levers? The process would consume an enormous amount of time. Still, what else could he do? Anger at his own ignorance, anger at the dead board itself, shook him. Surely *somehow* he could reach a listening ear. Surely—or wait: maybe the board really was out of order.

The thought struck him motionless. He was sitting there contemplating that possibility when a voice spoke behind him.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

Ken almost leaped out of his chair, then recovered himself enough to swing around without falling. He hadn't heard anyone approach. If it were—But at the sight of the figure on the other side of the counter he forced himself to relax.

It was an elderly man who stood there, his white hair ruffled as if he had been sleeping. He wore a bathrobe over

pajamas, and his short, plump figure gave him a helpless appearance.

"Yes, sir. Can I help you?" Ken hoped his slightly trembling voice and his nervous smile would pass muster as the normal reactions of an inexperienced employee a little too eager to please the hotel's guests.

The man smiled apologetically. "It's my bed lamp—doesn't work. I get wakeful, you know—you do, at my age—and I like to read in the middle of the night. Wonder if you could take a look at it? I tried to call on the phone, but . . ." His voice trailed off.

He'd tried to call . . . That explained the blinking light. Relief at this realization gave Ken new strength. He came briskly toward the counter.

"I'd be glad to look at it, sir," he said. "Not sure I'll be able to fix it, but let's see." He'd have to get the man up to his bedroom again before he'd be free to go on with his experiments at the board.

Deferentially Ken moved after him up the stairs, thankful that etiquette required him to follow rather than to lead: his water-darkened sneakers would hardly appear the proper footgear for an employee of this exclusive hotel.

At the head of the flight the bathrobed figure turned to look over his shoulder. "This way," he murmured, and walked down the corridor in the direction of Turner's room.

Both of them moved silently over the heavy carpet, but as they passed Turner's door, Ken was struck with a thought that almost made him gasp aloud.

How long had he been absent from Bert's room already? If the Allens grew worried about him, and went down to the desk to see if he had run into some kind of trouble, what would they do when they found him gone? They might think something had happened to him. While he himself was shut up in the guest's room, going through reasonably believable motions of inspecting the lamp, they might be raising alarms that would destroy the last

possibilities of getting help in time.

Ahead of him his guide had reached the end of the corridor, and, with another glance backward at Ken, turned the corner to the left.

Ken swallowed. He would have a chance to warn his friends, perhaps. He could hardly knock on the door and explain the situation to them, but perhaps they'd understand a signal. As he passed the door of Room 119 he was walking close to the wall, and managed to drag his fingernails lightly across the wooden panel. He had no way of knowing whether the sound even penetrated the wood, and—if it did—whether Sandy or Bert would recognize it as a sign from him. But it was all he could do for the present.

He hastened to catch up with the old gentleman, fumbling already with the knob of a door at the far end of the corridor—some ten rooms, perhaps, beyond Bert's—and told himself that if only the bulb of the lamp were burned out, things wouldn't be so bad. That would give him an immediate excuse to leave again, with a promise to return with a new bulb. And while he was out of sight he could at least get word to the boys, and perhaps one of them could take over the job at the switchboard while he maintained peaceful relations with the elderly guest.

As he reached the man's side, the latter pushed the door open and stood aside to let Ken proceed him.

The room was in utter darkness. Ken waited for a moment, expecting the old man to furnish some sort of light, before he remembered that as a bellboy he ought to know where the wall switch was. As his fingers explored the wall to the right of the door, it occurred to him that if the ceiling light was working it probably meant that only the bulb of the bed lamp was defective. He found the switch and pressed it. As the room sprang into brilliance he congratulated himself briefly. He'd be out of here again within two minutes.

While his eyes were still accustoming themselves to

the bright light, he moved forward firmly toward the blurred shape he knew must be the bed. It wasn't until he was beside it, and reaching toward the lamp, that he realized there was a figure on the bed—a man's figure, dressed, and lying in a curiously elongated position. Suddenly Ken could see clearly again. That white blob on the supine figure's face was a gag, and the man was lying stretched out like that because his hands, bound together, were pulled back over his head and tied to the headboard. His feet, also bound, were secured to the foot of the bed.

Ken turned back toward the elderly man who occupied this room. But before his body had completed the gesture, he stopped and swung toward the bed again.

There was something familiar about that figure. The shape of the closed eyes above the gag, those dark angled brows, the black hair—And then he knew.

"Dad!"

In a single swift motion Ken was bending over him.

"Dad! It's me! Are you all right?"

The closed eyes opened and they were looking at each other, communicating instantly in the way that had always been possible to them after the longest separation.

"What have they done to you? Are you really all right?"

Ken was babbling in his relief, oblivious to everything else in the world except the one fact that Richard Holt was here, before him, alive and breathing. He had found his father!

"Such a touching reunion. It's almost a shame to interrupt it."

For a moment Ken didn't even hear the words. And when they echoed in his ears a second time, there was a moment before the presence behind them was recalled to his consciousness. Slowly, then, Ken turned around.

The elderly man was still standing near the door, but it was closed now. His hair was still ruffled, and his round soft body still looked somehow helpless. But something had happened to the vague kindly eyes. They

had become hard, with the cold blue hardness of marbles. And one pudgy hand, withdrawn from its deep baggy pocket, was extended. In the hand was a gun.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BOSS SHOWS HIS HAND

"YES," the elderly man repeated, "a touching reunion. I'm glad I found you, young Holt. My assistants probably never would have succeeded. They're hardly competent when it comes to dealing with"—the round face crinkled into what was undoubtedly meant for a smile—"with the more crafty, experienced types like yourself."

Ken had been staring at him wordlessly, numb from the swift turn of events. The shock of seeing his father had made it impossible for him to realize, for a moment, that although they were together again, and Richard Holt was alive, they were still in extreme danger. He hadn't been able to adjust himself to the fact that this small white-haired man now represented that danger—perhaps represented it in a more menacing form than either Willie or Turner.

But the taunting words helped bring him to himself. He was being laughed at! This old man who had fooled him so neatly believed that he was always as stupid as he had been during the past few minutes.

At a waddling deliberate pace the figure behind the gun moved farther into the room. "And now," the soft voice said cheerfully, "if you'll just tell me where your red-haired friend is, it will save us all a lot of time and effort."

So he thought it was as easy as that, did he?

For an instant Ken swung back to the bed, as if to

suggest to his father that the time had come for the Holts to put an end to this sort of thing. His father looked up at him, and his right eyelid lowered and lifted again in a slow wink. The small gesture spoke volumes. It said that they were together again and that that was fine—but it also said that the situation was in Ken's hands now: Richard Holt was helpless to assist him.

Deliberately, Ken winked back. He hoped the message he conveyed was "O.K. I'll handle it." But as he swung around again he felt more terrified than he ever had in his life. He knew that one misstep would mean the end of everything. There was more than his own safety and that of the Allens at stake now: Richard Holt, too, depended on him, more immediately than he had before. As long as Ken was free, and the two Holts were separated, the journalist had perhaps been using his son as a weapon, as a threat of disclosure. But now that the Holts were both trapped in the same room, that was no longer possible. Now they would get out of it together—or they would both suffer the consequences.

"Well?" The plump man's pretense at patience was thinly veiled. "Where is your friend?"

Ken calculated his chances of leaping and grappling with that pudgy figure, and knew they were practically nonexistent. If only he'd been smart enough to have reacted otherwise to that light flashing on the switchboard, he thought frantically, things would be different. If he'd—But that was the most futile kind of thinking. His past chances were past. What he had to concentrate on was the chances that were still left to him.

But what were they?

The man glanced down at the wrist watch encasing his plump wrist. "I'll give you five seconds," he said quietly.

"I don't know where he is." Ken said, after he had counted off four of the seconds. He looked briefly at his father, and Richard Holt's chin rose a tiny fraction of an inch, as if in encouragement.

"You'll have to do better than that." The hand holding the gun was as steady as a rock.

"It's true," Ken said, a little wildly. And it *was* true, he reminded himself. If Sandy and Bert hadn't heard his signal, or understood it, they might right now be walking into the hands of some of the searchers, or—

The grizzled eyebrows over the hard blue eyes raised slightly.

"Oh, come now. We'll find him, of course, ourselves, but if you want to make things easier all round . . ."

"We were separated. I don't know where he is."

"I see. Well, in that case—" The eyes narrowed, as if they were measuring the distance between Richard Holt and the gun. "Since you apparently don't think enough of your father to save him by giving us this small piece of information—"

Ken opened his mouth to speak and then shut it again. Information as to Sandy's whereabouts wasn't going to save his father.

Suddenly he remembered the desk clerk's attempt to yell, and their own reaction to it. He knew better than to try to yell himself: the sound would never be allowed to leave his throat. But the shot that would cut it off would surely arouse more than the members of the gang.

"You're not going to shoot us here," Ken said, and his voice was almost even. "The guests in this place like quiet."

The man laughed. "Guests? There's nobody here but my own men."

Was it true? Ken wondered. He sounded convincing. But it *couldn't* be. This was a public hotel. It needed legitimate cars and legitimate guests around to mask its other activities.

"Then what about all those cars out in the parking lot?" Ken asked. "And I don't mean the ones in the shed that are smuggled out."

The blue eyes flew wide and then narrowed again. "Well! Been snooping around, haven't you?" The knuckle of

his trigger finger whitened, and then the finger relaxed slightly. "You're quite right." A crooked smile accompanied the words. "I'd rather not shoot you here, though I will if I have to. But there's a more secluded place near by that will be quite satisfactory." He waited a moment, but Ken didn't speak again. "Well, if you really won't tell us without some persuasion—"

As if reluctantly he gestured with the gun. "Stand over there—against the wall by the bed."

Ken moved the few feet indicated. The elderly man circled him, slowly crossing the room toward a door in the inner wall. When he stood in front of it he reached back to tap the panel sharply.

A moment later the door opened.

"What's up, boss?" Then Willie's eyes took in the situation, and his swollen lips grimaced with pleasure as he saw Ken. "Got him, huh?" He stepped forward into the room. "This'll be fun, boss."

"Don't touch the boy." The quiet voice stopped Willie as if he had come up against a wall.

"Huh? But why not, boss? I thought you—"

The white head shook slowly, as if in self-pity for the lack of intelligent cooperation. "We want him to talk. He'll be more inclined to do so if you apply your technique to his father."

"Oh." Willie digested this information for an instant.

"Besides," the elderly man continued, "I think we've been far too lenient with Holt up to now."

Ken shot a glance at his father and once more saw the right eyelid come down in a slow wink. Then Holt's head moved from side to side: a clear command to Ken not to speak.

But Ken knew that he was incapable of watching what was about to happen.

Again he calculated his chances. Could he dive for the gun and grab it before it went off? Probably not. But the shot that would stop him might arouse enough people to

save Richard Holt.

It was the only way. As Willie turned toward the bed, Ken tensed his muscles for the leap. The muzzle of the revolver was a tiny black hole pointing directly at him. It looked so harmlessly small, but within a second it ...

His already tight muscles knotted. What was that? That faint sound—almost as if someone were running a fingernail across the panel of the door into the hall?

There it was again. Or was he dreaming? Was he only imagining that his signal to Sandy and Bert was being returned to him?

Neither Willie nor his boss appeared to have heard anything. Willie was standing beside the bed now, looking down at the bound newspaperman as if trying to decide how to start.

Ken made up his mind.

"Wait a minute!" he said.

There was a muffled sound from the bed. Richard Holt was grunting through his gag.

Ken looked over at him, and his father's eyes blazed furiously into his. Resolutely Ken turned away again.

The hand holding the gun shifted a quarter of an inch, in impatience. "Well? You've decided to tell us where he is?"

"I can't tell you. But I'll show you."

A smile creased the round face. "That's a very old trick." His free hand motioned to Willie. "Go ahead."

"Wait! I mean it!" Ken could feel the perspiration spring out on his forehead. Somehow he had to persuade his adversary to move close to that door. Of course he would never take his eyes off Ken, but that would be all right.

"It's just that I can't *tell* you," Ken repeated. "We hid in a room—and I don't know the number of it. But I can take you there."

The man looked at him this time with more attention, but he was still not convinced.

"We've got the night clerk there—tied up," Ken added desperately.

"Oh? I wondered about him." There was another pause and then he apparently reached a decision. "All right. Our young friend has made up his mind to help us after all, Willie. Come along—we'll both go with him. Holt will be quite safe here alone for a few minutes." He gestured Ken forward in the same movement that brought Willie away from the bed.

Ken's heart sank. To have them close together wasn't what he'd hoped for.

Suddenly the old man stopped, just a few feet from the door. "Before we leave," he said, addressing Willie but keeping his eyes on Ken, "you might as well let the men know that they can come in. No use having them prowling the island any longer than necessary. Take that flash there"—he indicated a large one lying on the bureau between the two windows—"and signal to them."

Willie shrugged, moved to pick up the flashlight, and thrust it through the slats of the Venetian blind.

Now, Ken thought. Now was the moment. If his crazy scheme was going to work—if he hadn't imagined that scratch on the door—now was the time for action.

He spoke over his shoulder to his father, raising his voice.

"I know you don't want me to do this, Dad, but Sandy will understand. There's nothing else I can do—*right now!*"

The last two words were almost a shout.

The round face above the gun puckered questioningly.

Ken fastened his own eyes on the hard blue ones and kept them there. In a moment the sharp mind behind them would comprehend the significance of those two loud words. In a moment he—

Behind him Ken heard an exclamation from Willie—a wordless noise of warning. Only then did Ken let his gaze move up and over that pudgy shoulder.

The door was already open and Bert's long arm was

reaching forward. An instant later it had closed around the fat neck. Bert's other hand flashed downward to close over the gun, and to bring the fist that held it up behind its owner's back in a swift hammer lock.

Ken spun and leaped toward the window. Willie dove to meet him. The flashlight came down in a vicious blow that would have split Ken's head if it had landed there, but he took it on his raised left forearm. At the same time his right arm jabbed forward into Willie's unprotected midriff. Willie gasped and doubled over, to meet another right-hander that straightened him up again.

Willie's eyes were dull now. Ken looked into his slack vacant face and measured him for the knockout. He had time: Willie wasn't going anywhere. He had time enough to remember the glee on Willie's face when he stood over the helpless Holt. He had time enough to remember Willie's cruel taping job on himself and Sandy. He had time enough to put everything he had into this last blow.

It started way back and it had no finesse. But Willie wouldn't criticize.

The ferretlike head snapped back and the body curved like a trout rod. Willie landed with a thud and stayed where he fell.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF A LONG NIGHT

KEN LOOKED DOWN at Willie for a moment, then, satisfied that he would give no further trouble for some time, he turned to the others in the room.

Bert was still holding his prisoner immobilized and silent, and Sandy was picking up the gun the plump fingers had dropped.

"You all right?" Sandy asked.

Ken nodded. Not until then did he feel the agonizing pain of that blow from the flashlight. His left arm hung limply, as if it didn't belong to him. But there wasn't time to think about it now.

"Quick," he said. "He had Willie signal for the men to come in. They may come right here."

"Did he now?" Bert spun his prisoner around like a top, by pulling on the imprisoned arm. And when the man faced him he drove a left to one side of the heavy jaw and then a right to the other. The head rocked back and forth, foolishly, and then the body slowly collapsed on the floor, legs folding awkwardly under.

Ken was already at the bed, trying with one hand to loosen the gag over his father's mouth. Bert brushed him impatiently aside. He had a knife in his hand and with two strokes he severed the ropes holding Holt's bound hands and feet to the bed. He didn't stop to untie the bindings, once he was released, but picked the newsman up bodily

and slung him across his shoulder.

"Let s go."

"Wait a minute." Sandy stooped and thrust both inert bodies underneath the bed. "Let them look for a while."

"Down the back stairs," Ken said, opening the door. He could move the fingers of his left hand now, and the pain was receding slightly.

Sandy went through first, and then Bert. Ken closed the door and followed.

At the landing of the stairs Sandy stopped short, holding up his hand. Footsteps sounded below them. Ken pointed to the stairs going up, and Bert nodded and quietly disappeared around the turn leading to the next floor. Ken and Sandy huddled just below him.

The voices grew more distinct.

"Where's Turner?" one of them said.

"Out looking like the rest of us, I guess."

"Not him—he never does the hard work."

"Yeah—you're right. Him and fat old Bentley too. They never—"

The door at the head of the stairs swung shut, cutting off their words.

After a moment of cautious waiting, to make certain they weren't returning immediately, Ken led the way down to the main floor and the back entrance. They looked around before they ventured through the doorway, but no one was in sight. There might be spying eyes just beyond that lighted area before them, however, and—

"Risk it," Bert said swiftly. "Straight across."

Ken obeyed. There wasn't time now for their usual care.

Within a matter of seconds they were all across the dangerous spot and in the shadow of the hedge beyond it.

There Bert laid Holt gently on the grass and went to work on the tape that tied his hands and feet, while Ken carefully removed the gag.

"Thanks." The single word spoken through Holt's stiff

and swollen lips was barely audible. But Ken sensed that the Allens read into it as much as he did himself.

He put a suddenly trembling hand on his father's shoulder. "Gee," he muttered, "we . . ."

Richard Holt's fingers closed around his.

Bert stood up and helped the slender dark man to his feet. "How's that?" The concern in his voice counteracted the brusqueness of the words.

Holt took a tentative wavering step. "Fine. I'll be all right in a minute."

He and Bert understood each other, Ken knew.

"Here they come," Sandy said quietly.

They all turned to look in the direction he indicated. A half-dozen flashlights were blinking in the darkness, converging on the hotel from the various sections where the search had been conducted.

"We're right in their path," Bert muttered. "And we'd better get out of it."

"I think it's too late," Ken said. And when they all swung toward him he hastened on. "Let 'em catch up with us. Then we can keep walking with them, but slowly—so we drop behind. When they're far enough ahead we can turn and light out for the shore."

Richard Holt looked at the Allens questioningly, as if to say that they all knew the island better than he did and he was willing to put himself in their hands.

"It makes sense," Bert decided. "If Mr. Holt's up to it."

"I'll be all right."

"O.K. We'll have to spread out—separate. Where'll we meet?"

"At the little boat landing," Ken suggested. "We'll use their rowboat."

"There're speedboats at the—"

Bert cut his brother off. "Too risky. Rowboats always start. Come on." And he and Sandy faded off into the darkness toward the right.

Ken took his father's arm and, walking slowly to give

him a chance to get accustomed to movement, led the way leftward in an oblique direction.

Gradually the flashes from that quarter came closer.

"Dad?" Ken whispered finally, when it was no longer safe for them to remain together.

"Sure. Move off a little."

Ken slipped to the side, and a moment later he turned and headed directly back toward the hotel, in line with a flashing light some ten yards to the right.

Suddenly there was a glow around his feet, and his shadow was stretched across it. Ken knew that one flashlight was directly behind him. He resisted the Impulse to turn, and kept walking steadily.

"That you, Joe?" a voice asked from the darkness at his back, as the light flickered off to the side.

Ken opened his mouth to assent, but another voice spoke first.

"No. I'm over here, Mike."

"Oh." The man with the light didn't seem surprised that he had been mistaken, and Ken breathed a little easier. "Ben, huh?" The light struck Ken's back once more and threw his shadow forward.

Ken grunted aloud in what he hoped would pass for a yes.

"Guess they got 'em if we're being called in," the voice said cheerfully.

Ken grunted again, and the instant the light danced away he moved off at an angle. Casual conversation with these men was a little too much of a strain under the circumstances.

By shortening his steps and moving as slowly as he dared, he gradually fell behind the lights intermittently flashing around him.

When he was finally sure that all the searchers were ahead of him, he stopped and waited quietly.

"Ken?" Holt's whisper sounded faintly off to one side.

Swiftly Ken moved in that direction, "O.K., Dad?"

"Fine. Where's this landing?"

"Back there. Let's go."

As rapidly as Holt could manage, they headed westward away from the hotel. Behind them, in the east, the sky was growing perceptibly lighter, and even directly overhead the stars were fading swiftly.

A few minutes later they were crouching low at the edge of the gravel drive running across the front of the big car shed, alert for some sign of Bert and Sandy.

The signal finally reached them from one side, and the two redheaded figures loomed out of the fading night.

"Made it," Sandy said, grinning. "Guess I look more like a crook than I thought."

Bert came close to report. "We've been out on the landing. The boat's there, all right, and the coast is clear. But—" He stopped.

Ken had already taken a step forward, at Bert's words, but now he too stopped.

"But what?"

Bert's voice was worried. "There's a fog rolling in, so heavy I don't know how we'll guide ourselves. If we wander around in a circle, and find ourselves sitting right off the dock when daylight comes—"

"Let's chance it." The decision in Holt's tone assured Ken that his father was almost himself again.

"Right. At least we'll be off this island."

"And that I find an attractive prospect." Mr. Holt put a hand on Ken's shoulder to guide himself, and they all moved toward the landing.

Stepping into the little boat, casting off, and rowing the first few silent strokes away from the shore had about it such a feeling of escape that it was a few moments before Ken became aware of the seriousness of Bert's warning. The fog *was* heavy. Even Bert and Sandy, pulling at the oars only a few feet from him, were wreathed with gauzy veils of mist, ghostlike in the new dawn. His father, in the small stern seat, was only a vague shape.

There were no lights visible anywhere.

Bert and Sandy pulled steadily, and it seemed to Ken that they were moving forward in a straight line. But he knew that it was impossible to judge such a thing accurately. They might just as well be pulling around the edge of the island, or describing an arc in the bay that would return them directly to its shore.

For a long time nobody spoke: the rattle of the oars in the oarlocks and the faint splash of the blades made the only sounds. Ken sensed that all of them were as alarmed as he was himself.

"I think we're swinging to your side," Bert said finally. "I'll ease up a little."

"I thought we were swinging to *your* side," Sandy muttered.

"No. I—"

"Listen!" Holt's voice silenced them.

The oars stopped and four pairs of ears strained. The distant sound came from over Ken's shoulder. He turned to hear it better.

"A motor," he said.

"Speedboats?" Bert poised his oar ready to dig into the water.

"Hold it! Let me listen." Sandy turned to face the front of the boat, his body tense. A moment later he grinned at Ken in the bow. "Relax. It's a truck climbing the hill out of town. We're headed right. It'll take him five minutes to make the hill, and by that time we'll be far enough from the island to be safe even if we have to wait out the fog."

It was easier now, with that comforting sound coming across the fog-blanketed water to guide them, to keep the boat on its course. Ken glanced down at the oily water slipping smoothly past them and then up at the rhythmically moving, powerful backs of the Allens. Everything was going to be all right now.

He looked between their heads toward his father, and just then the mists parted a little. Holt's grin at him was

clear and suddenly real—not merely part of this dreamlike night.

"Hi, Ken," said Richard Holt. "Glad you could come down to meet me at the boat."

Ken grinned back. "Oh, it was nothing. Thought you wouldn't mind if I brought a couple of friends along. Dad, this is Sandy and Bert Allen."

Without breaking their smooth stroke, the two redheads acknowledged the belated introduction with a nod and a wide grin.

"Glad to know you," Holt told them. He laughed. "Sorry I was so tied up when you called. I'll do better next time."

There might not have been a next time, Ken thought, if it hadn't been for—

But the long night was past. He didn't have to worry about it any more. And the laughter in the scudding little boat was infectious. Ken joined in.

CHAPTER XIX

CONCLUSION

KEN PUSHED his chair back from the table and grinned at Sandy across the white cloth. "Couldn't eat another mouthful if my life depended on it, Mom," he said.

"There isn't another mouthful to eat, Ken." She smiled over her shoulder toward the sideboard, where a clean-picked carcass was all that remained of a huge turkey. "Of course there's another pie out in the kitchen," she added, "if you could manage to—"

"Please, Mom!" Ken protested. "I'm too big for my clothes as it is. I don't think I could even get into Sandy's now."

Pop Allen looked through the cloud of smoke that rose from his pipe. "After a lot of good food," he announced, "there's only one thing a man wants: a lot of good talk." He turned to Mr. Holt. "How about it, Dick? Going to fill in the details for us on all that's been happening?"

"That's the least I could do." Richard Holt glanced around the table at the family that had so quickly become his friends. "If it weren't for you Allens there wouldn't be any story at all—and neither Ken nor I would be sitting here—or any place else."

"That's not the kind of talk Pop meant," Bert Allen cut in. "Here it is Monday evening—thirty-six hours after we got away from the Inlet Hotel—and we still don't know any more than we knew yesterday afternoon when we got out

the extra." He pointed to the paper in a nearby chair. The special edition of the *Brentwood Advance* had screaming headlines:

INTERNATIONAL CAR THIEVES CAPTURED

"You've just come from Global's New York office," Bert went on. "There must be some news we don't know yet."

"There's a lot *we* don't know about, Dad," Ken said. "I gather Sandy and I sort of fell asleep for a while."

Mrs. Allen was passing refilled coffee cups down the long table. "Considering what little sleep you two got Saturday night, I can't blame you for sleeping the clock around. I told your headmaster when I called him that you wouldn't be back at school until Wednesday."

"Gosh!" Ken exclaimed. "I forgot all about Doc Berdine. Thanks, Mom."

"Hmm." Pop cleared his throat. "Now, Dick. How about starting at the beginning?"

Richard Holt lighted a cigarette and leaned back, smiling. "I'll get over that part fast—I wasn't very bright about it. You know how I became suspicious of those freighters while I was in France?"

Bert nodded. "We heard that from Ken the first night."

Holt went on. "Well, I put some facts together and decided to come back here for more concrete evidence. I knew nothing about the hotel, of course, though I suspected something like that because of what I'd found over there. Where I made my mistake," he grinned, "was in underestimating the resources of the gang, and overestimating my own ability to take care of myself. I got off the plane on schedule and the first thing I knew was that two men were alongside of me—Turner and Willie—and that there was a gun poking into my ribs. Under the circumstances there was nothing much to do except agree to accompany them." He shrugged as he tamped the cigarette out in an ashtray.

"They asked me a lot of questions when we got to the hotel," he went on, "trying to find out how much I knew and how much I'd told Global. I tried to make them believe I'd told the office more than I really had, but I don't think I got away with it. They called Global and asked when I was due in, and of course Global said they didn't expect me. After that, they felt safe in holding me for a while."

"They really had an organization," Pop muttered, "if they could keep track of your movements the way they did."

Holt nodded. "And then they got to worrying about how much Ken knew, so they went after him."

"How did they figure on getting hold of Ken originally?" Bert wanted to know. "They couldn't have anticipated getting the break they did—Ken starting out for New York and walking so neatly into their trap."

"The same way they got me, I suppose," Holt said. "It might have taken them a little longer if Ken hadn't cooperated, but they'd have managed it."

"The police rounded them all up then?" Sandy asked.

"They've got all anybody knows about," Holt told him. "Bentley, Turner, Willie, and a dozen or so others. Of course it may take a while to clear them all out, but Willie helped. He talked—volubly—when he found himself faced with a charge of kidnaping on top of everything else. In fact he talked so much the Treasury men had to listen to him in relays."

"What about the *Louise*?" Ken asked.

"I can tell you that," Pop Allen said. "If I remember rightly you two stayed awake about half an hour after you got to shore, so you remember Dick calling his office and the police."

Ken and Sandy nodded.

"Well, after that things began to happen," Pop Allen explained. "The State Police came tearing into town, and right behind them was a car full of Treasury men. They got right over to the island, and rounded up the boys who

were left. Bentley and Turner; had taken off earlier in a fast cruiser—but a Coast Guard boat picked them up not long afterward. And another Coast Guard boat caught up with the *Louise* and escorted her back to New York. They found one of the top European leaders of the outfit on board, didn't they?" He turned to Richard Holt.

"That's right. One of the men I was trailing over there. He was on his way home."

Ken looked startled. "He was on the *Louise*?" And when his father nodded, curiously, Ken looked at Sandy. "He must have been the man they were talking about there at the pier in New York—the one we thought was Dad."

Sandy nodded. "Well, so long as they caught him—"

"How'd they manage to get those stolen cars into France, Dick?" Pop Allen was inquiring.

"They had a setup in the Mediterranean like the one at Bayberry Dunes," Richard Holt explained. "Same kind of thing exactly: fancy island hotel and a ferry. The ships unloaded the cars at night, and then they were taken off the island a few at a time and sold to unsuspecting buyers at high prices."

"But even at high prices, how could they really have made much money?" Ken asked. "It must cost plenty to keep that hotel going, and the ships and all. But they only loaded about forty cars that night."

His father grinned. "They did all right, Ken. According to Willie, the *Louise* would have come back the next night and the one after that too. When she really set sail she'd have had better than a hundred cars aboard. At about three thousand dollars a car, it added up pretty fast."

Bert nodded. "Especially when you consider they didn't pay for the cars in the first place."

Sandy whistled. "That's three hundred thousand a trip!"

"And," the correspondent added dryly, "they'd been doing it for almost a year. Figure it out: each ship made one trip a month."

"No wonder they wanted us out of the way." Ken's voice sounded subdued. He was just beginning to realize what they had escaped.

"I suppose the French police are cleaning up their end of it?"

"They acted as soon as our Treasury men cabled," Holt told Pop Allen. "I hear they found almost a hundred stolen cars on the island over there."

"And more than that here, counting the ones on the *Louise*" Bert added. "I'll bet the insurance companies are happy."

"Insurance companies!" Holt pulled himself abruptly erect. "I almost forgot!" They all watched him curiously as he hunted through his pockets, one after the other. "Here it is!" He had found a crumpled yellow sheet. "Telegram from an association of insurance companies—addressed to Ken Holt, care of Richard Holt, care of Global News." He handed it across the table.

Ken stared blankly at the paper for an instant. "EXTREMELY GRATIFIED TO LEARN OF YOUR PART IN APPREHENSION OF CAR THIEVES," he read aloud slowly. "UNANIMOUS DECISION OF MEMBER COMPANIES TO PRESENT YOU WITH CAR OF YOUR CHOICE. PLEASE NOTIFY US OF YOUR WISHES. CHOOSE ANY CAR ANY MODEL ANY COLOR. THANKS."

"Whee!" Sandy shouted. "What a break! What's it going to be, Ken?"

Ken shook his head to clear it. "Gosh, I don't know. What kind do *you* want?"

"I don't care what you get—so long as it'll carry the whole Allen family when you drive down here in it."

"Drive down!" Ken stared at him. "The car'll *be* here. It'll be as much yours as mine. After all——"

"Boys!"

At Mrs. Allen's quiet voice they looked up to see everyone at the table smiling broadly. "Maybe I have a solution to your problem," she added.

"Mom's got the floor," Bert announced unnecessarily.

"I was wondering, Mr. Holt, if it might not be a good idea for Ken to come here and live with us; that is, if he wants to. We have lots of room, you know. I'd like it, and I know the rest of my family would." She smiled. "And of course it would settle this serious argument about the car: they could both use it if Ken were living here."

"Hey!" Sandy jumped to his feet. "That's a terrific idea!"

In the silence that followed Ken stared around at them all, scarcely able to believe what he had heard. They were all looking at him, smiling at him, waiting for him to answer. Ken glanced down, and the letters on the telegram blurred before his eyes. He swallowed several times around the lump in his throat.

He remembered his first night in the Allen house—how this family had ranged itself behind him at a moment when everything looked completely black. He remembered Sandy's stalwart presence when they were tied up in the apartment, when they were hiding on the *Louise*, when they were being hunted on the island.

"How do you feel about it, Ken?" His father's voice carried warmth and approval, but he held it low and even, as if he feared to influence Ken's decision.

Ken knew what his answer was: he knew how much he wanted to stay with these friends. But he was afraid he wasn't going to be able to say it.

"Gosh," he mumbled finally. "Gosh, I'd like that. Sandy and I could go to school together, couldn't we? We could . . ." He floundered helplessly.

"Good." Mom's single matter-of-fact word ended his agony. "Then it's settled. You finish your term where you are, and then you move in here with us." She looked at Richard Holt. "Unless you have any objections, Mr. Holt?"

"Objections? I couldn't think of one in a thousand years! It's not often two men get to pick their family ready-made." He grinned slowly around the table. "And such a family!"

Mom looked at Ken with mock severity. "You know who's boss in this house?"

Ken managed to meet her gaze and grin. "Yes, ma'am."

"What color are you going to choose, Ken?" Sandy was grinning too.

"What color do *you* want?"

"I'd suggest a nice red convertible," Holt proposed mildly. "It would look well with all that red stone in the Colorado mountains."

"Mountains! What have they got to do with it?" Ken had the feeling that things were happening too fast—or that perhaps he was still asleep up in Sandy's room.

"I got a reward too," Holt said, "—a month's vacation and a nice easy assignment afterward. Global's planning a series of stories on famous court cases, and I'm going to do a yarn on a land case that took place out there some time ago." Casually he lighted a cigarette while they all waited for his next words. "And since I'm not going to have to start the research right away, I thought maybe Ken and Sandy could drive me out and perhaps give me a hand at it, when they finish school."

Sandy's shout exploded into the room. "Can I go. Pop?"

The elder Allen winked at Richard Holt. It was clear to everybody but Sandy that the whole plan had already been discussed by these two. "Ask Mom, Sandy. She's the boss."

Sandy swung around. "Can I, Mom?" And then he saw her smile and the twinkle in her eyes. "You knew about this all along, didn't you?" he demanded.

"So long as you're not planning to leave before tonight's dishes are done," Mom began mildly. But Ken smothered the rest of the sentence in a hug that lifted her off the floor.

"Gee, thanks, Mom," he said.

"Thanks," Sandy echoed, looking over his mother's head at Richard Holt.

Three minutes later the two boys were shouting at each other in the kitchen, over the splashing water and

the clattering plates, making wildly enthusiastic plans for hunting and fishing in the Colorado hills.

No one could have told them that they would have little time for such harmless pursuits—or that the game they would seek there would be more dangerous than trout and wildcat. There was no way of knowing then that they were going to become deeply involved in *The Riddle of the Stone Elephant*.